

WILLIAM STODDARD

ULRIC THE JARL: A
STORY OF THE
PENITENT THIEF

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of the Penitent Thief**

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Ulric the Jarl: A Story of the Penitent Thief

CHAPTER I. Around the Viking House-fire

In the Northland were the roots from which grew the great nations which now rule the earth. The tribes were many, but the principal representative and the absorbent of their thoughts and their traditions may receive from us the general name of Saxons. These were the swordsmen of the sea whom the Roman legionaries declared to be the hardest fighters they had met, whether on land or water.

In the Northland were also the germs of political and religious liberty, and here were to be found the first forms of our highest faith.

But the men of the old race sailed southward and then eastward, at the first, taking their gods with them. Not until centuries later did they march and conquer this far western world, but we, their children, still devoutly believe that the great God came with them.

The landward slope of a vast gray granite headland was thickly covered with towering pine trees. Beyond them, inland, lay a snowy valley without woods, and beyond that arose a blue and misty range of mountains. There were no trees upon the summit of the headland; only bare rocks, storm worn and deeply furrowed, were uplifted to meet the bitter wind that swept down over the flinty ice covering of the North Sea from the yet colder winter which was manufacturing icebergs within the arctic circle. Sheer down, hundreds of feet, the perpendicular face of the cliff smote sharply the glittering level that stretched away westerly over the sea to the horizon, while an arm of it pushed in eastward over the fettered waters of a deep and gloomy fiord, rock-bordered.

Here would evidently be a good harbor in summer, when the waters should be free, but now it had a forbidding, dangerous look, and out of the fiord poured continually a volume of roaring sound, the solemn organry of the wind playing upon the icy and rocky reflectors.

There was another gigantic sea cliff at a distance of about a mile down the shore, southerly. Between that and the headland the ice line curved raggedly inward along the lines of a sheltered cove, which might at another season provide a landing place. Midway, and at the head of the cove, there lay, propped up on either side by timbers, the bare hull of a well-made vessel. It was of goodly size, being over thirty paces in length and of full six paces in width at its middle. At the prow and at the stern it was high built, with short decks, under which was room for stowage and for the sheltered sleeping of men. It was lower made amidships, where were both seats and standing room for rowers, and on either side were twenty thole pins. In appearance the hull was somewhat flat-bottomed, but it had a keel. At the center arose a stout, high mast, but upon it there was yet neither yard nor boom nor sail. Both prow and stern were sharply made. Evident was it that she was new and had never yet floated. Her outline was of much beauty, and all her timbers and planks were heavy and strong, that she might battle with rough seas and with the ice cakes of the spring breaking. From her prow projected a beak of firmly clamped and tenoned oak, faced and pointed with iron, that she might break not only the waves, but the ribs of other ships. All around her and in some parts over her lay the white snow, deeply drifted, but wherever the woodwork was uncovered there could be seen much of skillful carving and smooth polishing.

At other places along the curve of the cove there were boats and ships, larger and smaller. All were hauled up above high-water mark, and snow was on them. The larger craft seemed to be stanch and seaworthy, but not any of them were equal in size or in strength or in beauty to the new warship.

Upon a straight line inland a hundred fathoms, as if the iron beak were pointing at it, stood a long, low, irregular building of wood with high ridged roofs, in which were wide holes at the ridges. From these holes, as if they were instead of chimneys, columns of blue smoke were rising to be whirled away by the wind. Stonework or brickwork was not to be seen. Through the strong timber walls, under the projecting eaves, were many openings, equally cut, window-like, for the entrance of light and air on sunny days, but these all were now closed by wooden shutters, some of which were braced from without. The timbers of the house walls were cleanly hewn and skillfully fitted, and they were tightly calked with moss and tempered clay. The roofs were of shingles riven from the pine trees.

Beyond, landward, there were smaller, ruder structures for the shelter of horses, cattle, sheep, and swine, and there were many ricks of hay and straw and of yet unthreshed grain. In either direction around the cove and scattered irregularly up the valley were a number of less extensive buildings for the abode of men. Some of these were mere huts, built ruggedly of timber and unhewn stone. From every roof was there blue smoke rising to testify that there were no empty houses in this seashore village of the vikings. Around the central cluster of buildings there were palisades, but except for these there were no signs of fortifications. It was as if there need be little fear of the coming of any foeman.

Bitter and cold and strong was the windstorm that blew across the icy sea and smote upon the swaying crowns of the pine forest and howled among the bare boughs of the oaks. It came and knocked at the great door in the front of the house pointed at by the beak which was the forefinger of the ship.

The door swung open for a moment and then it closed, but in that moment there rang out loud voices of rude song and the twanging of sonorous harp strings. Also a great blast of fresh, pure air rushed eagerly into the house, where it was much needed. Not but that the vast room, low-walled, high-roofed, was fairly well ventilated in many other ways, but the fire in the middle of its earthen floor was blazing vigorously, and not all the smoke might readily escape at the round gap in the roof ridge over it. Now and then, indeed, the wind blew rudely down through that aperture and sent the smoke clouds eddying murkily among the rafters.

But for the fire blaze and for sundry swinging cressets filled with burning pine knots the great hall would have been gloomily dark, but these lights were enough, in spite of the smoke clouds, to show many things which told of what sort this place might be. So also might be plainly noted the faces and the forms of the men who sat or stood around the fire, or who lay upon the bearskins and the wolfskins that were scattered here and there upon the earth floor and upon the wooden settles along the walls.

A broad table ran across a raised dais at one end of the room, and on this were not only pitchers and mugs of earthenware variously molded, with many drinking horns, but there were also tankards and goblets and salvers of silver, richly designed and graven by the artisans of other lands than this. Of the articles of furniture for different uses some few had an appearance of having been brought from far, but the great, high-backed oaken throne chair behind the long table, at its center, was rich with the grotesquely elaborate carvings of the old North people. On the walls hung shields and arms and armor of many patterns. The steel caps of the vikings hung side by side with visored helmets that told of Greece and Rome and of lands yet further east. There were many men in the room. Some of them were scarred old warriors, but there were youths of all ages above mere boyhood. Likewise were there numbers of women.

As central as was the fire itself were three figures which seemed to attract and divide the attention of all the others. On the side of the fire toward the door towered one who looked a very embodiment of the warlike young manhood of the race of Odin. His blond beard and mustache were full but not yet heavy. His complexion was fair, notwithstanding its weather bronzing, and his steel-blue eyes seemed both to flash and to laugh as he stood with folded arms and listened. His dress was simple. His shoes, that arose above his ankles, were well made. Above them were leggings of tanned

leather, and he wore a tunic of thick, blue woolen cloth. He was unarmed except for the slightly curved, broad-bladed seax in its sheath that hung from his belt. Its blade was not more than a cubit in length. It was sharp on one edge only, and it was heavy. The steel hilt and the crosspiece were thick, for a good grip. It was a weapon terrible to meet if it were in the hand of an athlete like this – more than six feet in height, deep-chested, lithe and quick of motion – and already the short seax had won for its bearers, the Saxons, a dreaded name among all the peoples of the south countries to which their swift keels had carried them.

At the left of the fire was a large, high-backed chair made of some wood which had become almost black with age and smoke. It was not now occupied, but in front of it stood the form of a woman, straight as a pine and taller than any of the men around her. Her face was swarthy, deeply marked, haughty, and her abundant hair fell disheveled down to her waist, as white as the drifts upon the mountains. She was clad in a robe of undyed, grayish wool, falling loosely to her feet. On these were socks and buskins, but her lean, sinewy arms were bare as she stretched them out, waving her gnarled old hands in time to the cadence of a semimetrical recitation. She spoke in the old Norse tongue, with a voice upon whose power and mellowness time seemed to have had little effect. Every head in the hall bent toward her, as if her words were a fascination to her hearers, and none willed to interrupt her.

Weird and wild was the chant of the old saga woman, and the fire in her piercing black eyes brightened and dulled or almost went out as she sang on, from myth to myth, of the mystical symbolisms of the intensely poetic and imaginative North. Gods and demigods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, earth forces and spiritual powers, dwarf and giant, gnome and goblin, fate maidens, werewolves, serpent lore, the nether frost fires, the long night of the utter darkness, the twilight of the gods, the eternal hall of the slain, the city of Asgard – long and wonderful was the saga song of the white-haired woman who had, it was said, seen the ice of more than fivescore winters float out of the North Sea.

She ceased speaking and sank back into the chair as if all life had gone out of her. Rigid and motionless she sat, and there was no light in her eyes, but none went near her, nor did any speak. There was indeed a momentary outburst of approval, but it hushed itself. Even a fierce laugh that came to the lips of the tall young warrior died away half uttered.

