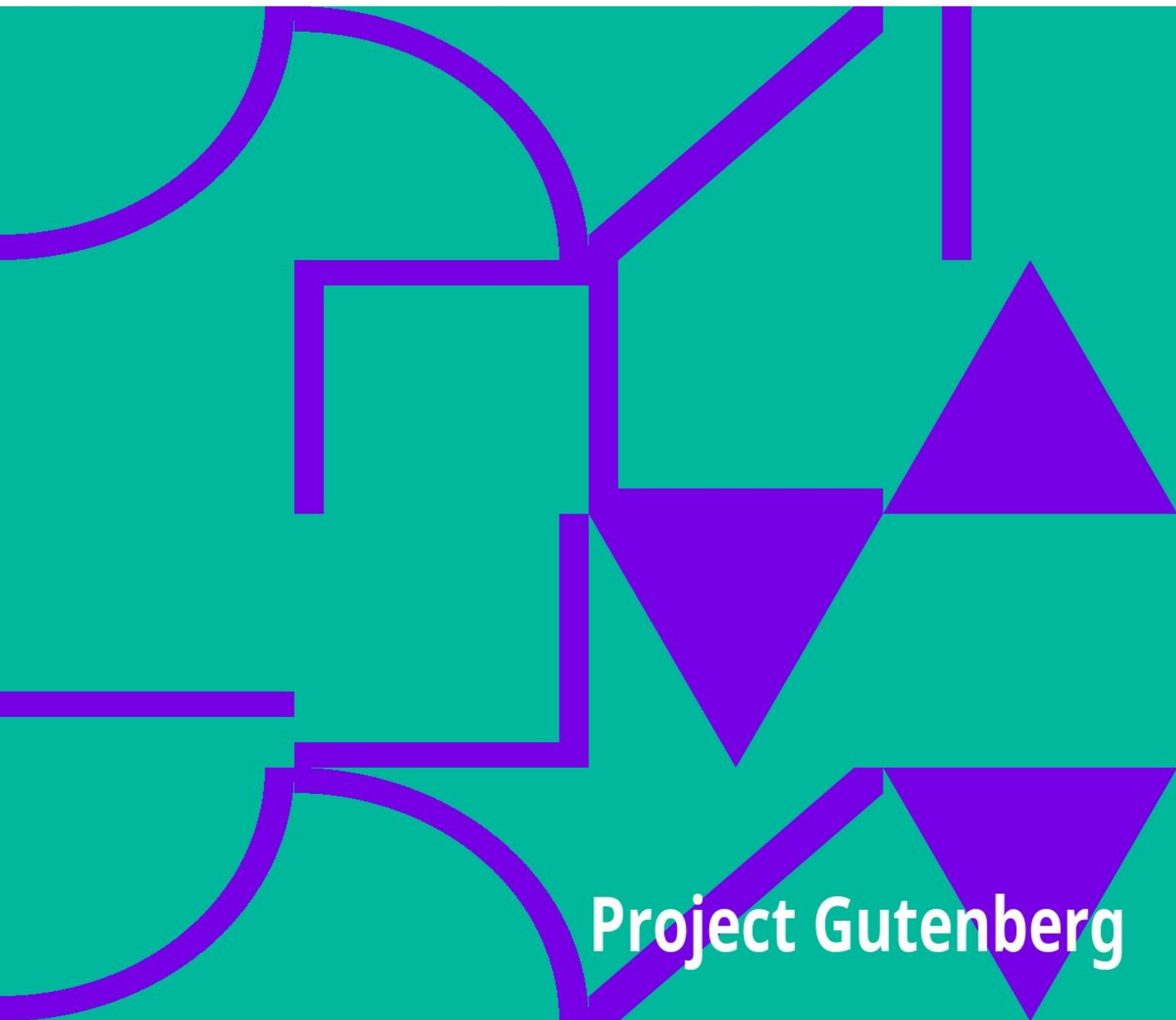


King Olaf's Kinsman

A Story of the Last Saxon Struggle against the Danes in the Days of
Ironsides and Cnut

Charles W. Whistler

An abstract geometric pattern composed of thick purple lines and shapes on a teal background. The pattern includes a large semi-circle on the left, a square in the center, and several triangles of various sizes and orientations on the right and bottom. The lines are thick and solid, creating a bold, modern look.

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**A Story of the Last Saxon Struggle
Against the Danes in the Days of Ironside
and Cnut**

by Charles W. Whistler

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Preface.

No English chronicler mentions the presence of King Olaf the Saint in England; but the two churches dedicated to him at either end of London Bridge, where his greatest deed was wrought, testify to the gratitude of the London citizens towards the viking chief who rescued their city from the Danes, and brought back the king of their own race towards whom their loyalty was so unswerving.

The deeds of King Olaf recorded in this story of his kinsman are therefore from the Norse "Saga of King Olaf the Holy," and the various incidents are assigned as nearly as may be to their place in the sequence of events given from the death of Swein to the accession of Cnut, in the contemporary *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is our most reliable authority for the period.

The place where King Olaf fought his seventh battle, "Ringmereheath in Ulfkyl's land," is doubtful. To have localized it, therefore, on a traditional battlefield in Suffolk, where a mound and field names point to a severe forgotten fight in the line which a southern invader would take between Colchester and Sudbury, may be pardonable for the purposes of Redwald's story.

With regard to other historic incidents in the tale, some are from the Danish "Knytlinga" and "Jomsvikinga" Sagas, which alone give us the age of Cnut on his accession to the throne, and recount the interception of Queen Emma by Thorkel's men on her projected flight. In the ordinary course of history the age of the wise king is disregarded, and the doings of the three great jarls are naturally enough credited to him, for after the first few years of confusion have been passed over, he takes his place as the greatest of our rulers since Alfred, and his age is forgotten in his wonderful policy.

The doings of Edric Streone are partly from the hints give by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and partly from the accounts of later English writers. But there is no chronicle of either English, Danish, or Norse origin which does not hold him and his treachery in the utmost scorn.

The account of the battle of Ashingdon follows the definite local traditions of the place. The line of the river banks have changed but little, and Cnut's earthworks still remain at Canewdon. The first battlefield is yet known, and they still tell how Eadmund was forced to fight on Ashingdon hill because his way across the ford was barred by the Danish ships, and how the pursuit of the routed English ended at Hockley.

Wulfnoth and his famous son Godwine are of course historic. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us how the earl was driven into sullen enmity with Ethelred by Streone's brother, and the Danish Sagas record Godwine's first introduction by Jarl Ulf to Cnut after the battle of Sherston.

As for the places mentioned in Redwald's story, the well on Caldbec hill still has its terrors for the village folk, and the destruction of the ancient mining village at Penhurst by the Danes is remembered yet with strange tales of treasure found among its stone buildings. The Bures folk still speak of the White Lady of the Mere, and their belief that Boadicea lies under the great mound is by no means unlikely to be a tradition of her true resting place.

C. W. WHISTLER

STOCKLAND, Nov. 1896.

Chapter 1: The Coming Of The Vikings.

All along our East Anglian shores men had watched for long, and now word had come from Ulfkytel, our earl, that the great fleet of Swein, the Danish king, had been sighted off the Dunwich cliffs, and once again the fear of the Danes was on our land.

And so it came to pass that I, Redwald, son of Siric, the Thane of Bures, stood at the gate of our courtyard and watched my father and our sturdy housecarles and freemen ride away down the hill and across the winding Stour river to join the great levy at Colchester. And when I had seen the last flash of arms sparkle from among the copses beyond the bridge, I had looked on Siric, my father, for the last time in this world, but no thought rose up in my mind that this might be so.

Yet if I stand now where I stood on that day, and see by chance the glimmer of bright arms through green boughs across the river, there comes to me a rush of sadness that dulls the bright May sunshine and the sparkle of the rippling water, and fills the soft May-time wind with sounds of mourning. Now to me it seems that I was thus sad at the time that is brought back to me. But I was not so. It is only the weight of long years of remembrance of what should have been had I known. At that parting I turned back into the hall downcast, only because my father had thought me not yet strong enough to ride beside him, and a little angry and hurt moreover, for I was broad and strong for my sixteen years.

Little thought I that in years to come I should remember all of that leave taking, even to the least thing that happened; but so it is. No man may rightly be said to forget aught. All that he has known and learnt is there, hidden up in his mind to come forth if there is anything that shall call it again to light.

Now my father lies resting among nameless heroes who died for England on Nacton Heath--I know not even which of the great mounds it may be that holds his bones--but he fell before the flight began when Thurketyl Mirehead played the craven. Neither victor nor vanquished was he when his end came, but maybe

that is the best end for a warrior after all. Some must fall, and some may live to boast, and some remain to mourn, but to give life for fatherland in hottest strife is good. That is what my father would have wished for himself, and I at least sorrow but for myself and not for him.

Now I have spoken of remembrance, and I will add this word--that some things in a man's life can never be set aside from his memory. Waking or sleeping they come back to him. Eight days after that going of my father came such a time to me, so that every least thing is clear to me today as then.

I sat plaiting a leash for my hounds on the settle before the fire in our great hall at Bures, and I remember how the strands of leather thong fell in my hand; I remember how my mother's spinning wheel stopped short with a snapping of broken threads; how the thrall who was feeding the fire stayed with the log in his hands; how the sleepy men at the lower end of the hall sprang up with heavy words checked on their lips before the lady's presence; how the maidens screamed--aye, and how the draught swayed the wall hangings, and sent a long train of sparks flying from a half-dead torch, as the great door was thrown open and a man flung himself into our midst, mud splashed and white faced, with hands that quivered towards us as he cried hoarsely:

"In haste, mistress--you must fly--the Danes--" and fell like a log at my mother's feet where she sat on the dais, neither moving nor speaking more.

It was Grinkel, the leader of our housecarles {1}. His armour was rent and gashed, and no sword was in the scabbard at his side, and his helm was gone, and now as he fell a bandage slipped from his arm, and slowly the red stream from a great wound ran among the sweet sedges wherewith the floor was strewn.

There came a mist before my eyes, and my heart beat thick and fast as I saw him; but my mother rose up neither screaming nor growing faint, though through her mind, as through mine, must have glanced the knowledge of all that this homecoming of brave Grinkel meant. She stepped from the high place to the warrior's side and hastily rebound the wound, telling the maidens meanwhile to bring wine that she might revive him if he were not already sped.

Then she rose up while the old steward took the wine and tried to force it between the close-set teeth, and she called the farm servants to her.

"Make ready all the horses and yoke the oxen to the wains," she said in a clear voice that would not tremble. "Send the lads to warn the village folk to fly beyond the river. For Grinkel comes not in this wise for nought. The Danes are on us."

Now I remember the grim faces of the men as they went, and I remember the look on the faces of the women as they heard, and in the midst of us seemed to lie terror itself glaring from the set eyes of the dead warrior. And of those memories I will say nought--I would not have them live in the minds of any by day and night as they lived in mine for many a long year thereafter. Many were the tales I had heard of the coming of Ingvar's host in the days of Eadmund our martyred king, who was crowned here at Bures in our own church, and those tales were terrible. Now the like was on us, and I saw that what I had heard was not the half.

The old steward rose up now, shaking his head in sorrow. I think he was too old for fear.

"Grinkel is dead, lady," he said gently, closing the wild eyes as he spoke, and then throwing a cloak from the wall over him. But my mother only said, "May he rest in peace. What of the Thane?"

Thereat the steward looked forthright into his lady's face, and spoke bravely for all around to hear:

"Doubtless the levy is broken for this once, and he bides with Earl Ulfkytel to gather a new and stronger force. The Thane has sent Grinkel on, and he has ridden in over-much haste for a wounded man. He was ever eager."

My mother gave back her old servant's look in silence, and seemed to assent. Yet I, though I was but a lad of sixteen, could see what passed in that look of theirs. I knew that surely my father had fallen, and that need was great for haste.

Then was hurry and hustle in the house as all that was most valuable was gathered, and I myself could but take my arms from the wall, and don mail-shirt and helm and sword and seax {2} and then look on, useless enough, with my thoughts in a whirl all the time.

Presently out of their tangle came one thing clearly to me, and that was that there were others whom I loved to be warned, besides the villagers.

My mother came into the hall again, and stood for a moment like a carven statue looking at the maidens who wrought at packing what they might. She had not wept, but in her face was written sorrow beyond weeping. Yet almost did she weep, when I stood beside her and spoke, putting my hand on her arm.

"Mother," I said, "I must go to Wormingford and warn them also. My horse will be ready, and I will return to you."

Then she looked at me, for as I go over these things I know that this was the first time that I had ever said to her "I must," without asking her leave, in aught that I would do. And she answered me calmly.

"Aye, that is a good thought. They will need help. Bide with them if need is, and so join us presently on the road. We will fly to London."

"So far, mother?" I said. "Surely Colchester will be safe."

"I will go to Ethelred the king," she answered. "He has ever been your father's friend, and will be yours. And I was the queen's maiden in the old days, and she will welcome me. Now go and bring Hertha to me."

She turned to her work, and I went out across the courtyard. Already the wains stood there, the teams of sleepy oxen tossing their long horns in the glare of torches. The church bell was clanging the alarm of fire to bring home the men from field or forest if any were abroad so late, for it was an hour after sunset, and there was no moon yet.

The gray horse that my father gave me a year ago stood ready saddled in the stall when I came to the stables. I went and loosed him, while a groom saw me and ran to help, and as I swung into the saddle I saw his face marked with new lines across his forehead.

"Do you fly first, master?" he said, with strange meaning in his voice.

"I go to Wormingford," I answered. "Likely enough, therefore, that I fly last," and I laughed.

"Aye, let me go, master, let me go," he said. "It is like that the Danes are on the road."

"Not yet," I said, touched by question and offer alike. "There is many a mile between here and Ipswich, and I think that to go to Wormingford is my work, surely."

So I rode away fast, seeing in the valley below me the lights of the house that I sought. As I had said, the errand was indeed mine.

For at the great house just across the river below the hills lived the one who should be my wife in the days to come--Hertha, daughter of Osgod, the Thane of Wormingford. It was now three years since we had been betrothed with all solemnity in our church, and that had seemed but fit and right, for we were two children who had played together since we could run hand in hand. And my mother had been as a mother also to little Hertha since she was left with only her father to tend her.

Our house and Osgod's were akin, though not near, for we both traced our line from Redwald the first Christian king of East Anglia, whose name I bore. Hertha was two years younger than I.

Now Osgod the Thane had ridden away to the war with my father, and unless he had returned with Grinkel, Hertha was alone in the house with her old nurse and the farm servants. Most surely she would have been at Bures with us but for some spring-time sickness which was among the village children, and from which my mother sought to keep her free. It might be that the thane had returned, but it was in my mind that the manner of Grinkel's coming boded ill to all of us.

So I rode on quickly down the hill towards the river. I knew not how near the Danes might be, but I thought little of them, until suddenly through the dusk I saw a red point of fire flicker and broaden out into flame on a hilltop eastward, where I knew a beacon fire was piled against need. And then from every point along the Stour valley beacon after beacon flashed out in answer, until all the countryside was full of them; and I hurried on more swiftly than before.

Our hall stood on the hill crest above church and village, beyond the reach of

creeping river mist and sudden floods, and I rode down the track that crosses the lower road and so comes to the ford below Osgod's place on the Essex side of the river. And when I came to the crossing my horse pricked his ears and snorted, so that I knew there were horsemen about, and I reined up and waited in the lane.

I could hear the quick hoofbeats of two steeds, and all the air was full of the sound of alarm bells, for the evening was very still.

Then up the road from eastward rode two men at an easy gallop, and my horse's manner told me that a stable mate of his was coming, so I feared no longer but went into the main road to meet them.

"What news?" I cried, and they halted.

"It is the young master," said one, and I knew the voice of Edred, our housecarle. And when he was close to me I could see that he was in almost as evil plight as had been Grinkel his comrade. The other man I knew not, but he bore a headless spear shaft in his hand, and Edred's shield had a great gash across it.

"Master, has Grinkel come?" Edred asked me.

"Aye, and is dead. He bade us fly, and could say no more. What of my father?"

The men looked at one another for a moment, and then Edred said very sadly:

"Woe is me that I must be the bearer of heavy tidings to you and the lady your mother. But what is true is true and must be told. Never has such a battle been fought in East Anglia, and the fortune of war has gone against us."

The fear that I had read in my mother's eyes fell cold on me at those words- and I asked again, longing and fearing to know the worst:

"What of the thane, my father?"

"Master, he fell with the first," Edred answered with a breaking of his voice. "Nor might we bring him from the place where he fell. For the Danes swept us

from the field at the last like dead leaves in the wind, and there was nought left us but to fly. Two long hours we fought first, and then came flight. They say one man began it. I know not; but it was no man of ours. Now the Danes are marching hitherwards to Colchester."

"What of Osgod of Wormingford?" I asked.

"He lies beside our lord. There is a ring of slain round them. I would I were there also," the warrior answered.

"Then were there one less to care for our helpless ones," I said. "All are preparing for flight at Bures. Come with me to Wormingford, and we will warn them. There is work to do for us who are left."

"Aye, master, that is right," he said; "we may fight again and wipe out this business."

Then the other man, who belonged to Sudbury, five miles beyond us, bade us farewell, and so rode on with his tale of terror, and Edred followed me across the ford to Osgod's house, which was but a mile from where we met. He told me that Grinkel had found a fresh horse in Stoke village, and so had outstripped him.

Many thralls stood at the gate of Osgod's courtyard as we came there, and they were staring at the beacon fires around us, and listening to the wild bells that rang so strangely. There was a fire blazing now on the green before our own house, and one on the hill above the Wormingford mere, which men say is haunted.

"I would see your mistress," I said as they came and held my horse. I had not been to the house for two days, as it chanced.

Then one ran and brought the house steward, and told him.

"I know not if that may be, master," he said; "but I will ask Dame Gunnhild."

"Has the lady gone to rest?" I said, being surprised at this delay.

"She is not well" the man said; "and the dame has not suffered her to rise today."

"Then let me have speech with the dame without delay," I said, for this made me uneasy, seeing what need there was for speedy flight.

The steward went in, and I bade the thralls do all that Edred ordered them, telling him to see to what was needed for flight and so I went into the house, and stood by the hall fire waiting for Gunnhild the nurse.

There is nothing in all that wide hall that I cannot remember clearly, even to a place where the rushes were ill strewn on the floor. And the short waiting seemed very long to me.

Then came Gunnhild. She was old, and I feared her, for men said that she was a witch. But she had been in the house of Osgod the Thane since he himself was a child, and Hertha loved her, and that was enough for me. Nor had I any reason to think that the dame had any but friendly feelings towards myself, though her bright eyes and tall figure, and most of all what was said of her, feared me, as I say. Now she came towards me swiftly, and did not wait for me to speak first.

"What will you at this hour, Redwald?" she said.

"Nought but pressing need bade me come thus," I answered. "The levy is broken, and the Danes are on the way to Colchester. My mother flies to London, and you and Hertha must do likewise."

"So your father and hers are slain," she said, looking fixedly at me, and standing very still.

"How know you that?" I asked sharply, for I had told the steward nothing.

"By your face, Redwald," she said; "you were but a boy two days ago, now you have a man's work on your hands, and you will do it. Who bade you ride here?"

"No one," I said, wondering, "needs must that I should come."

"That is as I thought," she said; "but we cannot fly."

"Why not?"

"Because the sickness that your mother feared is on Hertha, and she cannot go."

Now I was ready to weep, but that would be of no use.

"Is there danger to her?" I said, and I could not keep my voice from shaking, for Hertha was all the sister I had, and she in time would be nearer than that to me.

"None," answered the dame, "save she runs risk of chill. For she has been fevered for a while."

"Which is most to be feared," said I, "chill, or risk of Danish cruelty?"

She made no answer, but asked me what were my mother's plans. And when I said that she would fly to Ethelred the king, the old nurse laughed strangely to herself.

"Then you go to the very cause of all this trouble," she said. "Truly the king's name should be 'the Unredy', for rede he has none. It is his ill counsel that has brought Swein the Dane on us. We have to pay for the Hock-tide slayings {3}."

"We had no share in that" I said.

"No, because half our folk are Danes, more or less, some of the men of Ingvar and Guthrum. But Swein will not care for that--they are all English to him."

"What will you do, then?" I asked, growing half wild that she should stand there quietly and plan nought.

"These folk will side with Swein presently, when they find that he is the stronger, and then the old kinship will wake in them, and the Wessex king will be nought to their minds. Then will be peace here, for the Danes will sweep on to Mercia and London. Do you go to Ethelred the Unredy--and I abiding here shall be the safer in the end, and Hertha with me."

"But peace has not come yet" I said.

"I can hide until it does come," she said. And then, for my face must have shown all the doubt that I felt, she spoke very kindly to me. "Trust the old witch who wishes you well, Redwald, my son; she who has nursed Hertha for so long will care for her till the last; safe she will be until you return to find her when the foolishness of Ethelred is paid for."

"Where can you hide?" I asked, and urged her to tell me more, but she would not do so.

"No man would dream of the hiding place that I shall seek," she said, "and I will tell it to none. Then will it be the surer."

"I know all this country," I answered. "There is no place."

She smiled faintly, and paused a little, thinking.

"I will tell you this," she said at last. "You go to the king; well--I go to the queen. That is all you may know. But maybe it will be enough to guide you someday."

I could not understand what she meant; nor would she tell me more. Only she said that all would be safe, and that I need fear nothing either for Hertha or for herself.

"My forbears were safe in that place to which I go," she said; "and I alone know where it is. When the time comes, Hertha shall tell you of it but that must wait for the days to be."

"I fear they will be long. Let me see Hertha before I go," I said, "for I must needs be content."

"How looked she when last you saw her?"

"Well, and bright, and happy," I answered.

"Keep that memory of her therefore," Gunnhild said. "I would not have you see her in sickness, nor may she be waked without danger. Tell your mother that surely if she could take Hertha with her it should be so, but it may not be. She would be harmed by a long journey."

The old nurse turned and left me as swiftly as she had come. And now it is in my mind that she went thus lest she should weep. So I was alone in the hall, and there was no more left for me to do. I must even let things be as she would. It came into my thought that she was right about our half-Danish folk, for though they had fought to keep the newcomers from the land that their fathers had won, Swein was no foreigner, and they would as soon own him as Ethelred of Wessex, if he got the upper hand and would give them peace. Even we Angles never forgot that the race of Ecgberht was Saxon and not of our own kin altogether. The Dane was as near to us as the Wessex king, save by old comradeship, and the ties that had come with years.

So all that Edred and I could do was to bid the steward take his orders from Gunnhild, and so ride back to Bures along the riverside track. And when we came there the long train of flying people were crossing the bridge, and we rode past them one by one, and the sight of those wain loads of helpless women and children was the most piteous I had ever seen. Many such another train was I to look on in the years to come, but none ever wrung my heart as this, for I knew every face so well. Yet I thought they would be safe, for the Danes were far off yet, and there was full time to gain the depths of the forest land on the East Saxon side.

Now, our people had gone on more quickly than the villagers by reason of better cattle and more hands to the work, and when we had passed the foremost of these, the road went up the hill and no man was upon it. So we went quickly, and then came one on foot towards the village, and just beyond him were our folk, whom he had passed or left.

It was good Father Ailwin, our old priest, and I thought that he sought me, or took back some word to others and I would ride back for him.

"What is it, Father?" I cried, "I will do your errand."

"Nay, my son, you cannot," he said; "your mother drew me to fly with her, and my weakness bade me do it for a while. But I may not leave my place. The Danes are not all heathen as they were in Eadmund's days, and I think that I am wrong to go. When our folk come back they must find their priest waiting for them."

Then I strove to turn him again to flight with us, but I could not, and at last he commanded me to desist and leave him. And so he gave me his blessing, and I went, being sure that he would be slain, and weeping therefore, for I loved him well. But I told him of Dame Gunnhild's words, and begged him to seek her and speak with her, for she might hide him also for a while if he would not leave the place altogether.

So we left our home, and that was the last time I set eyes on our hall at Bures. Then I caught up my mother hard by the dark wood that is round the great solemn mound that we say is the tomb of Boadicea, the Icenian queen of the men who fought against Rome. We call it haunted, and none of us dare set foot in those woods, by day even.

The beacon fires burnt all round us, and in every farmstead was terror and hustle as the poor folk trembled to think what they could mean, and some came now and then and asked my mother what they should do.

"Bide in your homes till you must needs take to the woods," she said; and that was wise counsel, and many were glad thereafter that they took it, for the Danes passed them by.

Now I remember all that happened on our journey to London along the great Roman road that runs from Colchester thither, but there is little to tell thereof, for it was safe and we hardly hurried after the first day. We rested at the house of a thane who was well known to us on the first evening, and there my mother heard from Edred all that had befallen. And she bore the heavy tidings well, for she had already given up any hope that my father still lived. Yet as I look back I know that she was never the same after that day.

So we came in safety to London, and to the court of Ethelred our king, and there we were most kindly received, for my father was well known to the king, and the queen loved my mother for the sake of old days. They gave us lodging near the great house where the court was held, and on the third day after we came, we were bidden to the king's presence.

Then it was that I looked on Ethelred for the first time, and I had thought that a king should have been more kingly than he. For there was no command in his face, and he moved quickly and with little meaning in what he did, being restless

in his way. But he put his hand on my shoulder very kindly, and looked in my face and said:

"One may know that this is the son of Siric, my friend. He is like what the good thane was in the old days. What shall I do for him, lady?"

Now, my mother would have answered, but I was not afraid of this handsome, careless-looking man, and I had my own wishes in the matter. So I spoke for myself.

"Make me a warrior, lord king. I would fain fight the Danes, and already I can use sword and spear, and can ride."

Then my mother spoke hastily and almost weeping, being broken down with all her trouble and the long journey.

"I would have him serve Holy Church rather, in some monastery. Already he can read and write, my king, for I have had him taught in hopes that this might be."

Thereat the king shook his head, and walked away to the window for a minute. Then he came back quickly and said, not looking at my mother:

"Holy Church will be best served by warriors who will use carnal arms against Swein's heathen just now. The boy is right--I would that there were more who had his spirit. We need and shall need those who love fighting."

Then he said to me:

"Siric your father had a wondrous sword that I used to envy him; you shall learn to use it."

"Lord king," I answered, "I must learn to win it back from the Danes, who have it now."

I thought the king changed countenance a little at that, and he bit his lip.

"We have been well beaten in East Anglia," he said as if to himself. "Here is truth from this boy at least."

Now, if Ethelred did not know that our men had been so scattered by the Danes that they could not even ask for truce to recover their slain, it seemed plain even to me that the king was ill-served in some way. But I could say nought; and after that he bade us farewell for the time.

So it came to pass that he gave me a place among the thanes' sons of his own court and there I was well trained in all that would make me a good warrior. Soon I had many friends, and best of all I loved the athelings, Eadmund and Eadward, who soon took notice of me, the one because I was never weary of weapon play, and the other, Eadward, who was somewhat younger than I, because of the learning that our good priest of Bures had taken such pains to teach me against my will. For above all things Eadmund loved the craft of the warrior, and Eadward all that belonged to peace.

Chapter 2: Olaf The King.

My mother lived but a few months after that flight of ours; but at least she knew before she died that Bertha was safe. What the old nurse had foreseen had come to pass. The half-Danish and Danish folk of the East Angles owned Swein as king, though not willingly, and a housecarle from Wormingford made his way to us with word from Gunnhild that set our minds at rest. Truly our hall and Osgod's had been burnt by parties from the Danish host, and for a time the danger was great, for Swein's vengeance for his sister's death was terrible.

Now the land was poorer, but in peace. Yet Hertha would keep in hiding till we might see how things went, for the Danes might be forced back, and when a Danish host retreats it hinders pursuit by leaving a desert in its wake. Many a long year will it be before those Danish pathways are lost to sight again. They seem to be across every shire of our land.

So I lived on in Ethelred's court now in one town and now in another, as the long struggle bade us shift either to follow or fly the Danes; and presently the memory both of my mother and Hertha grew dim, for wartime and new scenes age and harden a youth very quickly. Soon I might ride at the side of Eadmund the Atheling to try to stay the march of Swein through England; and many were the fights I saw with him, until I was the only one left of all the youths who had been my comrades at first, and Eadmund had won his name of "Ironsides" in bravest hopeless struggle.

I grew to be a close and trusted friend of his, and so at last amidst the trouble that was all round us in those heavy times the remembrance of Hertha became but as part of a childhood that was long gone, and I thought of her but as of the little one with whom I had played in the old days beside the quiet Stour. There were none left to remind me of her, for one by one my few Bures men had fallen, and Edred, who had been my servant at the court, gave his life for mine in my first battle. Into Swein's East Anglia our levies never made their way.

What need for me to say aught of those three years of warfare? Their tale is

written in fire over all the fair face of England. For nothing checked Swein Forkbeard until step by step the Danish hosts closed on London, and at last even the brave citizens were forced to yield to him. Then Ethelred our king must needs fly from his throne, and leave the land to its Danish master.

Yet it was true, as Eadmund the Atheling said, that the Dane was but master of the land, and not of the English people. Even today my mind is full of wondering honour for those sullen Saxon levies of ours who for three years bore defeat after defeat at the hands of the trained and hardened veterans of the north, uncomplaining and unbent. What wonder if at last we were wearied out and must hold our hands for a while?

So now when I was nineteen, and looking and feeling many years older by reason of the long stress of warfare and trouble, I was at Rouen, in Normandy, at the court of our queen's brother, Richard the Duke. To him Ethelred had fled at the last and there, too, were the queen and the athelings, good Abbot Elfric of Peterborough, and a few more of the court, besides myself. Ethelred had hoped to gain some help from the duke; but he could only give us shelter in our need, for he had even yet to hold the land that Rolf, his forefather, had won against his neighbours, and could spare us not one of his warriors.

So in Rouen we waited and watched for some new turn of things that might give us fresh hopes of regaining our own land. Yet it was a weary waiting for one knew not what; and Ethelred the king grew moody and despairing as the days went on, and there seemed to be no help.

But Eadmund was ever planning for return, and was restless, riding down to each ship that came into the river to hear what news might be, until the winter set in, and we must needs wait until springtime brought the traders again from the English shores.

Only Elfgiva the queen, whom her own people call Emma, was well content to be in her own land again for a while, though one might easily see that she sorely grieved for the loss of her state as the queen of England. And Eadward the Atheling loved to be among the wondrous buildings of the Norman land, spending long hours with the learned men, and planning many good things to be wrought in England when times of peace should come once more. And in these plannings Elfric the abbot was ever ready to help him, and the more, as I think,

that to hear of their thoughts of return to England, and of happier times, would cheer our king. For Elfric would never allow but that we were here for a short while only, saying that England would yet rise up refreshed, and sweep the Danes into the sea, from whence they came.

"Else why should I have given all that I have--even five hundred pounds--for St. Florentine his body (wanting the head, in truth, but I might not have that), if I were not sure that I should take it home for the greater glory of St. Peter's church at Medehamstede {4} presently? Answer me that, lord king, and be not so downhearted."

This he said one day, being full of his purchase, and I think that the cheerfulness of the good man helped our king.

"Verily, Redwald, my son," the abbot said to me, "if I get not St. Florentine home, I think my money is not lost. The king waxes more hopeful when he sees the shrine waiting to be taken overseas."

Nor could I say for myself that I was not pleased with the stay in Rouen. For I had never known the fierce joy of victory, and the rest from the long tale of defeat was good to me. Yet I set myself to learn all that I could of the splendid weapon craft of the Norman warriors, for I thought that I should yet need in England all I could learn. And the new life and scenes pleased me well, for I was young enough to let the cares of our poor land slip from my mind for a while.

So the long winter wore away, and at last the season came when we might look for the first ships of the year, and with them news from England. Then Eadmund would go to the haven at the mouth of the great river Seine that runs to Rouen, so that he should be at hand to hear the first tidings that came. Glad enough was I to go with him, and we took up our quarters in a great house that belonged to the duke at the town they call "The Haven," and there waited, ever watching the long gray sea line for a coming sail.

But none came until the first week in March, when the wind blew steadily from the northeast, and the sky was clear and bright with promise of open weather. Then at last we saw eight ships together heading for the haven, and that sight was more welcome than I can say.

When they came near we knew that they were no traders, but long dragon ships, and at first we thought they were Danish vikings; and the townsmen armed in haste and mustered along the wharves to prevent their landing, if they came on their wonted errand of plunder. And eagerly enough did Eadmund and I join them, only hoping for another blow at our foes, and having no thought in our minds that the ships we watched were bringing us more hope than we dared long for.

Next I knew that these ships were like no Danish vessels that I had ever seen, but were far more handsome, both in build and fittings. Nor did they fly the terrible raven banner as most Danes were wont. Then it was not long before the lines of armed townsmen broke up their ranks and crowded down to the wharves to greet the ships in all friendliness, for they were Norse, as it would seem, and the Norse viking is ever welcome in the land that Rolf Ganger, the viking, won for himself.

So the ships came into the harbour, brave with gilded dragon heads and sails striped with bright colours, all fresh from their winter quarters, and Eadmund turned away, for he thought that they would be Swein's men, of the host of Thorkel the Norseman, his great captain, and foster father of Cnut his son. For Swein held Norway as well as Denmark, and many Norsemen followed him. Thorkel's host was that which slew Elfheah, the good archbishop of Canterbury, whom his monks called Elphege, but last year.

That, too, was the thought of the seamen to whom I spoke when the ships were yet distant, and so we went back to the hall heavy and disappointed. We would not speak to these men, knowing that from Thorkel's folk we should but hear boasting of Swein's victories.

But presently the steward came into the hall, where we sat silently listening to the shouts of the men as they berthed the ships, and he said that the leader of the vikings would see and speak with Eadmund himself.

"Is he Thorkel, or Thorkel's man?" answered the atheling, "for if he be, I will not see him."

"No, lord," said the steward, "he is one who has no dealings with the Danes. He will not tell me his name, but I think that he is a great man of some kind."

"Not a great man, but thick," said a kindly voice of one who stood without. "If hatred of Danes will pass me into Eadmund's presence, I may surely enter."

And then there came into the doorway a man who was worth more than a second look. Never had I seen one to whom the name of king seemed to belong so well by right as to this man, whatever his rank might be. He stood and looked round for a moment, as if the dim light from the high windows was not enough to show him where we were at first, and I could not take my eyes from him.

He was not tall, but very square of shoulder and deep of chest, with mighty arms that were bare, save for their heavy gold bracelets, below the sleeves of his ring mail, and his hair and beard were golden red and very long. He wore a silvered helm, whereon was inlaid a golden cross above a narrow gold circlet that was round its rim, and his hand rested on the hilt of such a priceless sword as is told of in the old tales of the heroes. But I forgot all these things as I looked into his pleasant weatherbeaten face, and saw the kindly look in the gray eyes that I knew would flash most terribly in fight. He was twenty-five years old, as I thought; but therein I was wrong, for he was just my own age, though looking so much older.

"I am Olaf Haraldsson--Olaf Digri, the Thick, as men call me," he said. "Some call me king, though I rule but over a few ships, as a sea king. Which of you thanes is Eadmund the Atheling?"

Then Eadmund rose up from his place, and went towards the king. His seat had been in shadow, else there had been no need to ask which was he.

"I have heard of you, King Olaf," he said, "for your deeds are sung in our land already. And you are most welcome. Have you news from England?"

So those two grasped each other's hands, and I think there were no two other such men living at that time. It was good to see them together.

"Aye," said the king, "I have been in England, and therefore I have come to find you. Swein is dead, and your chance has come. Let me help you to win your land again."

That was plain speaking, and for the moment Eadmund held his breath, and

could not speak for sheer surprise and gladness. But I could not forbear leaping up and shouting, tossing my helm in the air as I did so, so wondrous was all this to me, and so full of hope.

At that Olaf laughed, and leaving Eadmund to his thoughts, turned to me.

"Which of the athelings are you?" he asked. "I have heard of Eadmund's brothers," and he held out his strong hand to take mine.

"I am but the atheling's comrade--his servant, rather," I said, growing red as I did so, for I had surely forgotten myself in my gladness.

"Redwald is no servant, King Olaf," said Eadmund quickly. "He is my closest comrade here, and has fought well at my side. Thane of Bures in East Anglia he is--but now the Danes hold his place."

"Why then," said Olaf, "Thoralf's grandson surely?"

"Aye, king," I answered, wondering; "my grandfather was named Thoralf. He was one of Olaf Tryggvesson's chiefs."

"Then have I found a cousin," laughed the king. "Give me your hand, kinsman," and he looked me over from head to foot, but very kindly.

I took the king's hand gladly, but somewhat dazed in my mind at being thus owned. And Olaf saw that I was so, and told me more.

"Asta, my good mother, was this Thoralf's cousin, and we Norsemen do not lose count of our kin. So I knew well that Thoralf found an English home and wife when Olaf Tryggvesson was first in England, and that he was Thane of Bures by some right of his lady. So I knew, when I heard your name and place, that I had found a kinsman. And I have so few that I am glad."

Now I knew that this was true, but we had never thought much of Thoralf, rather priding ourselves on his wife's long descent from King Redwald. I wished for the first time now that I knew more of this Norse grandfather of mine.

"Presently we will find Rani, my foster father, who is with the ships," said Olaf; "he knew Thoralf well. You and I must see much of one another, cousin."

Then he turned to Eadmund, who was, as it seemed, well pleased that I had found so good a friend. And he said:

"Forgive me if I have forgotten greater matters for a moment. But I cannot greet a kinsman coldly, and it is in my mind that Redwald is a cousin worth finding, if I may judge by the way in which he hailed my news."

"Truly," said Eadmund, "I am minded to do as he did, now that I have taken all the wonder of it in. But it seems over good to be true--Swein dead--and your offered help!"

Then they both laughed, well content, and so Eadmund called the steward, and wine and meat were set for the king, and they sat down and talked, as he ate with a sailor's hunger. But I listened not to their talk, my mind being over full of this good fortune of my own. I had none left of my own kin, and till today I had been as it were alone.

Presently, however, I heard an East Anglian name that was dear to me. Eadmund asked how it was that Swein Forkbeard had died, for none thought that his end was yet to be thought of as near. Now it would seem that he had gone suddenly.

"He was at Gainsborough," said Olaf, "and he was about to make his way south to Eadmund's burg. Whereon men say that to save his town and shrine the holy martyr, King Eadmund, whom Ingvar slew, thrust Swein through with an iron lance. Some say that he slew him otherwise, but all agree as to his slayer. And now I think that England will rise."

"What of Cnut, Swein's son?" asked Eadmund.

"He is but a boy. What he may be in a few years' time I know not. With him it will be as with myself. I was given a ship when I was twelve years old, and thereafter all that my men did goes to my credit in the mouths of the scalds. Yet my men and I know well that Rani, my foster father, whom you will soon know, was the real captain and leader for the first three or four years."

Then said Eadmund:

"Cnut is of no account."

Olaf laughed a little, and answered:

"Cnut's own arm may be of little strength, but his name is on the lips of every Dane. There are three chiefs who will hold the kingdom in his name, and they are the men whom you must meet: Thorkel the High, his foster father; Ulf Sprakalegsson the jarl, his brother-in-law; and Eirik the jarl, whose brother Homing holds London even now. Good men and loyal they are, and what they do Cnut does."

"I have three chiefs in my mind who can match these," said our atheling. "Olaf the king, and Ulfkytel of East Anglia, and Edric Streone, my foster father."

Then Olaf looked in the face of Eadmund, as it seemed to me in surprise, and made no answer.

"Are we not equal then?" asked the atheling.

"I have heard that Edric Streone is on the Danish side," said Olaf. "Cannot Utred of Northumbria be trusted?"

"Edric has but sought rest, from need," answered Eadmund. "I know not what else he could do at last. He will join us again as soon as we land. So also will Utred."

"Then we are equal," said the king, while a cloud seemed to pass from his face, for Streone led all Mercia, and were he in truth on our side things would go well. It was no very secret talk among some of us that Edric the earl had made peace sooner than might have been, but that angered Eadmund and the king sorely if so much were even hinted.

"Then you will indeed help us?" said Eadmund, for Olaf had accepted the place he had named for him as it were.

"I have a debt to England that I can never repay," answered the king gravely. "She gave us our first teachers in the Christian faith. And Swein has held Norway, my own land, with the help of the heathen jarls who are yet there. I fight the fight of the Cross, therefore, and when I go back to my own land, it will be to sweep away the last worship of Odin and Thor. But the time has not come

yet," and his eyes shone strangely.

"When it comes I will help you," said Eadmund, "if it may be that I can do so."

"I know it, and I thank you; but it is my thought that I shall need no help," said the king, while the look on his face was very wondrous, so that I had never seen the like. It minded me of the pictures of St. Stephen that I saw in a great church here with Abbot Elfric and Eadward. Then he spoke of the spread of the Faith in Norway, and how that he would be the one who should finish what Olaf Tryggvesson, his cousin, had begun; and one might see that he longed for power and kingship only for that work.

Long did those two warriors talk before they turned to lighter matters, and in the end they planned to ride to Rouen to see the king himself on the next day. But before night fell there came more news with another ship that came alone into the haven. And she was English, bearing messengers from the great witan itself.

These thanes told Eadmund their news, and it was this:

That Cnut had been hailed as king by the Danish host at Gainsborough, but that the English people begged Ethelred to return to them, promising that a good force should be ready to meet him on his landing. Already the London folk had planned a rising there and in the great towns against the Thingmen, as the Danish paid garrisons were called, and it was likely that this had by this time come about.

So at once Eadmund went with these thanes to Rouen, and Olaf would have me bide with him till word came from the king as to the next doings.

That was a pleasant time to me, for I grew to love Olaf, and he was never willing that I should be far from him. Then, too, I heard many tales of my grandfather Thoralf from Rani, the old viking who had fought beside him, and had been with Tryggvesson when he was christened in England. And of all Olaf's men I liked best Ottar the Black, the scald, who was but five years older than myself, but who had yet seen much fighting with the king both by land and sea. We sang much together, for I was willing to learn from him, and he to teach

me.

Now of this singing there is one thing that I will set down, for the matter comes into my story again.

One day Ottar sang the saga of the sword of Hiorvard; how the maiden warrior won it from the grave mound of her father, Angantyr, in spite of terror of the dead hero, and of the unearthly fires. That was a good saga, and when it was ended old Rani said:

"Thoralf had a sword that was won by his father from a chief's grave mound in Vendland, It was the most wondrous sword, save only Olaf's 'Hneitir' yonder, that I have ever seen. Silver and gold was its hilt, and the blade was wrought in patterns on the steel, and there were runes in gold close to the hilt. He would call it 'Foe's Bane', and that in truth was what the sword was."

I knew only too well that that sword became my father's in his turn, and now it was lost to me.

"My father fell with sword 'Foe's Bane' in his hand," I said sadly. "Yet I know that the name was not belied ere he did so."

"Then the Danes have it," said Rani, "and it will come back to you."

I remembered that Ethelred himself had spoken of the sword, and how I had made his face fall when he heard that it was lost. Nor had I been long at court before I heard words from one thane or another that seemed to say that Edric Streone had made light of our defeat, for some reasons of his own.

"I must win it back," I said.

"If there is aught in old sayings," answered Ottar, "the sword will draw its holder to face you, unless he won it in fair fight hand to hand."

Thereat Olaf laughed, and no more was said. But in years to come there were told strange tales of the longing, as it were, of his own sword 'Hneitir' to be back at its master's side.

So the time went quickly for me, but to Olaf the waiting seemed long before

Eadmund rode back from Rouen. And with him came those thanes and his half-brother Eadward, but Ethelred himself was not with them. He would not go to England, fearing treachery as it seemed; but Eadward was to go over and meet the witan and speak with them. Yet the thanes said that without the king no force would move.

"Why does he not go?" said Olaf impatiently. "Here is time lost when a sudden blow would win all."

"Because he is Ethelred the Unredy," answered Eadmund shortly, for he was very angry at the delay.

Then was another waiting, but Eadward was very wise though he was so young, being but twelve years old at this time, and he had Elfric the abbot with him, and at last word came from him that all was going well. Then Ethelred made up his mind and listened to Olaf's counsel.

"Strike at London," he said. "We know that the citizens are ever loyal."

They had risen, as it seemed, and had slain many of the thingmen, and Heming, Thorkel's brother, himself. That had but brought on them hardships and a stronger garrison, while Ethelred wavered and would not come.

At last Ethelred gathered what few men would follow him from Normandy and sailed to go to Southampton, and so to Winchester. Richard the Duke gave him a few ships and men enough to man them. Then Olaf, as it was planned, would sail up the Thames in such time as to meet the king's land force at London on a certain day, and thus take the city by a double attack. And Olaf asked that I might sail with him.

That Eadmund gladly agreed to, saying that we should meet on London Bridge shortly, and so I saw him set out full of hope, and then waited with Olaf for the short time that he would yet stay before sailing. He would not reach the Thames too early lest London should be held in too great force for us, and it was his plan that we should sail up the great river too suddenly for any new Danish force to be gathered.

Now on the evening before we sailed Olaf the king was restless, and silent

beyond his wont at the feasting before departure, and he seemed to take little pleasure even in the songs of Ottar the scald, though the men praised them loudly. I thought it likely that some foreboding was on him, and that is no good sign before a fight.

So presently I spoke to Rani, asking him if aught ailed the king. Whereat he answered, smiling:

"Nought ails him but longing to be sword to sword with these old foes of ours. This is his way, ever. If he were gay as Biorn the marshal yonder I might wonder at him maybe."

But presently Olaf rose up and bade Rani take his place, saying that he would go down to the ships to see that all was well. And then he beckoned me to follow him, and we went down the long hall together. It would seem that this was no new thing that he should leave the feast there, for the little hush that fell as we passed the long tables lasted no long time, and the men seemed not surprised. Indeed King Olaf had little love for sitting over the ale cup, and no man was more careful to see to all things about his ships and men than he.

The great doors closed after us, and we stood in the white moonlight for a moment. The air was cold and sharp after the warmth of the crowded hall. Down in the harbour the water was quiet enough, but outside a fair breeze was blowing from the southwest.

"The wind will hold, and will serve us well," said Olaf. "Who of all the Danish hosts will deem that such a wind is bringing fire and sword on them from across the sea?"

Then he folded his cloak round him and we went down to the harbour, where the long line of ships lay side by side along the wharf with their bows shoreward. The great dragon stem heads towered over us, shining strangely in the moonlight, and the gentle send of the waves into the harbour made them sway and creak as though they were coming to life.

"The dragons are restless as I," he said looking up at them.

"Tomorrow, hungry ones--tomorrow--then shall you and I be set free to meet

wind and wave and foe again."

Then one of the men on watch began to sing, and his song was an old sea stave that had a swing and roll in its rough tune that was like the broken surge of sea water, even while it was timed to the fall of oar blades into the surf. One may not say how old those songs are that the seamen sing.

"That is the dragon's answer," said the king to me. "Sing, Redwald, and take your part."

So when the man came to the part where all should join, I took up the song with him, and then many others of the men joined in--some five or six in each ship.

"That is good," said Olaf, laughing softly. "Here are men whose hearts are light."

The man who sang first came now and looked over the high bows of the ship, and his figure was black against the moonlight.

"Ho, master scald!" he cried in his great voice, "now shall you sing the rest. You have put me out of conceit with my own singing. Why are you not at the feast, where I would be if I were not tied here!"

"He is keeping the dragons awake," laughed the king. "Nor do I think that even a feast would take you from the ship just as the tide is on the turn."

"Maybe not, lord king," answered the man, lifting his hand in salute. "But the dragons will be wakeful enough--never fear for them."

So the king answered back cheerily, and other men came and listened, and so at last he turned away, leaving the men who loved him pleased and the happier for his coming thus.

Now I thought that we should have gone back to the hall; but Olaf walked away from the town, going along the shore. The tide was just out, and the flow would soon begin. Soon we lost sight of the last lights from the houses, and still he went on, and I followed him, not speaking, for I knew not what plans he was making.

At last we came to a place to which I had not been before, and it was lonely enough. The forest came down to the beach, and the land was low and sheltered between the hills. There the king stayed, sitting down on a fallen tree and resting his chin on his hand, as he looked out over the water with grave eyes that seemed to see far beyond the tossing waves.

I rested beside him, and there we bided silent for an hour or more. There was only the sound of the wind in the storm-twisted trees behind us, and of the waves as they broke along the edge of the bare sands, where a few waking sea birds ran and piped unseen by us. Almost had I slept with those well-known sounds in my ears.

Then suddenly the king lifted his head, and spoke one word to me:

"Listen," he said.

I roused, but all that I could hear at first were the sounds that I had forgotten--the song of the wind in the trees, the rush of the breakers, and the cry of the sea birds across the sands.

Then my heart began to beat wildly, for out of these sounds, or among them, began to come clearly, and yet more clearly the sound of the tread of many armed feet--the passing of a mighty host--and with that the thunder of the war song, and the cry of those who bade farewell. And these sounds passed over us and around us, going seawards; then they died away out towards the north, and were gone.

Yet still the king listened, and again came the tramp of the armed thousands, and the war song, and the voices of parting, and they passed, and came, and passed yet once more.

Then after the third time there was nought but the sound of wind and wave and sea fowl, and I drew closer to Olaf and asked him:

"What is this that we hear?"

"Wait," he said, and pointed seaward.

Then I looked, and I saw all the northern sky glow red as glows the light of a

burning town on the low clouds when the host that has fired it looks back on its work. And plain and clear in the silver moonlight against the crimson sky sat the wraith of a king, throned on the sand at the very water's edge, and round him stood shadowy nobles, looking seaward.

And even as I saw it the first wave of the rising tide sent its edge of foam shorewards, and it surged around the kingly feet and sapped the base of the throne, and the stately wraith turned and looked upon the nobles, and was gone.

Then faded the red light from the sky, and the waves washed over the place where the throne and court had been, and Olaf rose up and looked in my face. Nor was there fear of what he had seen and heard written in his quiet look.

"What is this, my king?" I said, trembling with the fear that comes of things beyond our ken.

"It is the fate of England that is falling on her," he said quietly.

"Read it me, for I fear what I have heard and seen," I said.

"We have heard the going of mighty hosts to England, and we have heard the sound of farewell. But we have heard no shout of victory, or wailing for defeat. Little therefore will be gained or lost by this sailing of ours. Yet all is surely lost if we sail not."

Then he ceased, but he had not yet spoken of what we saw, and I waited for his words. Yet still he stood silent, and looked out over the sea, until I was fain to ask him what the vision meant.

"Surely it was the wraith of a son of Swein that we saw," he said; "but it will be long years ere Cnut bears that likeness, for that was of a man full grown and mighty."

Now the reading of this was beyond me, for I have no skill in these matters, as had Olaf. And he said nought for a little while, but seemed to ponder over it.

"Now I know," said he at last. "What we have seen is the outcome of the going of the hosts to England. There shall be a Danish kingdom built upon sand. Cnut shall reign, but his throne shall fall. The wave of English love for England's

kings of her own race cannot be stayed."

Then I was downcast, for hope that the Danes would be driven from the land had filled all my mind, and I said:

"Surely the vision may mean that we shall sweep away the Danish rule as the waves sapped the throne and swept over its place."

"Aye, may it be so," answered Olaf. "Often one may read these visions best even as their bodings come to pass. Let us go back. This is a lonesome place, and strange fancies weigh down a man's mind when all he may hear is the wind singing to the surges. Maybe these are but dreams. What matters it if Cnut reigns over the old Danelagh as Guthrum reigned, if Ethelred is overlord? It will be again as in Alfred's days, and once more an English king over the English folk, when Cnut is gone."

So he turned, and led the way back towards the town, and when we saw the lights close at hand, he bade me say nought of this to any man.

"We have seen strange things, cousin," he said, taking my arm, "and they will be better untold. You and I may see their meaning hereafter, and maybe shall have a share in their working out. Now let us sleep, and dream only of seeing England again tomorrow."

Chapter 3: The Breaking Of London Bridge.

There was a fair wind for us into the Thames mouth, and all seemed to be going well. But when we came off the Medway it seemed that there was to be fighting, for our way was blocked by a fleet and that stronger than ours.

Now as the longships were cleared for the weapon play, Olaf wondered how the Danes should have had word of our coming, for it was plain that this fleet of ten ships was waiting for us. Yet we had kept well away from the forelands, lest we should make it too plain where we were going.

Then one ship left the rest and came swiftly towards us, under oars. And when the ship drew near, we saw that she bore the banner of Ethelred himself.

So the fair plans that had been made had come to naught, and when Olaf understood this his face grew dark with anger, and he said:

"Almost would I leave this foolish king to go his own way without help of mine. But I have promised Eadmund, and I must keep my word. Henceforward I shall know what I must look for."

Little, therefore, had Olaf to say to Ethelred when they met, nor would he go on board the English ship, but Ethelred must come to him. Eadmund was at his father's side, and his face was very wrathful, for he felt even as did Olaf.

"London is ours already," Ethelred said. "Wherefore I would join you."

"London by this time may be in other hands," answered Olaf; "but we shall see when we get there. Now must there be no more time lost but we must make all speed up the river, tarrying nowhere."

So we sailed on. When we came to Greenwich there were no Danes there, nor any Danish ships. I went ashore in a boat, and asked the men I saw what was

become of them. And they told me that Thorkel's fleet had sailed northward on Swein's death, and that the thingmen whom he had left in the place had gone to London.

"That is as I thought," said Olaf. "Now there will be more trouble in driving them out than there has been in letting them in."

When we came at last in sight of London Bridge I knew that Olaf was right, for since the Danes had gained the city they had not been idle. They had built a great fort on the Southwark side of the river, girt with a wide moat, and all the stronger that the walls thus surrounded were partly of timber and stone. The road from across London Bridge runs through this fort, so that one might by no means pass over it until the place was won. And at the other end of the bridge the old Roman walls of London itself were far too strong for our force to take by storm.

But the strangest thing to me was to see what they had done to the great timber bridge itself, for they had made that also into a fortress. The old railing along the roadway was gone, and in its place were breast-high bulwarks of strong timber, and on each span of the bridge was a high wooden tower whose upper works overhung the water, looking downstream, as if they feared assault from the river itself.

We came up to the Pool on a good flood-tide, and as we dropped anchor there we saw all this, and, moreover, that the place was held by the Danes in force. The red cloaks of Cnut's thingmen were on bridge and walls and fort alike, and no few of them in either stronghold. There was work before us if we would win the place for our king.

Before any word had come to Olaf of what should be done, Eadmund had gone ashore with all his warriors, and had fallen on the Southwark earthwork. It was Olaf's first thought to follow him, but he held back.

"Let him go," he said. "Maybe he will like best to win his own city without my help at the first onset. Yet unless that fort is weaker than it looks, his attack will be of no use. For, see--all the Danes from the bridge are going to help."

So it was, and from the deck of Olaf's ship I looked on at the fight for half an hour. At one time I thought that we had won the place, for our men charged

valiantly through the moat and up the steep sides of the earthworks.

There waited for them the Danish axes, and an axeman behind a wall is equal to two men below him.

I longed to be beside Eadmund, whom I could see now and then, and ever where the fighting was fiercest; but Olaf bade me be patient. There would be fighting enough for me presently, he said.

"You will see that we shall have to take the bridge, and so cut the Danish force in two. Then from the bridge we have but to fight our way either into the fort or into the town."

Presently our men gave back. The earthworks were too strong for them. Then I asked again that I might go.

"If you must fall, it shall be at my side, cousin," said Olaf, laying his hand on my arm. "Eadmund does not need you."

For now he and his men were coming back to the ships, having won nought but knowledge of the strength of the fort. The Danes would not leave their walls to follow the retreating English, though Eadmund halted just beyond bow shot, and waited as if to challenge them to fight in the open.

Now by this time the tide was almost full, and the stream of the flood was slackening. And it seemed as if one might easily scale the bulwarks of the great low-timbered bridge from the foredeck of a ship. Ethelred saw that, and as soon as his men were on board again the word was passed that attack on the bridge should be made by every vessel that could reach it.

As it fell out, we of Olaf's eight ships lay below the rest, and must have passed them to reach the bridge. All we might do, therefore, was to close up to the sterns of the vessels that were leading, and wait to send our men across their decks when the time came. That pleased not Olaf at first, for he thought that his turn had come; but in the end it was well for us.

Now the ships slipped their cables, and drifted up to the bridge steadily, with a few oars going aft to guide them, and as they came the Danes crowded above them, manning their towers and lining the whole long length with savage faces

and gleaming weapons. They howled at us as we drew near, and as the bows of the leading ships almost touched the piles, they hove grappling irons into them from above, holding them fast. Whereat Eadmund thanked them for saving trouble, while the arrows fell round him like hail.

But in a moment that word of his was changed, for now fell from towers and bulwarks a fearsome rain of heavy darts and javelins, and the men fell back from the crowded fore decks to seek safety aft until the store of weapons was spent. Truly, there must have been sheaves of throwing weapons piled ready on the roadway of the bridge.

Then Eadmund's voice cried:

"Steady, men--this cannot last!"

And even as they heard him the warriors swarmed back across the corpse-cumbered decks, and began to climb up the piles, for the tide held the ships strongly against the bridge. Yet when the ships were there the height of the bridge above them was far greater than it had seemed from a distance. Now their fore decks were under the towers, for the upper works of these overhung the water.

Then the Danish war horns blew, and the men raised a great shout, and down from those towers and from openings in the bridge rained and thundered great ragged blocks of stone--masses rent from the old Roman city walls--and into the ships they crashed, and there rose a terrible cry from our men, for no ship that was ever built could stand so fierce a storm as this.

Two good ships swayed and sank, and their men climbed on bridge and piling, or leapt into the stream to reach the ships that yet were afloat. Then the storm stayed for lack of rocks within reach, as it would seem, for I saw men hoisting more into the towers as fast as crane and windlass would serve them.

Now fell the javelins again, and still the grappling irons held the ships, though the oars were manned. Then dared a man in each ship to do the bravest deed of that day. Through rain of falling javelins each ran forward, axe in hand, and cut the grappling lines as our Norsemen cheered them in wild praise. Yet I know that not one of those men lived to see that his deed had saved the ships, for

our oars were out and swiftly we towed them away to safety.

Aye, but I saw one tall Dane on the bridge strive to hold the hands of his fellows that he might save at least the brave man in the ship below him. And that should be told of him, for such a deed is that of a true warrior.

All this I watched in dismay, for it seemed to me that we could in no way take the town. As for Olaf, he said nought; and when we had come to anchor again he sat on the steersman's bench, looking at the bridge and saying no word to any of us. The Danes were crowding the bridge and jeering at us, as one might well see.

Then Rani came aft and sat on the rail by me.

"Well," he said, "how like you this business?"

"Ill enough," I answered. "What can be done?"

He nodded towards Olaf, smiling grimly.

"I know of nothing; but if your king lets him go his own way he will find out some plan. Know you what he did when the Swedes blocked us into a lake some years ago?"

"I have not heard," I said.

"Why, seeing that we might not go out by the way in which we came, Olaf made us dig a new channel, and we went out by that, laughing. We all had to dig for our lives, grumbling, but we got away."

Now Olaf looked up and saw us, and his face was bright again.

"I am going to see Ethelred," he said, "for I think that I can take the bridge."

A boat shot alongside even as he spoke, and a thane came to bid Olaf to a council of the leaders on Ethelred's ship. So Olaf went with him, and was long away. The tide was almost low, and darkness had fallen before he came back in high spirits.

"Ethelred was sorely downcast, even to weeping," he told us, "and so had

almost given up hope of taking London. He thought of sailing away and landing elsewhere. Then I said that I would take the bridge tomorrow if I had help in what I needed tonight."

Then he looked round on us, and what he saw in our faces made him laugh a little.

"It seems to me that you are over fearful of stone throwing after the Danish sort," he said. "Had I not a plan that will save our heads and the ship's timbers alike, I would not go. I am not the man to risk both for nought. We will build roofs over the fore decks and try again."

Then Rani growled:

"How are we to climb out from under your roofs so as to get upon the bridge? We have already seen that ladders are needed for that also."

"Nay," said Olaf, "we will bring the bridge down to us," and so he went forward laughing to find his shipwrights.

So all that night long we wrought as he bade us, and Ethelred's men came with spars and timber from houses they pulled down ashore, and when morning broke we had on each ship the framework of a strong, high-pitched roof that covered the vessels from stem to midships or more, and stretched out beyond the gunwales on either board.

Then the men who wrought ashore brought us boatloads of strong hurdles and the sides and roofs of the wattled huts of the Southwark thralls, and with them all our wooden shelters were covered so strongly that, if they might not altogether stand the weight of the greatest stones, these roofs would break their fall and save the ships.

When all this was finished, King Olaf told us what his plan was. We were not to try to storm the bridge, but were to break it.

"See," he said, "all night long the wagons that brought more stones have been rumbling and rattling into the middle of the bridge, and every Dane thereon will crowd into the centre to see the breaking of King Olaf's ships, and their weight will help us. We will go so far under the bridge that we may make fast our cables

to the piles, and then will row hard down the falling tide at its swiftest. Whereupon the laugh will be on our side instead of with the Danes, as yesterday."

After that he bade us all sleep, for we had some long hours to wait for the falling tide when all was done. And we did so, after a good meal, as well as we could, while the wains yet brought stones, and arrows and darts in sheaves to the bridge. But forward in our ships the men were coiling the great cables that should, we hoped, bring the bridge and stones alike down harmlessly to us.

It was plain that the Danes knew what the roofs over the ships were for, since all the while that we wrought we could see them pointing and laughing one to another in scorn, from where we lay, not much beyond arrow shot below them. But not one of all the men on the bridge could have guessed what our real plan might be. Only we who looked at the ancient bridge from the water, and marked how frail and decaying some of the piles that upheld its narrow spans were, knew how likely it was that Olaf's plan would succeed. The wide roadway seemed to them to be strong enough for the wooden towers and the many tons of stones they had burdened it with; but now that Olaf had showed us, we saw that it was none so safe, so we waited in good spirits.

The tide reached its height and as the ships swung idly to their cables on the slack, the Danes thronged the bridge, thinking, doubtless, that we should attack when they were within reach, as yesterday.

The hum of their voices came down to us, and as the time went by, and the ebb tide set in, the hum strengthened into a long roar of voices, that broke out into a yelling laugh now and then, as some word of scorn went round. For they thought our Norsemen were afraid.

But they could not see beneath the penthouse roofs, where the men, three at each oar, were armed and ready. Nor could they see the gangs of twelve men told off to the cables on each foredeck. Six of these were to pass the cables round the piles and make fast while the other six were to stand by with shields ready, in case the roofs were broken. But even then it should not take long to do all we needed, and some of the roof would be left surely at the worst.

Four only of the ships were to touch the bridge, one at each of the four

midmost pilings. The other four were made fast, stern to stern of the leading ships, so that their weight of oar play might be used to the full in the long pull to come, and two ships would haul at each set of piles where the weight was heaviest upon the bridge.

So we waited until the tide was at its fiercest ebb. The water rushed through the narrow waterways of the bridge in a broken torrent streaked with foam that swirled far down the stream towards us; so the time having come, Olaf gave the word. His own ship was one of the two in the middle, and Rani was in command of the other.

Then in a moment the oars flashed out, and the moorings were slipped; a shout went up from the bridge, and then the Danes were silent, wondering. The foam flew from our bows, and as we dashed up the stream the Danish war cry broke out again, while from end to end of the bridge the weapons flashed and sparkled.

Now the arrows rattled on the penthouse roofs, and one or two glanced from Olaf's armour and mine, and from the shields which Ottar and I held before him. For we were alone with him at the helm. He was steering his ship himself, as was Rani, and hardly would he suffer us to be beside him to shield him. But we would have it thus in the end.

At last we were almost on the bridge, and Olaf smiled and watched the ships to right and left of us--the oar blades were bending as the men struggled with clenched teeth against the fierce current that flew past us foaming.

Then the Danish grapnels were cast, as yesterday. The shadow of the bridge fell black upon us--the line of Danish faces were above our bows--and then down crashed the great stones from above, and I saw Olaf's lips tighten and set as he saw their work. Yet though the good ship quivered and reeled under the shock, the penthouse roofs were strong and steep, and but one great stone tore a hole for itself, crushing two men beneath it; but the rest bounded into the water, splintering an oar blade or two as they went. And all the while the arrows rained round us, and the javelins strove to pierce the roofs.

Then was a shout from forward of the ship, and Olaf's eyes brightened as he raised his hand. Instantly the rowers stayed, and the ships drifted away from the

bridge more swiftly than they had come, while the Danish grappling irons ripped and tore along the roofs uselessly. There was no firm hold for them.

That made the Danes think that we were driven off, and their yells began afresh.

Then came a quick word from Olaf, and the oars took the water to ease the sharp check as the length of the cables was reached, while the ship astern of us swung to her tow line. The king glanced to right and left of him, and saw that the other three ships had fared as well as we, and that they too were dropping down from the bridge.

How the Danes roared and howled with joy, thinking that we were all in full retreat! Yet, as the last ship tightened her cable, I saw the jerk shake one of them from his perch on the bridge bulwarks and send him headlong into the water.

Olaf saw it, and raised his hand and shouted. And with one accord the oars of the eight great ships smote the water, and bent, and tore the waves into foam--and London Bridge was broken!

The memory of that sight will never pass from my mind or from the mind of any man of us who saw all that the lifted hand and shout of Olaf the king brought about.

There was a slow groaning of timbers and a cracking, and then a dead silence. Then the silence was broken by a wild yell of terror from the swarming Danes, and ere they could fly from the crowded towers and roadway where the bridge was steepest, the whole length of three spans bent and swayed towards us, and a wide gap sprang open across the roadway. Into that gap crumbled a great stone-laden tower, and men like bees from a shaken swarm. And then those three spans seemed to melt away with a great rush and roar, and howl of men in mortal terror--and down the freed tide swept our ships, dragging after them the timbers that the cables yet held.

Then into the Southwark fortress went Eadmund and his men like fire, while from the London side of the river came the roar of a fight, as the citizens fell on the Danes who were fleeing terror smitten from the weakened spans that were left of London Bridge.

Then Olaf swung our ships to either bank, and past us went in confusion, on the rush of pent-up water, the great timbers and piles of the bridge, as it broke up piece by piece in the current. The men on Ethelred's ships had all they could do to save their vessels from being stove in by the heavier woodwork when it was swept down among them.

That danger passed; and now was our turn come to join in the fighting, for there were none to prevent us from getting the ships up to the bridge. And so we scaled from our decks the bulwarks that had been so terrible, and fell on the Danes in the rear as Eadmund in Southwark and the citizens in London took them in the front. It must have been that few Danes were left on either bank, for the fighting lasted no long time, and when we had done with these men from off the bridge there was no other attack.

So, before the evening came we knew that London was once more in the hands of Ethelred, and the bells were ringing to welcome back an English king to English land. For Olaf had brought him home.

There was high feasting in London town that night, and Ethelred deemed that England was already won. Nor was there any honour too great for him to show to the man who had wrought this for him.

But what Olaf said was this:

"To win London is much--though, indeed, it should never have been thus lost--but London is not England. There will be more fighting yet, if Cnut is a worthy son of Swein Forkbeard."

Now, in after years men made light of this breaking of London Bridge, and the reason is not far to seek. For, first of all, Cnut's folk, when they had the upper hand, liked not to hear thereof. And then the citizens would speak little among themselves of their thralldom to the Danes, and much of their welcome to Ethelred and their own share in the business when the bridge had been broken. And lastly, it was wrought by an outlander. Truly no Englishman, whether of Saxon or Danish kin, grudges praise to a stranger when he has won it well, but Olaf had few to speak for him after he had gone hence. But I have told what I saw, and think that it should not be forgotten, for it was a great deed. Men sing the song that Ottar the scald wrote thereon in Olaf's Norway, and I think that

they will sing it for many an age to come.

We have forgotten that song; but the first time he sang it was at the great feast in the wide hall of the London merchants' guild that night, and sorely did the few Danish lords, who sat as captives among us unwillingly enough, scowl as they listened. But our folk held their breath lest they should lose aught of either voice or words of the singer, for they had never heard his like before, and this is part of what he sang {5}:

"Bold in the battle
Bravest in sword play!
Thou wert the breaker
Of London's broad bridge.
Wild waxed the warfare
When thou gold wonnest
Where the shields splintered
'Neath the stones' crashing--
When the war byrnies broke
Beaten beneath them.

"Thine was the strong arm
That Ethelred sought for;
Back to his lost land
Thou the king leddest.
Then was the war storm
Waged when thou earnest
Safe to his high seat
Leading that king's son,
Throned by thy help
On the throne of his fathers."

He ended, and our warriors rose and cheered both hero and singer, and when the noise ceased Ethelred gave Ottar his own bracelet; but to Olaf he gave his hand, and there in the presence of all the company thanked him for what he had wrought, giving more praise to him than Ottar had sung.

Then sang the English gleemen of the deeds of Eadmund the Atheling, and all were well pleased. Now those songs have bided in our minds while Ottar's song is forgotten, and maybe that is but natural. But Olaf was my kinsman and very dear to me, and I am jealous for his fame.

Chapter 4: Earl Wulfnoth Of Sussex.

Cnut the new Danish king was at Gainsborough with all the force that had followed Swein his father, and he had made a pact with the Lindsey folk, who were Danes of the old settlement, and of landings long before the time of Ingvar, that they should fight for him and find provision and horses for his host.

So it seemed most likely that the next thing would be that he would march on us, and Ethelred gathered all the forces to him here in London that he could, against his coming. At once the English thanes came in, and even Sigeferth and Morcar, the powerful lords of the old Danish seven boroughs in Mercia, brought their men to his help, and that was almost more than could have been hoped. Then too came Edric Streone, the great Earl of Mercia, Eadmund's uncle by marriage and his foster father, praying for and gaining full forgiveness for having seemed to side with Swein, as he said. With these was Ulfkytel, our East Anglian earl, and many more, while word came from Utrred of Northumbria that he would not hold back.

So it was not long before Ethelred and Eadmund rode away north towards Gainsborough at the head of as good a force as they had ever led, in order to be beforehand with the Danes, who as yet had made no move. It seemed as though they feared this new rising of all England against them, although all Swein's men who had been victors before were there with their new king.

But Olaf, who knew more of Denmark and what might happen there than we, said that Cnut waited for news from thence. It might be that some trouble would arise at home, for seldom did a king come to his throne there without fighting against upstarts who would take it.

"So he holds his force in readiness in the Humber to fall on either Denmark or England. If things go ill at home, he will go over sea first, and return here. But if all is well, we shall have fighting enough presently."

Now when the court of Ethelred had gathered again, it was not long before he grew more cold in his way with Olaf, and one might easily see that this grew

more so with the coming of Edric Streone. So that when the march to Lindsey was spoken of, Olaf thought well to stay in the Thames with the ships, and when Eadmund asked him to come north with the levies he said:

"It seems to me that there are jealousies already among your thanes concerning me, and I will not be the cause of any divisions among your folk. Yet I would help you, and here is what I can do. I will see that no landing is made on these southern shores while you are northward, for if you beat Cnut he will take ship and come to Essex or Kent; or maybe even into the Thames again. Give me authority to command here until you return, and I think I can be of more use than if I went with you."

So that was what was done in the end, and Olaf was named as captain of the ships and of any southern host that he might be able to raise, and Olaf asked that I might stay with him.

That our atheling granted gladly, telling me that it was for no lack of wish on his part to have me at his side, as ever of late, but that I should take a better place with the king my kinsman than among the crowd of thanes who were round Ethelred. Then he took his own sword from his side and gave it me.

"Farewell therefore for a while, Redwald, my comrade," he said when he went away. "You have helped me to tide over many heavy hours that would have pressed sorely on me but for your cheerfulness. When peace comes you shall have your Anglian home again, with more added to its manors for the sake of past days and good service."

That was much for the atheling to say, and heartily did I thank him. Yet I had grown to love Olaf my kinsman better than any other man, and I was glad to be with him, away from the court jealousies and strivings for place. There was little of that in Olaf's fleet, where all were old comrades, and had each long ago found the place that he could best fill.

So the levies marched on Gainsborough, and Olaf bided in the Thames and gathered ships and men till we had a fair fleet and a good force. Then came the news that Cnut and all his host had taken ship and fled from England without waiting to strike a blow at Ethelred, and our folk thought that this was victory for us. But Olaf rode down to the ships in haste, and took them down to Erith, while

his land levies followed on the Kentish shore. For he thought it likely that Cnut did but leave Ethelred and his armies in Lindsey while he would land here unopposed.

Then came a fisher's boat with word that Cnut's great fleet was putting into Sandwich, but before we had planned to throw our force between him and London came the strange news that again he had left Kent and had sailed northwards.

We sailed then to Sandwich to learn what we might, sending two swift ships to watch if Cnut put into the Essex creeks. But at Sandwich we found the thanes whom Swein had held as hostages left, cruelly maimed in hand and face, with the message from Cnut that he would return.

"He may return," said Olaf, "but if all goes well he will find England ready for him. There is some trouble in Denmark or he would not leave us thus."

So now all that seemed to be on hand was to bring back the towns that were yet held by the Danish garrisons, the thingmen, to their rightful king, and to gather a fleet that would watch the coast against the return of Cnut. These things seemed not so hard, and our land would surely soon be secure.

Then began to creep into my mind a longing to be back in my own place again at Bures, to see the river and woods that I loved, and to take up the old quiet life that was half forgotten, but none the less sweet to remember after all this war and wearing trouble. But of all England, after Lindsey, East Anglia was the greatest Danish stronghold for those old reasons that I have spoken of, and it was likely that there would be more fighting there before Ethelred was owned than anywhere else. So I could not go back yet, but must wait for Earl Ulfkytel and his levies, who would surely make short work of the Danes there when their turn came. After that my lands would be my own again, and then--What wonder, after three years and more of warfare and the hard life of a warrior who had no home but in a court which was a camp--after exile in a strange land--with my new-found kinship with Olaf the viking--that what should be then had gone from my mind? Will any blame the warrior who did but remember his playfellow as part of a long-ago dream of lost peace, if he had forgotten what tie bound him to her? When I and little Hertha were betrothed it had been nought to us but a pleasant show wherein we had taken foremost parts--and across the gap of years

of trouble so it seemed to me still whenever I recalled it. I remembered my confirmation at the good bishop's hands more plainly than that, for well I knew what I took on me at that time.

But the knowledge of what our betrothal meant would have grown up in our hearts had peace lasted. There had been none to mind me of it, or of her, and warfare fills up the whole mind of a man. I was brought up amid the scenes of camp and march and battle just at that time when a boy's mind is ready to be filled with aught, and, as he learns, the past slips away, for his real life has begun.

And these were strange days through which I had been. We grew old quickly amid all the cruel trouble of the hopeless fighting. As David, the holy king, grew from boy to man suddenly in his days, which seem so like ours when one hears them read of in Holy Writ, so it had been with Olaf--with Eadmund and Eadward his brother--so it would be with Cnut, and so it was with myself. I have often spoken with men who were rightly held as veteran warriors, and who yet had seen less warfare in ten years than we saw in those three. It was endless--unceasing--I would have none go through the like. I know not now how we bore it.

So I had forgotten Hertha, whether there is blame to me or not. But now, as I say, with the sudden slackening of warfare came to me the longing for rest. I would fain find my home again and my playmate, and all else that belonged to the past. But before I could do so there was work to be done, and I was content to look forward and wait.

Now I might make a long story of the doings of Olaf the king during this summer. Ottar the scald has much to sing of what we wrought. For we went through the fair land of Kent with our Norsemen and the new levies, and brought back all the folk to Ethelred. It was no hard task, for the poor people thought that Cnut had deceived them by his flight; and they were ground down by the heavy payments the Danes had levied on them. Only at Canterbury, inside whose walls the Danish thingmen gathered in desperation, had we any trouble, and we must needs lay siege to the place. But in the end Olaf and I knelt in the ancient church of St. Martin and gave thanks for victory. We had avenged the death of the martyred archbishop, Elfheah.

Ethelred ravaged all Lindsey after Cnut was gone. It was a foolish and cruel deed, and he left men there who hated his name more than even the name of Swein, to whom they had bowed since they must. Then he sat down at Oxford as if all were done, while to have marched peacefully, but with a high hand, through the old Danelagh would have made the land sure to him. Olaf did so in Kent, and when we left it, we left a loyal people who would rise against Cnut for Ethelred if the Danes should indeed return. And Lindsey would as surely rise for Cnut against us.

But Olaf, though he blamed our king for this, in all singleness of purpose went on with the task that he had undertaken. And now the next thing was to gather a fleet.

"If we could win Wulfnoth of Sussex to help his king, we have a fleet ready made," he said. "Let us sail to his place and speak with him."

That was true, and the ships that Wulfnoth had were the king's by right. They were the last of the fleet that England had had but five years ago--and her mightiest.

Now it happened that I was to see much of this Earl Wulfnoth before we had done with him, so I will say at once how he came to have the king's ships, and how it was that we must ask his help for Ethelred--or rather why he had not given it freely.

It was the fault of Brihtric, Edric Streone's brother, who had some private grudge against him, and would ruin him if possible. So he accused Wulfnoth of treachery to Ethelred, and that being the thing that the king always dreaded from day to day--seeing maybe that he was not free from blame in that matter himself--so prevailed that the earl was outlawed. Whereon he fled to the fleet, and sailed away with all the ships that would follow him.

Then Brihtric chased him with the rest, and met with storm and shipwreck on the rugged southern coasts. And through the storm fell on him Wulfnoth, and beat him and scattered or took the ships the storm had spared. Brihtric left the rest to their own devices, and the shipmen brought them back into the Thames. There the Danes took them presently, and that was the end of England's fleet.

But Wulfnoth turned viking; and would have nought to do with Ethelred after that. His Sussex earldom was beyond reach of attack through the great Andred's-weald forests that keep its northern borders, and he could keep the sea line. So Ethelred left him alone, and Swein would not disturb him. But his help was worth winning, and Olaf thought that he might do it.

So we sailed to Lymne, and then to Winchelsea, and there we heard that the earl and some of his ships were at his great stronghold of Pevensea, which lay not far westward along the coast. And we came there in the second week of September, when the time was near that the ships should be laid up in their winter quarters.

As we came off the mouth of the shallow tidal haven that runs behind the great castle, whose old Roman walls seem strong as ever, a boat from the shore came off very boldly to speak with us. But we could see the sparkle of arms as some ships were manned in all haste lest we were no friendly comers.

The leader of the boat's crew was a handsome boy of about fifteen, well armed and fearless, and he stepped on board Olaf's ship without mistrust when the king hailed him.

"Who are you, and what would you on these shores?" he asked before we had spoken.

Olaf laughed pleasantly in his quiet way, and answered:

"I must know who asks me before I say aught."

"Maybe that is fair," said the boy. "I am Godwine, son of Wulfnoth the earl."

"Then you have right to ask," answered our king. "I am Olaf Haraldsson. I am a viking, and come in peace to see and speak with your father."

The boy stared at the king in wonder for a moment.

"Are you truly Olaf the Thick, who broke London Bridge?" he asked.

"Well, I had some hand in it," answered Olaf laughing, "for I told the men when to pull, and when they pulled, the bridge came down. They did it and I

looked on."

Then young Godwine laughed also, and bade the king welcome most heartily, adding:

"You must tell me all about the bridge breaking presently."

"Nay; but Redwald my cousin, or Ottar my scald here will tell you more than I may."

"Redwald is an Anglian name," said Godwine, taking my hand. "Are you English therefore?"

"Aye, young sir, from East Anglian Bures, in Suffolk," I answered.

"Are you Edric Streone's man then?" he said, dropping my hand suddenly and half stepping back.

"I am not," I said pretty stoutly, for I was angry with Streone's way with Olaf-and with other ways of his. "Ulfkytel is our earl."

"Aye, I have heard of him as an honest man," Godwine said.

"Come ashore, King Olaf, and you other thanes, and there will be good cheer for you."

"Can you steer us into the haven, young sir?" asked Rani, who stood by smiling to himself. "We must have the ships inside the island while the tide serves."

"Aye, that I can," said the boy eagerly; "I take my own ship in and out without troubling any other to help."

And with that he took hold of Rani's arm and showed him mark after mark, giving him depth of water and the like, while we listened and watched his face.

Presently Olaf said:

"Take command of my ship, Godwine, and lead the rest."

"You will take the risk, lord king," he answered laughing.

"Aye, and will hold you blameless if she takes the ground before she is beached."

Now there was no doubt that Godwine was used to command, and was confident in himself, for he made no more ado, but took charge, and bade Rani signal the rest to follow, while he went to the helm himself.

Then said Olaf to me while the boy was intent on his work: "Here is one who will be a great man in England some day, and I think before long."

And I had thought the same; for Earl Wulfnoth's son would rank high for the sake of his birth, and it seemed that he was fitted to take the great place that might be his.

So Godwine beached the ships well, in the lee of the island on which the great castle stands when the tide is high, and we went ashore. The castle gates were well guarded in our honour, for Godwine had sent the boat back with word who we were.

There greeted us Earl Wulfnoth himself in the courtyard of his great house. One went inside the castle walls to find almost a village of buildings, all of timber, that had grown up round the hall that stood in the midst, and that had its courtyard and stockading, as had our own house on the open hill at Bures. I think there was no stronger place than this castle of Pevensea in all Sussex, if anywhere on the southern coasts.

Now it were long to say how Wulfnoth the earl welcomed King Olaf, but it was after a kingly sort, for he was king in all but name in his earldom, shut off as it is from the rest of England by the deep forests. But he feasted us for two days before he would speak a word with Olaf as to what he had come to ask him, saying that it was enough for him to see the bridge breaker and the taker of Canterbury town, and to do him honour. For Olaf's fame had gone widely through all England.

Now Godwine would ever talk with me, for I could tell him of Olaf, and also of the long war, and of the Norman court, so that we became great friends. But

he had no liking for Ethelred, which was not wonderful, seeing that Wulfnoth his father had not a good word to say for him.

At last, when Olaf told him plainly of the needs of England and of her king, and of what he feared of the return of Cnut, Earl Wulfnoth answered:

"Had you come to ask me to go a-viking with yourself, gladly would I have joined with or followed you. Godwine my son has yet some things to learn which a Norseman could teach him, and it would have been well. But Ethelred holds me as a traitor; and while Edric Streone is at his side I will not have aught to do with him. I will drive any Dane out of my land, and that is all. Neither Ethelred nor Cnut is aught to me. I and my son are earls of Sussex."

Then he rose up from his high seat and strode out of the hall, bidding us follow him. He led us to the eastern gate, and climbed to the broad top of the ramparts.

"See yonder," he said, and pointed eastward across the river and marsh. "There is the hill where our standard has been raised time after time since OElla and Cissa drove in flight the Welsh who had raised theirs in the same place before us. There will I raise it again against Cnut or Streone or any other of his men."

"Edric Streone is with King Ethelred," said Olaf; "he is not Cnut's man."

"He has been Swein's man; and if it suits him will be Cnut's. I will not alter my saying of him."

"Ethelred believes in him," answered Olaf, "and Eadmund the Atheling believes in him as in himself."

"So much the worse for them," said the earl; "you will see if I am not right. I know Edric Streone over well, and he knows it, and hates me."

"Come, therefore, and take Ethelred out of his hands," Olaf said.

"Not I. Let him inlaw me again first. I will not go and ask pardon for what I have not done."

And after that the earl would say no more on the matter, waxing wroth if Olaf would try to persuade him. So it seemed that our journey was lost; and Olaf began to be anxious to return to the Thames, where our ships should go into winter quarters. But the wind held in the east, and kept us for a while.

Wulfnoth was not sorry for this, for it was full harvest time, and he sent his housecarles out to his other manors to gather it, so that he had few folk about him. Godwine went with them to a place on the downs called Chancton, where was a great house of the earl. We parted unwillingly; but we might sail at any time if the wind shifted, and the earl would have him go.

"When you have done with fighting for Ethelred the Unredy," said the boy to me, "bring Olaf back here, and you and I, friend Redwald, will go a-viking with him. He says he wants to go to Jerusalem Land some day--and that would be a good cruise."

Now the day after the housecarles left Pevensea, there befell a matter which would have brought them back hastily had we not been in the haven. There was always a beacon fire ready to recall them, and they watched for it even as they wrought in the upland fields, or if they were among the woods. Turn by turn one would climb to a place whence it could be seen, for one may never know what need shall be on our English shores, and I was to learn that need for arms might be in a forest-girt land also, from foes at home.

Olaf and I were in the ships. The wind was unsteady, and it seemed that a shift was coming with that night's new moon, and we were preparing for sailing. And from our decks we saw a little train of people crossing the difficult path from the mainland to the island that folk can only use when the tide is low, and then only if they know it well or have a guide to lead them. They say that once the path was always under water, but that the land grows slowly, and that at some time the island will be joined to the low hills that are nearest to it on the northwest.

We went back almost as these folk came into the castle garth by the western gate, and met them in the courtyard. Then it was plain that there was trouble on hand, for the leader of the party was athane whom I knew by sight, as he had been called to our feasting when first we came, and he had brought with him two ladies, who came in no sort of state; and, moreover, there were one or two

wounded men among the twenty rough housecarles who followed them, and bore such burdens of household stuff as had been taken by us when we fled from Bures.

I had seen the like too often to mistake these signs, and I said to Olaf:

"Here is fighting on hand, my king."

And then before he answered, came Wulfnoth out of the great door and hurried up to the party, doffing his velvet cap as he saw the ladies.

"Ho, friend Relf," he said, "what is amiss?"

"Outlaws, earl," said the thane, "and in strong force."

"This is the pest of my life," answered the earl angrily, "for no sooner are our men gone harvesting than these forest knaves begin to give trouble.

"When were you last burnt out, Relf of Penhurst?" and he laughed in an angry way that had no mirth in it.

"Four years ago--after our trouble with Brihtric," answered the thane. "They have not been so bold since then; and the small fights I have had with them have not been so fierce that I must fetch you from Bosham to my help."

"Evil times make them bold," said the earl. "How many are there in this band?"

"Enough to sack the Penhurst miners' village," the thane said. "Men say that there are Danes among them; and I know that there are men who are well armed beyond the wont of outlaws and forest dwellers."

Then Wulfnoth called to us:

"See here, King Olaf, this is your fault; you have driven the Danes out of Kent into our forests, and now we have trouble enough on our hands."

"Then, Earl Wulfnoth," answered Olaf, "my men and I will fight them here again."

But when we drew near I was fain to look on one of the two ladies who still sat on their horses waiting for the earl's pleasure. One was Relf the thane's wife, and the other his daughter; and it was in my mind that I had never seen so beautiful a maiden as this was. It seemed to me that I could willingly give my life in battle against those who had harmed her home, if she might know that I did so.

But the thane was telling Olaf that there must be some three hundred of the outlaws and others.

"I had forty-two men yesterday, and I have but twenty with me now," said he.

"Then you fought?" asked Wulfnoth.

"Aye," answered the thane shortly, for it was plain enough that he had done so.

"Have they burnt your house?"

"Not when I left. They are mostly strangers to the land, and they bide where there is ale and plunder, in the old Penhurst village at the valley's head."

"Then," said Olaf, "let us march at once and save the thane's hall."

"That is well said," answered the earl, rubbing his hands with glee. "We will make a full end; there will be no more trouble for many a year to come."

Then he bethought him of the two ladies, and he called his steward and bade him take them in. At which, when they would dismount, I went to help the maiden, and was pleased that she thanked me for the little trouble, looking at me shyly. I think that I had not heard a more pleasant voice than hers, or so it seemed to me at the time. She went into the house with her mother, and I was left with a remembrance of her words that bided with me; and I called myself foolish for thinking twice of the meeting.

Then the earl and Olaf and Relf began to speak of the best way in which to deal with these plunderers; and as I looked at the stout fair-haired thane it seemed to me that things must have been bad if he had had to fly.

It would seem that his place was some ten miles from Pevensea, lying at the head of a forest valley, down which was a string of the old hammer ponds that the Romans made when they worked the iron. And the village, or town as he called it, was in the next valley, at the head of the little river Ashbourne, whose waters joined the river which makes the haven of Pevensea. The town was very old, and had a few earthworks round it, though the place whereon it stood was strong by nature. The iron workers in the old Roman days had first built there, and they knew how to choose their ground. Thence, too, the Romans would float their boatloads of iron down to the port of Anderida, as they called Pevensea; and there were yet old stone buildings that had been raised by them.

So if these outlaws chose to hold the place, it was likely that we should have some fighting, though this would not be quite after the manner of forest dwellers, unless it were true that Danes were among them.

"Whether there is any fight in them or not," said Wulfnoth, "I will have the place surrounded, and let not one get away."

"That is early morning work," Olaf answered. "How many of my men will you have?"

"It depends on what manner of men they are," said the earl. "All I know of them yet is that they are good trenchermen."

That pleased not Olaf altogether, for there seemed to be a little slight in the words--as though he had come to the earl to be fed only. And he made a sign to me that I knew well; and I thought to myself that Wulfnoth of Sussex was likely to wish that he had seen our warriors in their war gear before.

Olaf paid no heed to me as I went quickly down to the ships. The men were lying about and watching the sky, for it was changing. But at one word from me there was no more listlessness; and Rani called them to quarters. I would that in the English levies there was the order and quickness that was in Olaf's ships. Yet these men had been with him for years, and were not like our hastily-gathered villagers.

So in ten minutes or less they were armed and ready for aught; and Rani and I led them up to the castle, leaving the ship guard set, as if we were making a

landing in earnest on an enemy's shore. Eight hundred strong we were, and foremost marched the men of Olaf's ship, each one of whom wore ring mail of the best and a good helm, and carried both sword and axe and round shield.

Wulfnoth stood with his back to the gate as we entered with the leading files. But when he heard the tramp and ring of warriors in their mail, he started and turned round sharply. I saw his face flush red, and I saw Olaf's smile, and Relf's face of wonder. And then the earl broke out--angrily enough--for his castle was, as it were, taken by Olaf.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"You wished to see my men, lord earl," said Olaf. "I sent for them therefore. King Ethelred, for whom they fight just now, was pleased with them."

Then the earl saw that Olaf tried one last plan by which to make him side with the king. Maybe he thought that this chance had been waited for, but it was not so. Therefore he choked down his anger that we should come unbidden into his fortress, and laughed harshly.

"Well for me, King Olaf, that you come in peace, as it seems. One may see that these men are no untried war smiths."

"There is no man in my own crew who has not seen four battles with me," answered Olaf. "Some have seen more. The rest of the men have each seen two fights of mine."

"I would that I had somewhat on hand that was worthy to be counted as another battle of yours, instead of a hunting of these forest wolves," answered Wulfnoth, seeming to grow less angry. "Supposing that you and I were to fight for the crown of England for ourselves--either of us has as much right thereto as Cnut."

"The Danes hold that England has paid scatt {6} to their king as overlord, and that is proof of right for Cnut, as they say," answered Olaf.

"They say!" growled Wulfnoth fiercely. "King and witan and people have been fools enough to buy peace with gold and not with edged steel. But that has been ransom, not tribute. When a warrior is made prisoner and held to ransom, is

the man who takes the gold to set him free his master, therefore, ever after? Scatt, forsooth! I have a mind to go and teach the pack of fools whom Streone leads by the nose and calls a witan, that there is one man left in England who is strong enough to make them pay scatt to himself!"

Then Olaf said, very quietly:

"Why not put an end to Danegeld once for all by helping me drive out the last Dane from England? We should be strong enough as things are now.

"For Streone and his tools to reap the benefit? Not I," said the earl. "Come, we have forgotten our own business."

Now it seemed to me that Wulfnoth was eager to get our men back to the ships outside of the walls again, for there is no doubt that had Olaf chosen to take the place for Ethelred it was already done. But such thought of treachery to his host could never be in Olaf's mind, and it was the last time that he tried to win the earl over.

So Wulfnoth went quickly down the ranks and noted all things as a chief such as he will. But now and then he waxed moody, and growled in his thick beard, "Scatt, forsooth!"

So presently he asked Olaf to bring two ship's crews--about eight-score men in all--against the outlaws. Fifty of his own housecarles would go, and Relf's twenty. And they were to be ready two hours before dawn, as he meant to surprise the outlaws in the village at the first light.

Then he praised the men, and had ale brought out for them, and so recovered his good temper, and at last he said to Olaf with a great laugh:

"Verily you may go away and boast that you are the first man who has brought his armed followers inside Pevensea walls without leave, since the days when OElla and Cissa forced the Welsh to let them in. Now I wot that Ethelred has a friend who must be reckoned with."

"Nay, but you would see the men," said Olaf.

"Aye, and I have seen them," answered the earl grimly.

When we sat down in the hall that night I was next to the maiden Sexberga, Relf's daughter, at the high table. She was very different from the great ladies of the court, who were all that I knew. I tried to assure her that her home would be safe, and I promised her many things in order to see her smile, and to please her.

Yet when I went down to the ships presently, for none of us slept within Wulfnoth's walls, I was glad that there was no light of burning houses over Penhurst woods, as yet.

Chapter 5: How Redwald Fared At Penhurst.

It was very dark when we marched from Pevensea. We followed the earl's men, and save for remembering the muddy torchlit causeway to firm ground from the castle, and after that dim hill and dale passed in turn, and a long causeway and bridge that spanned the mouth of a narrow valley that opened into the great Pevensea level, I knew not much of what country we went through. After passing that causeway we came into forest land, going along a track for awhile, and then turning inland across rolling hills till we began to go down again. And as the first streaks of dawn began to show above the woods, the word was passed for silence, and then that we should lie down and rest in the fern on the edge of a steep slope below which shone the faint gleam of water.

Then came Wulfnoth and spoke to Olaf, and said that he and his men would go beyond the village so as to take the outlaws from the rear. He would send a man to us who would show us all that was needed.

After that we lay and waited, and as the sun rose and the light grew stronger, I thought that I had never seen a more beautiful place.

We were above a little cliff of red rock that went down to the valley of the Ashbourne brook. And all the valley from side to side was full of the morning mists so that it seemed one lake, while the woods were bright with the change of the leaf, from green to red and gold--oak and beech and chestnut and hazel each with its own colour, and all beautiful. The blue downs rose far away to our left across the ridges of the forest land, and inland the Andred's-weald stretched, rising hill above hill as far as one might see, timber covered. There were trees between us and the village that we sought; but above its place rose a dun cloud of smoke from some houses fired that night by those who held it, and that was the one thing that spoiled the beauty of all that I saw.

Now Olaf and I spoke of all this, whispering together, for we were close to the village, and already we had heard voices from thence as men woke. For Olaf

was ever touched by the sight of a fair land lying before him. And while he spoke, a man seemed to rise out of a cleft of the rocks below us, and climbed up to us, and bowed before us, saying that he was to guide us.

He was a great man, clad in leather from head to foot, and carrying a sledgehammer over his shoulder. That and a billhook stuck in his belt were his only weapons.

"I am Spray the smith," he said, in a low voice. "The earl is ready, and the thane also. The knaves are all drunken with our ale, and we may fall on them at once."

"Have they no watch kept?" asked Olaf wondering.

"None, master."

"Are there Danes with them?"

"Aye; half are Danes. But I met one of them last night and spoke to him peacefully, being stronger than he, and I said that vikings had come to Pevensea, and that the earl was minding them. So they fear no one."

Then came a herdsman's call from the woods beyond the village, and the smith said:

"That is the thane. Fall on, master, and fear nought."

Whereat I laughed, and the men sprang up. The smith led us for a hundred paces through the beech trees and then across the brook, and the steep slope up to the village was before us. There was a little, ancient earthwork of no account round the place, but if there had been a stockade on it, it was gone.

Then came a roar of yells and shouts from the far side, and we knew that the work had begun, and ran up the hillside. Then fled a man in chain mail out of the place, leaping over the earthworks straight at us, unknowing.

Spray the smith swung his hammer, not heeding at all the sword in the man's hands. Sword and helm alike shivered under the blow, and the man rolled over and over down the hillside.

"That is the first Dane I ever slew," said Spray to me as we topped the ridge.

Then we were in the village and among a crowd of wild-looking, half-armed forest men, who fled and yelled, and smote and cried for quarter in a strange and ghastly medley. There was no order, and seemingly no leader among them, and an end was soon made. Before I had struck down two men they scattered and fled for hiding, and we followed them. Wulfnoth would have no mercy shown to these wretches who would harry the peaceful villagers--their own kin. They would but band together again.

Now I did a foolish thing which might have cost me my life. For two outlaws ran into one of the old stone buildings of which I had heard, and I followed them. As I crossed the threshold I stayed for a moment, for the place seemed very dark inside, and I could not see them. But I was plain enough to them, of course, and before I could see that a blow was coming one smote me heavily on the helm and I fell forward, while they leapt out over my body into the open again. Then I seemed to slip, and fell into nothingness as my senses left me.

Presently I came round, nor could I tell how long I had been alone, I heard far off shouts that were dull and muffled as if coming through walls, and then as my brain cleared, I saw that I was in what seemed to be a dungeon like those that Earl Wulfnoth had under Pevensea. All round me were walls, and the light came in from a round hole above me.

When I saw that I knew that I had indeed fallen into this place, and my sword, too, lay on the floor where it had flown from my hand as I did so. It was lucky that I had not fallen on it.

Now the shouts died away, and I thought that our men were chasing the last of the outlaws into the woods. When the silence fell, I waxed lonely, and began to wonder if I had been forgotten. But Olaf would miss me presently, and would surely return to the village before long. So I would be patient, and at least try to find a way out of this trap into which I had come so strangely.

But there was no way out unless a ladder or rope were lowered to me. The roof of the place was rounded and arched above me, and the hole was in its centre so that I could not reach it. Maybe the place was ten feet across and ten feet high under the hole, and it minded me of the snake pit into which Gunnar

the hero was thrown, as Ottar the scald sang. Only here were no snakes, and the air was thick and musty, but dry enough. I could see the beams of the house roof above the hole.

Then I thought that if I could prise some stones from the old walls I might pile them up until I reached the edge of the hole with my hands, when it would be easy to draw myself up, though maybe not without taking off my armour. But when I tried the joints of the masonry with the point of my seax, I did but blunt the weapon, for the mortar was harder than the stone, which was the red sandstone of the cliff where we had rested.

So I forbore and sat down, leaning my aching head against the cool wall, to wait for Olaf's return. There would be time to shout when I heard voices again, and it was not good to make much noise in that place after the blow of a club that had set my ears ringing already.

Then I fell to thinking of Sexberga, and those thoughts were pleasant enough. And idly I began to sharpen my seax again on a great square stone that was handy in the wall as I sat, but it was very soft, and crumbled away under the steel without doing it much good.