Almost at the same moment another sound began to fill the hall. It came, at the first, from a large harp that stood a few paces back from the fire. Over the strings of this harp were wandering the long, bony fingers of a pair of gigantic hands, while behind it, on a low stool, swayed and twisted a form whose breadth of shoulder and length of arm were out of all proportion to its height. The head was bald except for a fringe of reddish-gray hair above the ears. The face was scarred and seamed to distortion, the right eye having been extinguished by a sword stroke which, by its furrow, must have half cloven the frontal bone. Age was indicated by the tangled gray beard which floated down below the belt, but not in the powerful, rich-toned voice of the harper, for the smoke seemed to eddy and the fire to dance as the harp twanged more loudly, and then there came to join it a burst of stormy song – a song of battles on the land and on the sea; a song of the mighty deeds done by the warriors of old time; a song of fierce and stirring incitement to the performance of similar feats by those who listened.

The harp grew then more softly musical, for he sang of the blue waves and the sunny shores of the southern seas; of their islands of beauty; of their harbors of peace and their cities of splendor; of temples and castles; of gold and silver and gems; but he seemed to drift beyond all these into a song of something beautiful, which yet was vague and far away and indescribable. His thought and word concerning it became like a refrain, until the minds of all who heard were filled with ideas of the dim and unattainable glory of the land of heroes, the city of the gods, the return of the White One, and the rising of the sun that will never set. Like deep answering unto deep were the last utterances

of harp and harper, and as they suddenly ceased the tall young warrior stepped forward two paces and cried loudly:

"O Hilda! wise woman of the hundred winters, if this is indeed to be thy last – "

"I shall go out with the spring flood," she said, interrupting him, "but thou wilt be upon the sea when they lay me in the cleft between the rocks."

"I will go forth as thou sayest," he responded. "Am I not of the sons of the gods? I will sail as my father sailed and as Oswald has sung. I will crush, like him, the galleys of the Romans. I will look upon the cities of the east and of the south. I am of Odin's line. I will go out in the good ship *The Sword*, and will sail until I see the hero god and the city of the gods and the land of the living sun."

Loud now rang the shouts of approval from the bearded vikings as they sprang to their feet and began to crowd around their young leader.

"Go, O Ulric, son of Odin! Sail on into the sunset and the farther sea!" came trumpetlike from the white lips of Hilda.

Low sounds arose, too, from the strings of the harp, but the door swung suddenly open and upon the threshold stood a man garbed in wolfskins.

"Hael, Ulric the Jarl!" he shouted, and there were many exclamations here and there around the room.

"Hael, Wulf the Skater!" heartily responded Ulric. "What bringest thou?"

"Good tidings!" replied Wulf, joyously, stepping forward. "I came down the mountain slide and across the fiord. No other foot will cross it this season. During days the ice hath weakened and now the wind is changing southerly. There is already a rift in the sky. O son of Brander the Brave, be thou ready for the spring outing!"

"Odin!" shouted Ulric. "Keels for the open sea! Hael to the cruise of *The Sword*! Hael to the bright south! And I, Ulric the Jarl, I of the sons of the gods, I will go out and I will not return until I have looked into the face of one of the gods. And he will know me, and he will take me by the hand, and he will bid me walk with him into the city of the living sun!"

Glad were the hearts of all the vikings as they heard, and with one accord they shouted loudly:

"Hael to Ulric the Jarl! Hael to the cruise of *The Sword*! We are his men and with him we will go!"

Long had been the winter and slow had been the coming of the change for which men waited. Welcome was Wulf the Skater, but Oswald's fingers were slowly busy among the strings of his harp, and they found strange sounds which came out one by one.

"The message of the harp!" muttered Hilda. "It is like the moaning of the sea in the fiord in the long night."

CHAPTER II.

The Going Out of the Ice

Wulf the Skater brought true tidings to the house of Ulric, the son of Brander the Brave, on the day of Saturn. Winter was ending. The word passed on from house to house until all in the village came out and looked upward, seeking for the blue rift in the sky. The wind blew not now as in the morning. The north wind had gone elsewhere, and instead there came up from the south a breathing which was fitful and faint at first. It was cool, also, from having touched the frost faces on its way. Only one more hour went by and the sky was almost clear, so that the sun shone down unhindered and his heat was surprisingly strong.

The south wind grew warmer and more vigorous toward sunset, but with him now came a fog so dense that no man cared to go out into it; for if he did, it was as though darkness touched him. All through the evening the south wind sighed softly among the homes of the vikings, and went wandering up the fiords, and felt its way, shivering, across the flinty levels of the frozen sea, but toward the morning of the day of the sun the breeze brought with it, also, to help it, a copious warm rain. Before the noon torrents were leaping down the sides of the mountains and the sea was beginning to groan and heave and struggle in its effort to take off and put away its winter mail.

"Harken!" said Oswald, the harper, as he sat by the now smoldering fire in the hall of Ulric's house.

"I hear," said Hilda from her place on the other side of the ash heap. "It is the last time that I shall listen to the song of the outing ice, but I shall feel the wind from the sun land and I shall see the grass green in the valley before I go. There will be buds on the trees when I pass down into the earth to meet my kindred. O what a realm is that! The land of shadows. The under world which has the sod for a roof. But the old runes on the rocks tell of wide places. One may travel far in that land, and where I may go I know not."

The gnarled fingers of Oswald were searching among the strings of his harp, but only discords answered his touches.

"I have heard," he said, "that they hang their shields on the roots of the trees, and they see as we see in a twilight. I think I have heard them harping in the summer nights, when the moon was full and the wind was in the pines. I would that my own harp might be buried with me."

"No need," said Hilda. "They have better harps than thine. They will give thee one. It is well that the weapons of a warrior should be placed beside him in his tomb, but they must be marred in token that he useth them no more. He hath left others for his kinsmen. There are many good swords in the old tombs. One day they will all be opened and the blades will be found."

"And also much treasure," grumbled Oswald; but his harp twanged angrily as he said it, for he had ever been a man to hold fast anything in the shape of coined money or of precious metal. Many were said to be the outland coins in his leather bag in his room at the southerly end of the house. He had sometimes shown them to inquiring folk, but grudgingly, and he had always tied them up again tightly, as if he feared that there might be a thief even among the vikings.

Hilda arose and walked slowly across the room to the open door. She looked toward the sea, but the mist and the rain were a curtain.

"Hammers!" she said. "I can hear them. Ulric and his men are at work upon the ship. She will be ready to launch when the ice goeth out. She will sail to the Middle Sea, but when I look for her I cannot see her come again."

Once more she turned, and this time her slow and stately march carried her to the farther end of the hall, on the dais, where many suits of armor were hanging. She went straight to one of these and she touched it, piece by piece, while Oswald leaned upon his harp and watched her.

"When the hour was upon me," she said, "I saw the son of Brander in battle, and the men upon whom his ax was falling bore shields like this. There were dark men with them, wearing turbans. It is well. I think that at the end of this cruise he will come to me where I am. It were no shame to his father's son that the valkyrias, when they come to call the hero to Valhalla, should find him circled with slain Romans. Brander the Sea King took these arms for his trophies in the great fight off the coast of Britain. He drove the Roman galley ashore. He burned it with fire. Not one Roman escaped."

"I have seen Britain," muttered Oswald.

"Brander the Brave liked Britain well," continued Hilda. "It is a fair land, he said. If he could take more men with him, he would drive out of it the Romans and the Britons and keep it. But he said they have no good winters there, and the summers are all too long. It would be no land for me. What would I do in an island where the fiords do not shut up at the right season? I should perish!"

Very thoughtful was the face of the tall daughter of the Northland as she passed along, inspecting the armor and talking to herself about its varied history. Some of it had been won in fights with far-away peoples before she was born, but more of it had been brought into that hall before her eyes, and she had heard the bringers tell the tales which belonged to its pieces and to the swords and spears. Now, therefore, hanging there on the wall, the war treasures of the house of Brander were page-marks for her memory, and she also was a book of the old history of the Northmen from the days of the gods to this hour of her own closing.

Swiftly went by the day of rain and thaw, but their work was tenfold in the night which followed it. The rain fell on the roof in increasing abundance, and the wind threw it with force against the sides of the house. The torrents on the mountains grew into small swift rivers, and they made a continual loud sound of rushing water; but that was not the tumult which so filled the air and smote upon the ear. All other sounds were overborne by the booming and groaning of the ice and by the roar with which its loosened edges ground against the granite cliffs in the fiords.

The day of Saturn had been a day of frost and snow and storm until near its close. The day of the sun had brought the sun's breath from his own land and his smile into the sky, and he had slain the winter at a blow. The morrow would be the day of the moon, and before its arrival came now this night of such uproar that Oswald did not care to touch his harp, and the vikings mended their armor and sharpened their swords in silence. Hilda also was long silent, nor had Ulric the Jarl spoken aught that could be heard by all. When at last his voice arose, and men put by their work to hear, he gave answer to a question of Tostig the Red.