Now, when one is waiting and thinking, one will play with an idle pastime for the sake of keeping one's hands amused as it were, and so I went on working the long slit in the stone, which the blade was making, deeper and deeper. The sand trickled from it in a stream, and then all of a sudden I became aware that I had pierced through the stone into a hole behind, and I bent over to see how this could be.

The stone was not more than an inch or two thick, and there was certainly a hollow which it closed, and when I saw that I broke and worked away more of it until I could get my hand in. Then I found that I could feel nothing, for the place was deep. So I made the hole bigger yet, and put my arm in. Then I found the back and one side of a stone-cased chest in the wall, as it were, of which the stone I had bored was the door, though this was to all appearance like several other of the larger blocks that the place was built of.

When I reached downwards my hand could just touch what felt like rotten canvas, and at that I began to work again at the hole. The stone was too strong to

break, though it seemed thin, and I was so intent on this, that the voices I had longed to hear made me start.

"He was hereabouts, master, when I last saw him," said one whom I thought was Spray the smith.

"I will hang you up if he is lost," said Wulfnoth's voice.

Then I sprang up and shouted, and the vault rang painfully in my ears. It was Olaf who called back to me.

"Ho, Redwald where are you?"

"Under the house, in a pit," I answered, standing under the opening.

Then someone came tramping above me, and the next moment Spray's leather-hosed leg came through the hole, and he nearly joined me. Thereat others laughed, and he climbed up quickly enough, for it was an ill feeling to be hanging over an unknown depth.

"Lower me down a rope," I said, as I saw his face peering into the place with some others.

There seemed to be a ladder handy, for the next minute its end came down, and at once I picked up my sword and climbed out. Olaf stood in the doorway now with Relf.

"It is easy to see how my cousin got into that place," he said to Relf, pointing to my helm, which was sorely dented.

The big thane looked and laughed.

"That is what felled him. But I knew not of this pit," he said, looking past me into the house where Spray and the men stood round the hole.

Then the smith said:

"Nor did I, master. But this has been found by the forest men--here are their tools."

And when we looked, all the floor of the house was broken up, and the stone paving was piled in corners, and a pick or two lay on them with a spade and crowbar.

"They have been digging for treasure," said Relf, "and that has kept them from my house. There are always tales of gold hidden in these old places. I have seen that they have done the like elsewhere in the village."

"Aye," said Spray, "they have heard some of our tales, and they have dug where we would not, for it spoils a house, and the wife's temper also, to meddle with the good stone floor."

Now it seemed to me that here was a likelihood that there was truth in the old tales, and that I had lit on the lost hiding place of which some memory yet remained even from the days when OElla's men took the town from the iron workers five hundred years and more ago, when the might of Rome had passed.

"There is somewhat that I have found in this place," I said. "Come and see what it is."

Wondering, Olaf and Wulfnoth climbed down the ladder after me, and Relf did but stay to find a torch before he followed us. Then I showed them the stone and the hollow behind it, and the earl called for the crowbar that was left by the outlaws, and with a stroke or two easily broke out the rest of the stone, and the glare of the torch shone into the place that it had so long sealed.

It was a chamber in the wall, and maybe a yard square each way. The stone had not filled all its width or depth of mouth, but was, as it were, a sealed door to be broken and replaced by another. Then we could see that the canvas I had thought that I had felt was indeed the loose folds of the tied mouths of bags that were neatly arranged at the bottom of this stone-built chest. And the canvas that I had reached and pulled at had easily parted, and through the rent showed the dull gleam of gold coin as the torchlight flared upon it.

The light shone too on letters scratched on the soft stone of the back of the chamber. I could read them, but Wulfnoth pointed to them, saying:

"Here may be a curse written on him who touches. I will have our priest read

that which is there if he can."

Then I laughed, and said that it was no curse, but the name of some Roman who made the place, for all that was there was:

"Which means that a workman named Martin was proud of his work, and left his name there," I said when I had read it.

"And was slain, doubtless, lest he should betray the secret," said Wulfnoth.

And he put his hand out to take one of the bags from the place, feeling round the rotten canvas to get a fair grip of the mass of coin.

Then he drew back his hand with a cry that came strangely from his stern lips, for it sounded like alarm, and he stepped back.

"As I live," he said, "somewhat cold moved beneath my fingers in there."

Even as he spoke something crawled slowly on to the bag that was broken and sat on the red gold that was hidden no longer. There it stayed, staring at the torchlight--a great wizened toad, whose eyes were like the gold which it seemed to guard. And we stared at it, for not one of us dared touch it, nor could we say aught.

It is ill to waste breath in wondering how the creature got into this long-closed place or how it lived. But when I have told of this, many a time have I heard stories of toads that have been found in stranger places--even in solid-seeming rock. But however it came there--and one may think of many ways--it scared us. It seemed a thing not natural.

"It is the evil spirit that guards the treasure," whispered Relf to Olaf, edging toward the ladder.

"Fetch Anselm the priest, and let him exorcise this," said the earl. "It is some witchcraft of the heathen Romans."

"Were I in Finmark I would say that this was a 'sending' {Z}," Olaf said, "but we are in Christian England, and this is but a toad."

Now I said nothing, but I wished the beast away, for I would see the treasure I had found. Then the earl bethought himself.

"Maybe it is but a toad," he said. "I will cast it out."

And with that he went to do so, but liked it not, and drew back again.

"Toad or worse," I said then, "I mind not their cold skin, and will see what it is."

So I took hold of the beast, and it swelled itself out as I did so, and croaked a little. That was the worst it did; but I will say this, that the sound almost made me drop it. But I cast it behind me into the shadow, and then put both hands into the chamber and took out one of the bags.

It was full of gold coin, as was that which had been torn open, and as were all the rest--ten of them--when we looked. And the coins were older than we could tell, being stamped with strange figures that bore some likeness to horses whose limbs fell apart, and a strange face on the other side. Many had letters on them, and these were mostly--CVNO.

"They are coins of the Welsh folk whom we conquered," said Wulfnoth. "I have seen the like before. They made them at Selsea, and we find many there on the shore after storms."

Now I think that we had found the hiding place of the tribute money that should be sent to Rome when some ship came thence or from beyond the Channel to fetch it, or maybe it was some iron master's hoarded payment for the good Sussex iron that they smelted in these valleys in the Roman days. More likely it was the first, for men would know that it had never been sent away. None can tell how the places of these hoards are lost, but times of war have strange chances. Then folk do but hand down the knowledge that, somewhere, the treasure is yet hidden {8}.

"Good booty had OElla and Cissa our forbears, but they have left some for us," said Earl Wulfnoth.

"Here is gold enough to buy a good fleet for Ethelred," said Olaf thoughtfully.

"Gold enough for you and me to win England for ourselves withal," said the earl in a low voice. "You take the Danelagh, and I the rest, and we will keep

Ethelred for a puppet overlord."

"If Cnut wins there will be time enough to think of that," answered Olaf coldly. "Eadmund is my friend."

"Not Ethelred?" said Wulfnoth eagerly.

"I fight for him," answered Olaf.

"Well, well. I did but speak my own wish," said the earl. "You and I will not be agreed on this matter."

Then he turned to Relf, and began to give him some directions about a horse whereon to load the treasure. And Olaf and I went back up the ladder, leaving them, for the vault grew close and hot, and this was their business. The earl would take it back to Pevensea, where it would be safe. Word would go round quickly enough concerning the find, and of what value it was. Nor would that grow less in the telling, though none of us had ever seen so much gold together before.

I suppose that I had been in the place for two hours or more, and the morning sky had changed strangely since the fight began. The sun was hidden with a great mass of heavy clouds that were driving up fast from the southwest, although the woods around us were still and motionless in the hot, heavy air. The smoke that still rose from the burnt houses went up straight as a pine tree.

Olaf looked up at the sky, and seemed anxious.

"There is a gale brewing," he said. "I am glad Rani is with the ships."

Then he walked away to a spur of the hill that looked down the valley towards the sea. We could see all the tidal water, and almost to Pevensea, and there came a long murmur of the sea on the pebble beach, even to where we stood, so hushed were all things. Surely there was a heavy sea setting in to make so loud a noise as that. And all the hills and marshes seemed close at hand, so clear was the air.

Then came to us Olaf's ship master, and he was uneasy also.

"Tide is at its highest tonight," he said, "and if the wind gets up from the southwest, as seems likely, it will be higher yet than usual. See how the clouds whirl over us."

Then the king went back to the building and called to Wulfnoth, who came up the ladder asking what was amiss, for he heard that Olaf's voice was urgent.

"Here is a gale coming," the king said, "and we must be back with the ships."

Wulfnoth came out into the open and looked round.

"Aye; and tide will be high at the causeway. These spring tides run wildly at this time of year," he said. "We must be going."

Then was no more delay, but the horns blew the recall, and the men came in. We had lost none, but I do not think that many outlaws were left.

They brought a farm horse, with baskets slung across its back in the Sussex manner, and into them the gold was put. I looked down into the vault as the men left it, and saw that Relf was there, and that they had tried every great stone in the walls in search of another chamber, but that there had not been one. And when he came up I was about to draw up the ladder after him, and looked down for the last time.

There at the ladder's foot sat the elvish toad, and it seemed to me that it looked pitifully up at the light. How many years might it have been without sunlight or touch of dew or cool green leaves that it had loved? And I was fain to climb down and take it up in my hand and set it free on the grass outside the house, where a dock spread its broad leaves. It crawled under them in haste, and I saw it no more. Then I found that Spray the smith was watching me, and he said a strange thing.

"That is a good deed, master," he said. "I think that you shall never be in prison."

"May I never be so," I answered, wondering.

"I am a forest-bred man," he said, "and I love all beasts," and then he turned away, and went to the men who were waiting for the earl's word.

And when all was ready Relf came to me and said that he would go to his own place with his men, and that he would ask me to take word to his wife and daughter that all was safe at home. The outlaws had been too busy in the town to seek further for plunder, or had not cared to do so at once. So he went, as we started, and I was pleased with the chance of having speech with Sexberga.

Now there was a moaning overhead as we went through the woods along the ridge above the valley, and hot breaths of air began to play in our faces. The clouds raced above us more swiftly, and black masses of scud drifted yet faster below them from across the hard black backs of the downs to the westward. There was something strange in the feeling of the weather that seemed to betoken more than a storm of wind and rain, and we were silent and oppressed as we marched.

Now we came to the crest of the hill where the track goes down to the level of the river and marshes and to the causeway, which we crossed in the early morning. I could see now how narrow the outlet of the river was between the hills where it joined the main tidal waters, and the causeway was low, and both it and the bridge were very ancient. They call it Boreham Bridge, and it is a place that I shall not forget.

When we were halfway down the steep hill suddenly the first blast of the gale smote us in the face, and that with a roar and howl and rush that drowned all other sounds. The branches flew from the trees along the hillside, and more than one great trunk gave way at last to that onset. Then all along the coastline grew and widened a white line of flying spindrift that hid the distant gray walls of Pevensea on its low island, and shone like snow against the black dun-edged cloud that came up from out of the sea.

"Hurry, men," shouted Wulfnoth, "or the bridge will be down! Look at the tide!"

And that was racing up inland, already foaming through the wooden arches that spanned its course. I had heard that the tide reached this place a full hour after it began to flow at Pevensea, and even now it was thus, two hours before it should have been at its highest there.

Wulfnoth's men led, and then came the earl, riding beside Spray and the horse

which bore the treasure. Olaf was riding just behind them, and I marched with our crew not ten paces after him. So we went down the hill, and so we stepped on the causeway, and came to the first timbers of the bridge. And hardly had I stepped on them than there came a great shout from the men behind us, while one seized my arm and pointed seaward across the marshes.

There came rushing across the level--blending channel and land into one sea as it passed--a vast white roller, great as any wave which breaks upon the shore, and its length was lost behind the hill before us, and far away to our left. So swiftly did it come that it seemed that none of us might gain the hill before it whelmed us and causeway and bridge alike.

Earl Wulfnoth grasped the bridle of the pack horse, and the man Spray lashed it, shouting aloud to us to hasten. And Olaf turned in his saddle and saw me, and reined up until I grasped his stirrup leather, and ran on beside him. And our men broke and ran, some following us, and some going back to the hill whence we came. And all the while the great white billow was thundering nearer, and my head reeled with its noise and terror till I knew not what I was doing, and let go my hold of Olaf's stirrup.

Then it broke over bridge and causeway, and through its roar I heard yells, and the crash of broken timber, before I lost all knowledge of aught but that I was lost in that mighty wave, and was being whirled like a straw before it, where it would take me.

I struck out wildly as if to swim--but of what avail was that against the weight of rushing water? I seemed to be rolled over and against broken timber and reeds and stones--and once my hand touched a man, for I felt it grate over the scales of armour--and my ears were full of roarings and strange sounds, and I thought that I was surely lost.

Then a strong grip was on me, and the water flew past me, and hurled things at me, for I no longer went with it. My feet touched ground, and other hands held me, and then I was ashore, and spent almost nigh to death. Well for me it was that in the old days by the Stour river I had loved to swim and dive in the deep pool behind the island, for I had learned to save my breath. Had I not done so, the choking of the great wave had surely ended my days.

It was Olaf who had saved me. Almost had we won to the high ground when I had let go his stirrup leather, and then the shoreward edge of the wave had caught me. But he had faced its fury as he saw me borne away, and had snatched me from it as it tossed me near the bank again. Now he bent over me, trying to catch the sound of my voice through the roar of the storm and the rush of the flood below us. But I could not speak to him though I would, and it was not all drowning that ailed me, for the blow which had felled me in the fight was even now beginning to do its work. Else had I clung to him all along, and had been safe as he was. For he won to shore ten yards beyond its reach as the wave came.

Now I know that Olaf and our men carried me into a place under the lee of a hill, and bided there till the gale blew over. There was a sharp pain as of a piercing weapon in my side as they did so, and after that I knew not much of being carried on to the house of Relf, the Thane of Penhurst, along a forest road where travelling was no easier for the fallen trees that lay across it. And after I was there I knew nothing. The blow I had had took its effect on me, and I had several ribs broken by some timber that smote me amid the tossing of the great wave of the flood.

Many are the tales that men all round the coasts will tell of the great sea flood that came on Michaelmas even. For it ran far into the land where no tide had run before, and many towns were destroyed by it, and many people were drowned. It will be long before the scathe it wrought will be forgotten. Many of the earl's ships were broken, even where they lay behind the island, and two of ours were lost--carried across the level where no ship had ever swum before. And eight of our men had been swept from the causeway and drowned. Two lie yet under the wreck of bridge and causeway, or in the Ashbourne valley amid wrack and ruin of field and forest that the flood left behind it.

But these things I learnt afterwards. Now I was like to die, and Olaf bided at my side and minded nought else, as men said.

Chapter 6: Sexberga The Thane's Daughter.

Days came and went by while I lay helpless. Olaf the king at last must needs leave me, and take the ships back to the Thames, there to watch against Cnut's return, in which he, almost alone in England, believed. But he would not sail before he knew that I would recover, and he left me in the kind hands of Anselm, the old Norman priest, who was well skilled in leech craft, and of Relf the Thane and his wife. So I need say nought of the long days of weakness after danger was gone, for there are few men who have not known what they are like, and well for them if they have had such tending as these good folk gave to me.

Yet it was not till November had half gone that I was able to ride hunting again at last, and to go out with Relf in the crisp frosts of early winter through the great woods of the Andred's-weald in search of wolf and boar, or when the mists hung round the gray copses, and the turf in the glades was soft, and scent was high, to follow the deer that harboured in the deep shaws. We were seldom without their spoils as we came homeward, and how good it was to feel my strength coming back to me as I rode--to find the grip on a spear shaft hardening, and the bow hand growing steadier against a longer pull on the tough string. And Relf rejoiced with me to see this, for he deemed that he owed me the more care because my hurt had been gained in fighting for him and his home. Honest and rough, with a warm heart was this forest thane, and we grew to be fast friends.

Now when I was helpless, Wulfnoth the earl and Godwine would often ride from Pevensea to learn how I fared. For Wulfnoth and Godwine alike loved Olaf the king, and Godwine thought of me as his own friend among the vikings of our fleet. But presently Godwine went away to Bosham, where the earl's ships were mostly laid up, to see to the housing of his vessels for the winter, and when I grew strong it was rather my place to go to Pevensea and wait on Wulfnoth, if I would see him. I think the earl came to Penhurst more often also, because he would dig for more treasure in all the old ruins in the town. But he found no more, as one might well suppose, for it was but a chance that our find had

escaped the searching of the first Saxon comers. Yet I saw him now and then, and ever would he rail at Ethelred the king, who sat still and left the Danish thingmen in possession of the eastern strongholds even yet.

Now one day the thane and I rode together with hawk and hound eastward from Penhurst along the spur of a hill that runs thence for many a long mile, falling southward on one side towards the sea and lower hills between, and northward looking inland over forest-covered hill and valley. And we went onward until we came to the village that men call Senlac, where the long hill ridge ends and sinks sharply into the valley of the little river Asten, and there we thought that a heron or mallard would lie in the reedy meadows below the place.

But up the course of the stream came another party, and when we neared it, we saw that it was the earl himself with but a few followers, and he too was riding with hawk on wrist, and hounds in leash behind him, though it did not seem as if he had loosed either.

"Ho, Relf, good morrow. What sport?" he said.

"Little enough, lord earl, as yet," the thane said.

"Do you and friend Redwald come with me, and I will show you somewhat before you go home," the earl answered.

So we must go with him, willingly enough, for he was a great hunter, and very skilful in woodcraft.

Now we went back through the village and up the hill again on the same track by which we had just come, and when we were almost at the top of the rise, the earl bade the men wait while we three rode on. So they stayed, and we followed him, not at all knowing what he would do.

Then we came to a track leading to the right as we rode, and he took that way. It led to a place of which I had heard, for it had no good name among the people, but I thought that he would not go thither. Nevertheless he held straight on, and came to the place in the hillside that was feared. And it was very beautiful, for thence one looks out over the valley to the hills beyond, with the long line of the sea away to the right, and to the left the valleys that slope down to the inlet

where Winchelsea stands, far off to the eastward. There is a well which they say is haunted, though by what I know not, save that men speak of ghostly hands that seize them as they pass, if pass they must, at night. Hardly was there a track to the place, though the water that comes from the rocky spring is so wondrously pure and cold that they call the place Caldbec {9} Hill. And there by the side of the spring was a little turf-built hut, hardly to be known from the shelving bank against which it leant, and to that the earl led us.

"Now," he said, "tie the horses somewhere, and we will go and speak with the Wise Woman."

At that Relf was not pleased, as it seemed, for he did not dismount.

"Come not if you fear her," said Wulfnoth; "bide with the horses if you will, while I and Olaf's cousin go in. Maybe there will be a message that he must take to his kinsman."

"I have nought to seek from the old dame," said Relf, "nor is there aught that I fear from her. I give her venison betimes, as is fitting. I will bide with the horses."

Wulfnoth said no more to him, and turned sharply to me. "You give her no venison--maybe you fear her therefore!" he said in a scornful way enough.

"I fear her no more than Relf," I answered, "but, like him, I will not seek her without reason."

"Maybe there is reason for you to hear what she tells me," the earl said. "I will have you come."

He seemed in no wise angry, but rather wishful that I should be with him, and so I got off my horse and went. But it crossed my mind that Wulfnoth the earl liked not to be alone, and suddenly I remembered the way in which two of our Bures franklins had spoken to each other when they would see Dame Gunnhild, Hertha's nurse. It was just in this same wise.

There was a blue reek of oak-wood smoke across the doorway of the hut, and at first the tears came into my eyes with its biting, and I could see nothing as the earl drew me inside. We had to stoop low as we crossed the threshold, and then

the air was clearer at the back of the hut, which was far larger than one would think, seeing that its front did but cover the mouth of a cave that was in the sandstone rock. I heard the water of the cold spring rattling and bubbling somewhere close at hand.

There was a long seat hewn from the rock at the very back of the place and to one side, and Wulfnoth drew me down beside him upon it, and there we sat silent, waiting for I knew not what. A great yellow cat came and rubbed itself, tail in air, against my legs, and I stroked it, and it purred pleasantly.

Then I became aware that over against us across the fire sat the most terrible-looking old witch that I had ever seen or dreamed of, elbows on knees and chin on hand, staring at us. And when I saw her I forgot the cat, and could not take my eyes off her.

So for long enough we sat, and she turned her bright eyes from one of us to the other, letting them rest steadily on each in turn. And at last she spoke.

"What do Earl Wulfnoth and Redwald the thane seek?"

"Read me what is in the time to come. What shall be the outcome of this strife for England?" the earl said plainly, but in a low voice.

"Time to come is longer than I can read," said the old woman, never stirring or taking her eyes from the earl. "I can only see into a few years, and I cannot always say what I know of them."

Then she turned her gaze on me, and stretched out her hand and pointed at me. But her eyes looked past me, as it seemed.

"River and mere and mound," she said in a strangely soft voice--"those, and the ways of the old time of Guthrum, in the town that saw Eadmund the king. That is what is written for the weird of Redwald the thane."

Now at that I was fairly terrified, for it was plain that this old woman, who had never set eyes on me before, had knowledge more than mortal. But if she had gone so far, I would have her go yet further. Black terror had been before the days of Guthrum grew peaceful, and I swallowed my fear of her and asked:

"What of Guthrum's days?"

"Danish laws in the Danish Anglia," she said, "and the peace that comes after the sword and the torch."

"Fire and sword we have had," I said. "Danish laws have ever been ours. But Ethelred shall be king."

"Ethelred is king," she answered; "but I speak of time to come."

Then Wulfnoth broke in:

"What is this that you speak of, dame? Tell me if I shall bear fire and sword into Ethelred's land, and give it the peace that shall be thereafter."

Then she turned her look away from us, and stared across the fire and out of the doorway.

"Not with you, nor with your son, but with your son's son shall fire and sword come into this land of ours," she said.

"Godwine's son!"

"Aye--Harold Godwinsson, who is unborn. Look through the smoke, lords, across the valley, and see if you can learn aught."

Then I stared out through the blue reek, and the earl looked.

"You do but play with me--I see nought!" he cried, half starting up in anger.

But I minded him not.

Many a fight have I seen--but that which I saw from Caldbec Hill through the smoke of the fire is more than I may say. No fight that I have seen was as that--it was most terrible. Surely, if ever such a fight shall in truth rage across the quiet Senlac stream and up the green hillside, the fate of more than a king shall hang thereon. Surely I saw such a strife as makes or ends a nation.

The old woman laughed.

"What has Redwald seen?" she asked mockingly.

The earl glanced at me, and so plainly was it written in my face that I had seen somewhat awesome, that he gazed at me in amaze.

And I rose up and said:

"Let me go hence--I will see no more."

And I was staggering to the doorway; but Wulfnoth grasped my arm and stayed me, saying:

"Bide here and say what you have seen--if it is aught."

"Ask me not, earl," I answered.

Then the dame spoke in her slow, soft voice.

"What banner saw you? Say that much, Redwald."

"The banner that flies from Pevensea walls--the banner that bears a fighting warrior for its sign."

"Ha!" said Wulfnoth; "was it well or ill with that banner?"

"I know not how it went; I saw but a battle--yonder," and I pointed to where, across the haze of smoke, valley and stream and hill stretched before me, and thought that surely the fight still raged as I had seen it--wave after wave of mail-clad horsemen charging uphill to where, ringed in by English warriors, Saxon and Anglian and Danish shoulder to shoulder, the banner of the Sussex earls stood--while from the air above it rained the long arrows thick as driving hail.

One thing I knew well, and that was that the warriors who charged wore the war gear of the dukes of Rouen--the Normans. How should they come here? and who should weld our English races into one thus to withstand so new a foe from across the sea?

"So--a battle?" said Wulfnoth. "That is the first fancy that a boy's brain will weave. Battles enough shall my banner see. No need of you, witch as you are, to

tell me that!"

"Maybe not," answered the old woman. "Why, then, Earl Wulfnoth, come here to ask me to tell you things you know?" and she turned away towards the fire again as if uncaring.

Then the earl changed his tone, saying:

"Nay, good dame, but I would know if I shall take up arms at all at this time, and what shall befall if I must do so."

"I tell you, earl, that you have not any share in the wars that shall be seen. And let Godwine your son bide with his sheep--so shall he find his place."

Then the earl flushed red with anger and waited to hear no more, but flung out of the house, muttering hard words on the dame and on his own foolishness in seeking her.

Then the great cat sprang on my knee, and clung to me with its strong claws as I would set it down to follow him. And as it stayed me, the old dame spoke to me, and there was nought to fear in either her face or voice.

"Ask me somewhat, Redwald."

I wondered, but I dared not refuse. So I said:

"How shall fare King Olaf?"

"For him a kingdom, and more than a kingdom. For him fame, and better than fame. For him a name that shall never die."

"That is a wondrous weird," I said. "Tell me now of Eadmund Atheling;" for some strange power that the old woman had seemed to draw me to ask of her what I would most know.

"For Eadmund of Wessex? For him the shadow of Edric Streone over all his brave life."

"What then of Cnut, the Dane King?"

"Honour and peace, and the goodwill of all men."

"Not mine," I said.

"Yours also, Redwald--for England's sake and his own."

But I could not believe her at that time.

Now the angry voice of Wulfnoth called me from outside the place, and the dame said "Go," smiling at me and holding out her hand.

"No more can I tell you, Redwald. But I have this to say of you, that you have pleased me in asking nought concerning yourself."

"I would know nought beforehand," I said, speaking old thoughts of my own plainly. "It is enough to hope ever for good that may not come, and to live with one's life unclouded by fear of the evil that must needs be."

The dame smiled again, very sadly, as it seemed to me. "It is well said. Now I will tell you this, that over your life is the shadow of no greater evil than what every man must meet. Farewell."

So she spoke her last words to me, and sat down by the fire again. And it is in my thoughts that she wept, but I know not.

Outside stood the earl, staring over the Senlac valley eastward.

"This were a good place for a battle, after all," he said, as to himself. Then he heard me and turned.

"Well, what more has the old witch told you?" he said, trying to speak carelessly, though one might see that he longed to hear more.

As we went towards the horses, I told him, therefore, of what had been said of Eadmund and Cnut. And as he heard he grew thoughtful.

"Now," he said, slowly and half to himself, "if the shadow of that villain Streone is on Eadmund as on me, I will not strike for myself--as yet; and Cnut shall win other men's praise before I give him mine or go to him unsought."

"Eadmund needs a friend, lord earl," I said, mindful of Olaf's errand, yet hardly daring to say more seeing that he had failed.

"If there were no Ethelred--" said the earl, and stopped.

He said no more then until we were nearly within hearing of Relf. Then he turned and faced me, taking my hand and staying me.

"I would that Olaf and you were my friends," he said, "for you both speak out for those whom you love or serve. See here, Redwald, when you are tired of the ways of Ethelred's crew, come to me again, and we will plan together. And tell Olaf the same. I shall bide quiet, keeping my Sussex against all comers, until I think a time has come. And then, maybe, the old banner will go forward. I would have you with me then."

So it seemed that I had found a friend, though a strange one, and I thanked the earl, and promised him as he wished, for it bound me only to what I thought would surely never come to pass.

After that we went on to Relf, and rode to where we had left the men. Then the earl left us, making his way to his ships that lay at Bulverhythe, where some were in winter quarters. The great sea flood had changed the Pevensea haven strangely, and he mistrusted it.

I told Relf all these things, but he cared not much for aught but his free life in the Penhurst woodlands, where he had no foes or fear of foes left, now that the outlaws were done with.

"Well, if there must be fighting under the earl at some time," he said, "I am glad that you may be with us."

And he cared to ask no more about it from that day, nor do I think that he ever gave these matters, which were so heavy to me, a thought, being always light hearted. And now as we rode on silently, and I deemed that his mind was full of bodings, as was mine, he roused me from the memory of what I had seen and heard by saying, with a laugh:

"Saw you the old dame's cat?"

"Aye," I answered carelessly; "a great one, and a friendly beast enough."

"Was it so? Then I will warrant that the old witch was in a sorely bad temper," he said, laughing again.

"What makes you think that?" I asked, not caring if he answered.

"Why, our folk say that the temper of cat and witch are ever opposite. So when they go to ask aught of the old lady, they wait outside till they see how the cat--which is, no doubt, her familiar spirit--behaves. Then if the beast is wild and savage, they know that its mistress will be in good temper and they may go in. But if the cat is friendly, they may as well go home, else will they be like to get harder words than they would care to hear."

Then I laughed also, and said that there seemed nought strange in the ways of the great cat, but that it behaved as if used to being noticed kindly.

"That is certain," said Relf. "It is not well to offend either mistress or beast. But surely she was ill tempered?"

"There was nothing ill natured in her doing or sayings at all," I said. "The earl angered her a little, but that passed."

"Maybe that was enough to put her familiar into a good temper," said Relf, and was satisfied that the common saying was true.

Then I minded a small black cat that belonged to our leech at Bures in the old days. It would let none come near it but its master. Yet I have many times seen it perched on the shoulder of the town witch, and she hated the leech sorely.

So I fell to thinking of the old home and ways, soon, as I thought, to be taken up again. But at the same time there stole into my mind the feeling that I had grown to love this place.

Then with flap of heavy wings and croak of alarm flew up a great heron from a marshy pool, and in a moment all was forgotten as I unhooded my hawk--one that Olaf had given me from the Danish spoils at Canterbury. Then the rush of the long-winged falcon, and the cry of the heron, and the giddy climbing of both into the gray November sky as they strove for the highest flight, was all that I

cared for, and we shook our reins and cantered after the birds as they drifted down the wind, soaring too high to breast it.

And when the heron was taken the dark thoughts were gone, and we rode back to Penhurst gaily, speaking no word of war or coming trouble, but of flight of hawk and wile of quarry, and the like pleasant things.

After this I saw no more of Earl Wulfnoth, and the winter set in with heavy snow and frosts, so that before long one might hardly stir into the woods, where the drifts were over heavy in the deep shaws to be very safe to a stranger. But we had some good days when word came that the foresters had harboured an old boar in a sheltered place. And to attack the fearless beast when he is thus penned and at bay amid snow walls, is warriors' sport indeed.

But while the snow fell whirling in the cold blasts from the sea round the great low-roofed hall I must needs bide within, and so I saw more of the maiden Sexberga than before, as she sat at her wheel with the lady, her mother, and the maidens of the house at the upper end of the hall, while the men wrought at their indoor work of mending and making horse gear and tool handles and the like, below the fire that burnt in the centre.

And so it had been like enough that soon I should have bound my heart to this pleasant place with ties that would have been hard to break, but for some words that came about by chance. For there had begun to spring up in my mind a great liking for the words and ways of Sexberga, who had been pleasant in my eyes from the very first time that I had seen her and her mother in Earl Wulfnoth's courtyard.

And I think that there is no wonder in this, for these ladies were ever most kind to me, and long were the days since I had spoken with any in such a home as this. Nor, as I have said, should I be blamed for forgetting old days at Bures in this wise.

Now, soon after Christmas, when there came one of those days when men must needs keep under cover, I sat by the fire trimming arrows, and presently it chanced that the lady and I were alone in the hall, for the maidens were preparing the supper elsewhere, and the housecarles had not yet come in from cattle yard and sheep pens. And we talked quietly of this and that, as her wheel

hummed and clicked cheerfully the while, and at last some word of mine led her to say:

"I have heard little of your own folk, Redwald. I do not know even their names."

"After my father was slain, I had none left but my mother," I said. "We are distant kinsfolk of Ulfkytel, our earl, but we have no near kin."

"Was your mother's name Hertha?" she said, naturally enough, for I had never named her, always speaking, as one will, of her as my mother only.

I looked up wondering, for I could not think how she knew that name, or indeed any other than that of Siric, my father, and maybe Thorgeir, my grandfather, for Olaf had told them at first, when they took charge of me, to what family I had belonged, and how I was akin to him.

"That was not my mother's name," I answered. "It was that of a playfellow of mine. How could you know it?"

"One will go back in thought and word to old times when one is sick," the lady said, smiling. "This was a name often on your lips as I sat by you in your sickness. It was ever 'Mother' and 'Hertha'. Olaf said that you had no sisters, or I should have thought you called to one of them, maybe."

Then I remembered at last; and for a little while I sat silent, and my heart was sorely troubled. And the trouble was because my growing thought of Sexberga taught me, all in a flash as it were, when the remembrance of Hertha was brought thus clearly back to me, what tie bound me to Bures and to this more than playmate of mine. In truth, I think that had it not been for this, until I had been back in Bures again I should not have recalled it.

Now I was glad that I had said nought that might have made my liking for the maiden plain to her, and so things would be the easier. Yet for a few moments the thought of saying nought of the old betrothal came to me--of letting it remain forgotten. And then that seemed to me to be unworthy of a true man. It was done, and might not be undone by my will alone. I would even speak plainly of the matter; and at least I had not gone so far in any way that the lady could

blame me for silence. So I hardened my heart--for indeed the trouble seemed great--and spoke quickly.

"Hertha was nearer to me than sister, for we were betrothed when I was but thirteen and she eleven."

I think the trouble in my voice was plain, for the lady deemed that there was some to be told.

"Where is she now?" she asked. "I hope that no harm came to her when the evil Danes overran your land."

"I know not where she may be, dear lady," I said. "We know that she was in safety after the first peril passed. Now our land is in Danish hands, and I have no news from thence for four years."

"There are many places here where one might hide well enough," she said thoughtfully. "I suppose her people could find the like in your country. But it would be a dull life enough."

Then I told her of Gunnhild the nurse and her wisdom, and said that none knew the land around Bures better than she, while she had friends everywhere.

"Then you may find your Hertha yet," the lady said at last; and as she spoke Sexberga, of whom my mind was full, came into the hall.

"You speak sadly together," she said, looking from one to the other, and noting that her mother's wheel was idle.

"It is no happy tale that our friend has told me," the lady said, and so told her all that she had learned from me.

Then Sexberga clasped her hands together, and said:

"Shall I ever forget the time when we fled to Pevensea before the outlaws? And to think of that terror--if it had lasted for days and weeks--and months maybe, as it would for your Hertha. Could you in no way seek her, Redwald?"

She knew nothing of the ways of wartime and of the troubles which must

come to men who are weapon bearers, and I tried to tell her how I could by no means have sought Hertha, and how, had that been possible, and had I found her, I could hardly have brought her even to London in safety. I told her of good Bishop Elfheah and his death, and many more things, and yet she said:

"I think you have been over long in seeking her. And she has been in hiding for four years past!"

Now that was hardly fair, but what could she think else? Yet in my mind was the certainty now that I might have had no easy task to win this kindly maiden, who so little cared that I was bound elsewhere. Now I will not say that that altogether pleased me, for no man likes to learn that a fair maiden who is pleasant to his eyes has no like feeling for himself; which is nought but vanity after all. So when I turned this over in my mind I knew that I ought to be glad that she cared nothing, for so was the less trouble in the end, and I found also that what a man ought to be is not the same always as what a man is.

So I made no answer, and Sexberga went on:

"Now must you seek her as soon as you can, for that is your part as a good warrior--a good knight, as Father Anselm will say when he hears thereof."

"Surely I shall go back this spring with our earl," I said. "Then shall I find her, for she and her nurse will come back from their hiding when peace is sure."

"Aye; and you will not know her!" said Sexberga, clapping her hands and laughing. "She is a woman grown, as I am, by this time!"

Then was gone my little playfellow, and in her place, in my thoughts, must stand a maiden with eyes of sad reproach that must be ever on me. And maybe in her heart would be fear of me, and of what I had become, as she was bound to me.

And now Sexberga began to weave fancies of how I should meet this long-lost bride of mine, and I could make no answer to her playful railing, for I saw more clearly than she. And her mother knew that this must be so, and sent her away on some household errand, and I was glad.

Then she laid her hand on mine, and spoke very kindly to me.

"I fear, Redwald, that there is a strange trial coming for you; but I think that you will face it rightly. It is likely that you will hardly know Hertha when you see her; yet you are betrothed to her, and that is a thing that cannot be forgotten."

"She will not know me at all," I said.

"Women are keen sighted," the lady answered; "but it is more than likely that she will not."

Then said I:

"What if she has no love for me?"

"Or you of her? But I think that in her hiding she has thought of you ever, and well will it be for you if you come not short of her dream of you. But you have thought of her not at all."

"Blame me not, lady," I said humbly enough, though I thought I deserved blame more than she knew.

"I cannot," she answered, and then a half smile crossed her fair face; "nor should I have thought it wonderful if some other maiden had taken her place in your heart. But that would have been ill for three people in the end."

I sat silent, and maybe I was glad that the glow of the fire was ruddy on my face, for it seemed that she had seen somewhat of my thoughts of late.

"Now you must find Hertha," she went on, "and then if either of you will be released, I think that Holy Church will not be hard on you, nor keep you bound to each other, for things have turned out ill for such a betrothal."

"This is a hard case," I said, "for supposing that one longs for release and the other does not?"

"Why, you cannot be so much as lovers yet!" she said, laughing suddenly. "Here we speak as if a child's thoughts were aught. Now comes into my mind such a plan as is in the old stories. You shall seek Hertha as Olaf's kinsman only—as a kinsman who seeks for you, maybe, not letting her know who you are."

Then may you try to win her love, if you will--or if you cannot love her, you may so work on her mind that she will not love you, and then all is easy. For if she will not love you when you would win her, you will not hold her bound."

"Surely not," I said. "This seems a good plan, if only it may be carried out. But it depends on whether Hertha knows me again."

"Or the old nurse, Gunnhild," she answered. "If she lives yet, you must take her into the plan."

So this seemed to me to be a matter easily managed, as I thought thereof, and I was content. And after we had talked a while longer, planning thus, I said:

"Now I must go back to Olaf as soon as I can. The winter is wearing away."

"Aye; the good king will be missing you," she said.

I was not ready to say more, for I meant a great deal by my words, as might be supposed. And the lady knew it, as I think, for presently she said:

"I wonder that you spoke not of Hertha before."

"There need be no wonder, lady," I answered. "I have lived but in the constant thought of war, until I must needs be quiet here. But for this, I should still have forgotten her."

"That is true; but you must remember her now," she said, looking quaintly at me.

"I will remember, lady," I answered, kissing her hand; and she smiled on me and was content.

Truly that one who teaches a man that he is worthy of trust is his best teacher of honour, and the name of the lady of Penhurst is ever dear to me.

So it came to pass that I had nought wherewith to blame myself in the days to come, and I taught myself to look on Sexberga as a pleasant friend only, though it was hard at first, to say the truth. And I think that her talk of Hertha, and her jesting at my unknown bride, as she would call her, helped me, for it kept me

mindful.

Then at last came a messenger from Wulfnoth to bid me ride to see him at Pevensea, and I went, wondering what new turn of things was on hand. But when I reached the castle, I saw a ship that I knew lying in the haven--one of Olaf's own. For Ottar the scald had come to seek me with the first sign of open weather, bringing also many gifts of Danish spoil for Relf and his household, and many words of thanks also.

So in two days' time I parted from Relf and his people, not without sorrow. Nor could I say all that I would to them of my thoughts of what I owed them for their care.

Then Wulfnoth and Godwine gave me twenty pieces of the gold from the treasure, and bade me return ere long.

"And I think that you will come back presently with an itching to get home a sword stroke at one whom I care not to name lest I break out," said the earl grimly.

"At Streone?" said I, being light of heart.

"Aye; curses on him!" answered Wulfnoth, and turned away with a scowl of wrath.

Now Ottar had been to Penhurst with me, and we had come thence together to the ships. And when the old walls of the great castle were lost to sight as the vessel plunged eastward, he said:

"Relf's daughter is a fair maiden, friend Redwald. It is in my mind that she will long to see you back again."

"Not so," I answered; "she is but friendly."

"But she had much ado not to weep when you parted just now, and I saw her run home from the gate over quickly. These be signs," he said sagely, being a scald, and therefore wise in his own conceit about such matters.

Maybe I was glad to think that the maiden did care that I went, were it ever

so little, though I would not believe that it was so.

So I came back into the Thames to Olaf, and glad was he to see me once more, and that I was in no wise the worse now for my hurts. And in his company it soon came to pass that I longed not at all for Penhurst, though at first it seemed to me that I should have little pleasure in life away from Sexberga. By and by I could laugh at myself for that thought, but I have never seen cause to be sorry therefor. There is no shame to a man that his mind has turned towards a maiden whom he knows that he could trust and reverence.

Chapter 7: The Fight At Leavenheath.

March and April went by, and Olaf had gathered good fleet enough in the Thames. But there was no word of Cnut's return, though the dread thereof hung heavy over all the land, in such wise that no man could plan what he would do without the thought rising up, "Unless the Dane comes," seeing that each day might bring news of him.

No man knows now what that terror and uncertainty was like--to have ever in one's heart the fear of that awful host that seemed to sweep from end to end of the land before a levy could be gathered to meet it.

There had been time to gather a levy now against the coming of Cnut, but naught had been done. Sick at heart and impatient was Olaf, for England's rulers would not take care for her safety.

Then came word of a great council to be held at Oxford, and we hoped much from that; but two days after it had been held there came to us, angry and desponding, Ulfkytel, our East Anglian earl, and told us how things had gone as ill as they might. Few words enough are needed to tell it, but none can know what harm was wrought thereby. Whereof Olaf says that a good leader will act first, and call his council afterwards.

All the best of England were there, not only Saxon thanes of Wessex, but also loyal Danes of the old settlement, and had the king spoken his will plainly, all would have been well. For of the Danish nobles, Utred of Northumbria and the two earls of the old seven boroughs, Sigferth and Morcar, were at one with our earl and Eadmund for gathering a great levy, and keeping it together by marching through the Danelagh, and calling on the Danish thingmen, in the towns they yet held, to surrender.

That plan was good, and would have been carried out; but Edric Streone rose up and reminded Ethelred of how the march through Lindsey had done more harm than good.

"Cnut will not return," he said, "and messages to these Danish garrisons with promise of peace if they surrender will be enough. But if we fall on them, they will grow desperate, and will send for Cnut to help them. If we win them to peace, Cnut cannot come back."

Thereat Sigferth of Stamford spoke hotly, minding Streone that the harm was done in Lindsey by pillage and burning wrought among peaceful folk, who were thus made enemies to the king. The thingmen would submit quietly if they knew they must; but if they were left, they would send word to Cnut that there was no force to oppose him.

But the words of Streone prevailed as ever, and the council broke up, and the nobles fell to feasting, while this foolish message was sent to Swein's veterans in their towns.

Then Sigferth and Morcar made no secret of their belief that Streone was playing into Cnut's hands for reasons of his own. Wherefore Streone sent for them in friendly wise, as if to recall his words, and they went, and came from his house alive no more. Then their men went to avenge their lords' deaths, and were driven into St. Frideswide's church, and that was burnt over their heads.

"Now the seven boroughs will welcome Cnut," said Ulfkytel, "and Lindsey looks for him; so he has a clear road into the heart of England."

Then I saw that Streone surely wrought for Cnut, else was he a more foolish man than was thought, for all held him as the most skilful at statecraft in England.

Then said Ulfkytel:

"Utred has gone to mind his own land, and I have come to ask you to help me in East Anglia."

And in the end it came to pass that Olaf gave his new fleet into the hands of the London thanes, for Ethelred seemed to care nought for it, and took his own ships only, and we sailed first of all to Maldon. Little trouble was there, for the Danes who held the place submitted, being too few to fight us, and we gave their arms to the citizens, and mounted all of our men whom we could, and so left the

ships and marched towards Colchester, along the great road that I had last passed as a fugitive in the years that seemed to me so long ago.

It was strange to me as we went, and the mist of time seemed to pass away, so that all began to be as plain to my mind as if that flight had been but yesterday. There was nothing of the wayside happening that I could not remember well.

But all the roadside was changed, for the cottages were gone, and the farmsteads stood no longer in the clearings. I know not what tales of terror I might have heard concerning the burnings of these homes. Where the thralls' huts had been were but patches of nettles and docks hiding heaps of ashes, and the farmhouses were charred ruins. And we saw now and then a man, skin clad and wretched, seeking shelter in the woods in all haste as we sighted him. But I had no need to ask aught--I knew only too well what manner of tales might be told here, as everywhere in Swein's track.

As we drew nearer Colchester, and the village folk began to learn who we were, and so would gather with gifts for the good-natured Norsemen who came to release them from the tyranny of the thingmen, now and then a face that I knew would start, as it were, upon me from among a little crowd. But none knew me, nor were they likely to do so. Hardly could I think myself the same as the careless boy who had watched his father ride away to the war. Indeed, I know that I changed less in the ten years that came after this than in the four that had gone by since that day. For in those four years I had become the hardened warrior of many defeats and but this one victory.

Now when we reached Coggeshall village, word came to us that the Danes were gathering in force in Colchester, and that they expected Olaf to besiege them there.

"I will waste no time under Colchester walls," he said, "but will strike inland a little; then they will come out and give us battle in the open to stay our march."

By this time the loyal freemen of Essex had gathered to Ulfkytel in good force, and Olaf thought it would be well that he should march along the road that leads from Coggeshall to Dunmow and take that town, which is strong, so that the Danish forces should not join against us.

Therefore he left us, and would go northwards from Dunmow, taking the towns from thence to Thetford and Norwich, and he should go to Ipswich and maybe to Dunwich after this. So would all East Anglia submit. And all went well with Ulfkytel until the time came when he must turn back in haste, as I must tell presently.

Now, after he was gone, Olaf thought that it would be well to cross the Colne and Stour rivers, and so cut off the Sudbury Danes from Colchester if it might be done.

"Then there is no better place than my own," said I, "for the road on either side of the Stour can be guarded at Bures, and I know all the country well."

That pleased Olaf, and he said that we would take up some strong position there, and so wait to draw the Danes into the open, where he thought that one battle would do all for us.

Thus I came hack to the home that I loved and longed to see again. And when we came in the early morning to the place where the great mound of the Icenian queen towers above its woods I know not how my heart was stirred. I cannot say the things that I felt, and Olaf said:

"Let us ride on alone and see your place."

Then we came swiftly to the crest of the hill, and I could see all that was mine by right. But it was a piteous sight for me, and my rage and sorrow made me silent as I looked.

The stockading that had been so good was broken and useless, and the church was in blackened ruins, standing among the houses where black gaps among them also showed that the Danes had been at work and that none had had heart to rebuild. Black were the ruins of my home on the hill above the village, and across the mere woods one burnt gable of Hertha's home stood alone above the hill shoulder to show where Osgod had dwelt in the hollow of the hills beside the ford.

Then we rode across the bridge and into the street unchallenged, for all the poor folk had fled from before us thinking that we were some fresh foes. Very

strange the deserted place looked to me as I sat on my horse on the familiar green, and saw the river gleam across the gap where the church had been, and missed the houses that I had known so well.

"Call aloud, Redwald," said Olaf. "It may be that your name will bring some from their hiding."

So I called, and the empty street echoed back the words:

"Ho, friends! I am Redwald, your thane. Will none come to greet me?"

There was no answer, and Olaf lifted up his clear voice:

"Ho, Ethelred's men! here is help against the Danes."

Then from under the staging by the riverside where the boats land their cargo, crept two men and came towards us slowly. And one was that thrall of mine who would have gone to Wormingford for me on the night when we fled. His silver collar of thralldom was gone, for the Danes had taken it, and his face bore marks of long hardship, but I knew him instantly. So I called him by name, and he stared at me fixedly for a moment, and then cried aloud and ran to me and fell to kissing my hand and weeping with joy at my return. Nor could I get a word from him at first.

Then more of the people came from one place or another, timidly at first, but growing bold as they saw these two men without fear of us, and by the time that Olaf's warriors came over the bridge there were not a few folk standing round us and looking on. One by one I knew their faces, though years of pain had marked them sorely. But none knew me at first, though doubtless they would do so if I called to them as I had called to Brand the thrall.

Now was busy setting of watches and ordering of outposts, and Olaf went with me to the top of our hill and there set a strong post of our men, for there could be no better place for a camp either for rest or defence, and the people told him that every Dane in the countryside had gone to Colchester, where they thought to be attacked.

Now Brand the thrall had followed us to the hilltop, and while I sat and looked at the ruins of my home he left me and spoke to a group of countrymen

who looked on at the warriors. There was one among this group whose face drew me, for I seemed to think that I ought to know him, though I could not say who he was. He looked like a poor franklin in his rough brown jerkin and leather-gartered hose, and broad hat, and he bore no weapon but a short seax in his belt, and a quarterstaff, and there was nought about him to claim notice. But I was watching for old friends of mine with a full heart, and scanned the face of each one that came near.

Then it seemed that the others spoke to this man with a sort of reverence, and presently one bared his head before him. Thereat I knew who he was, and my heart leapt with joy, for it was good Father Ailwin, our priest, who had gone back to his death as we had thought.

Then I made haste and went to him, dismounting before him.

"Father," I said, "have you forgotten Redwald, your pupil?"

He took my hand in silence, being too much moved to speak, and signed the sign of the cross towards me in token of blessing. I bowed my head, and rejoiced that he was yet living.

Then Olaf called me, and I said:

"When the warriors have dispersed, come to the house on the green that was Gurth's. The king and I shall be there. We have much to say to one another, father."

So I had to leave him at that time, for now Olaf would take eight score of our men in haste to Sudbury, which is but five miles away, and call on the townsfolk to rise for Ethelred and drive out any Danes who were left there.

We went away quickly, and took all our mounted men, for we could hear of no Danish force afield yet. It is likely that word of our force had gone from Maldon, losing nothing on the way.