"Aye!" he said loudly, "the ship is ready from stem to stern. We will launch her behind the ice as it leaveth the shore. We will follow the floes as the tides bear them southward; ever do they melt as they go. So shall no other ship sail before us, and we shall be the first of all keels from the Northland, this year, among the islands of the Middle Sea."

Fiercely twanged the harp of Oswald and loud rang the shouts of the men who heard the young jarl speak his purpose, but before the harp could sound again Hilda arose in her place.

"Son of Brander," she said, "thou wilt go. Thou wilt see many things. All day have I been watching thy path, and the clouds are over it. In this thing that I now tell thee, do thou as did thy father: crush the keels of Rome in the seas of Britain and smite the men of Rome on the British island. And in the end of all thou wilt die, as did thy father, at the hand of a spearman of Cæsar."

"So be it," shouted Ulric, with a laugh on his lips and a flash of fire in his bold, bright eyes; "I ask no better!"

He said no more, but seated himself and began to sharpen his seax on a smooth, hard stone.

CHAPTER III.

The Launching of "The Sword."

The day of the moon, the second day of the week, dawned brightly over the village of the vikings. The faces of the cliffs along the shores of the Northland boomed back continuous echoes of the thunderous reports of the splitting ice. The frost had been strong, and the winter mail of the sea was thick and hard, but the sun and the lifting tides and all the torrents from the mountains made a league, and they were more powerful than was the ice. The south wind also helped them.

All the hours since Wulf the Skater brought the news of the coming thaw had been spent by Ulric and his men in getting the good ship *The Sword* ready for the water. No room in her was to be wasted, and her hollow, to her very keel, was now closely packed with provisions, taking the place of other ballasting. There were tightly stowed barrels of pork and beef, and there were bags and boxes of hard bread, and casks of ale and casks of water. Over the greater part of these were planks fastened down like a deck, for the voyage to be undertaken promised to be long, and all except provisions for immediate use must be sealed until a day of need.

The seats of the rowers were all in, and the short oars, and also the long oars, which a man would stand erect to pull with. The small boats were fastened upon the half decks, fore and aft. The mast was now stayed and rigged and the spars and the sail had been swung in their places. Not of woven stuff was the sail, but of many well-dressed skins of leather, that it might toughly withstand any gale.

There were twenty oars on a side, and the crew who were to do the rowing, taking their turns, had been carefully selected during the winter. Their war shields were hung along the bulwarks, and they placed them there with great pride. The chosen men who lived further inland were now arriving, and they were as eager as were the men who dwelt on the shore. Stalwart and high-hearted were all the vikings who were to sail in *The Sword*. Among them were veterans who had fought under Brander the Brave, the father of Ulric, and others were youths who were now going out for their first venture in distant seas. Great store of weapons went on board, for there had been much making of bows and arrows and swords and spears and shields all winter. So the gray-headed and caretaking warriors declared that the ship was exceedingly well provided.

At the dawn of the day of the moon Ulric the Jarl stood at high-water mark looking seaward.

"As the tide turneth I shall know," he said to those who were with him. "The flood hath lifted the ice, but the ebb must lower it. *The Sword* will be launched at the next high tide if the outing is good."

That might be toward the evening, and word went out so that all might be ready.

The ship as yet bore no flag, but on the forward half deck stood a great anvil, carved finely of oak and blackened, and upon the anvil was fastened a massive hammer, made in like manner, that Thor the Great, the god of war, the smith god, might go with *The Sword* into any battle. Now could more fully be seen the carvings and the gildings and the many rich ornamentations which had been lavished upon the ship, and men who now saw her for the first time marveled at her beauty and at the strength of her timbers.

"Larger ships have been," they said, "but not many, nor was there ever one that gave better promise of bearing well the shock of another ship or the stroke of an ice floe."

All day the sound of harping could be heard in the house, for other harpers besides Oswald were now there, and they played and sang in a rivalry with each other. Hilda was not to be seen. It was said that she had shut herself up in her own room and would have none speak with her. Although the house was thronged, there were none who thought well to disturb her. Not many, indeed, were curious enough to pass near the closed door behind which she was believed to be looking into the twilight where the gods live, and out of which come those whose shadows darken the woods at times and whose voices are heard in the night as they talk to one another across the fiords.

The noon came and at low tide the ice edge was out twenty fathoms from the shore, leaving clear water behind it. If it should shove in again, there would be no launching, but as the ebb ceased there came an unexpected help. A mighty drift of snow and ice had formed, in early winter, hundreds of feet above the level, and yet in a hollow of the high mountain at the head of the fiord. Hard and strong was the grasp of this glacier upon the rocks and trees at its sides, but under it was a stream which had been covered, though not entirely closed. Above and beyond was now a lake of melted snow, and the water from it was forcing its way under the glacier by that rivulet channel, mining, mining, mining, until its work was done.

There was a great sound of breaking, a sound that was sharp, rasping, shrieking, as if the mountain uttered a great cry to see the glacier tear itself free and spring forward. The screams of a gier-eagle, startled from the withered pine tree on the summit, answered the scream of the mountain. Down, down, faster and faster, to the sheer precipice at the face of the fiord, and then the glacier itself uttered an awful roar as it leaped headlong from the cliff. A thunderous boom responded from the smitten face of the ice, and through the clefts that were made in all directions the freed salt water bounded high into the sunshine, which it had not seen since it was imprisoned in the dark by the winter. The entire mass went over, and with it went the boulders, earth, and trees which it had rent off and brought away. The blow which it struck was as a blow from the hammer of Thor, and a vast wave rolled out of the fiord, breaking the nearer ice as it went and splitting square miles of the sea face beyond into floes of a right size for drifting. Out slipped the ice edge at the cove, a hundred fathoms further. In it came again angrily, but only to retreat once more and leave a wider, surer harbor for *The Sword* to dip her keel into when her launching hour should come.

All things were ready, both at the house and on the shore, when Oswald left his harp to go and speak to one of the maidens, of whom were many come to see the warriors depart.

"Go thou to Hilda," he said. "Say to her that shortly she will be needed at the ship."

"Come," said the maiden to other women who were near her, for she cared not to go alone.

Truly it was not far to go and come, stepped they never so slowly, and they soon brought back word that her door was open, but Hilda they did not find, nor did any know whither she had gone.

"So?" said Oswald, thoughtfully. "Pass thou on, then, and tell this to Ulric, the son of Brander, for he will understand. Bid Wulf the Skater and Tostig the Red that they come now to me."

Hastily went the maiden, for of this errand she had no fear.

On the summit of a low hill not more than half a mile from the house was a great heap of stones. Around it, in an oval, standing like watchful sentries, were many great stones, tall and upright. Upon the faces of these uprights were chiseled words in the old runes. A path that led to this hill had been kept open during the winter, and when Hilda left the house, with none to mark her going, she had walked along this path. The snow in it was soft, taking footprints, and Hilda stooped, looking closely at some which were already there. She followed them until they ceased at the heap of stones. She smiled and bowed her head approvingly.

"Ulric hath been here," she said. "He hath spoken to his father at the tomb. The son of the hero will himself be a hero. There is no other like him among the young branches of the tree of Odin."

Strong affection sounded in her words concerning the youthful head of the ancient house of Brander the Brave. A flush came for a moment into her withered face, and she stood in silence gazing at the tomb. Slowly her arms arose, waving, and her lips opened in a recitative that sounded like a song, wherein she was speaking to the father of Ulric and to other names than his, calling them her kindred. Louder, more weird, mournful, thrilling, grew the tomb song of the old saga woman. But it suddenly ceased, for to her came a response from one that stood upon the crest of the central heap of stones.

Not in any human voice of the dead or of the living was her answer, but from the gaunt and grisly shape of a large gray she-wolf, famished-looking, that stood there, snapping fiercely her bloody jaws and gazing at Hilda. Then lifted the wolf her head to send forth a long-drawn, wailing howl.

The long, late winter had been a hard one for all wolves and for other wild beasts, for against them the sheepfolds had been well guarded. And now this hunger-driven monster from the mountains had taken her opportunity to venture in almost to the village, finding this day a flock without a shepherd. She had ravaged unfought, and now she was here upon the tomb of Brander. Her presence there was as if she had been a written message to Hilda.

"Art thou here?" she exclaimed. "Aye! Thou art as I saw thee at the house. Thou art the name of Rome, O bloody mouth! Scourge of the world! Curse of all nations! Hungry one! The swords of the Northmen shall yet smite the cubs of the she-wolf in their own den."