We rode to Sudbury gates and called on the townspeople to open their gates. Then was some tumult and fighting inside the town, but they opened to us, and we rode in. There were some slain men in the street, for what Danes had been there had resisted the surrender to so small a force.

But the Sudbury folk rejoiced to see us, and hailed Ethelred as king very gladly. Then Olaf bade them raise what men they could and join him at Bures on the morrow with the first light. Thereat the old sheriff of Sudbury, whom I knew well, promised that we should have all the men whom he could raise.

"Nor will they be your worst fighters, King Olaf," he said, "for we have many wrongs to avenge."

It was late evening when we went back. And in the road where it winds between the river and the hill before one comes into Bures street waited Rani and some men with news. The Danes had come from Colchester, and already their watch fires were burning along the heath some four miles to eastward of us. It had fallen out, as Olaf wished, that they would try to bar our way into Suffolk, and we should have work to hand on the morrow.

Now men had gone with some thralls who could take them safely near the host, to spy what they could of the number and the plans of the Danes.

So it came to pass that I went no more into the village that night, but slept by a fire that burnt where our own hearthstone had been, amid the ruins of my home. And that was a sad homecoming enough. Moreover, in the first hours of the night a wonderful thing happened which seemed to be of ill omen, and was so strange that maybe few will believe it.

There was a bit of broken wall near the fire, and I laid me down in my cloak under its shelter, setting the sword that Eadmund had given me against it close to my head, so that I could reach it instantly if need were. After a while I slept, for the day had been very long and I was weary, else would sad thoughts have kept me waking. And presently there was a rumble and snapping that woke me up in a dream of falling ruin, and the man who lay next to me cried out and dragged me roughly aside.

The broken wall had fallen, crumbling with the heat of the fire, I suppose, and had almost slain me. But I was not touched, though the sword was broken. And when Ottar the scald heard of it he was troubled, not knowing what this might betoken. But Olaf thought little of it.

"It means that axe is better than sword for this fight," he said, for he had armed me like himself after the Norse manner, than which is none better or more handsome. He had given me a byrnie {10} of the best ring mail, and a helm gold-inlaid as became a king's kinsman, and axe and shield like his own. He and his men alone of all Norsemen in those days bore the cross on both helm and shield. Nor would Olaf have any unchristened man in all his host. Many a stout warrior did he turn away because he was not and would not be a Christian, for many Danes were yet heathen, and most Norway men.

Some of the men who had gone out to see the Danish force came back soon after midnight, and they said that there would seem to be close on a thousand of them in all.

After that we knew that a hard fight was before us, and the king bade us sleep and take what rest we might. Then, very early, came men to say that the Sudbury folk had come, and Olaf and I went down to the village to meet them. Close on two hundred men had come with Prat, the son of the sheriff of Sudbury, at their head, and they were not to be despised, for they were sturdy spearmen, and many had mail, though the most wore the stout leathern jerkin that will turn a sword cut well enough.

And Prat asked that they should have the first place in the fight, seeing that they fought for their own land.

"That is the place of my own ship's crew," said Olaf, "nor will they be denied it. Now shall you fight under Redwald, your own thane, and he will have the next place to me."

That pleased both them and me well, and after that Olaf sent me on as advance guard, for we knew the country.

We were nine hundred strong in all, and when I took my men to the hilltop I met a man who said that the Danes mustered some fifteen hundred strong. There were Anglian Danes there besides thingmen. But Olaf had said that we would fight two to one if necessary, and so I held on; he would send after me if he would make any change in his plans when he heard this. It was well that we had settled with the Sudbury force already or we should have had them to deal with besides.

We left Bures hill and went down the steep valley beyond it, and I thought that the Danes might wait for us in the wood that is on the opposite slope. But there were none, and we came out on the open ground that stretches away in a fairly level upland for many a mile northward and eastward before us. There I waited, for we needed no advance guard beyond these last woodlands. One could see to the dip that is by Leavenheath, and there the Danes would be. And indeed across the open rode a few men in that direction, and I knew that they were scouts who would take the news of our coming; but they were too far away to be stopped even had I wished to do so. Olaf would not be led far from Bures and the river, but would have the foe come to him.

So we stayed just beyond the cover, and the bustards ran across the heath as we roused them, and the larks sprung up and sang overhead, and the blackbirds called their alarm notes in the copse behind us, and the men talked of these things and pointed at the rabbits that sat up to look at us before they fled, as if there were no fighting at hand; for indeed I think that one notes all these well-known things more plainly when one's mind is strung up and over watchful, as it will be before somewhat great that is looked for.

Then came Olaf at the head of his men, and as he came I saw the first sparkle of armour across the heath under the sun, for the Danes were in array, and were coming up to the level ground over which we looked.

And when Olaf saw that his face grew bright with the joy of battle in a good cause, and his hand went to his sword while he looked quickly round for the place that he would choose. Nor was he long in choosing, for he led us but a furlong from the cover's edge, and there drew us up in a half circle, with the hollow towards the cover and our horsemen on the flanks, so that the greater force could not outflank us, while we had the wood in our rear. So if one half of the curved line was forced back it would but drive us closer together, back to back, and at the worst we could not be followed into the cover except by scattered men who would be of no account.

Now the strongest part of our curved line was in the centre, and there stood Olaf's mailed shipmen, and behind them my English spearmen. That place they liked not at first, till the king told them carefully what he would have them do at the first charge of horsemen for which he looked, for now it was plain that many of the Danes were mounted.

Olaf and I stood between his men and mine, leaving our horses in the cover, for a viking leader will ever fight on foot. Rani was on the right wing, and Biorn the marshal on the left; and Ottar the scald bore Olaf's banner beside the king. There were six of the best warriors of the crew before Olaf as his shield wall, and six of the best English warriors had been named by Prat to act in the same way for me. Olaf had given me a good plain sword in place of that which I broke, but I took a spear now, ashen shafted and strong, in the English way, that I might be armed as were my men, and I think that pleased them.

The Danes came on fast, and they had not been miscounted. They were full half as many again as we, and they were drawn up in line with their horsemen on the wings as we were, so that at first I thought we should fight man to man, both horse and foot, along the whole front.

Now they came almost within bow shot, and there they halted and closed up, leaning on their weapons, while a great man, tall and black bearded, and clad in black chain mail, rode out before them and came towards us with his right hand held up in token of parley.

Olaf went out from the line to meet him, and when they were close together a great hush fell on the two hosts to hear what was said.

"Are you the leader of this host?" the Dane said.

"Aye. Who are you?" answered Olaf.

"I am Egil Thorarinsson, of Colchester," he answered. "And whoever you may be, I call on you to yield to Cnut, King of Denmark and England, and Norway also."

"Maybe he is king of neither," Olaf answered quietly. "I am Olaf Haraldsson, and I am here to see if he shall be King of England. So I call on you to submit peaceably to Ethelred, leaving Cnut to take his own land if he can."

"We are Cnut's men and Danes," answered Egil, "and from your speech and name it would seem that you are no Englishman. Now if you are Olaf the Thick, own your own king Cnut, and leave this Ethelred the Unred to his own foolishness."

"I am one of those Norsemen who hold that Cnut is no king of ours, and therefore I fight him wherever I can. But if you will own Ethelred there shall be peace from him, and you will but do what the Danes of Guthrum's host did in the old days--hold the land you have won from an English overlord."

"A fine overlord, forsooth," said the Dane; "maybe one would think of it had he been a second Alfred--but Ethelred the Unredy! Not so, King Olaf. Will you own Cnut, or must we make you?"

"It seems that we shall not agree until we have fought out this question," said Olaf, laughing a little.

The Dane laughed back.

"Aye, I suppose not. I would that you had a few more men. But that is a hard lot in the centre."

And so he looked down our line with an unmoved face, and turned his horse and rode slowly back to his own men. Olaf came back to us with a confident look enough.

"There is a man worth fighting," he said to me; "he is foster brother of Thorkel the High, who leads young Cnut, and he seems an honest warrior enough."

Then all at once his face hardened, and he spoke in the sharp tone of command:

"Get your spearmen forward--the horsemen are coming first."

And I saw even before he spoke that this was so, for they were closing in across their line from the wings, and forming up for an attack that they maybe thought would break the grim ranks of Olaf's crew who were the strength of our centre.

So I gave the word, and my spearmen came quickly forward through the viking line, and there stood two deep, setting the butt ends of their spears firmly in the ground at their feet, and lowering the points to meet the horses breast high. Olaf bade the front rank kneel on one knee and take both hands to the spear shaft, and then the thick hedge of glittering points was double. I had never seen this plan before, but it was what Olaf had bidden us do if there was a charge of horsemen. And I stood in the second rank with Prat beside me, and behind me were the men of Olaf's shield wall. I took my axe in my right hand instead of the sword, for the heavier weapon seemed best against what was coming.

Now were the foes ready, even as the spearmen knelt, and a chief rode out before them and gave the word to charge, and with a great roar they answered him, spurring their horses and flying down on us. The arrow shafts rattled on the bow staves as Olaf's vikings made ready, and I cried to my spearmen to stand steady, for it seemed as if that thundering charge must sweep the crouching lines

like chaff before it. And as it came we were silent, and no spear wavered in all the long hedge to right and left of me.

They were but fifty paces from us; and then with hiss and rattle as of the first gust of a storm in dry branches the arrows flew among them, smiting man and horse alike, and down went full half of the foremost line, while over the fallen leapt and plunged those behind them unchecked, and were upon us sword in air; and the tough spear shafts bent and cracked, and a great shout went up, and over the shoulders of my men flashed the viking axes, falling on horses and dismounted men, and the Danish riders recoiled from the steadfast spearmen whose line they could not break though they had gapped it here and there, while the arrows and javelins flew among them unceasingly.

They drew back disordered, and then from the wings charged our horsemen and broke them, chasing them back towards their own men in disorder, while my stolid spearmen closed up again shoulder to shoulder, and the level hedge of spear points was ready again. But now they shone no longer, for they were dulled with the crimson token of their work.

Then the Danish ranks opened, and their horsemen passed through to the rear, and at once our men wheeled back to their posts on the wings, shouting in the faces of the Danes as they galloped past their lines. Then was the ground open between the forces again, but now it was cumbered with fallen men and horses, and below our spear points was a ghastly barrier of those who had dared to rush on them, for spear had begun and axe had finished the work.

"Well done, spearmen!" Olaf cried to us, "now is our turn."

And at his word his vikings took our place, and we were content. For we had borne the first shock of the battle after all, and had earned praise. Moreover the whole line cheered us as we fell back into the second line.

"Now comes the real fighting," said Olaf to me; "stay by my side, cousin, and you and I will see some sword play together."

So I stood on the left hand, and Ottar was on his right with the standard, and Prat of Sudbury was next to me. The viking line was two deep before us, and Olaf's shieldmen and mine were between us and the rear rank, and my spearmen

leant on their weapons behind us again. But it took us less time to fall into place thus than it has taken to say how we stood.

And hardly were we steady again before the whole Danish line broke out into their war song and advanced. Then the song became a hoarse roar, and their line lapped round to compass our bowed front, and man to man they flung themselves on us as the storm of darts and arrows crossed from side to side between us. Then rang the war chime, the clang of steel on steel loud over Leavenheath, and there came into my heart again the longing to wipe out the memory of old defeats, and I gripped my axe and shield and waited for my turn to come.

There was a little time while I might see all that happened, and at the first rush I saw Biorn's men give back a pace--no more--and win their place again. I saw our horsemen watching for a chance to charge in on the Danish flank, and I saw the Danish riders wheeling to meet them. Then I must keep my eyes for what was before me, for men were falling. Then Ottar began to sing, and his voice rose over the cries of battle, and rang in tune with the sword strokes as it seemed to me, and with his singing came to me, as to many, the longing to do great deeds and to fall if I might but be sung thus.

Then I saw a Dane fell one of the vikings, and leap at the men of Olaf's shield wall, and an axe flashed and he went down. The fighting was coming nearer to me, and I watched and waited, and I knew that I had never seen so stern a fight as this, for before me Olaf's veterans fought against Swein's--the trained thingmen who held the towns. And neither side had ever known defeat, and it seemed to me that surely we must fight till all were slain, for these were men who would not yield.

Then was a gap in the ranks before me for a moment, and through it glanced like light a long spear with a hook that caught the edge of Prat's red shield and tore it aside; and I smote it and cut the shaft in twain, so that it was but wood that darted against Prat's mail, and he said, "Thanks, master," and smiled at me, for the ranks had closed up again.

Then before me I saw Egil's black armour, and the mighty form of the chief who had led the mounted Danes; and they rushed on us and their men followed them, and in a moment one was shield to shield with me, and I took his blow on

mine, and my stroke went home on his helm, and he fell at my feet, swaying backwards, while over him tripped Egil, and lost his footing, and came with a heavy fall against me, so close and suddenly that I could not strike him or he me, and I grappled with him and we went down together.

Then my spearmen roared "Out, out!" and charged on the Danes who had broken our line thus, and I heard Olaf's voice shouting, and then I was inside our line behind the heels of the men who fought, and struggling with the Danish chief for mastery.

That was a tough wrestle, but I had been in training with Olaf, and the Dane had been shut up in the town at ease; and at last he gave way, and I knelt on his broad chest, drew my seax, and bade him yield.

"Not I," he said, panting for breath.

But I would not slay a brave warrior who had fallen as I knew by chance, and so I said--for fighting was too hot for any man to pay heed to us, as his Danes were trying to reach him through my spearmen:

"You had better. For you have fought well, and this is but chance."

"Tie me up, then," he growled. "Who are you?"

"Olaf's cousin," said I.

"I can yield to you, then," he said; "take my sword and tie me up, for I will escape if I can."

Then two spearmen turned and shouted, and went to drive their weapons into the body of my foe, and I put my shield in the way.

"Strike not a fallen man," I said, and they forebore, ashamed.

Then I loosed the baldric that his sword hung in--his axe was gone as he fell or wrestled--and took the weapon. And lo! it was sword Foe's Bane, my father's sword; and I cast away my axe and gripped the well-known hilt, and bade the spearmen guard my captive, and turned back into the fight. And all this had gone by in a whirl, as it were, and the Danes were still striving to regain their lord,

while Olaf and Ottar were smiting unceasingly. Only Prat was gone, while now our whole line was of spearmen and vikings mingled, and the Danish line was in no sort of order, but I thought they prepared for another rush on us.

Then it came, and we were driven back fighting; it slackened, and we took our ground again. And then I know not what sign Olaf saw in the faces of the Danes before him, but suddenly he spoke, and our war horns brayed. Then Ottar raised the standard and pointed it forward, and there rose a thundering cheer from our whole line as we charged and swept the Danes before us, spear and axe and sword cleaving their way unchecked. And surely sword Foe's Bane wiped out the dishonour of biding in a foeman's power that day.

Then rode our horsemen among the disordered crowd, and that was the end. The Danes broke and fled, and Olaf had won his seventh battle, and I had seen victory at last; moreover the sword of Thorgeir was in my hand.

The light-armed men and the riders followed the flying Danes, and Olaf sheathed his red sword with the light of victory shining on his face, and while the men cheered around us he put his hand on my shoulder and asked if I were hurt.

"I saw you fall, cousin," he said, "but I could not win to you. The Danes pressed on to reach the man you had down."

"It was Egil," I said. "I am not hurt--are you touched?"

And he was not, but it was our good mail that had saved us both. There would be work for the armourer by and by before we could wear it again, for after Egil had fallen I had been beside the king, and there was no lack of blows before the time had come when our charge ended the matter. Only three of his six shield men and two of mine were left.

But Prat was slain, and many another good warrior lay dead where our line had been.

Now when I looked for Egil he was gone. The two spearmen lay where I thought he had been, and I looked to find him slain also. So I asked the men round me, and at last found one who had seen him dragged up by the rush that

bore us back. And so he had escaped.

"That is the chance of war," said Olaf, "but you could not have slain him with honour."

"Nevertheless," said Ottar, "Redwald has a sure token there that he overcame him," and he pointed to my sword.

"It is my father's sword," I said. "It has come back to me, even as you said it would."

"They have not said too much of sword Foe's Bane," Ottar answered. "For I have seen you use it--and I think that Hneitir is hardly more handsome."

Now came that which is the most terrible part of a battle, even for the victors, and that is the calling of the roll. And sad enough were we when that was done, for the loss was heavy. Yet what the loss was to the Danes I cannot say, for our men chased them till there were no two left together to make a stand among those who had not found safety in the woods that fringe the heath.

Then we bore back our wounded--and they were many--to Bures, and it was noonday when we reached there. But there was no rest for Olaf yet, for Colchester must be barred against the Danes.

He and I therefore took a hundred of our men, mounting them on the freshest of the horses, and covered the nine miles between us and the town as quickly as we might. Very fair the old place looked to me as we crossed the Colne and saw the walls among the trees on the steep hillside, and the houses nestling against it. The gates were shut, and there was a strong guard along the ramparts on either side, and we halted and summoned the townsfolk to surrender to Ethelred in peace.

Doubtless some flying Danes had brought news of how the battle had gone, for at once the gates were opened to us, and the chief men came out and prayed for favour at Olaf's hands, and he told them that Ethelred their king would take no revenge on them for having bowed to Swein and his mighty force. So there was rejoicing in Colchester, for it seemed to the townsfolk that peace had surely come at last, and with it relief from the oppression of the thingmen. For these

warriors had carried matters with a high hand, so that no Anglian dared to call them aught but lord--it must be "lord Dane" if they spoke even to the meanest of the hosts and the gravest burgher must give way to some footman of Swein's if they met in street or on bridge. So they were not loved.

Olaf bade the townspeople prove their loyalty by taking all the Danish warriors who were in the place, and bringing them to him on the market hill where the great roads cross. Then was fighting in Colchester for a while, but in the end, towards sunset, there was a sullen gathering of them enough, and many were wounded.

Then the king went and spoke to them.

"What think you that I will do to you?" he asked.

"Even as we would do to you," one said.

"Hang me, maybe?" said Olaf.

"Aye, what else?" the man answered in a careless way, but looking more anxious than he would wish one to see.

"I do not hang good warriors," the king said. "What would you do if I gave you life?"

"What bargain do you want to make?" said the Dane.

"If I put you into a ship and let you go, will you promise to take a message for me to Cnut, and not to come back to England as foes?"

"If that is all, we will do it," the man answered, while his look grew less careful, and the other men assented readily enough with the fierce townsmen and their broad spears waiting around them.

"Go and tell Cnut, then, that Ethelred is king, and how you have fared. That is all I bid you. Are there any Norsemen among you?"

There were eight or ten among the six-score prisoners, and Olaf spoke aside with them.

"Go back to our own land and say what you have seen of the dealings of Olaf Haraldsson with those who fight bravely though against him. And if when you hear that I have returned to Norway you come and mind me of today, I will give you a place among my own men."

Then they said that they would fain serve him now; but he would not have that, and then they said that they would surely come to him if they heard that he was anywhere in their land.

There were two trading busses in the river, and into these vessels we put the Danes, giving them all they needed to take them back to Denmark, but leaving them no arms. The townsfolk would have it that they would return and take revenge in spite of their promise, but Olaf told them that they must not fear so few men, but rather take care to be ready against the coming of more.

So the Danes sailed away down the river and to sea, and whether they kept their promise or not I cannot say. But I think that Olaf had done somewhat towards preparing a welcome for himself when he should return to his own land by acting thus. I would that Ethelred and Eadmund had been wise as he, for by forgiveness they would have won men to them. But evil counsel was ever waiting on them, and maybe they are not to blame so much as is he who gave it.

There were no men of note among these Danes whom we took, and we thought that Ulfkytel would maybe hear of Egil before long, if he could by any means get his scattered forces together. Yet the rout was very complete, else he would have been back in Colchester before us.

The townsfolk made a great feast in Colchester for us that night, and next day Olaf called the headmen and set all in order for Ethelred the king. And we thought that the town was safe for him, for a levy would be made to hold the place at once. We rode back to Bures in the evening, therefore, taking a few of our men as a guard lest there should be parties of Danes on the road--a likely thing enough, as a beaten and disbanded force in a hostile land must live by plunder, for a time at least. But we met none.

Chapter 8: The White Lady Of Wormingford Mere.

As we rode over the uplands we saw that the Sudbury men would do all honour to those who had fallen fighting beside them, for they made a great mound over Olaf's men, and Ailwin our priest was there with us to see that they had Christian burial with such solemnity as might be in those troubled days. There might be no chanting of choir or swinging of censer at that burying; but when the holy rites were ended Ottar the scald sang the deeds of those who were gone, while the mound was closed. And that would be what those valiant warriors loved to hear.

So passed the day, and then were our wounded to be seen; but at last I might sit quietly in the house on the green and speak all that I would with Ailwin, and we had much to say. I know not if I longed or feared now to speak of Hertha, but I would do so. Yet first I asked Ailwin how he himself had fared when the Danes came; for I had thought that he would have been slain.

"Aye, my son, that I should have surely been," he said, "but I found a hiding place until their fury was past, and the host swept on, leaving but a few among us. Some of these were wounded men, and you mind that I am skilled in leechcraft. So I dressed myself in a freeman's garb and tended them, winning their respect at least, if not gratitude. So I have been the leech ever since, for the church was burnt, and many a priest was slain, and these Danes are but half Christian if they are not open pagans; and I might not don my frock, else would there have been no one left to christen and say mass and marry for our poor folk in quiet places."

Then I said:

"Where did you find a hiding place, father?"

"It was shown me by one who made me promise--aye and take oath, moreover, as if my word were not enough--that I would tell no man where it is.

For such a place once known to any but those who use it is safe no longer."

"Was it Gunnhild who helped you thus?" I said, for I remembered now my last words to him, that he should seek her.

"I may say that it was Gunnhild. There she and Hertha and I were safe till the worst was over," he answered, and looked in my face.

Then I must say what was in my mind all the while, and I asked him plainly:

"Where is Hertha now, father? Is she yet well and safe?"

"Both well and safe with Gunnhild," he said.

"Where is she--can I seek her?"

The old man looked at me meaningly for a minute, and I grew hot under his kindly gaze.

"What remember you of Hertha, my son?" he said gently.

"All, father," I answered; "but does she remember aught?"

"She remembers--she has never forgotten," he said.

And I had forgotten for so long. I think the old priest, who was so used to deal with men, saw what was written in my face, for he smiled a little and said:

"Women have time to think, but a warrior of today has had none. What think you of your meeting with Hertha?"

Then I said, being sure that Ailwin understood the puzzle that was in my mind:

"Father, I know not what to think. We are bound--but now it is likely that we should not know one another if we met; in truth, I think I fear to meet her."

"Is there any other maiden?" he asked, still smiling.

"Once I thought there was--and not so long ago either," I said honestly, "but I

remembered in time. Now I will say truly that there is not."

I had no longing for Penhurst now.

Then there came across me a strange feeling that one might hardly call jealousy--though it was near it--and I said:

"Has she seen any other who would make her wish to forget?"

"Truly she has not," Ailwin laughed; "how should she?"

"I know not where she has been, father," I said with a lighter heart, although but an hour ago I thought that I should have been glad to hear that it was so.

"Ah--I forgot," Ailwin said in some little confusion as I thought, and he was silent. But now I would say more.

"Well, then, father, both of us are heart whole, as it seems. But I know not if she would be pleased with me as I am now."

Ailwin looked up quickly at me, and then said:

"One cannot tell. Maybe she thinks the same concerning you and your thought of her."

Then I told the good man of that plan which the lady of Penhurst had made when we spoke of the same doubt, and he laughed thereat, which did not please me. So I said:

"Well, then, let me see her."

"Not yet," he said after a little thought. "This is not the first time that I have gone over this matter. Gunnhild has spoken with me more than once, and yesterday she gave me a message for you, and I was but to give it if I found that you longed to see Hertha again."

"What is it, then?"

"She says that the troubles are not over yet. Cnut will be back shortly, and

then you have warriors' work to do. When that is done there will be peace, for England or Denmark, or both, will be worn out. It will not be long ere that is so, she says, and she is very wise. Then come and find Hertha if you will. But now there will be less trouble for both if you meet not."

Then I grew impatient, for I hate concealments of any kind.

"Better break the betrothal at once, then," I said, "for if I must wait I cannot say that I may not meet with a maiden whom I shall love."

"Then shall you let me know," said Ailwin coolly, "and it shall be broken. Thus will be no sorrow to Hertha."

"So be it," said I. "But I think you are hard on me."

"No so, my son," said the good man, "not so. Redwald and Hertha of today are strangers. I do not altogether hold with these early betrothals; but what is, must be. Wait a little, and then when peace comes, and you can dwell, one at Bures and one at Wormingford in the old way--seeing one another and learning what shall be best for both--all will be well. Be content. Your place and hers lie in ruins. Why, Redwald, what home have you to give her?"

Now that word of common sense was the best that he could have spoken, for I was waxing angry at being thus played with, as I thought. But at that moment Olaf and Ottar came in with clang and ring of mail and sword, and so no more was said, and soon Ailwin rose to depart. But I followed him out, and asked him for the last time:

"Will you not tell me where Hertha bides?"

"No, my son--not yet. Believe me it is best."

"Well, then," I answered, "I shall try to find her; but if I cannot, you mind what I said."

"I will not forget. But I will add this--that there are many fair maidens, and but one Hertha."

Then he turned away into the dark, and was gone with an uplifting of his

hand in parting blessing. I knew the good man loved me, and now I was sorry that I had spoken harshly to him, yet I had a feeling that I had been treated ill. Maybe that was foolish, but one acts on foolish thoughts often enough.

There was a man sitting on the settle in the porch of the house as I turned back. I had not noticed him as we came out. Now the firelight from the half-open door fell on his face, and I saw that it was one of those two thralls of mine.

"Ho, Brand," I said, "answer me truly. Know you where bides Dame Gunnhild the witch?"

"No, lord. We know not where she bides but it is not far hence, for we see her at times in the village, though not often."

"How did she escape when the Danes came?"

"She and the lady Hertha took boat--it was but three days after you had gone. All the men had fled as she bade them, but her brother came and helped her with the boat. They went into the mere, and that was the last we saw of them."

Now I remembered to have heard of Gunnhild's brother, but I had never seen him.

"Where does her brother live?" I asked.

"I know not. I have not seen him again," answered the man.

"Whence comes Dame Gunnhild into the village?" I went on, thinking that I might learn somewhat in that way.

"Master," said Brand, "she comes at twilight, nor will she have anyone follow her. Ill would it fare with the man who did so. I do not know whence she comes."

Now it seemed to me that the man had more in his mind than that, and at least that there must be some talk about the place, which is small enough to make the doings of everyone the talk of each one else.

"Where do men say she lives?" I asked therefore.

The man looked doubtfully at me, but he could see that I was not angry. So he smiled foolishly, and answered:

"We say nought, lord. Danes hear everything in some way."

"Well, you can tell me safely enough."

"We think it is witchcraft of the old dame's, and that she and the lady Hertha live with the White Lady in the mere of Wormingford."

Then I was fain to laugh, for it was witchcraft more than even Gunnhild could compass, by which she might find refuge in the depths of that bottomless mere where the White Lady dwells. The place has an ill name enough among our folk, and even on a bright summer day, when all the margin of the wide circle of water is starred with the white lilies, I have known silence fall on those laughing ones who plucked the flowers, so still and dark are the waters, and so silent the thick woods that hem the mere round under the shadow of the westward hill that hides the sunset. No man cares to go near the mere when darkness has fallen, so much do our people fear to see the White Lady of whom Brand spoke.

I feared her not, for she was a lady of our own race, who was drowned there by the wild Welsh folk in some raid of theirs when we Angles first came from the land beyond the seas and drove them out. Ours was the clan of the Wormings--I bore the badge of the twining snake myself today, marked on my left arm, as had all my fathers before me--so ford and mere were named after us, and we were proud of the long descent, as I have said. Once had my mother seen the Lady, and that was on the day that my father was slain. Therefore had she seen unmoved the coming of Grinkel, for she knew already what had befallen. I had not seen the Lady, but I know that many others of my race had done so, and ever before the coming to them of somewhat great that was not always ill. But she never spoke to them, but floated, white robed, over the mere, singing at times, or silent.

Now it came into my mind that the thrall was not so far wrong, and that there was a chance that Gunnhild might have some hiding place among those woods about the mere, for no man willingly searches them, and Danes fear these places more than we, being heathenish altogether. So I asked Brand if the Danes knew about the White Lady.

"Ay, master, they soon learned that. They call her 'Uldra', though why I know not."

That was the name of the water spirit they believed in. So I became all the more sure that Gunnhild was there. It would be easy for her to feign to be the White Lady and so terrify any man who sought her. A man is apt to shape aught he sees into what he fears he may see.

"Has the White Lady been seen of late?" I asked therefore.

"I have heard that the Danes say that they have seen her," he answered. "They have seen also bale fires burning on the mound where the great queen lies."

That last was an old tale among us also, but I had never seen any light above the great mound. Ottar had many sagas that told of the fires that burnt, unearthly, above buried heroes, and the Danes would watch for them, and so, as I have said, would certainly see them, or deem that they did so. Yet I suppose that these strange fires may have burnt on the tombs of heathen men, else would not the tales have been told thereof so certainly. But Christian warriors rest in peace, and about their last bed is no unquiet. Nor may Christian folk be frightened by the bale fires of the long-ago heathen's mounds. For their sakes they have been quenched, as I think.

So I stood and mused for a while, turning over in my mind how best to find Gunnhild at the mere without leading others to her hiding place. And at last I laughed to myself, the thing was so simple. I had but to go into the mere woods at twilight or in the dusk, and wander about until she heard and feared my coming. Then she would play the White Lady's part on me to fray me away, and all was done. She could not tell who I was, nor would she think it likely that I would seek her there, and would easily forgive me for doing so, when we met.

I bade Brand the thrall goodnight, and went back into the great room of the house, where Olaf sat with Ottar resting and talking together. There was no one else in the place, for we had no fear of aught, and Olaf cared not to have many men about him. Some of his men would come presently and sleep across the doorway, but the evening was young yet.

"You seem as if you had heard somewhat pleasant," Olaf said when I came in.

I suppose that my certainty of finding Gunnhild and Hertha pleased me well enough to make my face bright.

Now both Olaf and Ottar knew of my wish to search for Hertha, and who she was, for I had told them as we sailed to Maldon on the way to my own country again, and they were eager to help me to take her from hiding into what we thought would be greater safety. So when the king said this, at first I thought of saying only that I had surely found out where she was hidden. But then I would not keep back what Ailwin had said, for Olaf might have advice for me.

Therefore I sat down and told them all the story of my talks with the priest and the thrall, adding that I was the more sure that Gunnhild was hard by, because Ailwin had said that it was but yesterday she had given him the message for me.

Then Olaf said:

"Cousin, I think these two old folk are right. Better wait for peace, as they say."

"It is not so sure that Cnut will come back," I said.

"Is it not?" said Olaf. "Why--seeing that he has left his host of thingmen in the towns, and we had Thorkel's foster brother to fight but the other day, and that these Danes do not yield at once and so gain peace and hold what they have, but will rather fight than own Ethelred--I think that none can well doubt that word has gone round the Danes in the kingdom that he will return, and that they need not fear to hold out till he comes."

Then the last doubt of trouble to come passed from me, for it was plain that these thingmen looked for help presently. But Olaf was thinking of my affairs again.

"Four years is overlong for anyone to play ghost on a whole countryside," he said laughing. "I cannot think that Gunnhild, even if she be a witch, can have bided in sight of the village all this time without being found."

"No man dares go near the place," I said.

"Well, whence has she her food unless from the village? I think she cannot be so near," he replied, and there was reason in his question.

I was cast down at this, for I had made so sure that I had found out the secret that was so carefully kept from me. When there is mystery made, which is, or seems, needless, there is pleasure and a feeling of mastery in finding it out unaided, and I was losing that.

I will say this, however, that I was more vexed in this way than with the thought that I should not find Hertha, for in my own mind I began already to own that Ailwin and Gunnhild were in the right about our not meeting yet.

Olaf saw that I was vexed now, and put forward a plan which he thought would be pleasant to me, for he was certain that I should not be satisfied until I had seen if I was right.

"There is no reason why we should not go to the mere and see if Gunnhild is there," he said. "If she is, maybe it will be well for you to speak with her. And if not--why, then we know at least that she has a good hiding place elsewhere."

That was a plan that pleased me well, for though I had no fear of going to that lonely place so long as I had made myself certain that I should meet Gunnhild, now that it seemed not quite so sure but that I should find myself alone there, the thought of the quest was not quite so pleasant to me.

"Then we may as well go at once," Olaf said. "How like you the thought, Ottar?"

"I like not such places, my king," the scald answered honestly. "There are chills that come over one, and rising of the hair."

"Aye, there are," answered Olaf. "I have a fear of this White Lady myself. Therefore am I going with Redwald, because I want to see if there is aught to be feared of."

"I will come with you," the scald said, hardening his heart, for his mind was full of the wild tales of the old heathen days which he sang, and he feared more than we.

"It is but a lady after all," said Olaf, laughing at Ottar's face.

"I have a sort of fear of living ladies," the scald said, "how much more, therefore, of their ghosts! I had rather meet Danes. For when one sees them there comes a stiffening of back and knees and fists--whereas--"

"Aye, Redwald and I know somewhat of what you mean," laughed Olaf, and then Ottar laughed, and we took our cloaks and were going, but first must seek Rani, and tell him that we were now about to leave the village for an hour or so.

Now no man questioned Olaf as to his lonely walks, as I saw in Normandy, and Rani said nought but:

"Take your arms, for there may be wandering Danes about."

But we were armed already, though without mail, and as we went not far it seemed unlikely that we should need any. It was but a half-hour's walk from the house.

Now the mere lies on the south side of the river, which runs into it only by a narrow inlet, and this inlet is so overshadowed by the trees of the thick woodland that when one has passed through the opening it is lost to sight very quickly. So heavy is the growth of timber round the mere that one can see the water from no place, save for a glimpse as this inlet is passed in going down the river, and many a stranger has passed by all unknowing that such a mere could be near him. Hardly can the wind reach the wide waters to ruffle them even when a gale blows, and so the place is more silent, and its terror falls more heavily on a man's mind.

It was two hours after sunset when we started, but the fringe of the woodland is but a mile and a half from the village, and we were soon there. The night was bright enough, with a clear sky and stars overhead, though there was no moon as yet.

As we went Olaf was very cheerful, and railed pleasantly at Ottar for his fears, while I said little, not knowing if I wanted to find Gunnhild or not.

But Ottar would not pretend to be braver than he felt, having no shame in fear of things other than earthly, a matter wherein I think that he was right.

"Why," said the king, "if Dame Gunnhild tries to fray us, do you but turn that cloak of yours inside out, and you will frighten her"--for it chanced that the scald's red cloak had a white woollen lining, whereof he was somewhat proud, being a lover of bright dress.

"It is ill to mock a spirit," the scald said; "wherefore do I believe the less that a Wise Woman will bide in the place that it haunts."

So they talked until we came to the woodland; and when we came among the trees a silence fell on us.

"It is of no use," I said, "let us go back. You are right, and she cannot bide here."

"Why, now that I have got over my fear so far," Olaf said, "I will go on, even to the water's edge. Then will we go back."

I could not gainsay him, as may be known, and so we went on. It was easy at first to thread our way through the trees, but presently they were thicker, and it was dark. There was no wind moving in the boughs overhead, and there is no denying that the silence of that deserted place weighed heavily on us all.

And when we drew close to the water's edge, and saw the still water, starlit, stretching before us, a water hen sprang from the reeds almost at our feet with her shrill warning cry, and flapped out into the middle of the dark mere, leaving a long trail of broken water behind her that gleamed for a moment with dancing star sparks from the sky, as if it might have been the path of the White Lady herself. And from all round the lake came the answering cries of her mates, sounding weird and strange through the silent gloom. I heard Ottar draw a deep breath, and we all three started, and stood still, as if turned to stone.

"We have taken fright easily," said Olaf, as if angry with himself for being thus startled. "My heart beats like a hammer, and I will bide here till I can do better than that."

Yet he spoke in a whisper; and I saw no reason to try to answer him if I could. Then he walked on, keeping to the right, where the ground is high, at the hill foot, but still skirting the water's edge. Then I saw something beside the reeds,

and went aside to see what it was; and, as I thought, it was a canoe that some fisher had left. There was a paddle still in it, and a bow net set on hoops, such as we were wont to use for eels and tench.

"Here is how Gunnhild might find food," I thought, but it was not likely.

Ottar stood and looked into it with me, but the king had walked on.

Now it grew darker as we followed him, and Ottar tripped and fell, and I lost him, though I could hear him close behind me as he broke a branch now and then in passing.

The king stayed in a clear place that I remembered well. Great trees stood round, and it was pleasant to sit there and look out over the water on a summers noonday.

"Where is Ottar?" he said, when I stood by him.

"Close behind me. I heard him even now," I answered. "Let us go back, my king. There is nought here."

"Aye, we will go back now," he said. "But Ottar is before me."

"Listen," I said, "the scald is behind us. I lost him in the dark."

"Nay, but I heard him in front of me even as you came," the king said.

And when we stood still we could hear the scald where I thought; but also we heard footsteps and breaking branches before us.

We could see anything that was not in shadow pretty plainly; and now Olaf whispered to me:

"Someone is forward, and coming nearer. Get your sword loose."

At that there came a cry like the moor hen's from the thicket before us, and in a moment, with a great shout and crashing, there broke out on us many men, and I was down and held fast before I could draw on them. I saw Olaf draw the long dagger that hung ready to his right hand, and smite backwards over his shoulder

in the face of a man who was pinioning him from behind, and the man shrieked and reeled backward into the bushes, hands to face. And then Olaf cried, "We are beset," and was borne down.

Then the men tied us roughly with belts, and stood round us.

I looked every moment to see the rush of Ottar into the midst, sword in hand; and saw that it would go hard with him, for all the men were armed, and some wore mail that rattled as they moved. But he came not; and I wondered if he too were taken, or if he had turned craven and had fled, a thought that I put from me as sorely wronging the brave scald; and then wondered how long it would take him to reach the nearest outpost of our men and come to rescue us.

But now one was hammering flint on steel and making a fire in haste that he might see who they had caught. And when it blazed up I saw that the men were Danes. No doubt they were strangers to the place, men who had wandered here from the Leavenheath woods after the battle; for no Dane who came from close at hand would have dared to shelter in this place. There were fourteen of them in all.

"Ho," said one who seemed to take the lead, "we have trapped some gay birds. Now, who might you be?"

He spoke to Olaf, who answered nothing. So the man turned to me with the same question. But I followed the king's plan and made no answer. Whereat the man kicked me, saying:

"Answer, you Norway rat!"

I ground my teeth with rage, and said nothing.

"Fetch the English churl, and ask him if he knows who these are," said the Dane. "Then shall we see if this is a question of drowning or ransom."

Two of the men went back into the woods, and presently returned, dragging with them my thrall Brand, whose teeth chattered with terror, more of the place than of the Danes as it seemed, for he kept his eyes on the mere.

When he saw me I shook my head ever so little in token that he should not

own us. If Olaf thought best we could do that for ourselves.

Then they cuffed the poor thrall, and asked him if he knew us; and for answer he did but point out over the mere, whose waters looked black as ink beyond the fire lit circle of trees and shore.

"Let us go hence, lord Danes," he said trembling, "then will I say what I can. The Lady is wroth with men who come here at night."

"We care for no ladies," said the leading Dane. "What are you feared of?"

"The White Lady who dwells in the mere. To look on her in her wrath is death," Brand said--and one might well see that his terror was real.

The Danes looked on one another, and there were white faces among them. Then, as luck would have it, one said:

"This must be the mere of which I have heard strange tales. Let us go," and he began to edge away towards the fire.

Then the leader said:

"Let us find out if these men are worth taking with us," and he came and questioned us again, and again we answered not.

"I will make you speak," he said savagely. "Take them up and make ready to cast them into the water."

Now I wondered where Ottar was. Surely he must be back with more men soon.

"Aye, throw them in, and let us be going," said one or two, for they had been asking Brand many questions, and now were eager to leave the place and its terrors.

So one brawny Dane took my feet and another my shoulders and began to lift me; while I could not so much as struggle, so tightly was I bound.

"Hold!" said the leader. "Will you throw away a sword like that?"

It was certain now that they were in haste, for they had forgotten to strip me in their wish to have done.

They set me down again, and that was the saving of us. For even as they loosed their grip on me, one who stood near the water cried out in a sharp voice:

"Listen--what is that!"

And they all stayed motionless as had we when the bird scared us.

There was a sound of wondrously sweet singing from away across the mere. Such a voice it was as I had never heard before, neither like the singing of man or woman, nor had the song words that I could catch.

The Danes forgot us as they heard that, and huddled together in twos and threes, looking out to whence the sound came. As for Brand the thrall, he fell on his knees and hid his face against a tree trunk, crying faintly:

"It is the White Lady."

So too thought I; and now I will not say that I feared her, for she was of my own race, and maybe she came to my help.

Then I saw some of the Danes gasp and start, and point across the water, speechless, and I looked also.

Plain enough in the firelight stood a tall white figure on the water of the mere, coming slowly towards us, and singing the while that wondrous song. And ever as it drew nearer the song grew wilder; and the long white-robed arm pointed towards us.

Then the thrall leapt up and yelled, and fled into the dark wood. And that was enough for the Danes. They gave not another thought to us, but cried out in mortal terror and fled also, tripping and crashing through the underwood as they went; while the song of the White Lady grew louder, and she still neared us.

Then, still singing, her pace quickened, and suddenly I saw that she came in no magic wise, but in the fisher's canoe which I had seen. And then the bows touched the shore, while with a wholesome clank of sword, and throwing back

his long white cloak, Ottar the scald leapt ashore and came to us, dagger in hand, and cut our bonds.

"Into the boat, lord king--quick!" he said. "We shall be safe there."

Dazed and stiff I was, but I rose and followed Olaf; then Ottar pushed off, and we shot out towards the midst of the mere into safety.

Then the king stared at me and at Ottar for a moment in amazement, and then laughed until the woods rang again, and I and the scald were fain to join him. Never had I heard such sounds before in that haunted place.

"Now, Ottar," he said, when he could speak again, "never say more that you fear troll, or nix, or ghost--for you have done what you told me but half an hour ago was most unwise."

"I needs must do somewhat, lord king," said Ottar gravely, "and it came into my mind that these Danes would be as badly scared as should I have been had I met Gunnhild; and methought that Redwald's lady would forgive me for his sake."

"Aye, surely," I said.

Then--was it fancy, or a vision wrought on me by long looking at Ottar as he came across the red track of the firelight on the water, still dimpled by the boat, glided the white form of no earthly maiden, and was gone.

I saw it and said nought. Ottar sat in the stern facing us, and his eyes were away from the fire, and Olaf was beside me, and I thought that he started.

Then Ottar said:

"Can we go back by water, Redwald? It would be safer."

I showed him the channel which leads to the river, and he took the paddle with which he had so deftly sculled the boat across the mere, and as we left the overhanging trees and saw the faint glow of the rising moon across the open river we breathed more freely, and were safe.

Surely had it not been for the scald's ready wit both Olaf and I had been lying even now in the dark mere. For it would have been death to us all three had Ottar tried to rescue us sword in hand. It is his saying that he was so frozen with fear at first--until he knew we had met with mortals only--that he stood still and helpless, listening. Then came to him the thought of what to do, when he heard the talk of either ransom or drowning and knew that we were not slain. So even as Olaf had bidden him in jest, he had turned his cloak and had saved us.

But Ottar the scald's courage and craft are well known, and I have other thoughts concerning his fear. But I know this, that never again could he find that strange and sweet voice that had come to him in the need of his master.

Brand the thrall cowered in the house porch when we returned, and he was pale as a sheet, while his knees trembled even yet. We took him in and gave him wine and meat, and then asked him how the Danes got hold of him.

"Master," he said, "they caught me but a little while after I had left you--as I set snares for rabbits on the hill. I let them come to me, thinking them some of the king's men who are kindly. Then they said they needed a guide through the country to the sea, and kept me with them."

Then Olaf said to him:

"No ill will come of this seeing of the White Lady, for she came to save Redwald your lord; you may sleep in peace therefore, but it would be unlucky to say that you saw her."

Then the man said that he would not speak of the matter, and it was plain that he dared not do so. But he went away cheerfully enough, with his mind at rest from its fears.

"It would be ill luck for me if Rani heard of this," said Olaf, looking ruefully at us; "for we cannot deny that he warned us. My foster father loves rating a king now and then, though it be only a small one like myself."

So we said nought that night, and none asked where we had been. Now I slept next to Olaf, and in the night I woke with a new terror on me, and I put my hand on his and woke him.

"My king," I whispered, "what if Gunnhild and Hertha are indeed in the woods yonder? These Danes will have found them."

The king was silent for a moment, for the fear that my guess as to their hiding place might be right came to him also before he gave the matter thought.

"It is not likely. The thought of danger makes it seem possible again," he said. "But I like not these prowling Danes--they are looking for hiding places for themselves."

"She was safe before," I said, but a great fear came to me with his words.

There had been nought to drive the Danes to seek sheltered spots before, now they were sure to do so.

"This matter is not in our hands," said the king, when I said as much. "We can do nought. Pray, therefore, and sleep again. I think that you need fear little."

Then after a while he spoke once more.

"Redwald, saw you aught upon the mere while we sat in the canoe in its midst?"

"Aye, my king," I answered, knowing what he meant.

"I saw her also," he said.

So it had been no fancy of mine, but the White Lady of our house had indeed passed before my eyes. I began to wonder if this portended aught to me, but soon I thought that it did not, for the like peril in which I had been, and even then had hardly escaped from, had not befallen any of my kin, as I was in peril at her own place, which was a new thing. So I judged that she showed her thought of us only.

In the morning matters fell out so that we had never need to say what danger we had run. For the men had seen Brand's plight, which was pitiful, after Danes and thickets had done their work on him, and told Olaf that the man had met with and escaped Danes from the mere woods.

So with twenty men we searched those covers in broad daylight, and found no token of any dwellers in the place. Nor were any Danes left, save one, and that was the man whom Olaf had smitten, for he had died. The embers of the fire were near him, and on the bank lay the severed belts that had bound us.

"These Danes have fought among themselves," said our men, and hove the body into the water. So the Dane lies there instead of Olaf the king and me, with the Welshmen whom my heathen forefathers cast into the black depths, in revenge for the death of the White Lady.

Now when we came back to Bures there was a tired horse standing by the house door, and in the hall waited a messenger from Colchester, and he brought the news that we looked for and yet feared, so that we had hoped against hope that it would not come.

A Frisian trader had put into the Colchester river, and he brought word that even now Cnut might be taking the sea for England, for in all the western havens of Denmark was gathered such a mighty host and fleet that no man had ever known the like, and he had heard that the day for sailing would soon come.

Then Olaf made no delay but rode to Colchester to see this shipmaster and speak with him, for he thought that he might find out from him what point on our coasts would be that at which Cnut aimed first.

So Gunnhild and Olaf were right, and the little peace we had had was to end. Now would come the last struggle of English and Dane for mastery in our land, and in my heart I wished that we had such a king as Olaf Haraldsson. For it seemed to me that we were not ready, though we had had a year and more in which to prepare.

Chapter 9: The Treachery Of Edric Streone.

When Olaf had gone I sought out Father Ailwin, for the danger that I had seen for Hertha lay heavily on my mind, and now also I would tell him of the certainty of coming warfare, asking him what he and Gunnhild would do. So I went to the place where one might be sure to find him during the last two days, and that was in the churchyard, where our people and Olaf's men were working together to raise for him a little wattled chapel among the ruins, that should serve at least until I could return and build the church anew.

It was a sore grief to me that the old one was gone, for in it had been crowned Eadmund the Holy, and it was rich with his gifts. And our hall had been the first house in which he had feasted as crowned king, so that we call the lane from church to hilltop St. Eadmund's Lane since he rode along it in all the pomp of that high festival after he left the altar. Only the ruins of God's house and man's abode were there now, but the lane was bright with the flowers that the good king loved, and the nightingale sang in the wooded banks even as when he listened to it in the old days. We had always these things to mind us of the martyr.

But Ailwin was not with the men, though he had been foremost in working and planning with them. Nor had any of them seen him that day.

So I waited for a little while and watched the work, wondering if I should live now to do all that I would in making new the place. And then as I walked to look across the bridge I passed a heap of earth that the men had thrown out for the place of a post, and I saw somewhat glittering in it, and stooped and took it up.

It was a silver penny, and when I rubbed the earth from it, I knew that it was one of Eadmund's, mint new and fresh as on the day when he stood in his robes and crown, even where I stood in the place of the old porch, while the people shouted and scrambled and fought in glee for the largess he threw among them. Doubtless this had been so thrown and had been trodden under foot and lost.

Now it came into my hands even when my thoughts were most troubled, and to me it seemed as a sign that I should surely return to the place that the saint had loved. I was greatly cheered thereat, for as I waited for Olaf to return I saw as it were the long hope of home and peace dashed from me, and the pain of the coming war grew plainer than I had known it in Ethelred's court. The old love of home had waked in me as I wandered in the places of my boyhood, and for the first time I learned the aching of the hearts of those who had known more of home than I, and would lose it.

But I was young, and it needed but a little thing to turn my thoughts, so this token as I say helped me to banish them. What might not Eadmund the Saint, who slew Swein to save his shrine from heathen hands, be able to do for me?

I would tell Ailwin presently, and ask him what vow I should make in return for this remembrance.

But Ailwin came not, and I grew impatient, and went to the cottage where he dwelt as the leech, at the head of the little street towards our hall. Maybe he would be there.

The door was open, and the little black cat that had been the leech's in the old days, and would not leave its house, sat in the sun on the step. I went inside and called, but there was no man. And then a footstep came from the road and in at the wicket, and a strange priest, younger than Ailwin, and frocked and cowled came in.

He saluted me gravely, and I bowed to him, and then he asked me where Redwald the thane might be found.

"I am he, father," I said.

"Then I have a message to you from Ailwin, your priest, whose place I am sent to take for a time."

"This is his house, father," I answered. "Let us come in and hear what he would tell me."

So we sat down inside the one room on the bench across the wall, and I wondered what I should hear.

"I will give my message first," the priest said, "and afterwards you shall tell me Ailwin's ways with your people, and I will try to be as himself with them."

I laughed a little, though I was pleased, and answered:

"You cannot do that, father--for he has christened everyone in the parish that is thirty years younger than he.

"Aye, I forgot that," the priest said gravely. "They will miss him sorely. Therefore I will say that he will return ere long, but that my ways must be borne with until he comes."

"Now I think that if you steer between those two sayings of yours you will do well," I answered.

"Ailwin's ways wrought in my manner, therefore. I thank you, thane," the priest said. "I am cloister bred, and know nought much of secular work. Now, that is enough about myself. This morning, very early, came Ailwin and asked for one to take his place, and I am a Dane of the old settlement, and so I came, as running less risk if Cnut returns, as they say he will. Then Ailwin bade me seek you and say this. That because of the wandering Danes he would take his charges into some more quiet place for a time at least. Truly, he bade me tell you, they have a last refuge where none would find them, but it is ill fitted for a long stay, and it is likely that once there it might now be months before they could leave it. So he and Gunnhild think best to go far off. They will return with peace, and then he bids me tell you that, if the Lord will, all shall be well."

"Where will he go?" I asked.

"I know not. He gave me the message, and I know no more. Not even of whom he speaks."

Now for a moment I grew angry with Ailwin again, for it seemed to me that I should have been told more than this. Then I thought that perhaps Ailwin himself knew not yet where he would go.

"Does Ailwin know that there is news from Denmark?" I asked.

"Our abbot told him, but he knew already, having had word from Colchester in some way. He had heard before we as it seems."

That was doubtless Gunnhild's work, for I came to know afterwards that in the long years of trouble she had made a chain of friends who would pass word to her from every point whence trouble would come. It seems to me that much of the dame's knowledge of coming events was gained in ways like this rather than by witchcraft.

Then I was glad that the danger that I had learned had been foreseen by her and Ailwin; and as I sat without speaking for a few minutes I felt that now I was free to follow Olaf where he would lead his men to meet the Danes, for Hertha was not here, and her I could follow no longer.

There was no more to be learned from the priest, and so we rose up and went down to the churchyard, and saw the work, and I told him what I could of Ailwin and his ways, and thought that he had found one who was like him in thought and gentleness.

So presently I took Eadmund's penny from my pouch and gave it to him, telling him about it, even as I would have told Ailwin.

"Give me this back when I return, father," I said, "and it shall remind me of some vow which I will make at your advice."

"Make no vows, my son, save this one," he said. "What will befall you we know not, and therefore there is but one vow which we know certainly that you may be able to keep. I will have you put the penny where you may see it often, and so you shall remember, and vow if you will, that when your eyes fall on it you shall say a prayer to Him who gave power to Eadmund to conquer in dying, for this home of yours and this church, that out of ruin may come beauty, and after war, peace."

"I will make that vow, father," I said gladly.

"Forget not me at times in the prayer," he said very humbly; and I promised that I would not, taking the penny back.

Then he went and began to work on the church, being plainly skilful in the

matter, and I went up to our hall's ruins and looked out over the land, and planned again what I would do in the days to come.

It was long dark when Olaf rode back, and he had learnt but little. But he had sent messengers to Ulfkytel at Thetford to warn him to watch his coasts, for he must go back to London with the ships to guard the Thames.

"And you, Redwald, my cousin, must go to Ethelred or Eadmund and warn them, and make them rouse, and raise and have ready the mightiest levy that they have ever led, for I think that all Denmark and Norway have sent their best to follow Cnut. We will ride together to Maldon, for the men shall follow me and find the ships with their cables up-and-down waiting for them, and you must hasten, for no time must be lost."

So it came to pass that my dream of finding Hertha passed from me, and the thought of war filled my mind again, for next morning we rode away southward along the Roman road, and the cheers of the villagers died away behind me and were forgotten.

Then I left Olaf where the road turns off to Maldon, to meet him again in London before many days, and I and my fifty men rode on. For Olaf would have me go as befitted his kinsman, and a word to the Colchester elders had found me the well-armed and mounted Anglian warriors who joined us after we reached the great road.

But when I came to London my journey was not at an end. Ethelred the king was at Corsham, in Wiltshire, and sorely sick as was said, and Eadmund was at Stamford. Now when I heard that I wondered, and asked the Sheriff, at whose house I was made most welcome, how this was.

Eadmund had been with his father, and had gone to Malmsbury, and there had seen the Lady Alghitha, the widow of Earl Sigeferth whom Edric Streone slew, and had married her, and now had gone to take over the Five Boroughs for himself. That was good hearing, maybe, for Olaf had feared that Streone would have taken them.

But next I found that this marriage was sorely against the king's will, and that he and Eadmund had parted in anger therefore. I seemed then to see the hand of

Streone in this quarrel, for all men knew that he slew the earls to gain the Five Boroughs for his own.

Then I thought that to go so far into Wessex to seek the sick king would be but lost time. I had better go to Stamford and seek the Atheling, and maybe it would be as well that he was free to act by himself, seeing that need was urgent. So I lay but one night in London, and then rode away to Stamford along the great Ermin Street, and there I found Eadmund and told him all that Olaf had bidden me.

And when he had heard all, he said:

"Let me send for Edric Streone, my foster father, and we will take counsel with him."

"Send round the war arrow first, my prince," I urged, "then when the earl comes no time will be lost. He cannot but counsel you to raise men instantly."

"Why," he said, "Cnut can but fall on the east coast. Utred is in Northumbria to guard the Humber, and Ulfkytel guards the Wash, and Olaf is in the Thames. They will drive away the Danes before they set foot on the beach."

"They are still fighting the thingmen in the towns," I said. "Northumbria and Anglia are Danish at heart yet."

Aye, and I might have added "Mercia also," but I knew not that yet. Eadmund should have known it, though. It was but a few weeks before it was plain that Wessex alone and London stood fast for Ethelred.

I chafed, but Eadmund would not be hurried. I cannot tell what strange blindness, save it was his trust in Streone, had fallen on him at this time.

Then the earl came from Nottingham, and at the very first he sent for me. Eadmund had told him my news when he sent for him.

I found him alone in a chamber of Eadmund's house--that which had been Sigeferth's, and it seemed that no memory of the murdered earl haunted him. His great form was as square and strong as ever, and his grizzled brown beard was as bushy and well cared for as when I used to see him and speak with him before

the flight into Normandy. And he still had the same pleasant voice and ways, even to the little chuckle--as to himself--when he spoke, and the way he had of gazing on the rafters rather than at the man to whom he was talking.

"So, Redwald, my friend," he laughed, "you have turned viking as it seems! How have you fared in East Anglia with Olaf the Thick?"

"Well enough, lord earl," I said, "but there is work to be done there yet."

"Aha! those thingmen are no babes," he said. "Where is your earl now?"

"At Thetford, as they say."

"Well, what is this tale that you bring about Cnut?"

I told him, and he laughed in his way.

"Cnut is but a boy. No such great following would gather to him," he said. "It is not possible."

"Eirik and Ulf and Thorkel the jarls may gather them for Cnut," I answered. "And he is Swein's son."

"Those men are Cnut as yet, as one may say," answered Edric chuckling. "One has to deal with them therefore. What says Olaf?"

"He says the same, lord earl."

Then he turned sharply towards me, though he did not look at me, and said:

"The king does not trust Olaf, I fear. He thinks that he might be won over to Cnut's side."

"Ethelred our king should have no mistrust of the man who brought him home," I said coldly, having no doubt who made the first jealousy of Olaf.

"He should not, in truth," Edric answered. "But what if Cnut offered Olaf the under-kingship of Norway, or Northumbria say, if he would go over to his side?"

"He would not take it," I said.

"Have you ever heard him say as much?" asked Edric in a careless way.

I was growing angry now, for this seemed beside the point.

"Such a thing has never been spoken of between us," I said.

"So. Then ask him the question one day, and see what his answer is."

"I can answer it now," I said hotly; "he would refuse. Nor will the offer ever be made."

"I am not so sure of that," said Edric. "Cnut needs help, and will bid high for it. Nay, I know that it will be made. We have our spies in Cnut's court, Redwald, and know more than you may think. Tell him, therefore, only what I have said to you, and let me know his answer by someone whom you can trust."

Then I rose up in my anger, and said:

"You ask me to spy on the king, lord earl, and I will not do it."

"Nay, nay," he said. "I do but want to set our king's mind at rest. I know what the honest viking's answer would be; he would be as wroth as you. Only I would have sure word to send to Ethelred."

Then I said, while Edric watched me sidelong:

"Olaf's force is small, and our levies, lord earl, should be enough without his help, if they are raised in time. Our king may be sure that Olaf has not sent me to raise England thus against himself."

"Aye, I will tell Ethelred so. Our king is very sick, and a sick man's fancies are many. So Olaf thinks that we should raise a great levy at once."

Then he spoke of nought but that, and so earnestly that I believed that the summons to the sheriffs would surely go out that night. And he spoke of the help of the ships that Olaf had gathered, praising him honestly, and not over much or too little, so that I forgot his doubtful speeches, and thought that all was well, and that his own levies were now gathering.

And so after an hour or more's talk he rose up and held out his hand.

"Many thanks, Redwald, for your pains," he said taking mine. "I think that Cnut and his jarls will have lost their journey through your coming hither. The king shall not forget you when all is safe again."

Who would not have been pleased with this? I went from Streone's presence with a light heart, until I came to the great hall, and there sat in the high place the Lady Alghitha herself and her maidens. Very beautiful she was, but very sad looking. And when I crossed the floor before her I bowed, and she beckoned to me.

So I came near, and knelt on one knee before her.

"You are Redwald, Olaf's kinsman and messenger?" she asked.

"Yes, lady," I answered.

"I have heard of your coming. Have you spoken with the earl--Streone?" she said, while a wrinkle crossed her fair forehead as she named him.

"I have but just left him, lady."

She sunk her voice very low, and bent a little towards me.

"Were his words pleasant and fair spoken?" she said.

"They could not have been more so--at the last," I replied, the memory of my anger coming back to me of a sudden.

"You crossed him once, then?"

"But a little; he crossed me rather," I said plainly.

"Wear your mail, Redwald," she said whisperingly. "Farewell."

Then she was once more herself again, the lady whose hand I might kiss reverently and look at afar. But in those few moments she had been as a friend who warned me of a danger unforeseen. Even thus had Edric Streone spoken with Sigeferth, fairly and pleasantly.

I left the house, feeling uneasy therefore; but I could not think that Edric would deem me worth crushing, and it seemed that the lady would let her hatred of Edric go far.

They had given me lodging in the town across the river, where there was a large guest house that had been made in the days of OETHelfloed {[11](#)}, the brave lady of the Mercians who won back the Five Boroughs from the Danes. One could see the great fort she made rising from the river banks over the whole town. No other thane was in guest quarters there with me, and I and my men had the place to ourselves. Nor was there anyone in Stamford at the time whom I knew, apart from the people of Eadmund's household.

So I went along the street slowly enough, and presently I passed a house where through the open window I saw a goldsmith working, and I thought that he could do somewhat for me. I would have the penny of St. Eadmund set in a gold band on the scabbard of sword Foe's Bane, where I should see it continually. There was much gilt silver work over all the scabbard from end to end--wrought by what skilful artists in the Norseland, or how long ago, I cannot

tell--and there was a place among the other work where such a fitting would go well.

But I had placed the coin in safety in the house, and I must go and fetch it, and I passed on for the time. Then I loitered on the bridge, for the old town and its grim earthworks looks very fair thence, and so a thane sent from Eadmund caught me up and took me back to the great house, for he had some word for me. It was near sunset by this time.

"Redwald, my friend," the Atheling said, when I stood before him, "I would have you go back to Olaf. You have done your errand well, and your kinsman will want to have you with him. You will fight for us no less well with him than here."

Now I could speak plainly with the Atheling ever, and I said, being anxious to know more of Streone's meanings:

"I am glad that you tell me so, my prince, for Edric the earl would have it that our king fears that Olaf's good faith may be little."

"That is new to me," Eadmund said, frowning; "but, as you know, my father and I have had little to say to each other of late."

"Then you doubt him not?" I asked.

"I would as soon doubt Edric himself," he said, "and him I trust as I would trust myself."

"That is well," answered I. "For I feared that you also might have been doubtful of Olaf."

"Why, what should the king think of Olaf but that he has been his best friend?"

"The earl tells me that he has heard that Cnut will offer Olaf some under-kingship if he will take his part," I said.

"I cannot tell how he has heard that," Eadmund said, and he looked puzzled.

"By your spies in Cnut's court," said I.

"We have no spies there. I hate spying," the Atheling said. "What means he?"

Then I saw that for some reason which was beyond me Streone had let me know more than was safe. It was plain that if he spoke truth, he had more dealings with Cnut than were known to the Atheling. Yet the earl might, for Ethelred's sake, watch thus on Cnut, rightly enough, and think it safer to say nought to Eadmund, whose wisdom was not so great as his valour. It was a poor watch enough though, I thought, if he knew the talk about Olaf and not the plans for sailing, which should surely have been told him first of all.

"Maybe he minded him of some old plan of Cnut's that he heard when you were in Lindsey," I said, that being all that I could imagine. "That were enough to return to the mind of our king in his sickness, and trouble him."

"Aye, I think my father fears treachery from all men," the Atheling answered. "But Olaf has done well for us both at the first and now in sending word by you."

Then the sword I was wearing caught Eadmund's eyes, for he was ever fond of goodly war gear.

"So--you have a new sword instead of that I gave you," he said. "And I think you have made a good exchange. Let me see this."

"I broke the other blade strangely enough," I told him. "But this was my father's sword, and it has come back to me."

Now I must tell him all about our great fight, and at the end he said:

"I would that I had been there. It was a good fight." Then he laughed, and added: "Now, I will say this, that Streone noted this fine sword of yours, and wondered who had given it you, and why."

"Did he think that Cnut had bribed me also?" I said. "Such a sword as this is to a simple thane as much as a petty kingdom to Olaf."

Then Eadmund spoke in the old tone of comradeship that we had been wont

to use in Normandy.

"On my word, I believe he did! But you have often spoken to me of this sword, and you described it well. I think had I found it on a Dane I should have claimed it for you. But I never thought you would see it again."

"Would you have believed that I was bribed, my prince, had it not chanced that you had heard of the sword from me beforetime?" I asked, being bitterly hurt that the earl should have put this into Eadmund's mind.

Did he want to make him doubt all his former friends?

"Not I, Redwald," the Atheling said. "Streone is over careful for our safety, I think, and lets his love for us make him suspect all men. I told him as much, and he said that perhaps it was so. Then I said that Olaf had doubtless given you the weapon, and he would have me ask you. He thought that you should not have lightly set aside my gift."

Now I was sure that the earl strove to break Eadmund's friendship with Olaf, for to anger me would help to do so. The next thing would be to have me made away with, for that would turn Olaf into a foe, and he would leave England maybe. I thought that the earl would stand alone in Eadmund's counsels, and did not dream yet that he was indeed working for Cnut in order to take the first place in England as Thorkel did in Denmark. But that was plain enough ere long, and all men know it now. At this time, however, these matters puzzled me, and had it not been for the slaying of Sigeferth and Morcar and one or two others, maybe I should have thought little of danger to myself. It was only as Olaf's kinsman that I was worth a thought of the man whose deep statecraft I could not pretend to understand.

So I said:

"The earl's life must be uneasy with all these doubts. But so long as you yourself have none of King Olaf and myself, it is little matter what he thinks. His doubts will be proved false in time, and he will have fretted for nought."

"That is true," Eadmund answered. "I would that he troubled me not with his suspicions."

So the matter passed, and we spoke for a little while of the fleet and of Olaf's plans, and then I left him, saying that I would ride back to London with the first light of morning.

"We shall have one good fight, and then peace," said Eadmund. "Farewell, and trouble nought about my foster father and his ways of doubting. He will doubt me next, maybe."

He laughed lightly, and I went away down the street with a troubled mind, and was willing to get back to my lodgings through the dusk as quickly as I might.

And when I came there I put on my mail, as the lady had bidden me--rather blaming myself for doing so for all that, for it seemed to show fear of somewhat that I could not name.

Then I thought of the goldsmith again, and sent a man for him, thinking that he could do the work here in hall, so that I could be sure of having the scabbard, which was very valuable, when I rode away.

When he came I showed him what I would have done, and he said that it was no long business, and took his tools into a corner and lighted a wax taper and began to work by its light. The sword stood by my chair as I ate my supper at the head of the long tables where my men sat.

The goldsmith ended his work soon after the men had gone out to the stables to tend their horses for the night, and only he and I and my headman Thrاند were left in the hall. He had put a flat band of chased gold round the scabbard, and the silver penny showed through a round setting that was in it.

I gave him one of the gold pieces that Earl Wulfnoth had taken from the treasure for me, and the man weighed it, wondering at its weight and fineness. Then he said that he was overpaid, and must give me money for the overweight, and asked that one should go back to his house with him and return with it.

"There were men lurking in the porches and on the bridge," he said, "when I came down here. I suppose there will be a fray when they meet the men they wait for, so I fear to go back alone. A goldsmith is ever fair prey."

Then came a knocking on the door, and my man went to see what was wanted. Then one said to him:

"Edric the earl bids Redwald the thane to speak with him at his house before he sleeps."

Now the goldsmith stood where he could see the long streak of light that shone from the door across the street, and he said to me in a low voice:

"There are a dozen armed men outside, lord."

Thrand turned round to tell me this message, and as he did so Streone's messenger pushed by him into the hail, rudely enough.

"To the stables and call my men," I whispered to the goldsmith, pointing to the door which led thither, and he went out slowly, not knowing why I sent him.

"Where is Redwald, Olaf's man?" the newcomer said, and his tone was so rough that at the uncivil words I glanced at him sharply and made no answer. He was fully armed, I saw.

But my follower would not bear this.

"Yonder is Redwald the thane," he said; "mind how you speak, man."

"Thane or not, I have come to take him to Edric the earl," was the answer.

"Ho, thane! hear you the earl's message?"

Now when this began, I had taken up the scabbard with my right hand and was looking at the work, and the sword was in my left, hidden by my cloak as it fell to my side. I suppose the earl's housecarle thought I was unarmed.

"I am Redwald," I said, putting the scabbard on the table, and so leaving my right hand free. "I hear an uncivilly-given message enough. And I think the earl has not sent for me in such terms as those."

The man raised his hand a little and made a sign, and I heard the quick steps of men crossing the street with clatter of steel. Then I knew that Edric had sent

for me, dead or alive.

"Come you must," the man said.

"What if I will not?" I answered.

"I will make you," he said, and with that he smote Thrand fairly in the face and felled him, hitting squarely from his left shoulder, and then his sword was out and he made one step towards me.

Quick as thought I grasped the hilt of my sword, and smote upwards with it as I drew it from under the fold of my cloak. There is no stopping that stroke, and the man leapt back from it as it seemed, but the blade smote him beneath the chin, and so far as he was concerned Edric's message had come to naught. He would never draw sword on any man again. Nor do I think he would have been thus bold had he not thought me unarmed.

Then at the same moment my man was up, cursing, and the doorway to the street was full of Edric's men, and some of mine were coming leisurely through the other.

The crash of the falling man woke my people into life, and they ran to their spears, which were piled along the walls, and the earl's men faltered on the threshold, for they liked not the look of sword Foe's Bane, maybe. Then my man Thrand ran at the great door, which opened inward, and swung it to in the faces of Edric's men, and barred it. I heard them give a howl of rage as he did so, for one or two of them were flung backward into the street, so suddenly and strongly did he fling it against them in his rage.

Then we looked at one another, and at the dead man on the floor, in silence. I was the only one of all who knew what this message brought by armed men from Streone might mean. And all had happened so suddenly, from the time that the man had told me that I must come, and had drawn sword on me, to when the door slammed, that there had been no time for thought or wonder even.

I took up the scabbard and buckled it on, and sheathed the sword, and said:

"We shall hear more of this, men. Stamford town is no place for us now."

"What is all this, lord?" asked the leader, who stood with his back against the door still.

"Edric the earl has another business on hand like that of Earls Sigeferth and Morcar," I said. Whereat the men growled fiercely.

The goldsmith came in with the last of my men, and heard me say this, and now looked in the face of him whom I had slain.

"This is the man who brought the like message to our earls," he said. "I was at Oxford, and saw him come. And the street then was full of armed men, as is ours tonight. Better go hence, lord, else you will be burnt out, as our men were when they went to avenge our lords' deaths, and were driven into St. Frideswide's Church."

Now it seemed to me also that we had better hasten, or we should have a strong force down on us. Then if we fought, Edric would have occasion against me, and if not, I was lost.

"To horse, men!" I said. "We will go to Peterborough for this night. Abbot Elfric is my friend, and will give us shelter."

"Let us take the road for London rather, and get back to Olaf the king," said the headman. "The horses are fresh, and we can ride far, and the nights are warm if we must lie out."

"We will speak of that outside the town," I answered. "To horse at once, and silently, or they will take warning and bring more men."

They ran out, leaving a dozen with me. Edric's men were yet in the street, and now they drew near the door, listening as I thought.

"How shall you escape?" I said to the goldsmith.

"Out of the back way, lord, and up the meadows to the ford if the ferryman is asleep. But I must go before the house is beset."

"Keep the gold for your service," I said, "for I think that the silver penny has saved me."

So he thanked me, and crept away easily enough. I suppose that Edric's men had no orders that had made provision for trouble with me of this sort, and that they hardly knew what had happened. But it was likely that they would send word to Edric directly, when they began to be sure that something had gone amiss. They tried the door again, but without much heart. My men wanted to throw it open and charge out on them, but I would not suffer it. So long as they loitered outside we had time to get away. Then some of them tried the gate of the courtyard behind the house, but the men had barred that after the goldsmith had gone out. And all the while the horses were being saddled silently, and they would be ready in a few minutes.

The earl's men spoke now outside the door, and I could hear what they said.

"Let us break in and see what has befallen Godric."

"Nay, the hall is full of men now. Let us go back."

"It was Godric's own fault. He had no reason to smite the porter, who stayed him not."

Then I thought that the men knew not what their errand was, and were to take orders from the slain man. Thus there would be no fighting in the street when we came out.

So it was, for when the horses were ready, the stablemen of the house threw open the great gates of the courtyard, which was beside the house, as it happened, and we rode out quietly, but with weapons ready, and they did but shrink together and stare when they saw us. There were about thirty of them in all.

Now I would not give Edric any reason to blame me to Eadmund, and so I wheeled my men to the right, away from the bridge and along the great road towards London, and letting them go on slowly, I called to a man who stood foremost.

"This is a sorry business," I said; "but your leader had no right to smite my man, and one waxes hasty when a man behaves thus. He was an unmannerly messenger."

"Aye, lord, he was," the men said.

"Well, then, tell your earl that I have even now left the town, and that being ready to do so I came not with you; and say how it was that this man was slain, and that I am sorry therefor."

"We will tell him," they said.

So I spurred my horse and rode after my company, knowing that it would be hard for Edric to know the rights of the matter. The men would certainly not wonder at the slaying of Godric, seeing how he had behaved. I thought that Eadmund would never hear of this.

I believe that I escaped very narrowly, and also that the silver penny was the cause thereof. For, first of all, it had been likely that Eadmund's messenger would not have found me so easily had I gone elsewhere than back to get it, and so I should have been belated and attacked in the street by these men. And next, the goldsmith warned me that the armed men waited outside. And then it was certain that Godric, the earl's man, would have cut me down before I could have drawn sword, had I not already held the weapon unsheathed. And that was because I looked on the penny and its setting before belting on the scabbard.

Now I thought, when we were fairly on the road, that we would go to Peterborough, to my good friend the Abbot Elfric, for I would fain tell him all this, thinking that he might warn Eadmund of Streone to more effect than could I. And inside the abbey walls would be a safe place for the night. It was not so certain that we should not be pursued, and so we went quickly, the horses rejoicing in the road after their idleness, for we had been three weeks in Stamford, waiting for the earl.

So we rode till we came to Castor, the old Roman town, and stayed not there, but went to the ford over the Nene at Water Newton, the road beyond the river being better than that on this side. It is not an easy ford, for a horseman has to turn downstream when nearly over, else he is over head and ears before he knows. One of my men had known somewhat of the place, and was going through first, but as his horse shied a little at the sparkling water and he was urging it in, a man rode fast down the opposite bank, and into the river, coming over to us. I heard his horse snorting, as if out of breath.

"Watch how he comes," I said to my man.

But there was little use in that, for he went to ride straight through, and next moment his horse was swimming, and he was crying for help, being bewildered, for the river was full and current strong.

Now, I was used to swimming my horse in our Stour fords, which are often very deep in autumn and winter, and so I rode in and grasped his horse's bridle, and told him to take heart, and so fetched him to our side.

"Give me a fresh mount, in the king's name," he said, for his horse was spent.

"Little thanks is that," said I. "What is the hurry?"

"I am sent with all speed to Redwald the thane, at Stamford, with word for Eadmund the Atheling."

"I am Redwald," I said. "Who sent you?"

"Olaf the king. Show me your sword, master."

I held out the hilt of my sword, for that was a token which a messenger should give and receive that Olaf and I had agreed on.

"Cnut the Dane has landed at Sandwich," the man said. "Eight hundred ships he has, and men more than I can count. The Kentish men have risen, and Olaf is with them; but he has not, and cannot have enough men to stay the Dane. There must be a levy of all England."

Then I was almost beside myself with rage, and could have wept, for the levy that should have been waiting for this had not even had a summons. And from the bottom of my heart I blamed Edric Streone for all the woe that I saw must come on England.

There was but one thing for me to do, and that was to go back to Stamford and see the Atheling. He would see me at midnight when no one else dared wake him, maybe, for he would know that I had heavy matters to speak of if I thus summoned him. The messenger would have to wait till morning, and could but give his message. I could reason with the Atheling, while this messenger would

fall into Streone's hands. And that I knew now was the worst that could befall.

"Give the man a fresh horse," I said. "I must go back with him."

"Not so, lord," the men said. "You will be waylaid."

"I think my luck will serve me," I answered. "Do you find some barn at Chesterton over the water, and leave two or three men to watch for my coming. Thrand and Guthorm may come with me."

Then they grumbled at my running into danger, but I would be obeyed, though I must let them bide on this side of the ford.

We were but seven miles from Stamford town, and we went back at a hard gallop on the good turf alongside the paving of the Roman way. It was in my mind to see Eadmund and leave him at once, before Streone knew that any man had come into the town, if I could.

The bridge was barred, and the gates were too high to be leapt; but the guards were sleepy, and would not let me through, until I bade them open in the king's name. Then they did so, and we rode clattering up the street to the great hall.

There was bustle enough when I beat on the courtyard gates, for the place was stockaded, and there was a strong guard inside. Presently they opened the wicket, and the captain looked out angrily enough.

He began to rate us, but I cut him short.

"I am Redwald," I said, "and I must see the Atheling without delay."

The officer knew me well enough then, and let us in.

"You cannot see the Atheling,thane," he said. "It is as much as my life is worth to disturb him."

"I will do it myself, then," I said. "Take me into the house."

"What is amiss?" he asked, hesitating. "Is the king dead?"

"Nay, worse than that," I answered shortly, and the officer stared at me in horror.

"Oh, fool!" I said; "Cnut is landed, and it is Eadmund only who can save our land. Let me to him."

The warrior clutched his sword hilt with a sort of groan, and turned and took me into the house without a word. We went across the great hall, where the housecarles slept around the walls, sword under pillow, and spear at side. They raised their heads when their captain spoke the watchword, and looked at me curiously, but did not stir more than enough for that. They were not bidden.

We crossed a room where a few young thanes' sons slept, as I had slept before the king's door when I was first at court, and these leapt up, sword in hand.

"What will you?" one said in a low voice, setting his back against the door.

"I must see Eadmund, our atheling, on king's business," I said gently, remembering how I should have felt when on the same duty, if one had come thus.

"He may not be waked," the boy said.

Then I spoke loudly, so as to end the business without troubling these faithful guards.

"I am Redwald of Bures. I think that Eadmund will see me."

"Hush! hush! thane," the boy said.

But there was no need to say more, for the long camp life had sharpened Eadmund's ears to aught unusual. Now I heard the bar of the door thrown down, and Eadmund came out with a cloak round him and his sheathed sword in his left hand.

"Redwald--friend--what is it?" he said.

"Even what we have feared, my prince," I answered, looking at him.

"Where has the blow fallen?"

"At Sandwich. Olaf is there, and the Kentishmen have risen. His word is that he has not enough men."

"Surely Kent and London and Olaf--" he said.

"Eight hundred ships lie in Ebbsfleet. A ship may hold a hundred or but twenty men--not less."

Then Eadmund made a sign to his people, and they went out and left us together, and we looked on one another.

"Let me send for the earl," he said; but I put my hand on his arm.

"You are enough, my prince. But for sending for him your levies would be here, and we should march together even now to London."

He groaned.

"You are right, and I am a fool," he said.

"Wait for the earl no longer," I urged; "raise your own levy, and bid him follow you or the king as he will. There must be a raising of all England. Send to the king tonight."

"What will Cnut do?" he asked me.

"Olaf thought that if he landed in Kent he would make for London and besiege it. If so, you have time yet."

"There shall be no delay. Bide here and help me."

"I cannot," I said, and told him plainly of Edric's message to me, and the way in which it was sent; and I ended: "Let me go to Olaf, therefore, and take word from you that you come in haste. The earl doubts me yet."

"I do not understand it," Eadmund said, "but it must be so. Go back and tell Olaf to hold Cnut under London walls, and I will be there in a day before he

expects, gathering forces as I come."

I kissed his hand and went, and as I did so I heard him bid his followers arm him. So I knew that he was roused, and that if he were himself all might yet be well.

Then I got to horse, and I and my two men rode down the street as fast as we had come. No man was about, and the bridge gates swung open for us.

"They are in a hurry to get rid of us," said Thrand, as we went through and passed the last houses of the town beyond the river.

Then the road lay white in the moonbeams before us until it ran among the trees of the first woodland, and there in the black shadow was a sparkle as of armour in the shafts of light that came through the leaves into the over-arched hollow of the track.

If any man was there he could see us clearly, though we could not well see him, for we were in full brightness.

Then Guthorm spoke, peering under his hand.

"Four men across the road, lord--horsemen standing still."

Then said I:

"If they are friends they will stand aside for us. If not, they will expect us to halt and argue matters with them. Any way, they have no right to the whole road, even if they mean us no harm. Ride on steadily, one on either side of me, and when we are twenty paces from them, if they yet bar our way, spur your horses and we will clear the road."

"Swords out, master?" said Thrand.

"No, spear butts ready; maybe they are friends. But I am in a hurry."

So we rode over those four men, and I fear they were hurt, for we left two rolling horse and two men in the road. Nor did I ever know if they were Edric's men or not. Howbeit, their swords were drawn, and so I think we were not

wrong in what we did, though the Colchester men smote hard, and my spear shaft was badly sprung over a helm.

After that we did not draw rein till we came to our comrades, and they were halfway back to Stamford looking for me. Then we took the road to London, for we would not tarry now at Peterborough.

Maybe my story would have had a different end had I gone there--but it was not to be. Yet, though I knew it not, I was close to Hertha at that time.

Chapter 10: The Flight From London.

I came back to Olaf while he gathered his ships in the Pool below London Bridge, and I found him ill at ease and angry with Ethelred and Eadmund, and when I told him all, most angry with Streone.

"Now you must stay with me, cousin, for that man will have you slain if he can. There is no doubt that he works for Cnut. And this word of his about a bribe for me is not his own invention; he has been told to make it."

Then he told me of the vast host that had poured into Kent. It was the greatest host that had ever landed on English shores--greater even than had been ours when we Angles left our old home a desert, and came over to this new land and took it. Olaf and the Kentish levies had fought and had been driven back, and now day by day we looked to see Cnut's armies before London, and also for the coming of Eadmund with his men. But neither came, for the Mercian levies would not fight unless the king himself headed them, and Cnut passed through Surrey into Wessex and none could withstand him.

Aye, they fought him. Wessex is covered with nameless battlefields; but ere long half of Cnut's fleet was sent round to the Severn, and Ethelred, sick and despairing, came back to London with but a few men.

It angers me even to think of what befell after that. Eadmund and Streone gathered each a good force, and came together within touch of Cnut. And then on the eve of battle, Edric made known his plan to his Mercian thanes, and that was nothing more nor less than that they should go over bodily to Cnut when the fight began. Which treachery so wrought on the honest Mercians that they would fight not at all, and so disbanded in sight of the enemy, leaving Eadmund with but enough men to make good his retreat. And Cnut was master of all the land from Kent to Severn shores, Ethelred's own country. So Edric Streone went over to Cnut, and with him many thanes who despaired of help from Ethelred, and chose rather peace under a king who was strong enough to give it them. And one night forty of the English ships slipped away from us down the tide and joined

the Danes at Sandwich. The men had been bribed by Streone, as we found.

Almost then did Olaf make up his mind to leave England, but he pitied Ethelred, who turned to him again in this new trouble, and he did not go.

"But my men will not bide patiently much longer," he told me; "here is neither honour nor gold to be won, and I need them for my going to Norway when the time comes."

For every day Olaf looked for some sign that should bid him go back and take his own land from Cnut's hand.

Now Ethelred would not stir from London, fearing treachery everywhere. And again Eadmund's levies melted away for want of their king's presence, and at last we persuaded him to meet Eadmund at Coventry, and I went with him. There was a good levy that would have followed him, but some breath of suspicion came over him, and suddenly he left them and fled back to London and the citizens, whom he trusted alone of all England. And he would not suffer me to bide with Eadmund, but I must go back with him. So the levies melted, and Eadmund went north to Earl Utred of Northumbria for help.

Then when the winter wore away, and April came in calm and bright, the most awesome thing befell England that had been yet. For in the north Eadmund and Utred marched across the country, laying waste all as they went, lest the north should rise for Cnut; and going east as they went west, Cnut ravaged and burnt all the southern midlands. Then rose the wail of all England, for friend and foe alike had turned on her, and her case was at its hardest. And from that time forwards I know that none who chose Cnut for king should be blamed.

Then Cnut fell on York, and Utred of Northumbria, whose wife was Danish, submitted to him, and was slain by Streone's advice, as men say, though some say that he was slain by Thorkel the Jarl when he took the ships that tried to escape from the Humber. It may be thus. The shipmen fought well, and were all slain--sixty ships' crews.

Now all England was open to Cnut, and Eirik the jarl fell on Norwich and drove Ulfkytel back on us, and from him we heard of this trouble.

On the eve of St. George's day, Ethelred sent for me to his chamber, for he would speak with me. I found him sitting in a great chair before the fire, wrapped in furs, though the day was warm and sunny, and he was very feeble, so that his thin hands had little strength in them. The queen, Emma, was with him, looking young and handsome as ever, and in the light of a narrow window sat Eadward the Atheling, the sunshine falling on his strange white hair and on the pages of a great book over which he pored. He just lifted his pale eyes from his reading as I went in and saw who it was, and smiled pleasantly at me, and then turned to his book again. I thought that the troubles of the time passed lightly on the proud lady and the boy, whose learning was all that she cared for.

"Come near, Redwald, my son," the king said, in his voice that had grown so faint of late. "I have a charge to lay on you."

I went and knelt by him, and he put his hand on my shoulder, and the tears came to my eyes at the kindly touch, for it was the same as, and yet so unlike, that which had been a promise of friendship to me at the first time that I saw him.

"All things are slipping from me, Redwald," the king said; "nor is there aught that I grieve to lay down when the day comes on which I must pass through the gate of death. Crown and sceptre have been heavy burdens to me, for with them has been the weight of the sword also. I have borne those ill, and used that cruelly. I am the Unredy; but I have listened to ill counsels, having none of my own, nor wit to see what was best."

He ceased for faintness, and my heart ached to hear him speak thus to me, his servant. But Emma the queen turned half away from him, her face growing hard and scornful as she heard. Then Eadward set his book down gently, and, looking sadly at his mother, came and stood over against me at the other side of the king, and took his wan hand and said:

"There are laws which you have made, my father, which will live in the hearts of men alongside those that Eadgar made--our best. There will not be all blame to you in the days to come, when men see clearly how things have gone with you."

Thereat Ethelred smiled faintly, and he answered:

"I pray that it may be so. But the good outweighs not the evil. I may not count the one--I must confess the other."

He passed into thought, looking into the fire, and we were still beside him. The queen moved away to the seat where Eadward had been sitting and took his place, staring out of the window with unseeing eyes. And I was glad that she was no longer beside us.

Presently the king raised his head and turned it a little towards me.

"Redwald," he said, "you were our companion in Normandy, and you are a trusted friend of ours. It will not be long before the queen must fly to her brother--the good duke--again, and it is in my mind that her flight will be perilous. When that time comes, let it be your place to see her safely thither, with the athelings, her sons. It may be that Olaf will help you, but that you must see to as best you can. And I have sent for Abbot Elfric to help you."

"Lord king," I said, "what I can I will do, but I think there are men better fitted than I to guard our queen."

"None whom we trust more fully," the king said.

"See, my queen, this is he to whom you must look for furtherance of your journey."

Then Emma turned from the window, and her face was still unmoved.

"I can trust Redwald," she said. "It will be well."

But Eadward wept openly, for he knew that the king spoke of the day when he should die.

"That is well," the king said, and leaned back on his pillows. "Now have I no care left. Yet it is hard to put so heavy a burden on your young shoulders, my thane."

"It is an honour rather," I answered. "May I be worthy thereof."

Then a brightness came over the king's face, and he answered me slowly and

plainly, and with great joy, as it were.

"Presently I shall meet with Eadmund, your martyred king, and to him I will say that his thane of Bures is worthy."

"Forget me not also, my father, when you come to that place," Eadward said.

"I will not forget. Now is given me to see plainly what shall be in the time to come--to what all tends even now. For now in the time of my death comes to me rede unearthly, as I think. There must be a strong hand who shall weld England into one--who shall bid our land forget that difference has ever been betwixt Angle and Saxon, Jute and Northumbrian, Mercian and Wessexman, Saxon and English and Dane. And when that wonder is wrought, then shall come peace and a new life to the land, under one who will give them the laws that they need to bind them into one English race, strong and honest, and patient in all things."

Then said Eadward, as the king ceased:

"That is what those who love England would most hope for."

But his voice was hushed, as in the presence of one who sees beyond this earth.

Thereat the king looked on him, and said:

"Have patience, my son, and you shall see it; aye, and you shall have part and share therein."

After that he spoke no more, and for a time we waited beside him. Soon he seemed to sleep, and I rose at a sign from the queen and left his chamber. Nor did I ever see Ethelred our king alive again. For when the morning came he had laid his heavy burdens down and had passed to the rest that he longed for. And the bells that rang merrily for St. George's mass ceased, and the toll for the dead went mournfully over the city.

"Eadmund is king, God help him," men said.

So it came to pass that even as they buried the king in the great Church of St. Paul the Danish armies were closing round the city, and when I went to Olaf to

beg him to advise me concerning the flight of the queen, he answered:

"You and I must part, my cousin. For you had better take ship from some quiet port, and that on the southern coast, and so make for Normandy. But I must see the citizens through this siege, and then I will come to you at Rouen, and we will take counsel together again."

He would bide no longer in England after this, for the doubt of him that Eadmund would not listen to was strong in the minds of others, and his presence was of little use. Only the London folk and Ulfkytel loved him, knowing him well, and holding that they owed him much. But none knew better than Earl Ulfkytel that Olaf must not bide here longer.

Now our scouts kept coming in with news of Cnut, and at last I could see by which road to fly with most chance of safety. I would go by Winchester and so to Southampton and there take ship with the queen. Cnut's fleet would be in the Thames ere long, if it barred not the mouth already.

But Abbot Elfric had not come. We feared that he had fallen into Danish hands, for it was hard to say where they were not. It seemed that we must perforce leave London without him. Yet I would stay till the last for his coming.

Now I must leave England, and I have said little about myself. But when this duty was laid on me by the king, I thought more of my lost quest of Hertha than I had done of late. For now I must leave her in our poor land, where she must be hunted maybe from hiding to biding, place to place, and in my heart grew up an unreasoning anger against Ailwin and Gunnhild, who by their secrecy had kept me from bringing her here with Olaf.

Then as I looked over this I became sure that they had seen somewhat in me which their charge could not love, so that they would keep me from her altogether. And I made up my mind to that at last, not wondering that it was so, for I was but a warrior and a landless thane with nought to be proud of but skilful weapon play, and some scars to show that I had been in a fight or two where blows were falling. And I minded how I had told Ailwin that I held myself free, and thought that he and Gunnhild, and maybe Hertha also, would have it so.

Yet I cared little for that, having heavier things to fill my mind than thought for a maiden whose very looks I knew not now. At least these two had taken Hertha into their charge, denying me any part therein, and I could not blame them rightly. I had done my best and could no more.

Then at the last moment Elfric came.

"Glad am I that you have not gone, my son," he said, as I greeted him. "I have wandered many a long mile over crossroads to escape the Danes. Very nearly did they have me once, but I escaped them. That will be a pleasant tale beside Duke Richard's fire, however. When must we go?"

"With nightfall, father," I said. "The horses are standing almost ready even now. How many shall you need?"

"Myself, and my chaplain, and three sisters--five," he said, "if you can take so many. These would fly with me and the queen."

I thought for a moment. The queen had Eadward and his brother Alfred and five maidens with her, and there were the pack horses and the servants. But two of the maidens were unwilling to go, being daughters of London thanes. Our court was very small in these days. So, as every woman added to our company was a source of weakness, in that our pace must be that of the least able to bear fatigue, I doubted until I thought that the queen might let the sisters take the places of the maidens who cared not to fly with her.

I went and asked her this, and she flushed with wounded pride, though I gave her my reasons and urged her peril.

"How shall it be told that Emma of Normandy was beholden to a nunnery for her handmaidens?" she said.

"It shall not be told, my queen," I said stoutly. "Men shall say that you gave protection to the holy women."

Truly my wits were sharpened by sore need, for at once the queen agreed to this. She loved power, and even this little use thereof pleased her.

"When can we go?" she asked. "I long to see my own land again."

"At nightfall, in two hours' time," I told her.

"It is well. Be ready then," she said.

She had persuaded herself, as I believe, that she arranged all things, and I was glad to have it so, for I had feared that I should have had trouble more than enough with her unreasoning pride.

So I told Elfric that his nuns could go, and he thanked me, laughing a little, with some thought of their journey here as I thought, and he added:

"Aye, their dress protects them a little. It is not as in the old days of heathen against Christian. There is this to be said for Cnut, that he will have no monastery or nunnery harried if his orders are carried out."

Then a thought came to me, and I wished that I could persuade our queen to take on herself and her maidens the convent dress. She would not be the first royal lady of England who had worn it. And I asked Elfric to persuade her to do so, for Emma's great failing was love of queenship.

"If I know aught of our queen," he said, "she wants to ride in state."

"She does," I answered. "I think, father, that we have a troublous journey before us. She will not believe but that she may ride as ever through the land."

"You plan and I will argue," the good man said, being ever light hearted.

So he went to the queen and spoke long with her, but she would in no wise ride out of London but as a queen, even as she had told me more than once. There was nothing against that but that word might go to the Danish leaders that she was leaving the city. Still, if we could get her to disguise herself thus when our guards left us it might be as well. The Danes, did they seek her, would look for a larger party than ours, and would pay no heed to us, perhaps.

Now Olaf and my Colchester spearmen would be our guards even to the Surrey hills, for beyond them was not much fear of the Danes, who were advancing from Mercia, northward of the Thames. Only in the towns were garrisons whom we must fear, for they sent out parties to raid the land for provender and plunder and to keep the poor folk from rising on them.

So it was my plan, and it seemed good to Elfric, to travel as a little party only. So could we more easily escape notice, and take the byways, while an armed force, however small, would draw on us the notice of the Danes whose duty it was to watch against any gathering of English warriors.

We started that night as soon as dark came on, and the queen was pleased with the guard around her, and that Olaf the king himself rode at her side. Men cheered him as we passed along the streets, and the queen deemed that the cries were for her, and drew herself up proud and disdainful as she sat on her white horse with spearmen before and behind her, and her maidens on either side. But I doubt if any man knew who she was in the dusk. And I had sent the pack horses and servants on before us to wait our coming at a certain place, so that none should be able to say that we were a party of fugitives.

Presently the queen waxed silent, and Olaf and I could talk to one another of what we would do in the time to come if this and that happened. I told him that I should certainly return to fight at Eadmund's side, for the queen would not keep me in Rouen. When he left London it was his wish to seek me there, and so we looked to see one another again before very long.

"Then it is farewell, my cousin," he said, when at last we came to Banstead, for he would not leave us sooner. "We have had a good fight or two together, and may have more, and to more profit, as I hope, in the days to come."

We halted at the monastery and prayed for shelter there for the night, or at least what was left of it, and while Elfric spoke with the superior of the nuns who were there, I took leave thus of Olaf and of my spearmen. And these prayed me to return soon and lead them again. That I promised them, and so the darkness closed between us as they rode away, and I was left sad at heart enough, for Olaf was as a brother to me, and I knew not when I should meet with him again.

There was no talk of Danes at this quiet place over which the wave of war had gone already, leaving it poorer, but in peace; and it was not until the next afternoon that we rode out again, our party being that which must see the long road over together.

Twelve of us there were. The queen and her two maidens and the three nuns,

Elfric the abbot and his chaplain, Eadward and Alfred the athelings, and Alfred's tutor--who was a churchman of Elfric's own monastery--and myself.

Then there were the servants, ten in all, who rode each leading a lightly-laden pack horse. It was such a party as an abbot might well travel with, and that is all that would be said of us if the Danish riders asked aught of the roadside folk. I and Eadward alone were armed as the abbot's housecarles. The men bore but spear and seax, as would any wayfarer for fear of robbers and the like.

Now, when all was ready in the courtyard, and we waited for the queen, she stood on the threshold before I knew her, for the nuns of the place, taught by Elfric, had prayed her to take their dress for the journey, and she had done so, as also had her two maidens. They were as abbess and sisters therefore, and I thought that one trouble was over--that is if our queen would but take the part of a nun as well as the dress, and be guided by Elfric the abbot.

Thus our journey to the sea was begun. And of that journey I might tell much, for it was a strange one. I think that the hardest task that a man could have, must be to take a proud and headstrong woman through a country full of danger, when she dislikes the manner of journey. And when that woman is a queen, surely it is harder yet. Had it not been for Elfric and Eadward I know not how we should have fared, for at times Emma the queen would not speak with me, if some plan that I must needs make was not to her liking. And seeing that she knew nought of the meaning of either time or distance, that was often enough. And when I heard of danger that must be skirted she would tell me that none would dare molest the queen--that she would declare herself and all would be well.

And seeing that of all hostages to Cnut the queen would be the most valuable, that plan would be fatal. I will say this now, that more than once I was obliged for very safety's sake to give wayside folk, among whom we were, to understand that the abbess was crazed through the long troubles, believing herself a queen.

And, alas for our land! it was but too easy for them to believe it. Few there were who knew not some wretched ones crazed at that time by all that had befallen them.

Well it was for us that the nights were clear and warm, and that the good Surrey and Hampshire franklins' wives were compassionate and hospitable. I

could not now retrace our footsteps, for we could go by no road at times, but must take to the woods and downs.

And ever when we did so the queen rode sullenly, and angry with all around her, while Eadward and I and the two priests, who were valiant men enough, were ahead, scenting danger everywhere, for we had many a narrow escape of meeting raiding Danes. The stragglers of that mighty host were everywhere. I think that had we fallen into such hands I should have tried to send a man in all haste to the nearest post of the thingmen, that we might be taken again by warriors at least.

But the ladies bore the long journey well, and Elfric's nuns the best. I had little to do with them, having so many cares about me, and was glad enough to leave them in the closer charge of the abbot and his priests. But soon I found that there was one of the three nuns who was untiring and ever able to hearten the rest, and that even the queen listened to her. The dress made all five of the maidens seem alike at first, but in a few days the pleasant, cheerful face of this one seemed familiar to me, and it was fair enough for all the novice's garb she wore. I thought she minded me of someone whom I knew, and at last, finding out a likeness as I looked for one, I called her in my own mind Sister Sexberga, for surely she was like that fair friend of mine. It never happened that I heard her name, for I was ever forward and away from the queen's complainings, and the nuns spoke little even to one another.

Little rest and much care had I all the way thus. I will not write it, but will go on to the time when we came safely in sight of Winchester town. I could not enter it with my charges, but must needs go by myself, for here I should learn more sure news than anywhere. And what I might learn would decide whether I could take ship in Southampton Water or turn eastwards a little and go to Portsmouth or Bosham havens.