A sharp, harsh bark, another howl, and a snapping of jaws replied to her and then the she-wolf sprang away, disappearing beyond the tomb, but Hilda turned and walked homeward along the path, muttering low as she went.

When Tostig the Red and Wulf the Skater came to Oswald, the harper, he gave them an errand, for they at once went away together to one of the best made of the stables in the rear of the house. They had not yet returned when Hilda walked past the house and on down to the beach. All men knew that the right hour for the launching of *The Sword* had come when Hilda came and stood at the prow of the vessel, laying her hand upon it.

She spoke then but few words, pointing at the heaps of driftwood and loose pieces of timber which were there and giving her commands. Those who heard her began to gather all this wood into a great heap. It was more like two heaps, for there was left a bare spot in the middle large enough for a yawlboat to have been lodged therein.

Ulric, the son of Brander, came and stood by Hilda, and as she looked at him the color arose again into her face and a kindly light kindled in her eyes. He also smiled at her very lovingly. She spoke a word that none else heard, and he blew three long, powerful blasts upon his war horn. From all directions came in haste the vikings and the other shore people and the upland people, both the old and the young, men and women. From the house came all who were in it. Oswald and the other harpers marched to the beach together, bringing their harps.

Now from the stables beyond the house came Tostig the Red and Wulf the Skater leading between them, whether he would or not, the snow-white colt which at two years seemed large for a four-year-old, but which as yet had neither been bridled nor mounted. That was partly because of the spirit that was in him; for none but Ulric or Hilda would he willingly let lay a hand upon him, and his eyes now grew red as if he were fretted overmuch. As he was led along he reared and plunged and snorted furiously, but Tostig and Wulf were strong men and they brought him to the heap of wood and in front of the hollow in its middle.

Hilda had brought with her a long polished staff of ash wood, which had something of woven cloth stuff wrapped closely around it. Now she made a sign to Oswald and he struck his harp. So did the other harpers, following him, and the sound of their music stirred the blood of all who heard, so that the men shouted and clashed their spears upon their shields. Then ceased all the harps but that of Oswald, and he sang a song of war which called upon Odin and all the gods to sail with their ship, *The Sword*, and give her a successful cruise, with many battles and much blood and great plundering and many burnings of the ships and of the strongholds of foemen.

The tide was rising fast, but the ice came no nearer the shore, and it was seen that there would be free searoom for the launching. All things else were ready for this, and the launchers with their hammers and their handspikes were prepared to go to their places. Oswald ended his song and all looked at Hilda. She did not at once speak, and her face grew ghastly as the face of one from whom life had departed. Taller she seemed as she raised her right hand and pointed to the colt.

"Ulric the Jarl," she said, in a hollow voice, but clear, "son of Brander the Brave, heir of the old house of the sea kings, son in the true line of the hero gods and of Odin, slay now the white horse of the Saxons and launch thy keel into the sea!"

Tostig and Wulf forced back the plunging colt into the hollow between the heaps, and Ulric walked forward, drawing his seax as he went. He put his left hand upon the face of the colt and it stood still, looking at him and neighing gently, while at every corner of the heaps torches of blazing pine were thrust quickly in by old women named for that duty by Hilda.

She had walked away to a little distance from the ship, and she stood now between the sea and the land, upon a spot where the sand was dry and smooth. Upon this she drew runes with the point of the staff that was in her hand, all the while chanting a saga which none of those who heard her could understand, except that they knew in it the names of the gods.

"Son of Odin," she shouted, "strike!"

"Odin!" responded Ulric, as he drove his seax to the hilt into the breast and through the heart of the colt.

It gave one cry that sounded like a human voice in sudden despair. It made one plunging struggle, restrained by Ulric, and then the beautiful animal lay quivering in the hollow. At once a heap of fuel was piled in front of it, concealing the sacrifice to Odin, and the long fingers of the fire seized rapidly upon the dry pine and the cedar and the firwood.

Loudly sounded the harps. Loud was the song in which all voices were joining. Out of the fiord came booming a great roar of the sea, for he was smiting his crags and dashing the floes of ice against the granite faces.

Hilda came again to the ship, unfolding as she walked that which was wrapped around her staff, and the south wind that was blowing blew it out so that all might see. It was a great banner, for a battlefield or for the mast of a warship. It was black, and upon it, fully half the size of the colt which had been slain, was painted the sign of the race of Brander, only to be carried before chiefs of Odin's line, the White Horse of the Saxons. Hilda placed the staff in the hands of Ulric, and he at once sprang on board the ship. He blew a blast of his war horn, and in a moment all the launchers were at their stations. Another blast, and all the rowers came on board and took their seats, taking hold of the short oars, ready to dip them, while tenscore more of vikings, fully mailed and armed, followed and posted themselves fore and aft, spear and shield and ax in hand. Ulric the Jarl stood by the hammer of Thor on the fore deck and raised his horn again. At this third blast, as he blew it, the launchers hammered hard and plied their handspikes and their levers.

"Go forth into the sea, O *Sword*!" shouted Hilda. "Thy beak shall break the ribs of the triremes and thy keel shall plow the seas of the south!"

Out sprang the vessel, so deftly shaped, so strongly made, so well manned, and into the sea she glided, while Ulric, the son of Brander, lifted high the standard and sounded again his war horn. Every harp twanged its loudest, and every horn on board the ship and on the shore, and every voice, joined in the shout of joy that hailed so successful a launching.

The Sword was now upon the sea, floating at the end of her shore hawser, while the crew lowered her anchors from the prow and stern. On the shore the fire flared upward like the streamers in the northern sky in winter.

The pallor on Hilda's face grew ghastlier still, and she walked to the house, forbidding any to come with her. As she went she muttered:

"Beautiful is the son of Brander, my boy! my hero! I love him as if I were his mother. Alas, she is not here to love him! O, I am old and it may be that I see not that which I seem to see when my eyes are opened. Not so! Him I shall look upon no more, nor upon the ship. I go, for I am very old. But I would that the young hero might not go down so soon. I would that he might win love and that he might bring home a bride, lest the race of Brander the Sea King should die with him. The gods be his guard where he goeth and the valkyrias find him not for a season!"

So the lonely old woman went into the house and went to her own room. She had seen the launching of *The Sword*, and the ship was to go out with the outing ice.

Rocking at her anchor lay she now, and all along the shore were men and women who rejoiced to look upon her and to think her the most perfect ship that had ever been built on the coast of the Northland. The fire was blazing high above the sacrifice to the gods, for many hands were ready to put on fuel, from time to time, and all knew that it must burn until *The Sword* should be out of sight.

It was when the sun was sinking, and the waves were washing gently and murmuring low along the beach because of the softness of the warm wind from the south, that Hilda came again, walking hastily. Her head was covered with her hood, and they saw not her face, but she spoke to a youth who stood by a small boat.

"Take thy boat," she said. "Go thou to the ship. Give Hilda's word to Ulric the Jarl. Bid him come to the shore, coming alone, rowing himself. Stay thou there until he returneth. Bid him that not one man of those who are now on board shall come again to the shore."

The youth sprang into his boat and went with his message. The men on the ship were greatly busied with stowing of goods and with other care for the fittings of all kinds, but they saw his coming, and Tostig the Red hailed him:

"What doest thou, coming to the ship? Is it not forbidden?"

Then the youth replied with Hilda's message, and Ulric himself came, but he descended into the boat without speaking while the youth clambered on board. It was for him a matter of pride, and a thing to be remembered in after days, that his was the last foot of any among the shore people to tread the deck of the beautiful ship before she should sail for the Middle Sea, and for the fights in which she was to crush the galleys of those far-away nations.

Ulric took the oars and rowed to the place where he saw Hilda awaiting him, and she was alone. She had her staff in her hand and she was again tracing runes upon the sand. It was the spot where she had stood before the sacrifice was slain, and neither man nor woman would have dared to tread upon it until after the next tide. This, when it should come, would wash out the marks which had been made by Hilda. Ulric stepped out and drew up his boat and walked near her.

"I have sent for thee," she said, "to show thee a thing. Thou art ready, and thy ship. See to it that naught else be sent to her from the shore. None of the men must again set foot upon the land. Sail thou away this night, and linger not."

"I had so ordered," responded Ulric. "The ice goeth out steadily, and we are to follow it. But I am glad to say this last word with thee, for thou art very dear to me."

"More than my son art thou," said Hilda, "because thou art also of the sons of the gods."

"There are gods in the south," said Ulric, thoughtfully. "I have it in my mind that I shall see one of them before I return. I would that I could see him in battle, like Thor, or Tiw, or Odin."

"Be thou thyself like one of them," said Hilda, and she gazed at him lovingly, throwing back her hood.