Now I knew that the Danes held the place in force, and so I told the queen. But to pass by her royal city seemed more than she could bear, and she wished and commanded us to ride in and call on her citizens to rise and protect her.

"Queen of England I am and will be," she said. "I have borne indignity long enough."

"My queen," I said, "if you see Winchester you will not see Normandy."

Then Elfric spoke with her, and at last she wept, saying that she was deserted, and the like, and so turned sullen, bidding us give her up to the Danes, who would respect a queen in distress.

Having seen this manner of submission to counsel not once or twice before, I put on a franklin's dress, and gave sword Foe's Bane into Eadward's keeping, and took a hunting spear instead, and went down into the town, leaving my party ten miles away in a nook of the wooded hills.

The scarlet-cloaked Danish thingmen at the gates paid no heed to me, for it was market day, and many countryside people were going in and out. So I went to the marketplace, and sat down on a bench outside an inn with others and listened to all that I could, while I drank my ale and ate as did the rest.

Some I talked with. There was little hatred of Cnut here, as I found. There was some change, too, in the ways of the thingmen, for it was not their plan here to make themselves hated and feared as in East Anglia.

Then came a man whose face and walk were those of a seaman, and he sat down close to me, and I pushed the ale mug towards him, and we began to talk of his calling. He had come to Winchester to find some merchant who needed a ship, as it seemed, and he began, as a good sailor will, to praise his own vessel with little encouragement.

I found out from him that Southampton Water was full of Danish vessels, and so I asked where his own lay.

"In Bosham haven," he said. "Earl Wulfnoth will have no Danes in his land. I must get some safe conduct from the Danish folk here if I come into the Water. So being tired of doing nought I even rode up to this place to see if aught could be managed for a voyage."

Now I thought that I was in luck's way, for from this man, who seemed honest enough, I could perhaps gain all I wanted. His ship was a great buss, fitted with a cabin fore and aft under the raised decks, and I could wish for no better chance than this might be.

"Would you take passengers for Normandy instead of goods?" I asked him carelessly.

"Aye, truly, and gladly if they could pay well."

"Now I will tell you that I am Earl Wulfnoth's friend," I said, "and you may know that pay is safe, therefore. I was at Pevensea when Olaf the Thick, the viking, came there."

He took my word for my friendship with the earl, and then I arranged for all things to be ready for us in a week's time. We had some rough country to cross before we came to Bosham, and I would not hurry over it. We wrangled over the price a little, as was fitting, for I would not seem too eager; but at last he said that he would depart on the morrow, and we shook hands and were satisfied.

"Speak not of this matter, friend Bertric," I said, "or we may be waylaid by Danes off the haven's mouth."

"Little fear of that, master," he laughed. "Our young Earl Godwine has beaten one or two ships already."

Then I went back light hearted to my people, and when the queen heard what I had done her mood changed, and she was most gracious, and thanked me, saying that she feared that I had run into danger for her in going into the town. So I felt myself repaid in full for the little trouble, that had been without risk as it fell out.

Very fair was the great Andred's-weald in the late April weather, but the forest tracts were rough and the way seemed long. Once we beat off, easily enough, some cowardly outlaws, but there were no Danes in Andred's-weald, and we came to Bosham in safety.

There Bertric's good ship was ready for us, and it happened that no other vessels, save fishing craft, were in the haven. I had looked to meet Godwine, my friend, but he and his ships were in Dorchester water, and there were few to mark our coming into the quiet town, or our going on board, which we did without delay.

We had no need of the stout housecarles, who had led the horses and served

us so well, so the queen, as I asked her, gave them the horses as gifts in recompense for their journey, and so when they had gone we were few indeed. But there was room for few passengers in the buss. The queen and her ladies had the larger after cabin, and Elfric and the athelings and the two priests had that under the fore deck. I would remain on deck with Bertric and his crew of twenty men, but there was no hardship in that.

That night on Bertric's ship was the first for three long weeks that had sound sleep for me, for they hauled out into the middle of the haven, and none could come near us unseen, and I was at last free from care and watching.

But one thing troubled honest Bertric, and that was that he had found a black kitten on board. None knew whence it came, and he said it was an ill sign. And he dared do nought but treat it well, since it had come.

Chapter 11: The Taking Of The Queen.

When the early sunlight woke me, we were almost at the haven mouth, and slipping past Selsea, with its gray pile of buildings, on the first of the ebb tide. The wind was in the northeast, with a springtime coldness in it, but it was fair for Normandy, and there was no sea running under the land. We were well out at sea, therefore, ere Elfric, almost as worn out as I, came from his close quarters forward and stood by me, looking over the blue water of the Channel to where the Isle of Wight loomed to the westward.

"Now I think that all is well, Redwald," the abbot said, "and every mile from the English shore takes us further from danger."

And so we stood and talked in the waist of the ship, and Eadward came and joined us. The men ate their breakfast forward, and brought us some, and the two churchmen came out with the little atheling, and then Sister Sexberga, as I called her, came and shivered in the cold breeze and spoke to Bertric, who was alone on the after deck steering, and so went back to the cabin, where the queen had all things needful for breaking her fast.

Then Bertric whistled sharply, and I looked up at him. He pointed away to the eastward, and out to sea. There I saw far off on the skyline the sails of two ships that grew larger as I watched them.

I went to the break of the after deck and climbed up beside him.

"Men say that two ships passed westwards tonight, master," he said. "Here be two more heading over from the south."

"Can you tell what they are?" I asked him.

"Longships, as I think," he answered. "We shall know betimes."

The vessels hove up quickly, for our great brown sail bore us more or less across their course.

"It is safer to hold on, master," he said, "for to up helm and fly would be to bring them after us if they are vikings. They will see that we are not laden with cargo, and will not pay heed to us therefore."

It was but half an hour after that when we knew that the two ships were Danish war vessels, and that they were laying a fresh course to overhaul us. Nor was there any chance of our escaping them. They were thrice as fast as we.

Then I feared greatly, for I knew not what would happen. It might be that they would let our party go on, finding them to all seeming nought but church folk; but one could not tell, and I feared. So also did Elfric when I went to him and told him what these ships were, and that they were bearing down on us.

"We cannot fight," he said. "We must let things be as the Lord will."

"If any roughness is shown to the womenfolk," I said, "there will be one man who will fight."

"And will lose his life for naught," he answered. "If the worst comes to the worst we must even do as the queen has bidden us before now. We must proclaim her, and then we shall be safe from harm, if captives to Cnut. Tell me, have you heard that he is cruel to those he takes?"

"Rather I have heard that he is not," I said. "Moreover, if Emma of Normandy suffers aught at his hands he will have the duke to deal with very shortly."

"Now are we in the Lord's hands," said Elfric, for a hoarse hail came from the leading ship, which was to windward of us. She was a splendid dragonship, bright with gold and colour.

"What will you have me do, master?" Bertric cried to me.

"They can do what they will with us whatever we try. We may fare better by obeying," I said, for in truth there was nought else to do.

Now the great ship ranged up alongside of us, and the tall warrior at the helmsman's side hailed us again to heave to. And I saw a man bend his bow, and an arrow flew down the wind and stuck in the deck not far from me. Whereon Bertric raised his arm in answer and called to his men, and luffed while they

lowered the sail. The Dane at the same time struck sail, and got out some oars in order to come alongside of us. There was no sea running that would make this dangerous.

Then I went to the low door of the after cabin, and spoke to the queen.

"Here is a ship that will come alongside ours," I said. "Fear nought, but wait for my word."

And then a glint of bright colour caught my eyes, and I looked more closely into the dark place; and there sat the queen no longer as a humble abbess, but in her own dress, for she had cast off the garb she hated, and she answered me:

"Who dares to stay the Queen of England on her passage?"

"Oh, madam," I said, "for pity's sake don the convent robe again. I fear that the Danes are on us."

Then she cowered back into the shadow and said nought, for the very word terrified her when she knew her foes were so near. But Sister Sexberga came to the door, and she was pale enough, though her face lacked no courage.

"What shall we do, Redwald--thane?" she said quickly.

"Keep a brave heart, sister," I answered, "and let me manage all. I will bide before the door, and you will hear all I say. Then, if I say that we have the Queen of England, let our mistress come forward and disclose herself. But I hope they will let us go free. Pray that it may be so."

Then the two ships jarred together, and I saw that the Dane was well manned with armed warriors, and I also saw that their leader was Egil Thorarinsson, whom I had captured and again lost at Leavenheath fight. I will say that I was glad to see him, for I knew him as a free-spoken warrior who loved fair play, and I thought that he owed me a life, for I did not slay him when I might.

They leapt on board--a dozen armed Danes with Egil at their head--and there before them stood Elfric the abbot with his cross in his hand, facing them alone. His priests were forward under cover, praying doubtless, with the athelings. The great ship sheered off again, and bided within half arrow shot of us, all her rail

crowded with men looking on.

"Neither gold nor goods have we," Elfric cried. "We are peaceful folk who cross the seas. It is the part of a good warrior and viking to let such go unharmed."

"Aye, so it is," answered Egil; "but, as it happens, we are looking for certain peaceful folk."

"You will not harm us," said Elfric, who knew nought of our queen's foolishness. "It is but a party of church people who go to Normandy."

"Put the holy man aside," said Egil to his men. "We are not heathens, and we will not hurt you, father."

So the warriors laughed, and went to draw Elfric away; but when he saw that I stood before the cabin door, he stepped aside by himself and watched what should befall. I had no mail on, and at first they did not notice me. It was the first day that I had not worn mail since we left London; but Foe's Bane was loose in the scabbard, and ready in case of need.

"Ho, skipper!" Egil cried, "whom have you on board?"

"Yon priest and some more of his sort," Bertric said.

"We have lit on a crow's nest," a man said, laughing. "Where are they, then?"

"In the fore peak, and aft here, deadly sick," said Bertric.

Then Egil's eyes lit on me, and he stared for a minute.

"Ho!" he cried, "here is no crow, but a stout warrior enough. What do you here, Olaf's right-hand man?"

"Helping the crows over seas," I said, trying to meet his words lightly, though my heart was heavy enough.

"Why then, friend," he said, "I must see these charges of yours. Stand aside, and let me go into that cabin."

"Nay, Egil; they are but nuns here."

The honest warrior looked puzzled, but some of his men began to crowd aft, being tired of the parley, and one tried to push me aside, saying:

"Let us fetch them out, and waste no more words."

Whereon I sent him reeling against the gunwale, hands to face, for I dealt with him even as Godric served my warrior at Stamford.

Then I had my sword out, for it was time--and two men who drew sword on me went down on the deck before me. Sword Foe's Bane smote not amiss. Then was a ring of shouting Danes forming, and I felt someone at my shoulder, and Egil cried out:

"Hold, men! the warrior is my man. Let me deal with him."

And there was Sister Sexberga beside me, with Bertric's sword, that had hung over his berth, in her hand; and her eyes were flashing, and it seemed to me that she had used a sword before this, or had learnt its use. It was reddened now.

The men gave back, and Egil came before me and he was laughing.

"That is enough, Redwald of Bures," he said. "I owe you a life, and you have it. If all your charges are like that maiden we had better begone. Little nunnery training is there about her sword play."

Then the sister shrank back into the cabin, and the men stared after her with a kind of awe, as at a Valkyrie of the old faith who had come to my help. There was a man whom she had smitten who was binding up a wound in his bare forearm. I believe that she stayed a shrewd blow from me.

"Let us go, Egil," I said.

"Presently, maybe. But I seek someone, and must needs see your people. No harm shall come to them."

Then I thought that all was well, and I turned to the door and spoke:

"Lady abbess, you must needs come forward. I know this chief, and you need fear nought."

I heard Sister Sexberga's voice speaking low and pleadingly for a moment--and then all was lost.

"I am the Queen of England," said Emma in her proud, shrill voice. "Begone, churls, and let me not."

And bright in crimson and ermine she came from the cabin and stood swaying on the deck before Egil and his men, while round her train played heedlessly the ill-omened black kitten; and that seemed strange.

Egil bared his head and bowed before her.

"Are you truly the queen?" he said.

"Aye, knave. Who else should I be?" she answered. "Fetch me the old priest."

"Nay, Redwald will tell me now," Egil said. "Does this lady speak truth?"

"It is true," I answered. "Why should you hinder her going to the duke, her brother, who will seek her at your hands?"

Now Emma had been still during these words, looking with hard and scornful eyes at all before her, but now she spoke:

"Let the sail be set again that I may go on my way. You shall surely answer for this hindrance."

But no one stirred, though even the Danes were silent, for there is that in the tones of one who is wont to be obeyed which makes men listen whether they will or not.

"Do you hear me?" she said, stamping her foot.

"Redwald, see that I am obeyed. Drive these knaves into the sea, and let me be rid of them."

Then Egil answered her, saving me trouble thereby, for I had nought to say:

"Queen, we will do your bidding and hoist the sail. But my men and I must bide here."

"I care not, so that you do not hinder my folk," she said.

And with that she turned away, saying to the brave sister who yet stood beside her:

"Let us seek shelter again--the wind is cold, and I am offended with the sight of these men."

They went into the cabin and closed the door after them, and Egil and I looked at one another. Egil grinned, but I could not. Outside the door the kitten mewed restlessly in the cold wind to be taken in.

"So," he said, "cheer up. This is not your fault; you almost won through. Had the queen come forth as an abbess, I think that I had left you for very shame. Priests and black cats are aye unlucky passengers, however."

I think that I was never so angry as then. To lose all our pains for the safety of the queen, and that by reason of her own foolishness, was hard.

Egil left me and went to Bertric; and once more the sail was set, and the ship headed backward for the English coast. We had almost lost sight of it. The two longships ranged up on either side of us, shortening sail to keep us company.

They took the two men whom I had slain and set them forward under some covering. Neither Egil nor his warriors bore me any grudge for their fall, which was in fair fight of their own making. After that Egil's men made the crew bring them what food and ale they had, and sat down below the fore deck quietly enough. They were courtmen of Jarl Thorkel's, as I thought, being better than the wild warriors who made the bulk of Cnut's great host.

Elfric came to me when all was quiet thus, and leant on the rail beside me for some time without speaking. We were making a long slant over to the English coast, and my heart was full of heavy thoughts, for I could not help wondering if this mischance had come about by my fault; and I was angry and sore that all the plans that I had made so confidently had come to naught. Presently the abbot said:

"The queen takes this matter very easily."

"The trouble is to come," I answered; "she thinks that she is yet on her journey."

"It is no fault of ours that she is not," said he. "Maybe it is best thus. I suppose that she will understand how things are when we reach the shore. What will be done with us?"

"Let us ask Egil," I said. "I think we might have fallen into worse hands than his. It is in my mind that he likes not his errand."

So we went aft to the chief, who stood beside Bertric. And when I came to him he said, pointing westward:

"Here comes Earl Wulfnoth, as I think."

Then I saw three large ships beating up to us, and the sail of one bore, painted on it, the device of a fighting warrior, Earl Wulfnoth's own ensign.

Now, on this I had a hope that we might be rescued by him, and my face must have shown as much, while Elfric glanced at me with the same thought written plainly in his eyes.

"I will not risk meeting the earl, though I do not think that he will interfere with us," Egil said; "but we are to windward of him, and can do as we like.

"Now, I have been wondering what I shall do with you, Redwald."

"Let me be taken with the queen and the athelings," I said. "What will you do with them?"

"They must go to Cnut," he answered; "but I am thinking that that will be bad for you."

"Why?"

"Maybe it is not my business, but I think that I owe you a good turn for letting me off at Leavenheath. If I take you to Cnut, Streone will have somewhat to say about you--and he is a great man with our king just now."

"Well, what if he has. He knows me well enough, and cares nought about me," I answered.

"Cares enough about you to have told Cnut to hang you as soon as he gets you," Egil said. "I suppose you have offended him in some way."

Then Elfric said:

"That is so. Redwald escaped from his hands at Stamford. We heard many tales about it at Peterborough. They say that Eadmund the Martyr came bodily and saved him out of a house beset by the earl's men."

"If there is one dead man that we Danes have to fear, it is that king," Egil said. "Is this tale true?"

And he stared at me as at one who had dealings with the other world.

I knew that my story must have come into this shape through some tales that the goldsmith had set about.

"Hardly," said I; "but it is a long story. Maybe Eadmund the Saint had more to do with it than I know; but I saw him not."

"Well then, Redwald, it seems unsafe for you to go near Streone--"

"It will be unsafe for him," I said savagely, for my temper was sorely tried by my failure, as I have said.

Egil laughed.

"Why, then, all the more must I keep you out of his way."

"Hang me and have done," I said; "I am of no more use."

"That," quoth Egil, "is what I thought concerning myself when you had me down in the fight. Now I am here to let you go, and bid you take heart. This is but chance of war, and one must take it as it comes."

Now it was so plain that the honest chief wished me well, that I could not but thank him for his words, though, indeed, just at this time I seemed to care little for what became of me.

"You are a generous foe, Egil Thorarinsson," I said.

"You and I shall be good friends some day, as I hope," he said; "meanwhile we will be fair foes. You slew me not, because I had fallen more or less by chance. Therefore I will let you go because you have fallen into my hands by chance. I will only lay this on you, that you shall bide with Earl Wulfnoth for two months before you fight against us again."

I was full of wonder at this, for he might well have made me promise to take up arms against Cnut no more, and I could have done no less than promise it, seeing that I was in his hands.

"Why, I must tie you down for a while," he said laughing at my face of doubt.

"Nay, Egil, I do but wonder that you set me free at all," I said.

"Is that so? I have wondered that you slew me not in the heat of battle. Well, I will add this, that if we fall on Earl Wulfnoth you may fight for him."

I held out my hand, and Egil took it.

"You have my word, Egil; you are most generous," I said.

Then he glanced at sword Foe's Bane.

"Some day you and I, maybe, will have a good fight for your sword in all friendliness," he said.

"Surely I thought you would take it back," I cried. "I feared so, for it was my father's sword."

"Aha! I knew there was somewhat strange about that blade," he said. "Tell me what story it has."

I told him in a few words about the winning of the sword from the grave mound by Thorgeir, my grandfather, and asked Egil how he came by it.

"I bought it from a man after Nacton fight, and I have never had any luck with it. I was sure it was a magic sword of some sort; for it let go three men whom I should surely have slain with any other blade. It seemed to turn in my hand. Such swords as these will not be used by any other than he who can win them from the owner."

"Ottar, Olaf's scald, said that it would draw the holder to me," I said; "but I would not believe it."

"You English have forgotten the old sayings," Egil said. "Now you know that he is right; keep the sword therefore."

Then I said:

"If I must die a bed death, Egil, the sword shall be sent to you, for I think that you have the most claim to it."

He grew red with pleasure at my saying, and Elfric broke in on our talk.

"I would that I might see many more meetings of brave foes like this. Then would peace come very shortly."

"Why, father," said Egil, "Redwald and I have not any hate for each other, though we must fight on opposite sides."

"That is well. I would that it were ever so."

Then Egil changed his tone, for we were nearing shore. The ships he had seen were still far away, beating southward now.

"Are these maidens nuns, or but in disguise, father?" he said.

Elfric answered not at once, and I said:

"Three are nuns, two only are disguised. You will not take the queen's maidens from her?"

"Not I," he answered. "I think that even with the abbot's help and theirs I shall have trouble enough with the queen when she finds that the shore we reach is not Normandy."

"Shall you take me?" asked Elfric.

"I must take all but my own friend here, and the three holy women; I will not hinder them. They can find shelter in Selsea or Chichester--a nun has always friends and a house--if Redwald will see them safely to the door," Egil said very kindly.

Then he bade the men get out the boat, which was a good one, and fitted for carrying cargo from ship to shore. Two of Bertric's men were to go ashore with me and the nuns, taking messages also to the Bosham folk of what had befallen the ship.

"You will scare the wife if you say you have fallen into the hands of the Danes," Egil said laughing at the shipmaster.

"It is the truth," Bertric said stoutly. "'Tis the doing of yon cat."

"You shall come to no harm with us, and your ship shall come back to Bosham shortly. We have no war with your earl, and all will be well. Tell them, therefore, that it is thus. King Cnut is generous to all who fight not against him."

When I heard that I began to see why our people went over to his side so readily, and it seemed to me that he was fighting not only with sword, but also with policy.

"Now call your nuns, father," Egil said.

"May I have one word with Redwald first?" the abbot asked.

"Tell him what you will," Egil answered, and went forward.

He called one of the priests and told him to bid the three nuns come forth.

Then Elfric said to me:

"Two of these women are nuns, the third, she who stood by you so well even now--saving your life, moreover--is not. She is the orphan daughter of a thane, whom her guardians begged me to take to Normandy, finding her a place in the queen's household or in some convent, if that might not be. She is friendless. But I think she may as well go with the nuns to Selsea. Bid her wait there till she hears from me--unless some lady will take pity on her and give her shelter."

"She will be more likely to take the vows, as have so many maidens of today who are in her case," I said. "I will do all for the nuns and her that I can."

The three sisters came out now. Two were weeping, and they were the nuns. The third was flushed and looked troubled, and she cast a glance back into the dark cabin. I heard the queen's voice speaking fast to her, as it would seem, and she shrank away as if dreading it.

Elfric went to meet them, and then the queen herself came through the cabin

door stooping, for it was not high.

"This is your doing," she said to the abbot. "Am I to be left without any attendants?"

"My queen," the good man said, "we can take the sisters no further with us. They must go ashore."

The queen looked at the coast, which was plain enough now. It was certain that she had no knowledge that we were returning to England. That the ship was on another tack meant nothing to her.

"Why cannot they bide here and go on land with me? We cannot be more than an hour in reaching the harbour," and she pointed to Selsea.

"Tell her, father, I pray you," said the maiden in a low voice. "She believes that we are even now nearing her home."

Then I thought that this might come more easily from myself, seeing that Elfric had to stay with her, and I stood before her, and spoke.

"My Queen, that is not the Norman shore which you see. The Danes, into whose hands we have fallen, are taking us back to England."

As I said this, the queen's face grew white with rage, and she looked from Elfric to me, speechless. On the deck above stood Egil, and he caught my eye, and looked ruefully at us.

"What!" she said, "has Cnut bought you also? Is there no man whom I can trust?"

That was the most cruel thing that she could have said, but I knew what despair might lie behind her anger, and I answered nothing--nor did Elfric. We waited for the storm to pass.

"Ill it was that Ethelred trusted me to your hands--" she began again.

But there was one who would not bear this. The friendless maiden spoke plainly for us.

"Queen," she said, "I have borne your reproaches to myself in silence, but I cannot bear that these brave servants of yours should be blamed. Look at the abbot's torn and dusty robes, look at the thane's care-worn face--are they in the plight of men who are bribed?"

But the queen made no answer, and her face was like stone as she looked on none of us, gazing straight before her.

"What lies on yonder deck?" the girl went on, pointing to where the two bodies lay under their covering. "It is the thane's sword and risk of life that stayed them from laying hands on you. Does a bought man slay his buyers?"

Still the queen was silent, and then I said:

"I think that you misjudge us, my queen. Had we wished to betray you it would have been long ere this that the Danes would have been summoned to take you."

I do not think that she heard me, and I am glad, for I spoke in anger. I saw her lean against the bulkhead, and her hand sought her heart, and she reeled a little. The maiden sprang forward to support her, for it seemed as if she would fall. But she recovered in a moment, and shook herself free of the girl's clasp.

"I am wrong, good friends," she said. "Now I know from what you have shielded me all this long journey through. What will they do with me?"

And she began to weep silently, yet she would not let the maiden touch her.

Elfric spoke then in his gentle voice.

"We cannot blame you, my queen, for the blow is heavy; yet the chief who has taken us is a true warrior and kindly, you need fear nought."

Then came Egil from the fore deck, and bowed to the queen, and said:

"I must take you to Cnut the king, lady; and his commands are that you are to be treated as becomes the sister of Duke Richard. I am here to see that it is so."

Then the queen's mood changed, and she was once more herself.

"You shall answer to my brother for all you do," she said in her proud way.

"I have to answer to Jarl Thorkel and to King Cnut," Egil said simply. "The duke is no lord of mine."

Thereat the queen paid no sort of heed to him, but spoke to me.

"I will tell my brother hereafter of your great care for me, my thane. Why must you leave me now?"

Surely I should have asked Egil to let me stay, but he knew best what was safe for me.

"I will not take either thane or nuns, lady," he said. "They must leave you even now; time is short."

She glanced coldly at the chief, and answered him by speaking to me. She had brought herself now to see that she was powerless.

"Then I must say farewell, Redwald. In better days I will not forget your service," and then she smiled a little, and gave me her hand to kiss as I knelt before her, adding: "I think that I have been an ill-natured travelling companion at times."

Then she turned away quickly and sought the cabin. But she said no word to the maiden who had made the journey lighter to her, and I saw that this grieved her sorely.

Now I took hasty leave of Elfric and the athelings, and sad was I at parting with them. But I told Eadward that Egil was worthy of his charge, and a generous foe.

"You will not blame me that this matter has failed even at the last, my prince," I said.

"Not I, Redwald, good friend; you and I will laugh over it at some time hereafter," the atheling said.

I shook my head.

"It has been waste trouble and pains," I said sorrowfully.

"That it has not been," quoth Elfric. "No duty well and truly done is lost in the end, though it may seem to be so at the time. I shall remember my guardian in this journey all my life long, and the queen shall remember presently. You have been most patient. Lose not patience now. Be of good cheer rather that things are none so ill as they might be."

So the good man strove to hearten me, for I thought meanly enough of myself at that time, because I had been so certain that all was well, and now my pride was humbled. Maybe it was good for me that this should be so, but good things are passing bitter if all are like this. Lastly, he gave me his blessing, and I joined the sisters in the boat, and she was cast off, while at that moment the black kitten came to the rail and leapt in after us, which I liked not at all.

Then the great ship slipped away, her helm went down, and she headed away out to sea to escape a meeting with Godwine's vessels that had now gone about for the shore again, beating to windward for Bosham. As she passed us I saw the abbot and Eadward wave to us from the fore deck, and Egil lifted his hand in salute from beside Bertric at the helm.

Then they were gone beyond our reach, and we could no longer make them out. Our rowers were bending to their oars, and the boat was making good way enough, shoreward.

I do not know how I can say enough of Egil's friendliness to me, for I found my armour on the floor of the boat alongside the few things the poor women had. Helm and shield and axe too were there. He was as one of the heroes, of whom Ottar sang, in his way to me. Then I grew light hearted in that strange way that comes after long strain of fearing the worst, when the worst is known and it is not so terrible after all. I had no fear for the queen, and I was free, and going to Godwine and his father who were my friends. Also I should see Penhurst and Relf again, most likely.

Now when that memory came to me, suddenly I thought that I must see Sexberga. And it was strange to me that I had no pleasure in that thought. Most of all I hoped that Olaf would put in at Pevensea on his way to Normandy. It was likely enough.

So I sat and pondered, not sadly, but looking forward ever, and, as I say, feeling that a load was lifted from me. Then at last my thoughts came back from myself, and I turned to the sisters and told them that the queen was safe, if a prisoner. They need not grieve for her. The two nuns wept, but the thane's daughter smiled a little, and said, fondling the cat meanwhile on her lap:

"In truth, I think that the queen will be happier in making Egil and his Danes obey her in little services than she has been in having to be guided by yourself and the abbot."

"It has been hard for her," I answered; "but she owes you much, as I think."

"She hates me," the girl said, half tearfully, "because I was the only one who dared speak plainly to her."

"Elfric and I owe you much, Sister Sexberga," said I, naming her as I had thought of her through all the journey, because I recalled so many times when we had looked to her for help in persuading the queen to common sense,

She looked astonished at this, and smiled oddly, and then I saw what I had done.

"Forgive me," I said hastily; "I know not your name. That is what I ever called you to myself when I had to think of you in ordering matters."

"Why 'Sexberga'?" she said, looking out seawards.

"Truly I thought you like a lady of that name whom I knew. But now the likeness is gone," I said.

"Maybe I ought to be proud thereof," she said coldly enough.

"I will not say that," I answered. "Let me know your name that I may remember it."

"My name is Uldra," she said, without looking at me, and flushing a little, and then busying herself with the kitten's ears.

"That is a Norse name, lady," said I.

"Aye--and a heathen one. But it is the best I have."

Then I said, feeling that I could not say aright what I would:

"Lady Uldra, I have to thank you for saving my life today. Yours was a brave deed."

She shivered a little, at the thought of what she had done, as I think, for the heat of anger had gone.

"I am glad I was of use," she answered. "What are we to do when we come to land?"

"I will take you and the sisters to the great nunnery that good St. Wilfrith founded. There you will be welcomed."

So I said, but as I looked at her I thought what a prison the nunnery would be to such a maiden as this. Yet it was all that could be done.

"That will be peaceful," she said, but the tears seemed close at hand.

Now one of the men spoke to the other, looking back over his shoulder at him, and then when he was answered he turned to me.

"Master," he said, "tide serves ill for Selsea, and it will be easy for us to go straight up the haven to Bosham. The flood tide is strong in with us. May we do so?"

"Is there any nunnery there?" I asked.

"Why, yes, master--a little one."

There too was Wulfnoth's great house, where I should be welcome, as I knew. So I asked the sisters if this would suit them.

"One place is as another to us," they replied.

So we went on up the haven, and it was a long pull, so that it was late in the afternoon when we came in sight of the town.

Now I had said no more to Uldra about ourselves--save for a few words concerning sea and tides and the like--but had tried to cheer her, and myself also, by speaking of how Cnut would treat the queen--namely, that it was most likely to be in high honour, lest the duke should fall on him.

But as we sighted our journey's end, I bethought myself.

"Lady," I said, "is there aught that I can do for you in sending messages to your folk? There will be chapmen and the like going Londonwards shortly, when the siege is over."

"I have no friends there," she said.

"You shall bid me do what you will for you when I am free to go to our king again," said I. "There will be some who would know where you are and how you fare."

She thanked me, saying nothing but that when the time came, if I yet remembered her and would ask her, she might give me messages for those at Peterborough whom she had left, and I promised to do all I could in bearing them.

"I cannot forget the maiden who saved my life," I said.

She made no answer, and the boat shot alongside the little wharf, where a crowd was gathering quickly to see us come. Many questions there were when Bertric's men were known.

There was a kindly-looking monk among his people, and I went to him, and brought him to the nuns where they and Uldra stood apart by themselves, while the two men were busy with their folk.

"*Pax vobiscum*," he said; "you shall be welcome, my sisters, at our little nunnery for tonight. Then will we ask the bishop on the morrow what you had better do."

Then they were eager to go with him, and I bade them farewell, bowing, and they turned away. They might say nothing, according to their rule, Elfric told me, save in need.

Neither did Uldra speak, though no vow of silence was on her, but she went with them for a little way. I was rather hurt at this, and began to go back to the boat, wondering that she had no word of farewell.

"Redwald--thane," came a gentle call in her voice, and I turned sharply.

She was close to me, and the sisters were waiting for her twenty paces or so away.

"Farewell," she said. "I could but thank you for all your care for us."

"It has been freely given, lady," I said. "I only grieve that the journey has ended thus. May it be well with you."

"I will pray for you, thane, day and night in the nunnery that it may be so with you," she answered, with a little sort of choking. "The gratitude of us helpless women to you for your long patience is more than we can say."

Then she went swiftly back to the nuns, and they went their way. I thought that I had not deserved so much. And of this I was sure, that had not the sisters' dress kept me far from Uldra, I had forgotten Hertha in her company. Then thought I that there was no reason why I should remember Hertha any longer. And next, that it were better that I should think of no maiden at all, at this time.

Which last seemed wisest, and so I grew discontented, and went down to the boat and bade the men take my arms and few belongings to Earl Wulfnoth's house.

When I came there the steward knew me, and made me very welcome. The earl was at Pevensea or Shoreham, but Godwine was in and out of the haven, and would be here ere long. So they told me, and set a good meal before me. And when I had eaten I lay down on a settle and slept the long sleep that comes to one wearied in mind and body alike. If the house had burnt over my head I should not have waked, for others watched now, and I had no need to wake for aught.

A man knows those things in his sleep, I verily believe. One ill dream I had, and that was of Bertric's unlucky kitten, which seemed to be the queen in some uncanny way. Sometimes I wonder what became of it. I never learned, but it

brought me no more ill luck.

Chapter 12: Among Friends.

When I woke it was daylight again. A fire burnt on the hearth in the middle of the hall, and someone had spread a wolf-skin rug over me. I had not moved from sunset to sunrise, and I was refreshed and broad awake at once, wondering at first where I was, and who had laughed and woke me.

There was a youth sitting on a table's edge by the wall over against where I lay, and a big broad-shouldered man leant on it with folded arms beside him, and at first I stared at them till my thoughts came back, and they laughed at me again, and then I knew Godwine and Relf the thane, who had but just come up from their ship to find me.

"On my word," said Godwine, "here is a man who could teach one how to sleep! We have sat here and talked about you for ten minutes or more."

"Redwald sleeps as though he had lost time to make up," said Relf. "Welcome back to us, anyway."

"Aye--welcome you are," said Godwine warmly, "but how did you come here?"

I got up and took their hands, rejoicing to see them. It was good to be among friends again after the long watching and many dangers. Then came the steward followed by his men with a mighty breakfast, and as he set the tables on the high place, Godwine's men trooped in. They had had to wait for the morning tide into the haven, and the ship was just berthed.

"Food first," Relf advised. "Then shall Redwald tell us all he knows."

So by and by we sat in the morning sunlight in the courtyard, and I told them all that had happened from beginning to end. They knew no more than that Ethelred was dead, and that Cnut was besieging London.

"We tried to chase those Danes because they had got our man's ship," said

Godwine. "When we got near enough, for they came down wind and passed us before long, we found that Bertric was contented enough, running up his own flag, and the Danes did not stay to fight. So we came home, only losing our tide by the delay."

"What would you have done had you known that the queen was on board, and a prisoner?" I asked.

"Why, nothing more than we have done," Godwine said. "My father hates Emma the cat as bitterly as he does Streone the fox, which is saying a good deal. The cat's claws are clipped now, maybe."

Well, I knew this, and said nothing. One could expect no more from Earl Wulfnoth's son. Nor do I think that any loved Emma the queen much. One may know how a person is thought of by the way in which folk name them often enough, and though our king would have had his young wife called by her English name, Elfgiva, none ever did so. Her Norman, foreign name was all we used. If she had been loved, we should have rejoiced to name her in our own way.

Then Godwine said:

"You have had an ill time with Emma, as I think, if she is all that my father says."

"Nay, Godwine," said Relf, "Redwald will not bear much of this. He is the queen's faithful servant, and will have nought against her, and he is right."

"So he is, and I am wrong," said the lad at once. "Forgive me, friend; I did not think."

Then I laughed, and turned it off. Godwine was only too right, but I could not say so. Now, however, I may say that the memory of Emma the queen's ways is to me as a nightmare.

"I would that I could meet with this Egil," Godwine said as I gave him sword Foe's Bane to handle; and then he forgot all else in the beauty of the weapon.

"What have you done with the brave maiden?" Relf asked me now.

"She is in the nunnery here," I said. "She is friendless, having no folk of her own nearer than Peterborough."

"That is far off," said Relf, and began to think, twisting his beard as was his wont when pondering somewhat weighty.

Now, before he had made up his mind to say any more, Godwine was ready to hear about the winning back of the sword, and of the fights in Ulfkytel's land, and then a man came from the ships with some business, and he went away with him. And by that time Relf had somewhat to say.

"Penhurst is a lonesome place, and it will be worse for my wife when Sexberga is gone," he said musingly.

"Why, where is your daughter going?" I asked him.

He looked at me sidewise for a moment, and I thought that his face fell a little. Then he said:

"Going to be wedded shortly."

"That is well," I said. "To whom?"

Then the thane turned fairly round on me with wide eyes, and a blank fear fell on me that he meant that I was to wed her. Yet surely the lady had told him that I was betrothed.

"Ho!" he said; "did you not know that? Methought everyone did."

That was worse, and I knew not what he looked for from me.

"I have been away; I have heard nought," I answered lamely enough.

"Oh, aye; so you have," he said. "Truly, I forgot that. We quiet people fancy that all the world knows our affairs. And it was in my mind that you had a tenderness that way yourself. I knew not how you would take it."

Then we both laughed, but it was not a hearty laughter, for each feared the other a little, as it seemed.

"I am glad for Sexberga, if she is happy," said I.

"Why, now, that is well," said Relf. "I had thought that I must break this matter gently to you."

"Maybe you would have had to do so had I bided at Penhurst much longer," said I truly enough.

"All the same, Redwald, I wish it were you, on my faith," said the thane, growing red in his earnestness.

"Thanks therefor," said I. "It is good to hear you say so; but I am a landless warrior in bad luck, and so it is better as it is. Who is the man of Sexberga's choice?"

"Eldred of Dallington," said he. "A good youth enough, and with lands enough. He has never seen a fight, though," and then he turned on me suddenly, putting his hand on mine. "I could have sworn, lad, that you were fond of the girl. Tell me if it is so, and Eldred shall go down the wind like a strayed hawk, for all I care."

I shook my head, but it came over me for a moment that I wished I might recall the wandering fancies of the winter days in Penhurst--but that passed, and I was lonely in heart.

"Nay, thane, that is not so. My sword here is all that I love next to my king and Olaf my cousin--and Relf the thane. I have no love for any maiden, nor could Sexberga think twice of me."

"If you had bided a little longer. Well, then, no hearts are broken, or so much as awry, and that is well. So, as I was saying, Penhurst will be lonely directly, and already I love this maiden with the outland name for saving you. How would she take it if we gave her shelter with us? I am going back home in a day or two, and you must come with me."

The good thane spoke fast, being easier in his mind, as it seemed, on one point, and not willing to make any show of generosity on the other.

"That is a kind thought of yours," I said, being very glad, and not less so that

I could not help rejoicing that I should see more of Uldra.

"I wonder what my wife would say?" he said thoughtfully.

"If I know aught of her kindness, and I think that I have proved it well," answered I, "she will be glad to help this orphan maiden."

"Let us go and see her, and ask her to come, therefore," said Relf, rising up. "I want to thank her, moreover, for saving you."

I was nowise loath, and so we went along under the trees towards the nunnery. And as we went Relf talked of Eldred, the Thane of Dallington, and the wedding that was to come. And all the while I believe that he was troubling about two things that were mixed in his mind--fear that I was set aside by Sexberga, and a wish that I had been the bridegroom.

Then we knocked on the great door, and he was silent until a sister looked through the little barred square wicket in the midst of it.

"We would speak with the Lady Uldra," I said. "I am the thane who brought her ashore."

The sister said nought, but shut the wicket door, and left us. We heard her steps retreating across the little courtyard, and she shut a door after her somewhere else. Then all was quiet.

"What does that mean?" Relf said.

"That we have to wait," said I "that is all. It is the way in which they treat folk at these places. They would do the same if the queen came. She has gone to her Superior."

"What would Emma say?" chuckled Relf, looking slyly at me.

"One cannot say much to an iron-barred oak door."

"But there are thanes and such-like left outside," he said, laughing more yet. "Now Godwine is not here, I dare say that you have felt, more than once, the queen's tongue for nought."

"I will deny it," said I, "to anyone but Elfric the abbot," whereat he laughed till the tears came into his eyes. He had known our queen in the old days before Streone's treachery.

I was glad that the wicket flew open again. Relf stayed his laughter in a moment, and became very grave.

"What would she say now?" he whispered.

"Enough," I said, for the sister, having seen that we waited, unbarred the gate and let us in. Then she pointed to a door on our right, and went away.

I took Relf's arm and led him to this door--for he was going to follow the sister--and we opened it. It led into a small high-roofed chamber, that had a great crucifix painted in bright colours on the east wall, and pictured legends on the rest, between high narrow windows.

But there stood Uldra, no longer in convent dress, but in some robe of dark blue and crimson that became her well, so that at first I hardly knew her, for now for the first time I saw her bright brown hair that the novice's hood had hidden from me. I could not say that Uldra was fair as Sexberga to look on, but, as ever, I thought that her face was the sweetest that I had seen in all my life.

I was a little abashed before this grave and stately maiden, who was the same, and yet not the same, as she who had been through so much danger and trial with me, and I could not find a word to say at first. Nor could she, as it seemed, and so we looked at one another until she smiled. It was only for a moment, however, for when her face lighted up thus, Relf found his voice and spoke.

"I have come to thank you, lady, for saving my comrade's life yesterday," he said, taking her hand and kissing it. "I had lost a good friend but for you, he tells me."

"But for the thane, your friend, I know not what would have become of us," she answered. "The thanks are from me to him, rather."

"Yet I think that I owe you somewhat," Relf said, "and now I am minded to try to show that I would thank you in deed, and not in word only."

He paused, and Uldra looked at me as if asking if I could throw any light on this stranger's meaning.

"Relf, the Thane of Penhurst, is he who gave me shelter and care when I was hurt in a fight and a flood last winter," I said. "He has indeed been a good friend to me."

"Not I," said Relf; "you fought for me. It was my wife and Sexberga, my daughter, who tended you."

Now at that name, which she already knew, the maiden looked quickly away from me, and a little flush began to creep up into her face, with pleasure as it would seem.

"I have heard of your daughter Sexberga already," she said to Relf with a little smile.

"Why, that is well," he said. "Now, after her wedding my wife will be sorely lost for want of a companion, and I would ask you to come home to Penhurst with us, and bide there until you may seek your friends again--or as long as you wish. And glad shall we be of your help at the wedding feast."

So he spoke cheerfully, trying to make all the honour come from her, as kindness to himself and his wife. But though the tears came into Uldra's eyes at the good thane's plain meaning, she was silent yet, save that she said:

"I know not how to thank you for your goodwill to me."

"Nay," he said; "but my wife will blame me if you come not. 'Here,' she will say, 'is the companion whom I needed, and a friend of our Redwald's, moreover, and you have not brought her.' I pray you, come with us. Do you ask her, Redwald; I am rough, and you are courtly."

Then I said:

"Lady, this is all that Elfric would wish for you. I cannot tell you of the great kindness that is waiting for you in the thane's home."

And for answer she turned away and began to weep, and Relf could bear that

not at all, and he went to her and put his arm round her, as he would have done to Sexberga, and tried to reassure her.

"Why," he said, "here is nought to weep about, maiden. Maybe we are homely people, but I think that you may learn to be happier in freedom with us than here. Nay, but weep not so bitterly, you shall be as our daughter to us if you will, for Redwald's life's sake. Aye, you shall have Sexberga's own chamber and all that--"

But still Uldra wept, and I was unhappy to see her do so. This could not be all for sudden relief from doubt as I had thought at first.

Then she took herself gently from the thane's arm, and dried her eyes, and clasped her hands tightly before her, and said:

"I cannot say how I thank you; but I must bide here."

"This is a cold place," said the thane. "It is no home for you."

"I think it will be so in the end," she said very sadly.

And I tried hard to think of somewhat to say that might persuade her, but there was that meaning in her voice that seemed to stay whatever came to me. I thought that she had made up her mind to take the veil, and there are few things that will turn a maiden from that when once she has chosen it.

Then said Relf:

"Maybe I ask you too suddenly, lady. Let us leave it till tomorrow, and I pray you think with all kindness of the matter, for I shall be sorely grieved if you will not come."

And I said the same as well as I could, but though she promised to give her answer in the morning, it was plain to me that it would be even as she said now.

Then we took our leave of her, and found our way out of the place, somewhat down-hearted. The door was bolted after us, though I do not know who did it, or whence the portress watched our going. And it was dismal to hear the great bars jarring in their sockets.

"Poor maid," said Relf. "Why does she choose such a prison?"

"Those dismal nuns have talked her into it," said I angrily.

"Maybe. It is a way they have," the thane said. "'Come in here!' said the rat in the trap to the rat outside, 'one is safe from the cat behind these bars.'"

So we walked on for a little, and then he said:

"How did she hear of Sexberga? I thought you had had no speech with her on the journey."

"Nor had I," I answered. "I thought she was another silent nun. But I thought she was like Sexberga, and so I called her Sister Sexberga to myself, giving her a name in my thoughts. Then in the boat it slipped out unawares when I had to speak to her, and she asked to be told why I called her so."

"As much like Sexberga as you are like Godwine, which is not at all," said Relf laughing. "Was she pleased?"

"Why, I think not," I answered.

"How much more about Sexberga did you tell her?" he asked.

"Nothing, there was no need."

Then Relf began to chuckle to himself, and I could not tell why. But presently he said:

"Did you give the sisters names likewise?"

"Yes, I did. I do not think I should have cared to say what they were," I answered, laughing also.

He said no more about this, and we came to the hall, and then went to find Godwine at the ships. But I could not but feel disappointed that Uldra would not come with us. And that was not all for her own sake, as I found when I came to turn over my thoughts a little. I would fain see more of the maiden who had borne peril so well, and had stood so bravely at my side.

Now when Godwine heard how our errand had failed, he laughed at Relf's downcast looks and said, scanning my weatherbeaten and forest-worn garments:

"Maidens love to see warriors go in bright array. She is tired of those old weeds of Redwald's. We must fit him out afresh in the morning, and then she will listen maybe."

He was so pleased with this boyish wisdom of his own, being fully persuaded that he was right, that he and I must ride together to Chichester with morning light, and find new gear for me.

"We roll in riches since you fell into the pit," he said, when I would pay for what I had with my last piece of gold. "And you must keep that one; there are more due to you yet as I think."

Nor would he be denied in this, and it is not a warrior's part to take an earl's gifts grudgingly. And when I fairly shone in bright array from head to foot, he must needs add a wonderful round brooch, silver and gold wrought, with crimson garnets at the ends and in the spaces of the arms of a cross of inlaid pearl and enamel, such as one seldom sees.

"It is a Kentish brooch," he said, "so shall men know that you are a friend of the earls of Kent and Sussex."

That was an earl's giving indeed, but Godwine is ever open handed, and I am not alone in learning how he will give.

"Now we must go back, and you shall seek this damsel again since old Relf is so set thereon. As for you, it is likely that you have had trouble enough with her already, and will care little if she will not come," he said, and looked me over from head to foot as we stood outside the chapman's house in the wide place where the four roads cross in Chichester town.

"My faith!" he added, "I believe that even Emma the Cat would mind what you told her now!"

"Lord earl," said I, "you will make me vain."

"Earl, forsooth!" he cried, "the clothes have made you mighty courtly all at

once. Godwine and Redwald are going back to Bosham, and the earl bides at Chichester Cross--mind you that!"

And he swung himself on his horse laughing, and we rode away, while the people shouted, for they had gathered in twos and threes to look on him.

Now when we came back to the great house, there was Relf sitting on the bench where we had sat yesterday, and he looked as if he had had good news.

"Now, thane," said Godwine, "here is a new messenger to your sorrowful damsel."

Relf stared at me and laughed, and when I got off my horse Godwine would have us go at once. So Relf took my arm and we went, while the young earl joked us till we were out of hearing.

"Now," said the thane, "we will not spoil the earl's jest, but must even let him think that all has been his doing thus."

"Why, he will see us start for Penhurst, and if Uldra is not there--"

"Aye, but she will be. She is coming gladly," Relf said.

"How is this?" I asked.

"Just that I have been to see the maiden while you were gone, and I spoke to her as to a daughter, and so she is coming."

"You would not wait for me, then?" I said, being glad that he had managed without me, as things had turned out.

"Methought I could do better alone. The girl would say more to me than if you were there, perhaps. Moreover, I had a notion why she would not come, and I wanted to ask her if I was right. And I was."

"I thought of that," said I; "she was in the same plight as myself until Godwine decked me out thus. Women think more of their attire than we."

The thane chuckled in his quiet way.

"Why, perhaps that had somewhat to do with it, but I did not ask her, I forgot. But I did tell the old Lady Superior to do so, and gave her withal to care for the maiden."

Then I said:

"It is well that you persuaded her; maybe I should have been in the way. I should have lost my tongue again, I think."

"Well, yes," said Relf, still laughing to himself, "it was you who were in the way; however, as you say, all is well, and she rides with us tomorrow. We will go and find a mule or a good forest pony for her, and so tell Godwine that the clothes have done it."

Now I never thought that there was anything more behind the thane's words, for of all things that had made my soul weary in these last weeks the complaints of Emma the queen about her dress had been the worst. So this seemed to me to be quite enough to explain Uldra's first refusal, and though I believe that Relf had been on the point of telling me more, he forbore, and let this suffice.

Relf knew where to look for a beast, and we soon had a good bay pony, that was quiet enough and strong, sent to Godwine's stables. And then Relf told the earl what he had done.

"Then I was right," said Godwine gleefully. "I will warrant that you two wise heads would never have thought thereof."

"Are you coming with us?" I asked him, for I did not care to have to find answers to many questions about our speech with Uldra, as things were.

"I am coming by sea presently with two ships," he said. "I shall wait till Bertric comes back, and so maybe shall have news of your queen to tell you. He should not be long. Relf goes back for the early hay time, he says, but I believe that he is tired of the sea."

"I am no sailor, lord," the thane said.

"As any of my crew will tell you," Godwine said merrily.

"Never, Redwald, was any man so undone as Relf when there is a little sea on. A common forest deer thief could tie him up."

"I should have thanked one for slaying me at times," said Relf grimly. "I prefer solid ground to shifty deck planks."

So whether it was love of home or loathing of sea that took him back to Penhurst, Relf and I left Godwine on the next morning; and at the nunnery door waited Uldra, looking bright and cheerful and greeting us gladly as we came. And it seemed to me that her troubles had passed from her, and that she was indeed glad to be leaving the walls of the place that was so prison-like.