Very bright were her eyes for a moment and then they grew sad and dim, as if a mist from the fiord had floated into them. Ulric looked upon her withered face as if also it were beautiful to him, and he said:

"Thou art a loving woman and true, and I will keep thy bidding on the sea and on the land."

"I shall see thee not again," she said, "and I willed to look upon thy face this once."

"It may be that thou wilt be here when I return," he responded, but she shook her head.

"Son of Odin, not so," she said, in a low, soft voice, like that of the young who love and are parting. "Me thou wilt not see, and I know not if in any manner I am again to see thee. They of that land into which I quickly go do sometimes see the people of this land, when the gods permit. If so, I will come to thee some evening when there is a silence around thee, and I will touch thee on the forehead, thus," and she leaned forward and kissed him, placing her hands upon his shoulders.

"I will welcome thee!" he said, with a great thrill, and she stood erect, continuing her last words.

"I have this much more to tell," she said. "Thou wilt sail far and contend with many. As thou knowest well, thou wilt meet no foemen like the men of Rome, on land or sea. Thou wilt not tarry

long in any place, for thou art a viking, and thou hast no home in the south. Thou wilt go on from place to place until thou shalt come to this harbor, or city." She pointed at the runes drawn upon the sand at her feet, and he replied:

"I cannot read them, O Hilda! They are in another tongue. They are unlike any that I ever saw."

"Neither can I read them," said Hilda. "But note them with care, for when thou seest them upon the ground of any land thy voyage is ended."

So Ulric stooped low and studied well the deeply graven furrows which the saga woman, the seeress, had drawn upon the sand. They were in shape like this:

"Thou seest?" she said.

But the runes were close to the water's edge and the tide was coming in. At that moment came a great swell out of the fiord, rising and surging along the beach, and it put out a hand of foam, glittering in the light from the setting sun. Hilda stepped back beyond its reach, and so did Ulric, for a sound came with it. Back fled the billow, breaking as it went, but it left behind it no trace of those strange runes on the sand.

Hilda clasped Ulric in her arms, for a moment, but she did not weep.

"Go thou to thy ship," she said. "I go to my own place."

"Farewell, my best friend," he replied, but she turned and walked away, and all who met her made room for her, for a low voice like a wail crept out from under her hood, and she did not walk firmly, as was her custom.

"Very great was her love for the son of Brander," said all of them; and they knew that this was her last season, for she had told them so, even at Yule.

Ulric rowed to the ship and went on board. The youth returned to the shore with his boat. The sailors pulled up the anchors. Then the watchers on the shore saw the long oars go out, the rowers standing in their places on either side of the ship, while the young jarl, the leader of men, stood alone at the stern, steering with one hand while the other held his war horn. Long and powerful was the blast he blew, for it was a farewell to the Northland and to the people he was to see no more. So sailed away the good ship *The Sword*. It had been a grand launching, but there were those upon the beach who turned and went away to their houses mournfully, even weeping.

In the house of Brander there was silence. Hilda had gone to her own room. All guests had departed. The household folk were for the greater part at the beach, by the fire of sacrifice, and Oswald, the harper, sat in his place with his harp before him, leaning upon it.

CHAPTER IV.

The Ship "The Sword" and the Ice King

The morning of the day of Tiw dawned mistily across the cold North Sea. Everywhere, as the sun looked in through the floating curtains of fog, he could see steel-blue waves wrestling foamily with the masses of ice. Who in this place would imagine that in some other, far away, the same sun had found the bright flowers and green leaves of the fully opened spring?

The wind increased with the coming of the sunshine, as if the additional warmth brought to it better strength wherewith to blow away the mists. One mound of white vapor had been thicker and higher than its neighbors. It had gathered over something that it was hiding, but the breeze blew now a short, sharp gust and the mound was gone. So was uncovered the good ship *The Sword*, and her crew could discern what things might be around them.

Ulric the Jarl was standing in full armor on the fore deck. He had been waiting for this clearing, and now he put his horn to his lips. He blew it lustily, and all who heard him raised a shout, for they knew that no land was in sight and that their voyage had begun.

"We have gone far in the night," said a large man standing near the jarl. "But there is much ice. We can do little more than drift, but we can use the oars somewhat."

"We shall go but little faster than doth the ice," replied Ulric. "But, O Knud the Bear, thou wilt off with that black shirt of thine when this sun is higher."

There was loud laughing at that, for Knud was clad in the warm skins of the bears he had slain. Even upon his head was that which had covered the skull of the largest of them. Good clothing it was for winter time, but it was likely to prove heavy gear for southern wearing.

The jarl gazed southward, hoping to see open water, but only ice fields lay between him and the horizon. The mist was fast disappearing, nevertheless, and those who were watching were seeing further; but now a great cry arose from the stern, where Wulf the Skater was taking his turn at the helm.

"O jarl!" he shouted. "Mark! Seest thou how we are pursued? Come hither!"

Down from the fore deck and quickly along the ship to the after deck went Ulric and those who were with him, and there was no need for any man to point with his hand as Wulf was pointing.

"The ice king!" he said, shivering. "I told thee how I saw him anchor off the North Cape when the leaves fell, and the first freezing put ice around him over the calm waters. He came down from his own place that far last summer. He seemeth to me to be as tall as ever, and he hath many strong floes with him."

Ulric looked, and so did they all, saying nothing at first, for the sight was rare. Not often did any mountain of ice float into that water; and here was a mighty one. His peak arose, they could not tell how high, and the sun was glittering gorgeously among his crags.

"He is moving faster than we are!" exclaimed Tostig the Red. "He will strive to overtake us. He could crush us like a nutshell with one of his crags."

"We will keep out of his path if we may," responded Ulric. "But how is it that he saileth along so well against the wind without oars? There is no tide. If there were any current, it would be with us as much as with him."

"Aye," said Tostig the Red. "But did not Hilda ever tell thee? I have heard her speak of these ice kings. The gods that walk on the bottom of the sea push him along that he may go south and die, for his time hath nearly come. Never, I think, was anything like him seen below the fiords until this day."

Vast, truly, was this ice mountain which was nearing them, propelled by some unseen hand. If there had been a strong undercurrent it would have moved the wonder from the north in precisely

this manner. Nevertheless all Northmen of the sea knew that any peak of ice above the surface must rest upon a mass of ice seven times greater.

All the vikings upon *The Sword* watched earnestly for the next sign of whatever was to come, but Ulric took the helm and sent the rowers to the long oars, two men to each oar. Well and vigorously did they row, and the ship was deftly steered into and through one after another of the open channels between the small floes around her. Much distance was gained, but at last the ice fields beyond began to close tightly and the rowing ceased.

"Son of Brander!" shouted Knud the Bear from the fore deck. "Mark! The floes are lifting!"

All saw that it was true. Under all the nearer ice-pack a hidden field, the forefoot of the iceberg, was slipping steadily on unseen until those floes rested upon it. And now there came a grating sound along the keel of *The Sword*, and she too was lifted. The ice arose with her, so that she sat firmly in a great cleft of it, remaining upright, indeed, but as completely out of water as she had been upon the strand before her launching.

Silent and stern stood Ulric, facing the ice king and asking of himself, "My voyage hath but begun, and is it ended? Was my ship built for this?"

Not so was it with the mind of Knud the Bear, for he gazed long and joyously upon the untellable beauty and majesty of the ice king, and then with a great laugh he shouted:

"Sons of the Northland, the gods are with us. They have sent him. Nothing can stay him. He will carry us fast and far. There will be no toilsome rowing, and we need not care for the direction of the wind. The gods of the frozen sea come with him. They would send us south that they may go and fight the gods of the islands where there is no ice, for they hate them."

"So be it!" replied Ulric, gloomily, but he looked again and he said to Knud, "I know not the ice gods, but I think there are friends of thine yonder. Seest thou?"

Every man was gazing, for there was naught else left to do. Around the pinnacles and the cliffs of the ice king there were sea birds flying and screaming. On the snow-packed levels there were brant and geese and ducks and other fowl that should have been at the south by this time, and that would soon, no doubt, be going.

"Odin the Strong!" exclaimed Knud, "I see what thou meanest. I had seen a white fox, I thought, but yonder are the bears of the night country. They are white, that they may see one another in the dark, and there is nothing else that is so fierce as they are."

"Hilda sayeth," replied Ulric, "that all the world north and east of us must forever belong to the sign of the bear. Hast thou ever slain one of these white ones?"

"Never," said Knud. "I have not hunted to the northward so far as to know much of them. Wulf the Skater hath met them oft enough on the north coast, but they go back into the night, for they hate the sun. If it would not anger the ice king, I would go out and slay one even now. But he brought them with him."

So thought others of the vikings, as if the crew of white monsters now clambering nearer over the rugged ridges of the ice were as his own cattle to the mighty gnome who had builded this frozen tower for his castle.