Now that was a fair and pleasant ride over the Downs and among the forest paths through Sussex, and I look back on it as the brightest time that I had had in all the long years of trouble. The joy of going back to my old home at Bures had been clouded with the knowledge of loss, and with the sight of the trail of war. But here were none of these things.

We rode with twenty housecarles of Relf's behind us, and it was a new thing to me that I should see the wayside folk run out into the trackway to see us pass; that the farm thralls in the fields should but rise up, straightening stiffened backs and laughing, and stay their work for a moment to watch us; that no man who met us should ask with anxious face, "What news of the Danes?"

New it was, and most pleasant to Uldra also, for she had come through all the harried land, where the click of steel or the glint of armour had bidden the poor folk fly in terror, so that one rode through silent and deserted villages, and past farms where nought but the dogs told of life about the place. And that was what I had seen over all England since Swein of Denmark landed, so long ago. Men will hardly believe it now. Relf could hardly believe us as we told him. Yet today, were I to ride into an East Saxon village shouting "The Danes!" there are men who would cast down tools and all else that they were busied with, and clutch at the weapons that rust on the wall before thought could come to them. For the terror of these years cannot pass from England yet while any man is alive who knew it.

Now there was another pleasure for me, and that was to watch Uldra growing brighter and happier day by day. It was wonderful to me to see this, and with me

she was ever frank and open, never wearying of speaking of our former journey and its troubles, for we could smile at them now. And Relf grew very fond of her in those few days, as one might see. Nor do I know how anyone could help doing so. Even the rough housecarles would watch for a chance of doing some little service for her.

And yet, as I have said, Uldra was not the fairest maiden that I had seen. Men are apt to think that the fairest must ever be the best, and a man learns that it is not so only by degrees, maybe. And when I looked on Uldra's face it began to seem to me the best that could be, and ever to me it would seem that I knew it well. For some look of hers that should be new to me was not new--I had expected it in some way, and should have wondered not to see it cross her face. And so in gesture and in word also. So that she seemed already well known to me, and why this was I could not say, and at times it troubled me as puzzling things will. But, all the same, I loved to find myself so puzzled.

Thus, by the time we came over the great spur of the Downs that ends in Beachy Head, and looked over all Pevensea level to the Penhurst woods and hills beyond, I and Uldra were very good friends, and Relf was pleased that it should be so, and rode between us in high content.

It was midday when we passed the last hill of the Downs where the mighty giant lies like a shadow on the grass by Wilmington; then we saw the gray castle where Wulfnoth bided, away to our right; and then along the steep ridge inland and down to Boreham, where I must tell the maiden of the great sea wave, and how Olaf saved me. And so we came to Penhurst in its valley among the trees, and the ride was over.

Now there is no need to say what welcome was at that house, whether for its lord, or for the warrior who had been nursed back to life there, or for the new-come homeless maiden. Relf was not wrong when he told her that she should be as a daughter in the house.

Some of the men had ridden on, so that the homecoming feast should be spread for us, and there was the lady at the courtyard gates, and with her Sexberga, and a tall, handsome youngthane, whom I knew for Eldred of Dallington; and there was Father Anselm, and Spray the smith, and many more whose faces I was glad to see again.

And among all those faces were nought but welcoming looks--save from one only. I did not note this, being taken up with watching how they greeted Uldra, for that seemed to me to be the only thing that I cared about. If I had any thought of Sexberga now, it was as if she had been my sister, and I hoped that she would be pleased with the maiden who was thus brought to her unlooked for. I need have troubled nought about that, however, for she and her mother were alike in many things, and if I was sure of the one, so might I have been of the other in all that had to do with kindness.

But if I had looked beyond Sexberga to where her young thane stood I should have met with a black scowl enough, though I could not have told why this should be his greeting for me. I had but seen him once before, and that was at Earl Wulfnoth's feast to Olaf when we first came.

That was an evening to be remembered as most pleasant when, after the feast, we sat and spoke of all that had happened since I left Penhurst. I told them all the tale of warfare, and of Olaf's deeds, and of the winning back of my sword, and how that helped our meeting with Egil.

And when Spray the smith, who sat listening, with the other men in the hall below the high place, heard of that escape from the Danes, he said, without ceremony:

"Master, well I knew that you would never be cast into prison."

"That was a saying of yours, Spray," said I. "May the luck last."

Then Uldra would tell the story of our journey in her way, and my name came pretty often into her tale. So, looking about the hall while she spoke, my eyes lit on Eldred, and it seemed that he was ill at ease, and displeased with somewhat. I thought that he would rather be sitting nearer Sexberga, maybe, and troubled nought about him, though I did think that he showed his ill temper over plainly in his face.

Now, in all this story telling there was one thing about which I said nothing, and that was my search for Hertha. It seemed to me that there was no need for doing so, and moreover, I would tell the lady thereof in private at some time. And I was glad that Sexberga asked me nought about it. I do not think that she

had forgotten it, but she had her own reasons for saying nought of the matter, which were foolish enough when I found them out. The lady, her mother, waited for me to say what I would in my own way when I thought right.

Chapter 13: Jealousy.

That generous foe of mine, Egil--if indeed I should not call him my friend, as he named me once--had set two months as the time in which I must bide in peace, and I will not say that this space seemed likely to go over-heavily for me. We could hear little news except from such ships as put in from along the coast, and the first news that came was when Godwine returned from Bosham.

The Danes had taken the queen to Winchester in high honour, and there she was living in some sort of state, which pleased her well enough, until word came from Cnut concerning her. It was thought that he would let her go back to Normandy, keeping the athelings as hostages. So concerning her and them my mind was at rest.

Now Cnut was besieging London. But before he had left Wessex, there had been a great council of bishops and clergy at Salisbury, and at that gathering he had been chosen as king in succession to Ethelred, whose house was not loved. There, too, he was present, and swore to be their faithful king and to protect Holy Church in all things.

Then into Wessex went Eadmund, ravaging and laying waste there. One might know what hatred of him would come from that, and my heart sank at hearing this folly.

Two days after Godwine came, we saw the sails of a great fleet going westward, and we thought that Cnut had been beaten off from London. But a ship that had sprung a leak in some way put into Wulfnoth's haven at Shoreham from this fleet, and from thence we learnt that the Danes had halved their forces, and that Cnut and Ulf the jarl were going again into the Severn to withstand Eadmund in Wessex, and if possible to hem him in between two forces in the old way of the days of Alfred. London was beset straitly, but not taken yet.

I was more content then, for I could not have reached our king, had I returned from Normandy, as it seemed. And now it was possible that he might make headway against the divided forces of the Danes. I might join him yet in time to

share in some final victory.

So the early summer days at Penhurst became very pleasant to me, for I had little care that need sit heavily on my mind. Indeed, I think that I should almost have forgotten that I had any, but for the foolishness of Sexberga, which bid fair to turn all things to sadness at one time.

I had spoken with her mother about my search for Hertha, telling her plainly all that had passed between me and Ailwin, and I asked her to tell me what she thought I must do now.

"Wait yet longer," she answered; "peace will come, and he will bring Hertha back to Bures."

That ought to have been my own plan, but I had rather hoped to hear her say that I was right in holding myself free to choose afresh as I would. The thought of being bound seemed irksome to me; though why I, landless and luckless, should have found it so, I could not say. It mattered not at all at present. So I said:

"That is all one can do, lady; it matters not."

"What thinks Sexberga?" I asked presently.

"You have not spoken to her of your search, then?" the lady said. "I had thought that she would ask you of it first of all."

She had asked nothing, and I had said nothing.

Then the lady said:

"She and I spoke thereof with Uldra but yesterday, and they were both full of your praises for wishing to seek for your Hertha. They will be glad to hear that you have done so, and sad that you have failed to find her."

Then there came over me a wish that Uldra knew nought about it. And that angered me with myself, because it was plain that I cared overmuch for the company and pleasant voice and looks of this maiden who was friendless as I.

So that was all that was said at the time, and I met Uldra in my foolishness as if this were going to make some difference in her way with me. Which of course it did not. Whereupon I was angrier yet with myself for deeming that it would.

Now, there was another person who should have known of this betrothal of mine, and that was Edred, but Sexberga never told him, and her mother did not, for she thought that Sexberga would do so.

Of all the foolish things that a maiden can do, the most foolish is to try to make the man who is to wed her jealous. For it is playing with edged tools in two ways--if the man, being an honest man and trustful, is not jealous, the maiden thinks that he cares not, and so is herself wretched. But if he is jealous, why, then every thought of his towards the maiden is changed and spoilt, and it will be long, if ever, before full trust is won again between those two.

But this seems to be good sport to some damsels, and so it was with Sexberga. The blacker grew the young thane's looks the more she would praise me, and the more she would choose to speak with me rather than to him; wherefore his life was made wretched for him, and I think he hated the sight of me. Maybe I was blind not to see this, but I liked him well enough, save for what I thought was his sullen temper, and I would try to joke him into better humour at times in all good fellowship. But I think that the trouble began before I came back, with talk of the time when I had been at Penhurst before.

He was ever at Penhurst--I should have thought ill of him if he had not been--for Dallington was close at hand, and he was ever welcome.

After that talk with the lady I must needs ask Sexberga what she thought concerning my strange betrothal, she having had so much to say thereon before. And so one day, as I had been with Spray to see some traps set by the bank of the Ashbourne river for otter, and was coming back with him, bearing a great one between us on a pole, we met Sexberga in the woodland track to the house, and Spray went on, while I walked back with her on her way to the old village--where we had had the fight--and talked about my baffled search.

Now her saying was that I had no need to pay any more heed to this betrothal after what I had said to Ailwin, and that he himself would seem to try to break it by thus taking Hertha out of my ken. And we talked freely of the matter, and the

last thing that I said was this, coming round to what I had made up my better mind for:

"It is not much matter either way. I can think of no maiden as things are."

Whereon we met Eldred, and his face was not pleasant to look on, though he said nothing at that moment, and turned and walked silently with us on the other side of the maiden.

When we came to the village I said that we would wait outside until she came back, and thought that Eldred would go along with her. But he stayed with me, and I looked round for a sunny seat where one could see all the long chain of bright hammer ponds that went in steps, as it were, down the valley before us.

"Nay," he said in a strange voice, "come over to the other side of the valley--there is a pleasant place there."

"The lady will miss us," said I.

"We need not be long," he said. "The place I would show you is not far. One of us can be back before she has done with these churls."

So, as I supposed that we might have to wait for half an hour, because every woman in the place would want to tell her ailments to the kindly young mistress most likely, we went together, passing over the brook, and going up the steep valley side beyond it, until we came to the rocks of the old quarry where we had rested before the fight with the outlaws.

A pleasant place enough it was, truly, for the rocks stood round in a little cliff, hemming in a lawn of short grass on every side but one, and the trees that hung on the bank of the stream closed that in. So when we were fairly within this circle of red cliff and green trees Eldred said:

"This will do. We will see which of us is to go back to Sexberga."

"Why, you will," said I, thinking that he had some device by which he might be free from my presence. "I spoil company for you both, and will go back to the hall by the lower track presently."

"You have spoilt company long enough," he said, his face growing very savage of a sudden. "Now I will end it, one way or the other."

"What is this foolishness?" I said, seeing now what he meant.

"You know well enough," he answered with a great oath. "Pluck out that fine sword of yours and show that you can do more than talk of using it."

"Come, Eldred," said I, "I have not deserved this."

"You deserve all that I shall give you," he answered, drawing his sword. "Stand up like a man."

Now it seemed very hard to me that all these friendships should be broken and spoilt by this foolish business, as they would be if either of us was hurt; and so I tried to quiet him yet once more.

"Eldred, listen to reason," I said. "I have done you no wrong. Tell me of what you complain."

Thereat he only cursed, bidding me draw and cease prating.

"I will not fight you thus," I said, for he was growing over wild to fight well for himself. "Let us find some to attend us and watch the business, that neither of us may be blamed. It is ill to slay a man in a hidden place like this with none to say that the fight was fair."

"You are afraid," he said sneeringly.

"You must ask Relf if that is likely," said I, for I would not be angered by his angry words. "But I do not care to risk blame to you or me. Nought is gained by fighting thus."

"Ask Relf, forsooth!" he snarled. "I care not to hear again how you lay hid in the pit yonder while others fought."

"Have a care, Eldred," I said then. "You grow heedless in your anger, and go too far. I do not think that you mean this."

"Do you need to be called nidring {12}?" he snarled at me.

Now none heard that word pass between us, and though it made me bitterly angry I kept my wrath back. Truly I began to think that I was foolish to argue with him; but there would be grief, lifelong, at Penhurst if deadly harm befell either of us where none could say that all was fairly fought out.

"Are you not going?" he said in a choking sort of way.

"No," I said, "not until I know what all this is about."

"What good in going over that again?" he answered. "You know well enough. Let me be--you have won."

"I know," said I; "but you have not told me aught. I can only guess that you think that I have taken your place with Sexberga."

"Aye--and now you have won it."

"I want it not," I answered. "Had you not been so angry you would have known that, when I bid you go back and meet her without me."

Now he looked at me with a sort of doubt, and said, in a somewhat halting way:

"I heard you just now tell her that it could not be that you could think of her--as things are."

Then I remembered what my last words had been, and I saw that they might easily have misled him after all the trouble he seemed to have had.

"You heard too much or too little," said I, being minded to laugh, though the matter was over serious to him to let me do so. "I spoke of my own troubles, which were the less because my fortunes prevent my thinking of any maiden, seeing that I have no home to give a wife when I find her. You were wrong in thinking that I spoke of Sexberga--I spoke, as you might have known, of the one whom I have lost."

"How should I know that? I know nought of your affairs."

Then thought I to myself that I would punish Sexberga, for she had tortured this honest lover of hers over much.

"I will not tell you that tale. Ask Sexberga, who has known it from the first."

Then I was sorry for what I had said, for he flushed darkly.

"I have been made a fool of," he said.

"Nay; but you should have been more trustful," said I. "Now, were I in your place, I would go home to Dallington and bide there for a week, and the maiden will be pleased enough to see you when you return. And if she tries to make you jealous again, seem to mind it not. There is little sport in it for her then."

"I suppose there would not be," said he, and he began to look more cheerful.

"Now," said I, "I was betrothed long ago--the war time has come between me and her who should have been my wife. I have hunted for her and cannot find her--and that is all. Now you understand. It was Sexberga who cheered me in my search, and so I spoke to her thereof."

"I should not have doubted you," he said frankly; "forgive me."

I held out my hand and he took it. There was nought but friendliness in his grasp, and I could not blame him. I blamed Sexberga wholly.

Then he laughed a little ruefully.

"I am a fool with a sword," he said. "Will you teach me somewhat? I think I was mad when I used those evil words to you."

"I have forgotten them," I answered; and so I had. One does not think much of what a man says in utmost rage as his. "Come, let us go back to the village."

So we went back together, but Sexberga had gone on her way homeward without us. Whereat Eldred was not sorry, and said that he was going back to his own place.

"You will see me no more for a few days," he said. "I think your plan is good."

"Mind this," I answered, "I never tried it."

"Lookers-on see best," he answered, laughing bitterly. "But think no more of my anger with yourself, I pray you."

I told him that I would not, and so we parted good friends enough, though I feared that he might take this matter to heart in such wise that he would have some ill moments presently. There was little spring in his walk as he took the path towards Dallington.

I said nought of this affair, as one might suppose, and made little excuse to Sexberga for leaving her. We had walked too far, and had returned too late to find her, I said. She pouted and said nothing, but I thought that her punishment had already begun.

Next day there were ships heading in for Pevensea, and I rode away to find out what I could, and forgot Eldred and his troubles. For Olaf had come, and that was luck beyond what I could have looked for.

The ten great ships slid into the haven, and I was first on the strand to meet the king. Wulfnoth and Godwine were riding inland, and doubtless were returning posthaste if they knew that ships had come. But for a little while I had my kinsman to myself, and great was his wonder to find me in this place.

"I have thought that I should have to ransom you from Cnut's hand," he said, "for we have heard that Thorkel's men took the queen's ship. Were you not taken likewise?"

So when he heard of all that had brought me here, he praised Egil highly.

"He is a Norseman, and no Dane, by birth," he said. "One may be proud that he is so. I would that he were my man."

Then was my turn, and I wondered how Olaf had left London, for the Thames was full of Danish ships, as I had heard.

"Aye, so it is yet," he told me. "The Danes cannot take the city, try what they will, though they dug a great ditch round the Southwark fort, and took ships through it above the bridge, and so kept us shut up close enough. But walls and forts and citizens are too much for them. Now the siege is but a blind, while the real warfare is to be in Wessex. So I came away with the Danes, my men being tired of unprofitable warfare where we were not wanted, and gaining, moreover, neither gold nor honour."

"You came away with the Danes?" I cried. "Surely you made no pact with them?"

"Not I," said he. "But they sailed with an evening tide, which was my chance. Ten ships among four hundred or so make no odds. We took off the dragon heads, and when it was quite dark rowed down after them, and so caught them up at Greenwich. Then we slipped through the fleet easily, for it was mostly of cargo ships full of men, and no one paid any heed to us, as might be supposed. So by daylight we led the fleet, or nearly, and when the next night came we stood away from it, going across Channel. Then I came here to see if Wulfnoth or Godwine would cruise with me on some other shore, as I promised."

Then I asked him what I had better do, for with the sight of his face came the longing to be free again.

"Come with me," he said. "I am going to win ransom from a town or two against the time when I shall need gold wherewith to win men to me in Norway."

I think that I should have done this in the end, though I did not like to leave England without striking one more blow for Eadmund, and I cannot deny that I thought that Uldra would blame me if I did leave our land when she needed every sword that would strike for her. I had come to think very much of what the steadfast eyes of the brave maiden would tell me as I watched her face.

But that evening came Wulfnoth and Godwine, and they had made a plan for themselves which might help me to reach Eadmund when my freedom came. They had manors on the Severn, at Berkeley, and the earl would go there to save them if possible from plunder. At least, that is what he told me and Olaf. Whether he had any other deeper plan I cannot say. It seemed afterwards as if that might be so.

They brought back some strange news, too, at which both Olaf and I wondered. There was a rumour spreading through the country from Winchester that Cnut would wed Emma the queen.

"It is not likely," said Olaf. "She is twenty years older than he."

"If any man wants revenge on Cnut, I would counsel him to go and do all he can to see that this marriage comes to pass," sneered the earl, in his hatred of the Norman lady.

"What says Redwald?" asked Godwine.

"First, that the queen has little choice in the matter," said I; "and next, that, between ourselves, I think that she would do much to remain a queen in truth, if it must be over Denmark instead of England; and lastly, that if Cnut weds her, he keeps the duke, her brother, quiet, and maybe brings over more of our people to his side."

It was only too plain now that Cnut had a party for him in England, and I thought that he tried to strengthen it thus, if the report were true. But it seemed hardly possible; so much so, that when I turned the question over in speaking with Olaf presently, we thought that no man could have invented the story, and that it must be true.

Now Olaf and I went to Penhurst on the next day, for though he would not stop long in England, he would see and thank these good friends of mine for their care of me. And great was the rejoicing when he came.

I had told him of Uldra, and presently he bade Ottar, who was with us, sing of Leavenheath fight, and so spoke quietly with her, sitting a little apart in the shadow of the hall, for he wished to tell her also that he owed her thanks.

When the end of the long summer day came, and he must go back to the ships--for he would not sleep away from them--I went with him in order to see all that I might of him before he left, for I had made up my mind to go westward with Godwine, seeing that my promise to Egil was to bide in peace with Wulfnoth till the time came when I was free.

So as we rode with no other near us, he said:

"What of Hertha, my cousin?"

"I know not," I answered. "I have heard nought, nor shall I now till I go back to Bures."

"Shall you hold to your betrothal?"

"Aye; the ladies think that it is my part to do so."

"So you asked them? Is that why fair Sexberga is so dull and restless?"

I laughed, for he had heard Ottar jesting about the fair maid at Penhurst more than once.

"No," I answered. "She has been crossing her lover, and he is in dudgeon for a while--that is all."

"I am glad," he said. "Asked you aught of Uldra?"

"I have not spoken of it to her."

"Is that so?" said Olaf, smiling. "Now she is likely to have more than common interest in you, for one reason or another."

Then I said frankly, knowing what he meant:

"And I in her. That is partly the reason why I must go with Wulfnoth and Godwine westward. And the rest of the reason is this, that I would be near Eadmund. And maybe if I looked to find more reason yet it would be to leave Sexberga to work out matters without having me to fall back on when Eldred is to be made jealous."

Thereat Olaf laughed long.

"You have had an ill time with the womenfolk of late," he said, and it was true enough.

"I have," said I, "and I am tired thereof. I shall be glad to be where byrnies and swords are more common than kirtles and distaffs."

Yet in my mind I knew that I should not leave Uldra with much cheerfulness. Such companionship as ours had been, strange and full of peril, was a closer bond than even the care of me that had made me think twice or more about Sexberga. Thoughts of her came lightly in idleness, but when I thought of Uldra, there was comradeship that had borne the strain of peril.

Now I knew well what that comradeship might easily ripen into, and maybe, because I knew it, what I would not allow had begun. But Uldra had never given me any reason to think that this was so with her.

Olaf said that maybe I was right, and after that we talked of his doings, wondering now when we should meet again, for we were going different ways. Our parting was not as it had been before, when we knew that sooner or later we should forgather in one place or the other.

"I think, my cousin," he said, "that the time will soon come when I shall head north again for Norway, and I long for the sign that I must go. I am going to sail now towards Jerusalem Land, that I may at least try to see the Holy Places before I die. It may be that I shall reach that land, and it may be not, but when the sign comes I must turn back and go to fight the last fight that shall be between Christian and heathen in our country."

So he said to me before his ship sailed with the morning tide. And I had no words in which to answer him, for his going seemed to leave me friendless again, so much had we been at one together. Almost had I taken up that journey to the Holy Land with him, but I thought that if it was a good and pious thing to go on that pilgrimage for myself, it was even more so to bide for the sake of king and country here in the land that should be holy for all of us who are English. And when I said that to Olaf, he smiled brightly and answered:

"If old Norway called for me, I would say the same. You are right."

Thus we parted, and I watched his sails fade and sink into the rim of the southern sea, and then rode back to Relf feeling as if the time to come had little brightness for me.

I went slowly, and by the longer way, for I had much to think of, and I cared

not just yet for the light talk of the happy people in the Penhurst hall. And so I came into the way that leads across the woodland through Ashburnham and so by the upper hammer ponds to Penhurst, and when I was about a mile from the hall I met Uldra coming from a side track.

"Why, thane," she said in her bright way, "is aught amiss?"

"I have lost my kinsman, lady," I said, "and I have none other left me. Therefore I am sad enough. But these things must be, and the shadow of parting will pass presently."

I got off my horse and walked beside her, and I was glad that I had met her first of all. She had been to some sick thrall, and was now returning.

"Partings are hard," she said, "but one may always hope to meet again."

Then I said, speaking my thoughts:

"I must go west into Wessex with the earl's ships, and I have more partings to come therefore."

She made no answer at once, and I thought that none was needed; but when she spoke again her voice was graver than before.

"You would be near our king if possible by doing so?"

"That is my thought," I answered. "If I wait in this pleasant place I may be far from him when the day comes that I should stand at his side again."

"You have six weeks--not so much by two days--yet," she said thoughtfully. "It is not long. Then you will be fighting once more."

"I hope so--and not in vain at last," I answered. "All our land longs for peace."

"Aye, and they tell me that you have a search to make," she said, looking away across the woodlands that lay down the valley to our right. "I fear there will be sorrow if--if you fall."

"Aye, I have a search that has been made hard for me," I said somewhat bitterly. "Truly I had not thought of falling; but it is in my mind that little grief will be in that quarter if I do so. Those who might have ended the search in an hour or two have kept their charge more deeply hidden than ever from me."

"Is that the maiden's doing, think you?" she said, hesitating a little, for the question was not an easy one for her to put, maybe. But it was like her to make excuse for others.

"I cannot tell," said I, "but I think it likely. We were but children, and she fears me now."

"That is to be seen," she said; "but I hope that you will find her. What shall you do if--if she loves you not now?"

"I would let her go free, surely."

"Even if you found you loved her yet?"

"Aye. I would not hold her bound were she unwilling."

"But if it were the other way--if she would wed you willingly, and you--well, were unwilling?"

"I would keep troth," said I; "she should not know it."

She laughed softly and answered:

"You could not hide that from her."

Then I fell silent, for I liked not this subject at any time--still less from Uldra. And I think that she saw that I was displeased at her questioning, for after a little while she said shyly:

"I think that I have asked you too closely about your affairs. Forgive me--women are anxious about such matters."

"It is a trouble to me, lady," I said, hardening my heart lest I should say too much; "but I can see no further than the coming warfare. When that is ended

there will be time for me to think more thereof. But, as I have said, I believe that Hertha wishes that she were not bound."

Now I had almost said "even as I wish," but I stopped in time.

"Now, whether that is so or not, she should think well of you for your faith kept to her," Uldra said, and there was a little shake in her voice as of tears close at hand.

Then I knew that if she kept faith with me as I with her--though this was in a poor way enough--I must think well of her also. Wherefore, being obliged thus to think of one another, it would be likely enough that there would be pretence of love on both sides--and so things would be bad. Whereupon the puzzle in my mind grew more tangled yet, and I waxed savage, being so helpless.

And all the while those two words that came to me as I talked to Relf grew plainer, and seemed to ring in my ears unspoken, "*Landless and luckless--landless and luckless*," for that was what it all came to.

Then Uldra looked at me and saw the trouble in my face, and took what seemed to her to be the only way to help me.

"You cannot think of these matters now, Redwald," she said softly. "It is well for a warrior that he has none who is bound to him so closely that he must ever think of her. It is well for Hertha that she knows not what peril you are in--that she cannot picture you to herself--"

She stopped with a sob that she could not check, and stayed her walk as if she had tripped. I turned to her, and put out my hand, and she leant on my arm with both hers for a moment, hanging her head down, and I thought she was faint, for my pace had quickened. So I waited till she raised her head again, longing to help her more and yet not daring to do so, lest I should give way altogether and say all I would. And then I said:

"Let me set you on the horse--you are weary with keeping step with me."

She shook her head, but she said nothing, and so I lifted her and set her in the saddle, and the colour came back to her face.

"Thanks, thane," she said, "I am very foolish. I have been setting myself in your Hertha's place--as if she knew aught of you now. Aye, it is better as it is for both of you, as things must be for a while."

And I thought to myself:

"Would that you were in Hertha's place;" and then this other thought, "She says right--landless and luckless am I, and there is none to trouble about me--nor shall there be."

"But I was going to tell you this, if I may," she said, "I will pray night and day that things may be well for you and yours in the end."

"Aye, pray therefor, Uldra," I answered, and thereafter we said no more, for the hall gates were before us, and the dogs came out to bid us welcome, and the thralls followed them to see who came. I helped her from the horse, and she smiled and went in.

Now, I saw Uldra no more that night, and Sexberga was unfriendly with me because Eldred still kept away. So I had my thoughts to myself while Relf slept as was his wont after supper, and the lady of the house turned her wheel as ever. I think that I would not wish any man to have such strange and sad thoughts as mine were at that time. There was nought of which I could be sure--save of Uldra's friendship, and of that it were better not to think, maybe.

Chapter 14: The Last Great Battle.

Ten days after I spoke thus with Uldra I was at Berkeley with Wulfnoth and Godwine. That was in the third week in June, while I was on my honour not to fight for a month yet. I had parted from Uldra as from a dear friend and no more, though well I knew now that she was more than that to me. And there had been a look in her face, moreover, that bided with me, making me wretched and yet glad, for it told me that her thoughts were as mine. And more than that neither of us would show. The tide of war had hold of me, and whither it would drift me none could say. Nor did I lose much. I had nought to lose as it seemed to me.

As for the rest of those who were such good friends of mine at Penhurst, they had wished me hearty God-speeds, bidding me return again, and that soon. Eldred of Dallington and Sexberga stood hand in hand as I went, vowing that they would not be content till I returned for their wedding, for there was no trouble between them since the young thane had come in from his place one day as if nought had happened, calling me to walk with him when Sexberga had feigned to wish for none of his company. After which he had talked lightly of going to Wessex with the earl and me; and he had no further trouble. I know not what he said presently in private to Sexberga, but he was the one who led thereafter, and I think that the maiden was the happier that it was so. There are some maids who will seem to wish to rule, though they are longing all the while to be ruled.

So we came up the Severn river to Berkeley, passing the endless lines of Danish ships that lay along the strand below Anst cliffs and Oldbury. Cnut's ship guard held the ancient fort in force, men said. His men boarded us, but Wulfnoth's name was well known, and it was not Cnut's plan to make an enemy of him. So we went on our way unhindered, and I bided, chafing sorely, in the great house where Wulfnoth lived in no state at all, as if he were but a rich franklin--gray clad and rough in ways and talk.

Now it is hard to me to think of what passed so close to me while I was helpless. But I saw nought of the battle that was at Pen-Selwood, and even as I

heard thereof from men who had left the levy, the greatest battle of all was being fought within a morning's ride of us, at Sherston.

Two days that battle raged, and all men say that Eadmund would surely have chased the Danes in the end to their ships, but for a trick of Edric Streone's. It was another count in the long score against him, and I seemed to see that the words of the witch of Senlac were coming true--his shadow was over our king, for ill in all things.

The battle was going against Cnut--once Eadmund himself had cut his way through the press of Danes before their king, and had almost come to hand strokes with him, but had been borne back. And then Streone's eyes lit on one Osmer, a warrior of the Danish host, standing near him, and he saw that he was like our king. Therefore he slew him, and set his head on a spear, and rode forward to where the English line pressed most hardly on the Danish ranks. There he raised the head aloft, shouting in his great voice:

"Fly, English, fly! Eadmund is dead. Know his head!"

Then for a moment panic seized our folk, and they held their hands, and in that pause Ulf the jarl charged among them, and the line was broken and flight began.

But Eadmund unhelmed when he heard the cry that he was slain, and rode through the ranks, and our men knew him, and cheered, and fell on the Danes afresh, and the broken line closed up, and they fought till night fell, and in the night the Danes drew off. And in the night by twos and threes, and then in companies, Eadmund's levies melted away from him, for his men were worn out and sick of slaughter, and knew not enough to bid them stay to follow their foes and turn retreat into rout, and doubt into victory. The Danes were going, they saw and heard; what need to stay longer?

So it came to pass that nothing was wrought by that awful fighting, and both sides claimed victory, for our men deemed that they had won, and the Danes claimed it because they were not followed, and because Ulf the jarl had cut through our line.

It was through this last that I lost Godwine as a companion. For Ulf lost

himself in the forest that was in the rear of our forces, because he followed the flying too far, and the dusk of the evening was close at hand. He thought that the victory was surely won, for it had ever been that the first sign of flight was followed by rout of our men. At least the Danes learnt this at Sherston, that Eadmund could hold his own against them.

So Ulf the jarl wandered all night in the wood, and came out of it on the hillside where Godwine was speaking to one of his father's shepherds. And Godwine brought him, unknowing who he was, back to Berkeley.

Then maybe came into Wulfnoth's mind that rede of the witch of Senlac, that bade Godwine mind his sheep, and so find his place, or else this was part of the plan which had brought him into Wessex. For he asked Ulf to take Godwine to Cnut, and find him a place in his court, and the jarl did so. It was not until Godwine came to the ships that he knew who it was that he had guided, and they won him over, and he stayed.

Nor did I know. I spoke with Ulf, asking him of the battle, and of Egil, and the like, for he was the earl's guest. And I thought nothing of Godwine's guidance of a Dane to the ships, for the earl was no foe of Cnut. But when I rose in the morning after Ulf had come, and found that he and Godwine had gone in the night, and was told by Wulfnoth who the warrior was, and what he had asked for his son, I was very angry, though I knew that the earl had little cause to love the house of Ethelred.

But the earl said, very quietly:

"There are two kings in England, and no king of England. Choice is free to me, and I choose that king who will honour my son, and who has done me no wrong. Were you to go to Cnut I would hold you blameworthy, seeing how things have been between you and Eadmund. Godwine goes to Cnut even as he flies to his ships. No man may say that he did but join him when he was victor."

Now, it was not Wulfnoth's way to give reasons thus for aught that he did, and I was surprised that he would do so to me. But I could look at things in his way if I put my own love for Eadmund aside, and I said:

"I may not blame you, lord earl, maybe; but it is hard for me to see my friend

take what I think the wrong side."

"Think no ill of him. It is my doing," Wulfnoth said. "All his life has Godwine been bidden to hate the house of Ethelred of Wessex. Now before long this warfare must end. And if your king has the victory I pray you speak for Godwine if need is. And if Cnut is victor you will need Godwine, maybe, to speak for you. Let this matter bide there between us. I would now that I had not let him go, for I am lonely."

Then I knew why the fierce old earl unbent to speak thus to me, and I spoke only of honour to be gained in the service of so great a king as Cnut.

Thereafter the time went very heavily for me. The great Danish fleet left the Severn on the day when Godwine would have come to them, and then Eadmund must gather another levy, and prepare for some fresh landing. And before that was done I was free again, and I could join him with a light heart. The earl gave me a good horse when I rode away, and parted with me very kindly for Godwine's sake, he said, and his own liking for me also.

"I shall look for you at Pevensea yet. Come to me when things go ill with you, and you shall be welcome."

I knew not if ever I should see Sussex again. But of this I was sure now, that if fortune went with me presently, I would surely seek Ailwin and tell him that I must be free, and so would seek Uldra, and ask her to share what I might have to give her, if a home should be mine again. I had thought much of this brave, quiet maiden while I was chafing at doing nought in Wulfnoth's farmstead, though I would not have stayed at Penhurst.

Now came a time when the victory was ours, and it seemed that at last the strong hand had come. For men would follow Eadmund, and he had the power of making them fight as he would. Yet there was nothing that would keep our levies together. Had they done so we had surely conquered, but it was ever the same. They fought and dispersed, and all the work and loss was for nought. I think it would have been the same with the Danish host had they been in their own country; but here they must needs hold together, and Cnut and his jarls wielded that mighty force as a man wields his sword. Eadmund smote as a man who fells his enemy with a staff that breaks in the smiting, so that he must needs seek

another while his fallen foe rises again, sword in hand.

But our men were called from home and fireside to fight, and when they won and their own fields and houses were safe, they thought they had done all, and went home again, at ease, and maybe boasting overmuch.

We marched on London and relieved the city, driving the Danes in flight to their ships. And Eadmund slept that night among a great host; and in the morning the Wessex men were going home, and only his own housecarles and the men who followed him from ruined Mercia and East Anglia and Kent would bide around him. London could take care of herself now. But Eadmund strove to gather them for one more blow, and we had a great fight at Brentford, for the Danes had gone up river, and we won. Yet the Danes turned on us when the ships were reached, and we lost many men in the river, for they scattered in their eagerness to plunder the ships that they thought were already won, and so, without order or leaders, were driven to their death in the swift water.

Then Wessex disbanded, and all the work of gathering our forces must be done over again; and at once the Danes closed in round London when Eadmund had gone back to Salisbury.

Surely it would have broken the heart of any man but Eadmund the Ironside that thus it must be, but he would say:

"England is waking; we shall win yet."

Then Cnut recalled the ships and host from London, and they raised the siege, and went into the Orwell, and once again began to march across the heart of our land.

This fourth levy that Eadmund the king had made was the best that he had had. And word must have come thereof to the Danes, for they went back to their fleet; and so waited for a little while, thinking doubtless that this levy would melt away in idleness as ever. For they came back into the Medway with the booty they had, and there we fell on them and drove them headlong to their ships, and I surely thought that we had done with Cnut for good and all.

Then fell the shadow of ill on us. Edric Streone and his men met us at

Aylesford, and he came in to the king and made most humble submission to him.

And that was what Olaf had told Eadmund would happen when once again he had the victory. Therefore when I saw the earl come into the camp to speak with Eadmund I said:

"Mind you what Olaf said. How that you should hang Streone."

"Aye, I mind it. But the man is deserted by his new friends. They have gone."

Almost had Eadmund quarrelled with Olaf on that saying.

"Put him in ward, my king, at least," I urged, and Ulfkytel, who had come with us from London, prayed him also to do so.

But Eadmund's fate was on him, and he received his foster father kindly, and forgave him, and thought that all would be well.

Now with Ulfkytel came my Colchester men, or rather the thirty who were left, And those two brothers, Thrand and Guthorm, who had ridden to Stamford with me were there also. These two came to me that evening when I was alone, and said that they had a plan they would carry out if I gave the word. And it was nothing more or less than that they would fall on Edric Streone and slay him when and where they met him.

I would that they had not asked me, but had wrought the deed on their own account. But I said that I could not have this done, for it was too much after Streone's own manner of settling things. I could not think of letting my men lie in wait for any foe of mine, however good cause I had for hating him. And I did hate Streone with a hate that I am not ashamed of, not for my own sake, but because he was a traitor to both king and country. There were Englishmen who fought for Cnut thinking that thus they wrought best for England and her peace--as Wulfnoth chose for Godwine--and I had no hatred for them. They were honest if they were wrong; but they were no traitors. But Edric Streone was as Judas to me.

So Thrand and Guthorm grumbled, and forbore, though they would have spent their own lives willingly in this way had I lifted a finger. It was, however, in revenge for the Stamford business that they would slay the earl, and that was

only my quarrel, nothing higher. Nevertheless I owed them thanks for their love thus shown to me, and so I told them. Little had I done to deserve it; but who shall know what wins the love of rough souls like these?

Strange news came with Streone, though I had heard rumours thereof before, as I have said. It was true that Cnut was to wed Emma the queen; and they had, as it seemed, already been betrothed, at the advice of the three great jarls. Now she and the athelings her sons were back in Normandy, and one might see what the reason of this policy was. Not only was Duke Richard kept quiet, but also Cnut was stepfather to Eadward Atheling and his brothers. That meant that if Cnut won, they must needs suffer him to take the crown unopposed. And more than this, if Cnut must leave England alone presently, when Eadmund died he would claim the throne at once, either for himself or for one of these athelings as his under-king. For no man ever thought twice of Eadmund's brother Edwy, who was weak bodily, nor of his half brother, the other Edwy, whom we called "king of the churls," by reason of the low birth of his mother, for no thanes would follow him had he had the gift of leading.

Cnut's fleet went from the Medway northward, and it was in the thoughts of all men that the end had come, and that he sought his own land at last. And that seemed the more certain to most because Streone had submitted, as if he knew that he had no further hope of honour from the Danish king. Presently, however, it was plain that his coming over was but part of the deepest plot that he had yet made.

Suddenly, even as our levies dispersed in spite of all the king's entreaties, came the news that the Danish fleet had turned and was in the Crouch river in Essex, whence already the host had begun their march inland across Mercia in the old way. And so for the fifth time Eadmund strove to gather all England to him, and his summons was well obeyed. The thanes and their men gathered in haste, savage with hope deferred, and Cnut shrank back again to Ashingdon on the Crouch, and there built himself an earthwork on the south side of the river, while his ships lay on the further shore at Burnham, and in the anchorage, and along the mud below the earthworks, seeming countless. And there he waited for us, and there we knew that he meant to end the warfare in one great fight for mastery, with his ships behind him that he might go if he were at last obliged.

And there, too, though we knew it not, he waited for Streone to give England

into his hands.

We were close on him when his main force fell back upon his earthworks, where they stand on the little hill above the river banks that men will call "Cnut's dune" {13} henceforward, in memory of what he won there. And Ulfkytel and I and the few East Anglians that we had were with the advance guard, and drove in the pickets that were between us and the hill. And then we knew that Cnut meant to stand and fight in the open, and we were glad, for out of his intrenchments poured his men, and we sent horsemen back to Eadmund to hurry on the main body of our forces.

They were a mile or two behind us, and we waited impatiently, watching the Danish host as it neared us, forming into the terrible half circle as it came. And I remember all of that waiting, for the day began with such hope, and ended so fearfully for us.

One could not have had a better day on which to fight, for there was neither sun to dazzle, nor rain to beat in the faces of men who needed eyes to guard their lives. But it was a gray day with a pleasant wind that blew in from the sea, and the light was wonderfully clear and shadowless as before rain, so that one could see all things over-plainly, as it were. The rounded top of Ashingdon hill seemed to tower higher than its wont, and close at hand, beyond the swampy meadows to our left, and I wondered that Cnut had not chosen that for his camping ground, though maybe it would have been less well placed for reaching the ships, owing to some shoaling of water that did not suit them. The tide was nearly high now, and all the wide stretch of the Crouch river was alive with the ships that brought over men from the Burnham shore, and one could see the very wake and the ripple at the bows as they came.

And when one looked at the Danes, the chiefs who ordered the host were plain to be seen, and the gay colours of banners and cloaks and shields were wonderful in the brightness, though at first we were nearly half a mile from them as we waited. I thought that we were about equal to them in numbers, and I knew that did we but fight as at Sherston the day would surely be ours. For when a force that is hard pressed knows that safety is close behind them there is an ever-present reason for giving way.

"We can drive this host to the ships, lord earl," I said to Ulfkytel.

"Aye, surely," he answered. "They know that the ships wait for them, and so will give back."

Now came Eadmund, and behind him our men marched steadily, and at his side was Edric Streone. He looked at the Danes, and his face was bright and confident.

"How shall we fight, lord earl?" he said to Ulfkytel.

"Redwald and I have spoken thereof," the earl answered. "And it seems to us that Olaf's viking plan is best. Let us fight in a wedge, and drive the point through that circle and break it in twain. We of East Anglia will willingly make the point, as we are on our own ground."

"It is a good plan, but I have not tried it," said Eadmund; and then Streone spoke.

"The old Saxon line is surely good enough," he said. "What need to take up with outland plans?"

"It will be good enough if our men fight as at Sherston," Eadmund answered.

And all the thanes who were gathering round him cried out that they would surely not fail him, and one could not but listen to the voice of all the noblest in England who were gathered there, for Eadmund had all his best with him. It was indeed a levy of all England.

So we were to fight in line, as Eadmund had given us our places on the day before, when we neared the battlefield. He himself was in the centre with his Wessex men, and Edric Streone and his Mercians were with him. There were some of us who had cried out at that, but the earl had said proudly that he would make amends for former ill, and the council had listened to and believed his words.

Ulfkytel was on the left, and there our line was flanked by the marshes that lie between the long slope where we were to fight and Ashingdon hill. At least he would have no horsemen upon him from the side, and that flank was safe from turning. The right wing was given to the Lindsey men under their own ealdorman, and with them were the men of the Five Boroughs {[14](#)}.

So our line was drawn up, and Eadmund rode out before them and they cheered, and then he unhelmed, and Bishop Ednoth of Dorchester, clad in his robes over chain mail, and with a heavy mace at his saddle bow, rode up beside him, and a monk who was with him brought forward and raised aloft a golden cross, and at that sign the host knelt, and the bishop shrived them and blessed them before the fight, and the sound of the "Amen" they spoke was like a thunder roll from end to end of the line. And it reached the ears of the Danes who waited for us, and they broke out into their war song--the Heysaa--and thereat our men sprang up and shouted thrice, and then the sullen silence of the Saxon kin settled down on them, for we are not wont to speak much when work is meant.

Silently we crossed the heath between us and the yelling Danes, and I rode beside Eadmund in my old place, and my heart was light, and sword Foe's Bane rattled in the scabbard as if longing to be let loose. And all the while I kept my eyes on Streone, who was riding among his Mercians twenty yards away to our right, and presently behind him I saw Thrand and Guthorm.

I thought that was ill for Streone, but I could not help it now--we were but a hundred yards from the foe. The first arrow flight crossed as I saw them, and then Eadmund cried:

"Forward--remember Sherston!"

At that word the front ranks sprang like wolves to meet one another--and then came the shock of the meeting lines and the howl and cheer of Dane and Englishman--and under the arrow storm the spear and axe and sword were at work.

I kept my shield up and covering Eadmund's right side, and watched. The time for us to take our part had not come yet. And Eadmund looked on his foes to see what chance might be for a charge that would break them when arms grew weary.

Many were the brave deeds that I saw done in that little time, as the first lines fought man to man. And presently I knew that over against us was Cnut the king, for I saw one who was little more than a boy, whose helm bore a golden crown.

There were several chiefs round him also, and one was Ulf. But I saw not Godwine, for he would not fight on that day against his own kin.

There, too, was another chief--he was Eirik the jarl, though I knew it not then; and he looked ever to our right, as if waiting for somewhat. And when I saw that I looked also, but there was nought that I could see. Our whole line was fighting well, and this first attack had brought no faltering on either side.

Then said Eadmund to me:

"Let us make a dash for my stepfather yonder," pointing to Cnut--and even as he said it the brave bishop on his left threw up his arms and fell from his horse, smitten in the face with a javelin, and Eadmund leapt down to help him.

As he did so I heard a shout raised that he was slain.

Then was a roar from our right like nothing that I had ever heard--I pray that none may ever hear the like again--and I turned and looked to see what was on hand, and I saw the Mercians going backward, and Streone's horse was heading away from the Danes; and then the men of the Five Boroughs howled and fell on Dane and Mercian alike, cursing and smiting like madmen.

And I saw my two men leap up among the press and smite over the heads of those around them at Streone, and they were smitten down--they had not touched him.

That was all in a moment, and I called to the king, and he rose up and leapt on his horse and looked. And as he did so the Mercians, Streone's men, wheeled round and fell on our flank, fighting for the Danes, and the Danish line swept the Stamford men from before them and joined the Mercians; and I heard a great sob rise in Eadmund's throat, and he called to me, and charged among the traitor's men to reach him if he might. And the Mercians broke and fled before us, and the Danish line unbroken rolled forward and swept us into flight, for our men knew not what they could do.

Then I pointed to Ashingdon hill and cried:

"We can rally yonder!"

And Eadmund gainsaid me not, but groaned, and called to his men, and we got together and faced round, so that the Danes drew back a little, as men will when a boar turns to bay. And we fought to reach the Lindsey and Borough men through the Danes, who had filled the gap that the flight of the Mercians had made--and won to them. There was the greatest slaughter of the Danish host at that time. But we could not win to Ulfkytel, for the centre and left wing of the Danes lapped us round, and their right drove him back on the marshes, away from us.

Then we were pressed back along the higher ground, and we were forced into a great ring that the Danes could not break, and ever where sign of weakening was Eadmund rode and shouted and smote, and the Danes gave back before him. Once or twice I could hold my hand as he sat in the midst of our circle watching all that went on, and I saw many things in those few moments while sword Foe's Bane rested.

The Mercians had not followed us for very shame, but they sat on the open hillside in the place where the Danish line had been. I think it was not Streone's fault that they were not fighting hand to hand with us. I saw him ride to Ulf the jarl, and I saw Ulf turn his shoulder on him, and then he sought Rink, and that chief spoke but a word to him, so that he tried not to reach Cnut, who never looked at him.

Then I saw Ulfkytel's men breaking and taking to the marshes, where the Danes cared not to follow them. More than one I could see sinking under the weight of arms in the fen slime among the green tussocks of grass that he had slipped from, and I saw that the flying men made for Ashingdon hill.

Now as we drew back some word went round among the Danish host and their onset slackened, and presently they drew off and left us to retreat as we would. They could not break our ring, and we were coming to broken land where we might have some advantage.

Then Eadmund said:

"We will go to yonder hill and hold it. Then will East Anglia come to us, and we can begin again tomorrow, maybe; and if not, we can watch the Danes away. All is not lost yet."

So we went to Ashingdon hill, and there formed up. Only the Danish horsemen followed us to find out what we did. And we saw the main force drawing back towards their earthworks on one wing, while the other held the place of battle, and it was not plain at once why they thus divided.

We rested for a short half hour on Ashingdon hill, and the men of Ulfkytel gathered to us. But the brave earl was slain, and with him Abbot Wulsey, and the Mercians had slain the Ealdorman of Lindsey when they turned on us, and many more lay in the place where the flight began, good men and noble sold to their deaths by the traitor.

It was about midday when we won back to the hill, and the battle, from the time when we had first met, had lasted but a short time. Yet what with slaughter when we broke, and the desertion of the Mercians, we were short of a full third of our men now.

Eadmund waxed restless. There was the best half of a long summer day before us, and our men were angry and full of longing to fight and take revenge. I think there was not one that did not know all that might hang on this battle.

"Redwald," the king said, "is there no way by which we might cross the river? Then might we fall on the ships at Burnham, and Cnut must send his men over ship by ship, and so we might well gain the victory."

I looked at the tide, and called for some Essex men who knew the place, and one came and told me that in two hours' time we might cross at a ford higher up, which they name Hull bridge, though there is no bridge there. And when he heard that, at once our king set his men in order and cheered them with fresh hopes, and we started to march thither.

And at the same time Cnut's ships began to move, and from Burnham and from this shore his men were coming up on the tide towards the very place where we would cross, and before the ford could be passed by us we knew that they would be there in force.

"So," said Eadmund quietly, "they are before us. We will even go back to the hill."

We went back, and then I think that we knew the worst. We were hemmed in upon it, for the half of the Danish force that had remained were barring our way inland, while from the river every other man of the Danish host was coming up to attack us from that side.

"Now it would seem that some of us will stay on this hill for good," said Eadmund; "but if we must lie here till the last day it is a place whence one can look out over the English land and sea and river for which we have died."

And so he drew us up in the ring again there on the hilltop, which was wide enough, and we sat down and waited for the coming of the Danes.

"Lord king," I said, "let us make a wedge and cut through the Danes inland. So shall we win back to the open country, and we can gather men afresh."

He smiled wearily at me, and it seemed to me that at last he had given up hope. And but for Streone's treachery that thing would never have been. It had broken our king's spirit.

"Friend," he said, "I will die here if I can."

"That shall not be while there is one to give his life for you," I answered, and the thanes around us murmured "Aye!" in that stern voice that means more than aught of clamour.

Then I saw some Wessex thanes speaking earnestly to one another, and presently they beckoned to me, and while Eadmund sat silent on his horse I went to them to hear what they would.

"We will get the king off this field if we can," they said. "We cannot lose him. If chance is, we will take him against his will. Hinder us not."

"That is well," said I. "I will help you, for he is the hope of England."

Maybe Ashingdon hilltop is full fifty acres in the more level summit, and we could not guard it all; so we waited on that edge nearest the Danes, the half circle that faces inland from the marshes towards the battle ground we had lost, and to Hockley from the river. And presently the Danes began to come up the hill in even line, and we watched them drawing nearer in silence.

Then Eadmund bade our bowmen get to work; but the arrows were as nought against the long line that did but quicken its advance as they felt their sting here and there.

The Danes spread out along the hillside to surround us, and then when they had gained the summit they charged on us, and again we were hand to hand with them.

I suppose we fought so, without stirring from the place where we were, for half an hour. Our circle thinned, but never broke, and Dane after Dane fell or drew back to let fresh men come forward, and as we might we also sent fresh men from our inner ranks to relieve those who had grown weary. It was stern hand-to-hand fighting, and one knows how that will ever be--one of two men must go down or give way, and our men fell, but give way they would not.

I have said we were on the edge of the hilltop circle, and therefore the attack from the steep hill slope was weakest. And so it came to pass that presently the line against us there was thinned out, because men pressed upwards to the level, and then those Wessex thanes saw that we might break through and cut our way down the hill and make good our retreat.

Where Eadmund was I followed, and I know that I saved him once or twice from spear thrusts that would have slain him when he charged among the Danes, where they pressed us most hardly. Wearied was my arm, but sword Foe's Bane bit through helm and harness, and once I was facing Ulf the jarl, and he cried out to me:

"Well smitten, Wulfnoth's man!"

For he knew me. And I looked for Egil, that I might call him to come and win the sword from me, but I could not see him; and a foolish fear that some other than he might get the good blade got hold of me, for I had no doubt that I must fall, and no fear thereof, save that. And why I longed for Egil thus was, I think, because of utter weariness and loss of hope.

Then they pushed us as it were over the hill edge, and we began to go down, and I knew at once what would come next.

The line of Danes on the hill slope gave way before us and left the way clear; and at first we went slowly and in good order, and then they charged on us down the hill with crushing weight of numbers.

And so we fled. I saw the Wessex thanes catch Eadmund's bridle, and they turned his horse and spoke to him. And he threatened them with his sword for a moment; but they were urgent, and at last he fled. And I, knowing that if we could keep back the Danes but for a few minutes longer he might escape, cried to what chiefs were left to us, and we rallied on the hillside for a last stand.

Then my horse reared and fell back on me, and I heard a great shout, and the rush of many feet passed over me, and Ashingdon fight and aught else was lost in blackness.

Chapter 15: The Shadow Of Edric Streone.

"The man is dead," said a rough voice. "Let him bide."

"He is not," one answered. "He had nought to slay him. Here be three flesh wounds only."

Then I began to come to myself, for water was being poured on my face, and I opened my eyes and saw Thrand of Colchester looking at me. My head was on his knee, and he had a helm full of water in his hand. His own head and arm were bandaged, and the man who spoke to him was passing on, seeking elsewhere. All that had happened came back to me in a moment then, and my ears woke to the sounds round me. I knew them only too well, for they were the awesome sounds of the time after battle.

"Where is the king?" I said.

"Safe enough, they say," Thrand answered. "Is it well with you, master?"

I sat up, and the maze passed from me. I had but been stunned by the fall from my horse, and now seemed little the worse, save for sickness and dull weight of weariness. I had been an hour or two thus, as it would seem, for now the Danish host was gone, and only a few men sought for friends on that hillside, as Thrand had sought for me. My horse was dead, slain by the spear thrust that made him rear. It was that one which Earl Wulfnoth gave me when I left him.

"I shall be myself again directly," I said. "How has it all ended? I thought I saw you slain."

"The Danes are chasing our men towards yon village," he said grimly pointing towards Hockley. "They will not catch the king, however. They smote me badly enough when I tried to be revenged on Streone, and they slew Guthorm; but they only stunned me."

"Go hence before Streone catches you," said I.

"Not I," said Thrand. "He knows me not, and I shall wait for another chance. The Danes think me a Mercian, and so I bide with you. Can you fly now, master?"

I tried to rise, but I was weak and shaken, and sank down again. I was not fit for walking even yet.

"I must wait," I said.

"There are stray horses enough down yonder," Thrand said, looking over the meadows below us. "I will go and catch one. We must go soon, or the Danes will be back."

"No use," said I. "They are between us and safety. I must wait and take my chance."

With that I missed the sword that I loved, for I had thought of selling my life dearly if the Danes would slay me.

"Where is sword Foe's Bane?" I cried.

Thrand looked round about me, but could see it not. Then he turned over one or two of the slain men who lay thickly in the place where our last stand was made. But he could not find it, until a wounded man of ours asked what he sought. Thrand told him. Then I noted how few wounded there were. The sun, nigh to setting now, broke out and shone athwart the hillside; and it sparkled like the ice heaps on the long banks that a winter's tide has left by the river, for everywhere were the mail-clad slain. But the sparkles were steady, as on the ice, not as on a host that is marching. Ice cold were those who would need mail no more on Ashingdon hill.

"The sword is under the horse," the man said groaning. And it was so, and unhurt.

"Get me a sword from off the field," I said, "and hide Foe's Bane somewhere. Then, if they slay me, take it to Egil, Jarl Thorkel's foster brother; and if not, I can find it again. I will not have it taken from me thus."

So Thrand took it and its scabbard and hid both under his cloak, and went to where there was a patch of woodland at the foot of the hill--ash and alder growing by the marsh side--some two hundred yards off.

I closed my eyes and waited till he came back--and he was gone for some while. Presently he came, and told me that he had hidden it under a fallen tree trunk, and that the place was dry and safe. He found me another sword easily enough--and it was notched from point to hilt. Its edge was not like that of Foe's Bane, but the man whose it had been had done his duty with it. It was an English sword.

Now I thought that I could walk again, and stood up and made a step or two, painfully enough, in truth, but in such wise that I should soon do better. And then over the brow of the hill the Danes began to come. They had circled round and I had not noted them, and came on us from the other side. They were searching among the slain for their comrades.

Half a dozen of them came towards Thrand and me, and I suppose that they would have slain me. But my man was ready for them, and took the sword from me quickly.

"Will the king suffer us to keep captives?" he said.

"Aye," one answered, in some Jutland speech that was new to me, though one could understand it well enough, "there is word that we are to take any chiefs alive--but that is a new word to us. Who minds it?"

"I do," said Thrand. "Here is one who will pay for freedom, and he has yielded to me."

"That is luck for you," they said, and passed on.

There was plunder enough all around, and they were in haste lest others should come. Thrand's Anglian speech was Danish enough for them.

"Now you are safe, master," Thrand said; "no need for the sword."

"I am a captive," said I bitterly.

Then my eyes sought the ground as Thrand cast the useless blade away, and there, crawling on the reddened turf, was a toad that feared not the still dead, and must seek its food whether men lived or died, unheeding aught but that. And when I saw it, into my mind flashed the time when I had stood, weakened and hurt, and looked at the like in Penhurst village--and the words that Spray the smith spoke came to me, and they cheered me, as a little thing will sometimes. And then I thought of her who prayed for me among Penhurst woods, and I was glad that life was left me yet.

More Danes kept coming now, and presently one who was in some command came to where I sat with Thrand standing over me.

"Is this a captive?" he asked.

"Aye," said Thrand.

"Who is he?"

"Some thane or other. What shall I do with him?"

"Cnut wants to see all captives. Take him to the fort whence we came."

He passed on, and Thrand said:

"Master, if you can find Egil all may be well, Let us go."

That was all that I could do. Egil or Godwine might befriend me. Godwine surely would, but I knew not if his word would go for anything.

Aye, but that was an awesome walk across the upland, where the flower of England lay dead. I knew not what had befallen us fully until I went slowly over Ashingdon hill. All the best blood of England was spilt there; and I knew, as we passed the wide ring of heaped corpses where our stand had been longest, that the hopes of Eadmund had come to nought, and that the shadow of Streone lay black across his life.

We came to the further slope of the hill, and were going down, and through the tears of rage and grief that filled my eyes I saw a few horsemen breasting the slope towards us, and one of them was Edric Streone the traitor himself; and

when I saw him I felt as a man who lights suddenly on a viper, and I shuddered, for the sight of him was loathsome to me, and Thrand ground his teeth.

Streone's eyes fell on us, and he turned his horse to meet us. And when he knew who I was he glowered at me without speaking, and I looked him full in the face once, and then turned my back on him. He did not know my man.

"Bind your prisoner," he said sharply to Thrand.

"No need to do that," said Thrand coolly, "he is sorely hurt, and has no arms."

Then the other horsemen rode up leisurely.

"Who is this?" said one--and he was Jarl Eirik.

"No one worth having," said Streone, and reined round his horse to go on as if caring nought.

They went on up the hill. I suppose that they were going there that Edric Streone might say who the slain were. As for us we went our way, and Thrand cursed the earl with every step.

We had hardly got away from the hill when men came after us in haste, and before I knew that it was myself whom they sought, they had pushed Thrand aside and bound my hands.

"What is this?" Thrand asked angrily.

And I said:

"Bind me not. I go to yield myself."

"Earl Edric's orders," said the men. "We are to keep you here till he comes."

At that I knew that I had fallen into his hands, and that my life was not worth much. I could see that Thrand knew this also.

"That is all very well," I said; "but I am Egil Thorarinsson's captive."

Whereat one of the men laughed.

"You may not choose your captor, man. Egil has not been ashore all day. He is with the ships yonder."

Then Thrand said, seeming very wroth:

"I will not lose a good captive and ransom for any Mercian turncoat. I will go and find the king and make complaint."

"Tell him that you are Egil at the same time," a Dane sneered. "You will not hoodwink him as you have this Saxon."

"Is not this man Egil?" I asked, looking at Thrand with a hope that he would guess whom I needed.

"He Egil!" they answered, laughing loudly. And at that Thrand turned and went away quickly, and I sat down and said:

"What will Earl Edric do with me?"

One said one thing and one another, and I did not listen much. But they all thought in the end that Edric's lust for gold would make him hold me to heavy ransom. I thought that he loved revenge even better than wealth, and this cheered me not at all.

About sunset Edric Streone came. Thrand had, I thought, made his escape, most likely, and I was glad. He had helped me all he could.

The earl left the party he was with, and came to me and my guards. He looked at me sidewise for a while, and then spoke to me in broad Wessex, which the Danes could hardly understand, if at all.

"So, Master Redwald, what will you give for freedom?"

I answered him back in my own Anglian speech, which any Dane knows, for it is but the Danish tongue with a difference of turn of voice, and words here and there:

"I will give a traitor nothing."

"But I am going to hang you," and he chuckled in his evil way. There were many meanings in that laugh of Streone's.

"You can do as you like with me, as it happens," I answered, "but I had rather swing at a rope's end as an honest man than sit at Cnut's table as Streone the traitor."

He tried to laugh, but it stuck in his throat, and so he turned to rage instead.

"Smite him," he said to the Danes.

"Not we," said the spokesman of the half dozen. "Settle your own affairs between you."

"Take him to yon tree and hang him, and have done," said Edric.

"Spear me rather," said I in a low voice to the men.

They laughed uneasily, but did not move, and Edric again bade them take me to the tree, which was about a hundred paces away.

They took me there and set me under a great bough, and then stood looking at me and the earl. They had no rope, and the belts that bound me were of no use for a halter. Edric saw what was needed, and swore. Then he sent one of the men to the ships to get a line of some sort; and I think that his utter hatred of anyone who had seen through his plans made him spare me from spear or sword, for there is no disgrace in death by steel. But at this time there seemed no disgrace in the death he meant me to die, for it was shame to him, not to me.

The ships were not so far off. It was not long before three or four men came through the gathering dusk, and one had a coil of rope over his shoulder. And after them came across the hillside a horseman, beside whom ran a man on foot. There were many men about, and these were too far for me to heed them. I only noticed that which should end my life.

"Set to work quickly," said Streone.

So they flung the end of the line over the bough, sailorwise, and made a running bowline in the part that came down. There is torture in that way, and

some of the men grumbled thereat, being less hard hearted. So they began to argue about the matter, and Streone watched my face, for this was pleasure to him, as it seemed, though he did not look straight at me. I wished they would hasten, that was all.

Now the horseman and his follower came up, and lo! Egil was the rider, and with him was Thrand.

"Ho!" cried Egil, "hold hard. That is my man."

Streone turned on him with a snarl.

"Your man!" he said. "I took him. Hold your peace."

"There you lie," quoth Thrand. "I took him myself for Egil, my master--as your own men know. I told them."

"He did so," the Danes said, for they loved Egil, and Streone was a stranger of no great reputation, though high in rank.

"Set him loose," said Egil. "I will have no man interfere with my captives."

Then Streone hid his anger, and took Egil aside while the Danes and Thrand set me free. Presently Egil broke out into a great laugh.

"Want you to hang him for slaying men of yours!" he cried. "Why, he might hang you for the same. How many of his men did you slay this morning?"

"That was in fight--he killed the others in time of peace."

"Better not say much of that fight," said Egil. "There was a peace breaking there."

Streone turned pale at that, for he saw that the Danes did not hold his ways in honour though they had profited by them.

"Well, then, take him. Little gain will he be to you, for he is landless and ruined," he sneered, chuckling.

"Well," said Egil, "he is a close friend of Earl Wulfnoth's, and maybe it is just as well that you hung him not. Cnut would hardly have thanked you for setting that man against him, and maybe bringing Olaf the Norseman down on him also."

Streone had thought not of those things. He turned ashy pale at the picture Egil had drawn of loss of Cnut's favour. He looked once or twice towards me as if he were trying to frame some excuse, but none would come.

"I knew it not," he said, falsely enough. "I am glad you came."

Egil only laughed, and with that Streone rode away quickly, and never looked back as he went.

Thereafter Egil took me down to the ships, and he sent Thrand for sword Foe's Bane when the night had fallen. Most kindly did the Dane treat me, but I cared for little. I could not move for stiffness and bruising after I had slept for twelve hours on end, but that was nought compared with the sorrow for what had befallen us.

Two days after this the Danish host followed in the track of Eadmund and his flying levies: but Egil stayed in command of the ships, and I with him. I had not seen Cnut, but Egil had spoken of me to him.

"I have heard of Redwald of Bures before," the king had said. "What know I of him? I think it is somewhat good."

"He nearly got Emma the queen out of England," Egil had answered. "I know not if you call that a good deed, lord king."

"That is it. She spoke to me for him, asking me to treat him well if he fell into my hands, because of his faithful service and long-suffering patience on the journey."

Then he asked what he could do, but Egil answered that I would bide with him at this time, and hereafter he would mind the king of me again.

"Do so," said Cnut. "He must be a friend of mine."

I could not but think well of the young king for this, but it seemed unlikely that friendly towards him I should ever be. Nevertheless, the words of the witch of Senlac were coming true.

Then we, safe in the shelter of the river, waited for news: the two kings being in Wessex. But I could not think it likely that Cnut would give time for a fresh gathering of Wessex men to Eadmund.

Nor did he. All men know how the two kings met at Olney in the Severn, and how peace was made, after Eadmund had said that he would rather fight out the matter hand to hand to the death. Few of us knew then how little able Cnut was to fight the mighty Ironside, but we thought him strong in body as in name. Else had that plan never been thought of.

They say that Edric Streone advised Cnut to take the old Danelagh and Northumbria and leave Eadmund the rest of the kingdom, the survivor to succeed to all the land. Maybe he did. If so, it was that he might earn more from Cnut by giving him all the land. But it is certain that thus Cnut wrought best for himself, for the Danelagh received him gladly, while Wessex loved Eadmund. And when Eadmund should die, Wessex would take Cnut for king at Eadmund's word, as it were, by reason of the treaty made and oaths given and received. Not for nothing do men call the King Cnut the Wise, for it is certain that he had Eadmund in his power, and forbore to use his advantage to the full.

So the long struggle ended, and at last there was rest to the land. But I, who had hoped for victory, felt as though life had little pleasure left when first this news came to me. But in a few days came one of Godwine's men bearing messages to me from him, and also from Eadmund my king.

The first were most kindly, speaking of hope of seeing me ere long, and the like; but it seemed that the young earl had promised Eadmund to send me the letter which the messenger brought, and that that was the most important business. I took the letter ashore and went to Ashingdon hill and sat there among the graves of the slain and read it, while the summer sun and wind and sky were over me, while the land and sea seemed at rest, and all was in a great peace after the strife that I had seen in that place.

To my Thane, greeting.--What has befallen us, and how we have divided the

kingdom with our brother Cnut in the old way of the days of Alfred the greatest of our line, you will have heard. We have fought, and all men say that we have fought well; but this is how things have been ordered by the Lord of Hosts. Therefore, my thane, for your sake, and seeing specially that already our brother Cnut is well disposed toward you, as Godwine son of Wulfnoth tells us, by reason of your service to Emma the queen--I would bid you accept him as ruler of East Anglia, where your place is. And you shall hold this letter in proof that thus our word to you is, if in days to come the line of Wessex kings shall hold the kingdom once more. Few have been those who have been faithful to us as have you.

Now, I will set down no more, for Eadmund my king wrote to me as he was wont to speak in the days that were gone, and I wept as I read his words--wept bitterly there on Ashingdon hill, and I am not ashamed thereof.

And when I had spelt out to the end of his letter there were words also that were pleasant to me. For they were written by Elfric the abbot, my friend, thus:

Written by the hand of Elfric, Abbot of St. Peter's Minster at Medehamstede.

I, Elfric, bid you, my son Redwald, be of cheer, for in the end all shall be for the best. Bide in your home of Bures if Cnut wills, as I think shall be, and see to the good of your own people as would your father who has gone. There is an end of war for England. It remains for us to make for the things of peace.

Then I sat and thought for long, and at last it seemed to me that I could do nought but as both king and friend would bid me, and the words that Elfric had written weighed more with me than those of the king. Now that I could fight no more I began to long to get back to that home life in the old place that had seemed so near to me and had been taken away.

And then came the thought of Uldra, and of what she would say of this. But as things were, and with this letter before me, I could not doubt what her word would be. She would speak as Elfric wrote. Then I longed for Olaf and his counsel. But he was far beyond my reach, nor could I tell where he might be. He had gone across the gray rim of the sea, and no track was there for me to follow.

The evening fell, and still I sat there, and Thrand of Colchester came to seek me--I know not what he feared for me if I grew lonely on Ashingdon hill now that all seemed lost.

"Master, come back to the ships," he said. "It is ill bidding here after sunset. The slain are unquiet by reason of Streone's deeds."

"They will not harm me, Thrand," I answered. "I would I lay here with them even now . . . but that is past."

I rose up and went down the hill with him, and the sun set behind it, and it was gray and black against the red evening sky. There was a mist from the river, and one might think that one saw many things moving therein.

And I know not that I saw anything more than mortal--though maybe I did--until as we went to Cnut's dune, under which Egil's ship lay, and we passed that place where the left wing of our line had been driven back on the marsh. Then I saw an armed man coming towards us, and Thrand, who walked at my shoulder, closed up to me, for the warrior had a drawn sword in his hand.

And when we came face to face I knew that I looked once more on Ulfkytel our earl, and a great fear fell on me, for he lay with his men in the mound where he fell, and Egil and I had raised it over him. Then I must speak.

"Greeting to the earl," I said, and my voice sounded strange.

But he made no answer, save that he looked me in the face and smiled at me gravely and sweetly, and sheathed the sword he held, folding his arms thereafter as one whose work is done. And while one might count a score, I saw him, plainly as in life, and then he was gone.

Wherefore I thought that our own earl was not wroth with me for what I would do; and after that my mind was at rest, and ready to take what peace might come to me at the hands of Cnut the king.

"We have seen the earl," Thrand said, when he was gone.

"Aye. He tells us that the war is at an end, and that, in truth, Cnut is king in

East Anglia."

"It is well," Thrand answered simply. "Dane were my fathers, and Danish is my name and that of Guthorm my brother. If Cnut lets us keep our old customs and governs with justice, it is all we need."

There was spoken the word of all Anglia, whether of the north or south folk, and I knew it. No man would but hail him there willingly. Our people had never forgotten that the Wessex kings were far from them, and that little help came from thence.

Now, when I came to Egil, I told him that the letter I had gotten bore messages to me from Eadmund, and I read it to him so far as I have written here.

"This is good," he answered, when I said that it should be as the king said. "Now are you Cnut's man and my friend indeed. Thorkel, my foster brother, is to be Earl of East Anglia, and you shall be Thane of Bures as ever. And I shall have to mind Colchester and this shore, and we shall see much of each other."

So he rejoiced, and I grew more cheerful as the days went on. Then Thorkel came, and together we went to Colchester, and thence he bade me go to Bures in peace and take my old place, for he said that Cnut and Emma the queen would have me honoured in all that I would, even did he himself not wish to keep me as his own friend.

Then said I:

"What of Geirmund, your own man, who had Bures?"

Egil laughed.

"Geirmund is the man over whom I fell at your feet at Leavenheath fight. You yourself have made an end of him. I wonder that you knew it not."

So I went back to Bures, and there is no need to say how my poor folk rejoiced. But Ailwin was not there, nor had Gunnhild been seen. The young priest was there yet, and well loved.

Then I said to myself:

"Let things bide for a while. When peace comes altogether and certainly, then will Ailwin bring back Hertha, and there will be trouble enough then, maybe. As it is, my house must be rebuilt, and the land has to settle down after war."

With that I set to work to gather the timber together from my own woods, that we might begin to build in the coming springtime, and I grew happy enough at that work, though I would that I worked for Uldra.

Then came the news that Eadmund our king was dead, slain by Streone's men--some say by the Earl's son, others by the king's own men, whom he bribed. One will, I suppose, never know what hands did the deed, but Streone's doing it was when all is told.

There is more in my mind about this than I will say. But Thrand, who had been with me, begged that he might go to Colchester for a while; and I let him go, for he waxed restless, though I knew not what he would leave me for.

Then the kingdom was Cnut's, and he spoke to the Wessex nobles at a great council in London in such wise that they hailed him for king. There was naught else for them to do. And he promised to keep the laws of Eadgar {15}, and to defend Holy Church, and to make no difference between Dane and Saxon, and by that time men knew that what Cnut the king promised that he would perform.

So came the strong hand that Ethelred our dying king had foretold, and sure and lasting peace lay fair before England. Above all things that made for our content Cnut promised to send home his host. Nor was it long before Jarl Eirik sailed away with all but those to whom lands had fallen. There were many manors whose English lords had died, and they must own Danish masters.

And I will say this other word, that now at the time that I write of these things, men speak of English only, for Cnut has welded the races of England into one in such wise as has never been before.

So I mourned for Eadmund, and wrought at home-making until the springtime came, and all the while the thought of Uldra grew dearer to me, and I longed to seek her again. And the thought of Hertha and my betrothal seemed as bondage to me. Yet I would do nought till Ailwin came or till I could find him. But none knew where he was.

I knew now that it was well that Hertha and I should not meet till all was broken off, for her I could not love, and she knew nought of me. Yet for her sake I set the Wormingford thralls at work in the like manner as my own people were busied, that she might find withal to build her own house place afresh, when, if ever, she should return.

Now, one day as I stood watching the shaping of the timber for the first framing of my hall, Thrand came back. He ran to me when he saw me, and cried:

"Master all is avenged! Streone the traitor is no more."

I took him away to a quiet place, for this news was strange, and the thralls were listening wonderingly, and I asked him how this came about.

"Master, I slew him myself," he said grimly.

Then said I:

"By subtlety--after his own manner?"

"Not so, master. But even in Cnut's own presence."

So I was amazed, and bade him tell all.

"When I left you, master," he said, "I took service with Jarl Thorkel. Then he went to court in London, even as I hoped, for that was all I needed, and presently came Streone with a great train to see Cnut. Now the king is not a great and strong man, as men think who have not seen him, but is tall and overgrown for his years, looking eighteen or twenty, though he is younger. He will be a powerful man some day, but his mail hangs loosely on him now. He is like an eagle in face, for his nose is high and bent, and his eyes are clear and piercing. Quiet and very pleasant is he in his way, and being so young also, some think they can do as they will with him. But that they try not twice.

"This is what Streone thought, for he deemed that he should be the king's master if he set him on the throne. So he must needs try to gain more wealth from the king, and after he had been at court for a while, one might see that Cnut grew weary of his words. But at last there was a great feast, and I stood behind Thorkel at the high place, and Streone was next to Thorkel, and Thorkel to the

king on his right hand. When the ale was going round, Streone began to find fault with some ordering of Cnut's, and at last said:

"Maybe one might judge how things would go when the man who gave you this kingdom is treated thus.'

"Then Cnut looked at him very quietly and said:

"'You have the same honours from me as from Ethelred.'

"'Not so, not so,' he said. 'I was wont to sit at the king's right hand, with none between me and him.'

"Thereat Thorkel would have spoken, but Cnut held up his hand. I saw his bright eyes shining, and Streone should have taken warning, but his fate was on him.

"'You think, then, that you have not all you deserve?' the king said.

"'I have not. You have all--owing to me.'

"Then Cnut rose up and faced him, and a great hush fell on all the assembly.

"'This earl, as it seems, will be content with nothing short of the king's seat. Two kings has he pulled down, and one has he slain of those two. We have profited by this, as all men know. But here do I proclaim myself clear from all part in the slaying of Eadmund my brother, who, but for this man, might hereafter have taken all the kingdom when I died, according to our oaths. I suppose that no man will believe that I had nought to do with this murder, but I am clear thereof, both in thought or wish or deed.

"'Now in gaining the kingdom which has been the right of the Danish kings--if tribute paid for conquest in old time means aught--at least since the days of Guthrum, if not before, I have used the help of this earl, for Mercia was ours by right, as in the Danelagh. I will not say that his way of helping me has been what one would wish, but in war one uses what weapons one can find. For his help to me the Earl of Mercia has been well paid. Now, what shall be given to the man who betrayed to death the foster son who believed in him as in himself?'

"Then I, Thrand the freeman of Colchester, nowise caring what befell me, answered in a loud voice:

"'Let him die. He is not fit to live.'

"'Slay him, therefore,' said Cnut.

"Thereat Streone cried for mercy once, grovelling. And he having done so, I lifted the axe I bore and slew him, even on the high place at the king's feet.

"Then one in the hall said in a great voice:

"'Justice is from the hands of Cnut the king.'

"There went round a murmur of assent to that, and I called to me another of Thorkel's men, a Colchester man of your guard also, and while all held their peace and Cnut stood still looking at what was done, stirring neither hand nor foot, but with his eyes burning bright with rage and his head a little forward, as an eagle that will strike, we two bore the traitor's body to the window that overhangs the Thames, and cast it thereout into the swift tide.

"After that I went my way down the hall, and the king cried:

"'Let the man go forth.'

"So that none spoke to me or withstood me.

"When I got to the street it was dark, and it seemed to me that the best thing that I could do was to fly. So I went by day and night, and I am here."

So that was the traitor's end. And I was glad, for I knew that England was free from her greatest foe. Justly was Edric Streone slain, and all men held that it was well done. Nor did any man ever seek Thrand to avenge the earl's death on his slayer. I think none held him worth avenging.

I bade Thrand hold his peace concerning his part in this matter, for a while at least, lest I should lose him.

After Streone's death it was plain that Cnut was king indeed, for his Danish

jarls knew him too well to despise him. They went each to his place, and the land began to smile again with the peace that had come, and Cnut sent Eirik the jarl home to Denmark with the host, as I have said.

Chapter 16: By Wormingford Mere.

Now it was not long after Streone's death that I had a message from Emma the queen to bid me to her wedding with Cnut, that should be completed with all magnificence. And I went with Thorkel the jarl and Egil, and I could not complain of the welcome I had both from the queen and from Cnut. I might say much of that wedding, for it was wonderful, but I cared not much for it, except that there I met Elfric the abbot again, and he would have me stay in his house, so that it was most pleasant to be with him, and away from the bustle and mirth of the strangers who were with the king.

But for this wedding Eadward Atheling would not come from Normandy. Men said that he was likely to gather forces against his new stepfather, but that it would be of no use. So thought I, for it was a true word that I had heard at Senlac in the hut on Caldbec hill--that Cnut should have the goodwill of all men, even of myself. For so it was, as one might see written in the faces of the London burghers, who alone of all England had baffled him again and again, and now could not do enough honour to him. He had won even their love.

When I would go back to Bures, Emma the queen sent for me, hearing that I would speak with her ere I went, and she received me most kindly, coming down from her high place to greet me.

"Redwald," she said, laughing a little, "I was a sore burden to you when we fled hence."

"My queen," I answered, "the danger was the burden. It weighed on all of us."

"That is a court speech," she said; "but we taught you court ways, and I will not blame it. Nevertheless, though you will not tell me so plainly, I know that I made things worse for you by my foolishness. Forgive the abbess, if the queen may expect nought but smooth words."

"I do not know how I can answer you, Queen Emma," said I at that, "but it is

true that for you I would go through the same again."

"Then I am forgiven," she said. "Now tell me what became of the brave maiden who withstood the Danes with you, and also my sharp tongue--trouble sharpened it, Redwald, and I have repented my hard words to her."

"She is with friends at Penhurst, near to Earl Wulfnoth's castle of Pevensea. And she feared that you would hate her."

"I would that I could reward her rather," the queen said. "Have you seen her of late?"

"Not since just before last midsummer," I answered; and I suppose my face showed some feeling that the queen noted.

"Redwald," she said, "if you would wed this maiden it is I who would give her a portion that should be worthy of her and of you. Can it be so?"

"My queen," I said with a great hope in my heart, "if that is your will, I think that it must be so. But in honesty I will tell you that an old betrothal that was when I was a child seems to stand in the way. But neither I nor the child to whom I was betrothed have seen one another since the coming of Swein's host. And I know not where she is."

"Ah! you would have it broken, and I wonder not. That can surely be."

Then all at once came over me one thought of how Hertha had perhaps, after all, longed and waited and prayed for my coming. I remembered words that Ailwin had spoken that seemed to say that this might be so; and thus on the very threshold of freedom I shrank back lest I should wrong the child I had loved by breaking my troth so solemnly plighted; and I knew not what to say, while the queen looked at me wondering.

Then she smiled and said:

"Maybe you cannot love the maiden. Wait awhile, and let me hear of you again. One may not, in kindness, force these matters. But I will trust you to tell me if she is to wed any other than you--for her portion shall be ready for her. The riches of England and Denmark and Norway are mine."

There spoke Emma of Normandy again, and her proud look came back. The maidens on the dais were smiling at one another, for the queen was turned away from them.

"Let it be thus, my queen," I said, after I had thanked her.

And she said that it should be so, deeming that I had thought of Uldra not at all, maybe.

Then she spoke of my own doings, and Cnut came as we did so. I bowed to him, and he took my hand, calling me "thane" in all good faith.

"Now I have to come ere long into your country," he said, "for I have vowed to build a church in each place where I have fought and conquered. Have you a house where I may stay?"

"My place is far from Ashingdon, lord king," I answered, "and I am rebuilding my father's house as best I can."

"I suppose my men burnt it?" he said plainly.

"Your father's men did so in the first coming."

"Therefore shall his son rebuild for your father's son," said the king. "Will you accept aught from me?"

"Lord king," said I, "I have fought against you, and have owned you unwillingly at first."

"That is certain," he said laughing, "else had you not tried to take away my queen. Go to, Redwald, you are a troublesome subject."

"I think I shall be so no longer," I answered.

So those two most royal ones bade me farewell, and I went away to Elfric, and found Godwine there. The young earl was high in favour with Cnut, and rightly.

Presently came one from the king with somewhat for me, and that was a

goodly gift of money, which I hardly cared to take at first.

Then Godwine laughed at me.

"We have a great chest half full of gold at Pevensea out of which you may take a double handful whenever you need it. Cnut has the gold of three kingdoms and says you may do the same out of his hoards. Head breaking brought you the first, and hardship the second. Take one as you would the other, man. It is your due."

And Elfric added that the king's gift was surely out of goodness of heart. There could be no thought of bribes now. So I took it, and was glad thereof, for I could not ask my people for rents and dues yet.

Elfric asked me of Uldra, as one might suppose, and was glad when he heard of her welfare.

"I suppose that when I get back to Medehamstede her folk will want to know how she fares in Normandy, or the like. Maybe they have troubled the good abbess already more than enough, for she brought her to me."

"Whose daughter was she?" I asked.

"Maybe I heard, but I have forgotten," he said. "The abbess knows. I saw not her folk, for the sisters brought her with them with my consent."

So I went back to Bures well content with all but one thing, and that was what troubled me more than enough. But I knew not that to my dying day I shall rejoice that I kept my troth to Hertha.

It was on one of those wondrous days that come in October, with glory of sunshine and clear sky over gold and crimson of forest and copse, that I learnt this.

I would go to Wormingford now and then to see that all was going well with the rebuilding of Hertha's home, for Cnut's gift was enough for that also, seeing that all one needed was at hand and did but require setting up by skilled workers. Our priest, Father Oswin, found me such craftsmen as I needed.

"Let me rebuild the church first, father," I had said to him when I returned thus rich.

"Not so, my son. That is a matter which must be taken in hand presently, and not hurriedly. Shelter first the man who shall do it, and provide for the fatherless at Wormingford, and it will be better done after all."

Therefore I was very busy. And on this day of which I speak I walked in the late afternoon, and must needs turn aside into the woods by the mere, for I had often done that of late, loving the place for old memories the more now that Olaf came into them. It seemed to me that I had never seen the still mere look more wondrously beautiful than on this day, for we had had neither wind nor rain to mar the autumn beauty of the trees, and that was doubled by the mirror of the water.

So I lingered in that place where Olaf and I had been so nearly slain, thinking of that night and of many other days, and then I heard a footstep coming through the wood, and turned to see who it might be, for I had never met any other in the haunted place.

And there came towards me slowly a white-robed maiden who looked steadfastly at me, saying nought. And I thought that surely she was the White Lady of the Mere. The shadows flickered across her face and dress, and in her hand she bore a basket with crimson leaves and the like.

And then I saw that surely this was Hertha coming to meet me as in the old days when I had waited for her here--Hertha grown older, and changed; but yet as I saw her here in the old place one could not but know her, and half I cried out her name, and then stayed with my heart beating fast.

For as she came into the clearing and was close to me she held out her hands, and the basket fell at her feet, and lo! it was Uldra, whom I loved--and Uldra was Hertha--and I had in my arms all that I longed for, and my trouble was gone for evermore.

"How was it that you knew me not before this?" she asked presently, while we walked together to Wormingford to find Ailwin. They had but come back that morning.

"Always have I seemed to know you well," I said, "but first the sisters' dress, and then that I looked not for Hertha in London, prevented me. And so I grew to know your looks and ways as Uldra, whom I grew to love. Then all thought of the old likeness that puzzled me at first was forgotten. There is no wonder in it, for you have grown from childhood to womanhood since we fled from Bures, and I have gone through much that blotted your face from my mind. Rather do I wonder where you have been all this time."

"One secret I may not tell you today," she said; "and that is where our safest hiding place has been in sores peril. Some day I will show it you, for it is not far. But for long did Gunnhild and I dwell with her brother in the forest and marsh fastnesses beyond the Colne. There one might take to the woods when prowling Danes were near, though it was but twice, and but for a few hours then, that we had to do so. There was little or no danger there when the host passed on. Some day shall you and I ride to that quiet farmstead, for I love the kindly folk who cared for me so well."

Then I said, and my words came to pass afterwards:

"If they will, they shall have my best farm here for their own, that they may be near you. Now tell me how you came to be with Elfric."

She blushed a little, and laughed.

"When we were at Penhurst," she said, "you told me how you were seeking me--well, maybe I was seeking you. It fell out thus. When you and Olaf, whom I long to see, scattered the Danes here, Gunnhild said that we must fly, for they were seeking hiding places. So she would go to her sister, who is abbess at Ramsey, by the great mere of Whittlesea. So we fled there, and the journey was overmuch for her, and there she died after two days. That was a sore grief to me, but I will not speak of grief now. Then Ailwin told the abbess to keep me with her until all things were safe, when he would return for me. But Gunnhild had asked her to find me a place with the Lady Algitha, Eadmund Atheling's wife, because I should meet you in his house often enough. That she could do, and would have done.

"Then the Danes came, and one day Elfric sent word that he was going to Normandy. Those two sisters would go home, and so the abbess sent me with

them, thinking that thus her sister's plan for me would be best carried out. For she was told by Elfric that you were in charge of the party, saying the sisters would be safe in your care. Elfric might get me a place in the queen's new household; and if not--if you knew me not nor cared for me--there was always the convent."

"So all that plan came out thus--and it is well," I said. "But why would you not come to Penhurst at first?"

She laughed lightly, answering:

"Can you not guess? Relf saw, and set things right. Did he never tell you what was wrong?"

"He said that it was want of travelling gear," said I.

"Why, that was not it, though being thoughtful and fatherly he asked of that first."

"Tell me what was the trouble, then."

"I thought--there were things said, and you called me by her name--that the wedding Relf spoke of was yours and Sexberga's. That was all."

"Surely Relf knew not who you were?"

"No. He did not till Ailwin came to Penhurst."

"Then," said I, "it passes me to know how he found out what the trouble was."

"Because he has a daughter of his own," she laughed.

And so she began to speak of Sexberga's wedding, which had been not long since.

Then we came to Wormingford, and there was Ailwin, bent and aged indeed by the troubles, but well, and rejoiced to see me once more, and that I and Hertha were so happily together. But I had to ask his pardon for my roughness to

him before I could feel content.

"My son, had you not felt this matter very deeply, I know you would not have troubled yourself even to wrath about it. Truly I was glad to hear you speak so. There is nought to forgive."

So he said, and maybe he was right.

I rode back presently to Bures with my heart full of joy, and a wondrous content. And when I came to the house on the green I was to learn that joys come not always singly any more than sorrows, which are ever doubled.

The door stood open as I rode up, and in the red light from within the house stood two tall figures on the threshold, and the light flashed from helms and mail as they moved, and for a moment a fear came over me that some new call to arms waited me, so that the peace that I thought I had at last found was to be snatched from me. For it was as in the days when Olaf's men stood on guard over us at the doorway.

More like those days it was yet to be, for as I reined up a voice cried:

"Ho, cousin what of the White Lady?"

And Olaf himself came and greeted me as I leapt from the saddle, holding my shoulders and looking at me as he took me into the light to scan my face. The other warrior was Ottar the scald, my friend, and now I had all that I could wish.

We sat together in the old places, and he said presently:

"You seem contented enough with Cnut, to judge by your face, my cousin."

"I had forgotten him. I am content with all things," I answered.

"How came you here?"

"Nay, but you shall tell me of yourself first," he said. "Then I may have somewhat to say of my doings."

So I told him all.

"Why then, you must be wedded betimes," he said; "for I must see that wedding, though I would not have Cnut catch me. The ships are in Colchester river, and but for Egil I had never got there even."

Then I heard how he had been southward, and what deeds he had done; and it was Ottar who told me that, for Olaf had nought to say of himself. But presently when it came to the time when he turned his ships homeward, Olaf took up the story.

"When I was minded to go on from this place, in Carl's water as they call it, even to Jerusalem and the holy places, I had the sign that I looked for--the sign that I should go back to Norway. I slept, and in my sleep there came to me a man, very noble looking and handsome, and yet terrible, and he stood by me and spoke to me saying, '*Fare back to the land that is thy birthright, for King of Norway thou shalt be for evermore.*' And I knew this man for Olaf Tryggvesson my kinsman, and I think that he means that I shall gain all Norway for Christ's faith, and that my sons shall reign after me in the days to come."

"It is certain that you shall win Norway," I said, "for so also ran the words of the Senlac witch, '*For Olaf a kingdom and more than a kingdom--a name that shall never die.*'"

"I think men will remember me if I beat Cnut in my own land," he said lightly. "So I came back as far as the Seine river, and there was Eadward Atheling trying to raise men against Cnut his stepfather. I knew not that that peaceful youth could rage so terribly when occasion was, It was ill to speak of Cnut to him--or of the queen either. Now I spoke with his few thanes, and they held that it was of no use to try to attack England. None would rise to help him. But he begged me to go with him for the sake of old days and common hatred of the Dane. Wherefore I thought that it was as well for England that he learnt his foolishness, and we went together, and were well beaten off from the first place we put into. So he went back contented to try no more, and I put in here on my way homeward."

Then I said:

"Do you blame me for submitting to Cnut?"

"You could do nought else," he answered. "And from all I hear he is likely to be a good king. Mind you that vision we saw on the shore in Normandy?"

"It has come to pass as you read it," I answered.

Then he said:

"Yet more is to come to pass of that vision. Cnut will reign and will pass when his time comes, and with him will pass his kingdoms. There will be none of his line who shall keep them {16}."

"After him Eadward, therefore, or Alfred, should they live," I said, musing. For the words of dying Ethelred came back to me--his foretelling of the strong hand followed by the wise.

"That will be seen," answered Olaf. "Now I came to know if you were yet landless and desperate so that you would sail to Norway with me. But now I cannot ask you that. Nevertheless I shall be more glad to see you wedded and at rest here, for I think that you have seen your share of war."

"And I have been unlucky therein," said I.

"Now has your luck changed," said Olaf. "And all is well."

So it came to pass that our wedding was made the happier by the presence of Olaf the king and by the songs of Ottar the scald. And Egil came from Colchester, and with him many of those of my men who were left, and Olaf's ship captains, so that with Sudbury folk and our own people there was a merry gathering enough, and the little church was over full when Ailwin and Oswin were ready at the altar.

After that was over, Olaf came forward and gave to the priests a great chain of gold links, bidding them lay it on the altar for a gift towards rebuilding the house of God.

"Only one thing do I ask you," he said, speaking in a hushed voice as he stood there. "And that is that no week shall pass without remembrance of those of my men who died for England on Leavenheath."

And Oswin said:

"It shall be so, King Olaf, for it has already become our custom here. Now will we remember your name also."

* * * * *

Ten years ago it is since Olaf sailed away from us and won Norway from the hand of Cnut. Now and then come Norsemen to me from him when they put into Colchester or Maldon, and ever do they bring gifts for Hertha and Olaf and Eadmund and Uldra, the children that are ours. For all things have gone well with us, and with all England under the strong and wise rule of Cnut the king.

I stood beside him on Ashingdon hill when he came to see to the building of the churches on the battlefield at the place of the first fight, and at Ashingdon, and at Hockley where the flight ended. And he dedicated that at Ashingdon to St. Andrew, in memory of Eadmund his noble foe and brother king, for on the day of that saint Streone slew him.

There Cnut the king stood and spoke to me:

"I build these churches, and their walls will decay in time, and maybe men will forget who built them, but the deeds of Eadmund will not be forgotten, for there are few men who have fought a losing fight so sternly and steadfastly as did he. Nor shall men forget you, Redwald, and those who fought and died here, and on the other fields that are rich with their blood spilt for love of England. None may say that their lives are wasted, for I see before us a new brotherhood that will rise out of our long strife, because Dane and Saxon and Anglian know each other for men."

So he said, and so it is, and our England is rising from the strife into a mighty oneness that has never been hers before.

We went to London before long to see the great wedding that was made for Godwine, my friend, and Gyda, the fair daughter of Ulf the jarl, and niece of Cnut himself. There also were Relf and the lady of Penhurst, and Eldred and Sexberga, and many more of Wulfnoth's thanes. But the old viking had gone to his place beyond the grave, and I saw him no more after I left him at Berkeley.

Godwine is the greatest man in England now, and well loved. All men speak of his deeds in Denmark, whither he took the king's English host when troubles were there, and he is one of those who hold the kingdoms together since Ulf and Thorkel and Eirik are dead. They were slain in petty quarrels, and it is ever in my mind that it was in judgment on them for treating with Streone the traitor in the days when Cnut had not yet taken the kingship and rule into his own hands. I hold him blameless of that, for what could a boy of thirteen, however wise, do against their word and plans?

But Thrand of Colchester lives yet, being port reeve of his own town under Egil, my good friend.

None have ever seen the White Lady of the Mere again, nor has aught ill befallen my thrall, who thought he saw her. I gave him his freedom when we were wedded, and he is over the herds for us. But ever do I choose rather to call my dear one "Uldra," the name which she borrowed from the White Lady when I met her at Bosham, and asked what I should call her, for by that name I learnt to love her.

Now one day she bade me take her to the great mound of Boadicea the queen beyond the river, for she had somewhat to show me, and half fearing I went. But she had no fear of the place, and one might see that she knew her way through the pathless woods around it well, so that I wondered. She led me across the water which stands around it in the old trench, stepping on fallen trees which made a sort of bridge, and then went to a place where the bushes grew thickly and tangled.

"Can you see aught strange here?" she said to me.

I could see nothing but thicket of briar and sloe climbing the steep side of the mound. And therefore she parted them, not easily at first, for none had touched them for long; and there before me was the opening of a low stone-sided-and-roofed passage, leading to the heart of the mound.

"Enter," she said. "This is our hiding place in sorest need."

"Hardly dare I do so. It is ill to disturb the mighty dead," I answered.

"The dead queen has sheltered us helpless women well," she answered. "She is not disturbed, for this is not her resting place."

So I went in, stooping double, for the stone passage was very low. I cannot tell whence the stone came, nor why the place was made unless it were to receive some chiefs of the Iceni, whose bones were gone had they ever been there, for there was a stone chamber in the mound's heart, fitted with stone seats and stone beds, as it were, and four people might well live in that place, for it was cool in summer and warm in winter, but very silent.

I spoke not a word till we were in the sunshine again, and then I shivered.

"I could not have entered that place alone," I said.

"Gunnhild had no fear thereof, nor had I as a little child. Three times we bided there for days, while the Danes pillaged and burnt all around us, and were safe."

It was some old secret handed down to Gunnhild that had taught her how to find the passage entrance. But she knew not where the great queen lay. Maybe her resting place is below the mound itself, or maybe she lies elsewhere, as some say.

Then said I:

"Let us close the place. I pray that none may need it again."

So I loosened the earth above with my spear butt and it fell and covered the doorway. And none, save Hertha and myself, know where its place is.

Yet men say that they see the bale fires burning even now, on the mound top on the nights when men look for such things. I have never seen them.

There are two men of whom I must say a word, for I love them well. One is Father Ailwin, our priest, and my old master--who bides here with Oswin, whom I prayed to stay with us also--growing old peacefully; and the other is Elfric the abbot, my friend ever, and now Cnut's best adviser. Each in his own way fills well the place that is his, one as the counsellor and friend of plain folk like ourselves, winning the love and reverence of thane, and franklin, and thrall alike;

and the other as the wisest in the land maybe, high in honour with all the highest in church and state. Well have those two wrought, and we cannot do without their like, whether in village or court.

It is likely that Elfric will be archbishop ere long, and that will be well for us all. So great is the name of Cnut the king that hereafter it will be that all that was wrought of wisdom in his time will be laid to his account; but he would not have it so, for he knows what he owes to Elfric. But also I think that the cruel deeds wrought by the jarls while he was yet but a child will be thought his work also, for men will forget how young he was when the crown came to him, seeing that in utmost loyalty the jarls spoke of him ever as commanding, as the old viking ways bade them.

But I who knew him almost from the first have seen how he hated these deeds, staying the hands of his chiefs as soon as he knew what his power was. Therein wrought Emma the queen, whose pride taught him what his place was, sooner than might else have been.

Now I will say one last word of myself, who am happy--in wife, and children, and home. Cnut made me ealdorman, that so I might serve East Anglia, and I am glad, for I must needs go to the great witan at times and meet Godwine and Relf and many others who are my friends. But, rather than Redwald the ealdorman, I would that I might be called ever by the name which comes into the songs of Ottar the scald now and then--the name in which I have most pride, King Olaf's kinsman.

THE END.

Notes.

[1](#)

the armed followers of a Saxon noble.

[2](#)

The national weapon. A short, strong, curved blade used as a dirk.

[3](#)

The massacre of the Danes on St. Brice's day, 1002 A.D., in which Swein's sister was killed.

[4](#)

Now Peterborough.

[5](#)

From the Heimskringla, Saga of Olaf the Saint.

[6](#)

Tribute.

[7](#)

An embodied familiar spirit.

[8](#)

According to Bede, in A.D. 418 the Romans collected and hid all the treasure in England, except some part which they took to Gaul. OElla took Anderida in 491 A.D.

[9](#)

The cold spring.

[10](#)

Mail shirt.

[11](#)

Daughter of Alfred the Great, and wife of Ethelred, Earl of Mercia.

[12](#)

The utmost term of Saxon contempt.

[13](#)

Now Canewdon.

[14](#)

The "Five Boroughs" of the old Danelagh were Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, Stamford, and Derby.

15

The work of the great Dunstan, and the first code that recognized the rights of Danish settlers.

16

This prophecy of Olaf's is recorded in the "Saga of Olaf the Saint".

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