"As many they are," said Tostig, "as the fingers of a hand. I have heard that they have no fear of men."

If the bears had no fear, they at least had much curiosity, and they were coming to inquire what this might be that lay upon the ice with so many men walking around within it.

Ulric went into the after cabin for a heavier spear than was the light weapon he had with him, saying to Knud, "White bear have I never slain. This chance is mine, but the second fight belongeth to thee. I do not rob thee of thy hunt."

"Thine by right, O jarl, is yonder great one," replied Knud. "No man may go before thee unless thou wert hurt or dead. But I warn thee that the long claw, over there, were he to grapple thee, is worse to meet than might be three Romans."

"I would face more than three Romans," laughed Ulric. "But thy pale friend on the floe is a king of bears."

He returned speedily, armed and armored for battle. The spear he brought was long and strong, with a steel crossguard at the heel of its broad blade. It was very sharp, but its weight would have been unwieldy for a slight man.

Twenty fathoms from the stern of the ship stood the great bear growling, and the others walked around at a greater distance. He was a fathom and a half in length and his paws were tremendous, with claws like reaping hooks. No man ever faced any beast more terrible in aspect than was that angry monster from the darkness which broodeth over the forever frozen sea.

Down stepped Ulric, and when he was a few yards from the ship some of the men followed with Knud, but not too near, lest any should seem to help and so should spoil the honor of the fight.

The surface of the ice was broken and there were chasms in it, but it was as firm to stand upon as the dry land. Moreover, *The Sword* was now lying not far away from the mighty perpendicular front of the ice king. None knew yet what might be his aspect looking northward, and there were those among the vikings on the ship who shook their heads doubtfully, considering this matter of the bears.

Stone still stood this bear, growling at intervals, until the jarl drew within six paces, holding his spear leveled. Then, with a loud roar and a clashing of his teeth, the huge beast made his rush, rising upon his hind feet and spreading his enormous arms to close with Ulric. Had he done so his hug would have been speedy death, but the point of the spear met him firmly, with a thrust which buried the blade to the crossguard midway between his shoulders.

"That would slay anything else that liveth," said Knud to Tostig, "but the white ones die hard. Mark! the jarl! The son of Brander! It is grand!"

His comrades answered with a shout and then they were still, and so were all the vikings, who crowded the decks and bulwarks of the ship, looking on.

Horrible was now the roaring of the bear as he struggled against the spear of Ulric, striving to plunge nearer. What tenacity of life must have been his, to fight on with the spear blade in him so deeply! Around swung Ulric on the slippery ice and his whole frame was strained to its uttermost endurance by the swift changes of that wrestling, but the plunges of the bear forced him backward a fathom at a time. His face was now but an arm's length from that of his vast antagonist, and they were looking each other eye to eye. Red and yet full of green fire were the eyes of the bear, and his teeth glistened awfully in their ranges as his wide jaws opened to gnash them. But that the descendant of Odin was many times stronger than other men the combat might here have ended.

"Slip not now!" shouted Knud. "Son of Brander, there is a chasm behind thee. Stand fast, if thou canst! Thou art beyond our help!"

Only his own length from him was the cleft in the ice floe, and it went down to deep water. If he should fall into it in his heavy armor, none might hope to see him again.

Roar – roar – roar – in dreadful wrath and pain struggled the bear, for this was his death throe; but Ulric's foot found a brace – a break in the ice – and he gathered his last strength, the strength of the sons of Odin, the hero might of the old gods.

Snap! The tough ashen shaft of the spear broke at the guard, and both bear and hero fell heavily, but Ulric arose with his seax in his hand. The claws of the bear wrenched away his shield as if it had been a piece of oaken bark, but the seax was driven in to the hilt, and as it came flashing out the life of the bear came with it. Over he rolled with a loud shriek, that was echoed back from the face of the ice king. Then he stretched himself at full length upon the ice and lay still, while Ulric stepped forward to cut off his forepaws for a token.

"Hael!" shouted every voice among the vikings, as the white one rolled over. "Hael to Ulric the Jarl, the son of Brander! The son of Odin! Hael to the first good death and to the long cruise of *The Sword*!"

CHAPTER V. The Unknown Thing

The ice king had lost only one of his fierce white flock. It had been the largest of them all, however; and in the latter part of Tiw's day there had been a feast of his flesh. Greatly had the crew of *The Sword* enjoyed that feast, and they believed the saying of Knud that there was courage and strength to be gained by such eating after so brave a battle. "The gods themselves eat mightily," he said, "and they have nothing better than this."

During that day a number of the vikings went out to explore the ice fields somewhat, and they captured many wild fowl easily with bow and arrow. They reported having seen in the distance other animals, like great seals or walruses. They also planned to hunt the remaining bears, but the jarl forbade it, being unwilling that they should go far from the ship lest harm should befall them from sudden breaking of the ice.

Nevertheless, to all testing, it seemed to be packing even more firmly. The entire visible mass of it drifted steadily southward, as if the ice king, or the under gods who were pushing him, knew of the channels by which they were to steer him into other seas than this.

Night came, and then the day of Odin. But now the worst foe of the ice king, deadlier than even the sun, was wearing him away with floods of warm rain. There were rivulets pouring down his sides, and some of his pinnacles and crags came crashing, thundering down from time to time. This was, therefore, not a good day for hunting, and the vikings passed it on board the ship, or near it, but not dismally, for there were among them many whose minds and tongues were busy with old voyages and old fights, and the land to which they had sailed. Also there were songs to sing, and there was much ale, and no man was hindered from feasting. It was a time, too, for the remembering of sagas, and many spoke of Hilda, but Ulric did not utter her name, saying rather that it would be well if Oswald and his harp were on board.

These two, indeed, the saga woman and the old harper, sat at home in the house of Brander that rainy day, speaking to one another across the ash heap, on which a slow fire smoldered. Their talk was of many things, but from all it would ever come back to some word concerning the ship and her crew and Ulric. To others Hilda had spoken little, and they noted that she had not eaten since the launching. Oswald was fretful and fitful, and he said that he cared not for harping. In an early hour of the day he had gone out and he had even climbed to the crag on the top of the headland that he might look far to seaward, but he had returned, shaking his head, to say to Hilda:

"All is ice! She is out of sight, but the floes have closed behind her."

"So they close not before her I care little," replied Hilda. "They will conquer the ice, for the sun will help them, and they are sailing nearer the sun."

Oswald was long silent then, and at last he arose and walked out of the hall while Hilda went to the door and gazed seaward. It was to his own room that the harper made his way, leaving his harp near the dais. In a far corner of the house he had been given his place, for he was held in high honor. Nevertheless, it was but small, and bare save for a table and a lamp thereon and a stool. There was, also, a heap of skins for warm sleeping, and from under this Oswald drew out something, stooping and then looking behind him to be sure the door was closed. "What will the jarl bring me, when he returneth from the southlands?" he muttered. "Bright gold, I hope, for there is more to love in the yellow, the heavy, than there is in light silver. The touch is not the same, and gold hath a better ring."

It was a bag that he held, untying its mouth, and his hand was now in it. He drew out pieces of varied shapes, looking at them and rubbing them with his fingers. "The faces of kings are on them," he said. "Runes of the southlands. I can read some, but all I cannot read. May the gods guide the jarl to places where he will find many like these and bring them to me. He careth not for them himself."

Hilda, standing in the doorway, grew sad and wistful in the face. "Gone," she said. "Gone beyond seeing or hearing. And I love him so! He is my hero! My beautiful one! I am old, and I am soon to pass away, and I know not clearly whither I go. Sometimes I would that one of the gods might come and tell what things there are in those countries for such as I am."

Then turned she and went back to her great chair by the fire; but Ulric also was thinking of her and of Oswald, for he said to Tostig and Wulf and those who were with them, under the after deck: "The tongues of the south folk? We do well to talk about them. My father knew many. Oswald, the harper, and Hilda could speak with him in all of them and they had more that he knew not. She hath learned much in her hundred years, and she is not like other women. When I was a child, and afterward, in the long winter evenings, when we had naught else to do, I loved to have them teach me, and they said it would be my need some day. I can talk with a Briton or a Roman or a Greek. But Hilda and Oswald taught me many words of a tongue that belongeth to a people who live on the easterly shore of the Middle Sea. They are a trading folk, and our sea kings found them everywhere. They are not like other folk, and they have a god of their own, but none of them can tell what he is like. I have thought I would wish to see him, but Hilda sayeth that he will not come out of his own country. And that, too, is much the same with our own gods; but I wish they may go with us now, for some of these southland gods are cunning and strong."

"Not as are the gods of the North," said Tostig, sturdily. "I too have heard of these Jews and their god, but I do not care to see either him or any other god. It is more than enough for me when I hear them whispering across the fiords."

"So!" exclaimed Wulf the Skater. "I have been out far on the ice, when there was no wind and there was a bright moon, and I have gone landward with speed lest their voices should overtake me. I heard them loudly once, and that night I was chased by many wolves. I slew some, but I stopped not for their skins, for the rest were an army."

"Glad am I," said Ulric, "that if I meet one of these gods I can speak to him fairly well in his own tongue. How else, for instance, could I question this Jew god? We shall sail all around the coasts of the Middle Sea before we come home."

"What couldst thou ask him?" replied Knud. "And what thinkest thou he might tell thee?"

"One thing that Hilda knew not," said Ulric. "I am curious if the gods of those lands know the gods of the North. I would know if this Jew god hath ever met with Odin and Thor, and whether or not they are friends. If they have fights, as do our own gods, which of them is the stronger? I have thought that if I were a god, I would bring all the others under me. It is not managed well."

"I would not have land gods meddling too much with the sea, save in battles," said Tostig. "It is well as it is. But the Middle Sea is wide; we may not look upon all of its coasts. There are deep bays and many islands."

"They say," responded Ulric, "that there is an open water leading southward, and that if one can find it and will sail into it boldly, fearing nothing, he may follow its leading until he shall find the city of Asgard and the home of the gods. Moreover, there are lands which no foot hath trodden. I would see some of them if they are to be found by sailing not too far."

So said they all, and there were other tales to tell concerning seas and lands.

They still were talking of these things when a loud shout from one of the watchers summoned them, and they rushed out to the gunwales and the decks. The rain was no longer falling and the sky was clear, so that they saw well what was doing. The ice king had not at all lost his grip upon his own floes, but southward was a vast rift in the ice pack. Wide and blue was the open water, but it was not very near them, and as they were looking at it from their icy anchorage the watcher shouted again:

"O Ulric the Jarl, whales! They will come up again from under the floes. I saw them. A great herd!"

Loud voices replied, inquiring, but they ceased, for the herd quickly showed itself. Many and huge were the whales that emerged, and some of them sprang half their length out of the water.

"They are pursued!" exclaimed Knud the Bear. "I have seen them spring in that manner when the swordfish troubled them. But see them flounder now!"

Strange indeed was the confusion and the tumbling about of this herd of the sea. They were beating the waves into foam, and they were plunging hither and thither as if wildly affrighted.

"I think that it is neither the swordfish nor the thrasher," said Tostig the Red, for he had halfway climbed the mast and he was leaning out to see. "O jarl, it is one of the monsters that Hilda hath told us of. She sayeth that only a few are left, for the gods destroyed them lest they should eat up all the whales. Look yonder!"

They were near enough to see, but could not note clearly until a great fragment broke away from the field of ice which carried *The Sword*. Through that chasm at its outer border there came up a shape which was not the head of a whale. It was long, with vast jaws, and in them were pointed saws of long white teeth, with which it tore terribly the side of a tremendous bull whale that was nearest. But the bull whale turned and fought him, and there was a vast whirling of foamy water, as the two sea creatures struggled against each other, beating with heads and fins and tails, but the vikings could none the better discern the form of the whale's enemy.

"He is a comrade of the ice king," said Wulf the Skater. "Never before was he seen in these waters. He is somewhat like a snake, but with a vast belly. I saw his head once before, long ago. Ten more were with me in the ship, and we had been long storm-driven. The old men told me much about him."

"He could upset a ship," said Tostig. "I am glad we are here on the ice. But thou mayest have seen another like him."

"Not so said the old men," replied Wulf. "He is alone. There! He showeth again!"

"I am glad we have seen him," said Ulric. "But I am more troubled concerning the ice king. See ye not that he is fast melting? I have thought that he is beginning to lean this way. We are drifting, truly, but we do not get away from him. We are his prisoners."

They well understood that there might be deadly peril for them in aught that should change the position of the iceberg, but there was naught that they could do, even if sure death were coming. So they preferred to gaze after the herd of whales, and every now and then they thought that they caught fresh glimpses of the monster from the under sea, the terror of all other monsters. Few of them but had heard and could tell old sagas of such creatures, the remnants of the forgotten days, and they agreed that this one was the world-snake that Hilda had sung of as the destroyer.

"He eateth men joyfully," said one, "when he can get them."

"Hilda said," replied Ulric, "that he cometh among men no more. He cannot live in any sea that is plowed by the keels of ships. The gods are against him. But now the whales have fled and he hath followed."

Then turned they to stare at the ice king, and he seemed as strong as ever. Far away at his right they saw the bears, walking to and fro, and the wind brought from them a sound as if they were moaning.

CHAPTER VI.

The Fall of the Ice King

When the sun arose upon the fifth day of the week, the day of Thor, the glittering pinnacles of the ice king still towered high above the floes, and these covered the sea as far as the eye could reach. All the white mass was evidently in motion and the drifting was rapid, but it seemed to the vikings as if their danger were striving to push nearer to the ship. She was now lying almost within his reach, if he should choose to strike her – and she was but a very small thing. Her crew, going and coming around her, were but so many specks upon the ice. From her masthead still fluttered bravely out her White Horse banner, and she was yet altogether unharmed, but the rowers were at their places continually.

A prudent captain was the jarl, for, although the men were impatient, he forbade their going far from the ship. He held them back even when the remaining white bears appeared near the feet of the ice king.

Knud was almost angry that he was not permitted to go forth and slay them.

"One man for each bear, Ulric the Jarl," he said. "It is our right. We may not ever meet them again, and the chance for honor were lost. Thou hast won thy pair of claws."

"Thou hast slain bears enough," said Ulric. "Were I to let thee go, thou mightest perchance be left behind on the ice, or under it. Small honor in that. I promise thee the next chance to get thyself killed fairly."

"I obey," growled the grim old hunter, "for thou art my jarl. But when we return from this cruise I will go with Wulf the Skater into the winter of long night and we will find them there. I will not go to Valhalla until I have slain one as large as thine."

"Mind not thy bears now," responded Ulric. "Seest thou not? Art thou blind?"

He blew his horn sharply, and all who were on the ice around the ship sprang on board in haste.

"Mark!" he shouted. "Between us and the foot of the ice king there is a chasm that widens. We know not when the field may break away. Then he will be upon us. Every man at his place this day!"

They who saw could understand, and there was no more talk of hunting. Even when a white fox came and looked at them, within bowshot, no arrow went after him.

"Let him go free," said Tostig. "He hath wild fowl enough for the catching, but he will swim far before he runneth on land again."

It was a time of doubt and of waiting, but the drifting ceased not. There was much discussion at intervals, among even the elder seamen, as to precisely in what part of the sea they now might be, for there were no guidings. Toward the sunset, after long hours of idleness that brought weariness, Ulric went and stood by the hammer of Thor on the fore deck. Tostig the Red came and stood by him and laid his hand upon the hammer, for Tostig was a smith, as had been his fathers before him. Not only could he smelt iron out of the right rock, but he could harden it for cutting and for bending and springing. The secret of that art was his inheritance, and Hilda had said that it was a thing that the old gods who were dead had brought with them from the east before Asa Thor's time. It was from a rising-sun land, but a cold one, that Odin led his children, said some, and there were runes on the rocks to prove it, if they might be read by any now living.

"We go faster," said Tostig. "We have already gone far this day. If the gods were against us, I think they would not so swiftly bear us forward without wind or work."

"Who knoweth the will of the gods?" replied Ulric. "Not thou or I. They puzzle me greatly. I would they might come at times and show themselves. How can one know what to think of a god he hath never seen! I mean to look upon one of them, if I may, before I sail back to the Northland. That were a thing worth telling of a winter evening by the fire in the hall."

"And have all men answer thee that thou wert lying?" laughed Knud cheerily, from behind Tostig. "I believe that Hilda seeth them at an hour that cometh to her, but I would rather let them alone. I will think well of them if they will but shove us along in the right direction. They work finely now, it seemeth, but the sun goeth down. Thor hath been friendly to us during all his day, but I doubt if we are as safe after he is gone. The morrow will be Freya's day, and she meddleth not overmuch with seafaring matters. Ægir is the god of the sea, and of him we know but little, nor of Ran, his wife, nor of his nine daughters. They must at this hour be all under the ice doing nothing."

The saying of Knud was a thing that it was hard to dispute, but it was in Ulric's mind to wonder whether or not he and his vikings were drifting altogether beyond the help of the old gods of the North.

The wind began to blow strongly, and the men listened with eager ears, for they thought that they could now and then hear shrill and angry voices from the neighborhood of the ice king. Some of them were like shrieks, but these may have been made by the gale itself, blowing among the crags and chasms.

"We will both eat and drink," commanded Ulric. "Let every man be hearty, that he may have his full strength for that which may be before him."

After he himself had eaten he went to the after deck, putting his hand upon the tiller. From that place he might best watch the ice king, and there came others to stand with him, waiting.

"He is very tall," said Ulric, at last. "I doubt if we shall ever look upon his like again. But saw ye ever such moonlight? I have known days when I could not see so well as I can this night."

"Aye," said Wulf. "I know this moon. It is not such light as ours, for he hath brought it with him. It is the light which the gods make instead of sunlight in his own place, and it will not go south any further than he goeth. But mark the bears!"

"Something troubleth them," said Ulric.

All could see them plainly, and they were like ghosts wandering to and fro among the rugged heaps of the ice floes. They were much scattered and they moved as if they were hunting for something which they could not find, and they were calling often to each other, moaning as if they were in pain or in great discontent. Sometimes as they did so they lifted up their heads toward the moon, but oftener toward the ice king.

"Look at him now!" exclaimed Ulric. "The moon is shining upon him wonderfully."

"It is so," said Tostig, "but I think not of that. Wilt thou note this, that whenever there cometh a boom of the rending ice the bears call out to their mates? More than we do they know of such matters. All such creatures have gods of their own, and we may have offended them. I like it not."

"The gods of the bears will care for the bears!" said Knud. "They have naught to do with men."

Nevertheless, it was a time for men to speak softly concerning such things when powers whom they saw not and knew not were dragging them and their ship along so helplessly. There are times when one feeleth that he can get along well enough without the gods, but this was a different matter. All the vikings talked soberly and they were glad that their jarl was a son of Odin.

It was a strange, solemn, weird night in spite of the moonlight, what with the peril and the moaning bears and the booming ice. After all, they said, Odin himself might not be with them. There had been places, as all men knew, where all the gods had abandoned even the bravest of the Northmen. Men like themselves had died without a sword cut or a spear thrust. All hope of falling in battle might be lost to them among these treacherous ice floes. It was a short night, if there had been aught to measure it by, but to the men on *The Sword* it seemed long enough. None cared to go under a deck, but there were some who lay down and slept. The moon sank lower and lower and the shadows lengthened across the ice fields, but there was yet a great flood of broken light when Ulric, the son of Brander, uttered a loud cry and put his war horn to his lips. Every man sprang to his feet, for each thought that he had never before heard such a blast as that. A louder sound instantly answered it, but none could tell whether it came from among the ice peaks or from down toward the bottom of the sea.

"The bears are moaning again!" said Knud. He was ever thinking of his bears, but all the rest were hearkening for what might be coming next, and they knew not yet the meaning of Ulric's blast.

"Oars!" shouted the jarl. "Every man to his place! There is free water southerly. The ice king is bowing!"

Loudly moaned the bears, for a moment, and they seemed to be running toward the ship, as if they would come on board; and Ulric blew his horn again with the notes of battle defiance, but then there burst out upon all sides a roaring, splitting, rending sound, such as none of the vikings had ever heard before.

"He hath struck! He is aground!" shouted Ulric. "Hark to his breaking! His hour is come!"

If that were true, so also it seemed as if the hour of *The Sword* had come, and of all who were on board of her. But the gods were with her. If the forefoot of the ice king had indeed caught upon a shoal, checking and breaking him, the shock of that striking had separated the great floe in front of him so that it might move freely. Still it no longer upheld him, and he suddenly began to pitch forward toward the ship. Vast was the roll of the sea that swelled away from his pitching, and powerfully it uplifted *The Sword* in her bed of ice.

"Hold hard, all!" shouted Ulric. "Ready with your oars! Odin!"

Up gazed they then, and the bravest of them shuddered, for the gigantic white head of the ice king was bowing nearer, as if he would cast himself upon them. On rolled the great wave, steadily, and all along the crest of it the ice it carried was rending into fragments that ground angrily against each other. The floe that carried *The Sword* became twain that parted, letting her down and shooting her swiftly forward. It was just then that the ice king fell upon his face, his uppermost pinnacle almost crashing upon her stern.

The foaming water dashed across the deck and drenched Ulric at the tiller. He was wearing no headpiece now, and the salt spray drops glittered brightly among his yellow curls. But they glistened not with moonlight, for while they all had waited and watched the sun had risen and his first rays lit the hero face of the son of Odin as he shouted to his men to row their best, and as he steered the good ship *The Sword* into the open water the White Horse banner of the Saxons floated gallantly from the masthead and men sprang to set free the sail.

"Hael, O Ulric the Jarl!" shouted Knud the Bear. "We have a good sea captain."

So said several of the elder vikings.

"Hael, all!" cheerily responded Ulric. "The ice king hath fallen and we shall fear him no more. The gods are with us!"

Loudly shouted they all, and those who were not rowing clashed their swords upon their shields as if they had won a victory.

"Aye!" growled Tostig the Red. "'Tis a stout ship."

CHAPTER VII.

The Living Sand

It was the time of thaw in the Northland, but the snow and ice go fast when the winter letteth go its hold. Already great reaches of land were bare, but no man might travel far from his own home because of the floods from the melting. All must wait until days should pass, and these were growing longer, but they were full of unrest. Even the cattle in their enclosures lowed impatiently to one another; for the brute creatures know well the signs of the return of green grass to their pastures. In the house of Brander there was no shadow because of the absence of any who had gone, but these were spoken of cheerfully. Moreover, there came boats and larger keels into the cove from other villages up and down the coast and from out the fiords that were opening. Far and wide had been known the building of *The Sword*, and many would have been glad to look upon her. All these were disappointed, but there were wise old vikings and jarls of note who said to Hilda:

"Thy foster son hath done well. It is like his father. Other keels will follow him speedily, but he will be first to strike."

As if she had been mistress of the house was Hilda, and she entertained well all who came. Reverence was paid her because of her high descent and her kinship to Odin the Strong, and because of her hundred winters, but even more because of her learning and her knowledge of the gods. Men asked her questions concerning them, and there were those who believed that she had seen and known more than she would tell.

"I would not like to anger her," said one, "lest she might afterward come to me in a bad hour, for she hath knowledge of charms and of witchcraft and she can write runes."

There was reason in that, said all, but that she was a kindly woman and that she kept the house of Brander liberally.

Much time she now spent among the old armor, the trophies on the wall, and in the study of such things as had been brought from the lands around the Middle Sea. She made Oswald open his bag and she read the many inscriptions upon his coins, and she talked to him of Greece and of Rome, where most of them were made. He also knew about his gold and silver pieces, and there were some even of copper for which he had names and values. What good was there in such things in a land like this, where money was not needed?

"I would that Ulric had them," she said. "He might buy with them another ship, or provisions, or arms."

"Not save of a friend," replied Oswald. "He will need nothing that his sword can win for him. It is not the custom of the vikings to be long in need."

The household knew by her face that her thoughts were not troubling her concerning Ulric and his men.

"She hath had no ill token," they said. "It must be that he doeth well."

They knew not of the ice king, nor how narrowly he had missed his last angry blow at *The Sword*. But that peril was over and the good ship was flying along in safety, driven by strong rowers, who had also some help from the sail. They would have had more but that the winds were variable. Therefore the days and the nights went by before they again saw land, and the older seamen knew by that that they had kept in the open sea and were well advanced in their voyage.

"How fast or how far the ice king bore us I know not," said Knud the Bear, "but if that headland were not of one of the northern isles, we have seen a cape of North Britain."

"Not so far south as that," argued Tostig the Red, "but all these coasts are bad to land upon. There is naught worth the taking away."

"Our errand is not to them," said Ulric. "We will not waste an arrow upon them. I will not let the prow of *The Sword* touch the sand until we see the mid-coast of the British island – "

"We shall see a storm this night," interrupted an old viking. "The wind changeth to the northwest, and Knud may wear his bearskins. It will be cold."

When the night fell all were willing to cover well; but the rowers might rest, for the ship carried her sail all the more safely because it was not too large and because she was well laden. There was a spirit upon Ulric which kept him at the helm, so that his men needed almost to take him away by force that he might sleep.

"I would I might see Hilda and have speech with her," he said to himself. "I have strange dreams when I close my eyes. She might tell me what they mean. Do the gods come to one when he is asleep? I have heard so. But they have told me nothing – save that I have dreamed of men who wore the armor that hangeth behind the table on the dais. Strong men they were, and dark, and I think they were good swordsmen. Before long it may chance that we shall meet a trireme of the Romans if my dreams have that reading. I must burn one of their ships before we pass these seas."

Heavier blew the gale and higher rose the waves, and *The Sword* sped on as if she were a waterfowl, but all on board were willing to be as well covered as was Knud the Bear. The night was dark and the next morning they saw no land. The storm drove them onward steadily all day, and now and then they saw ice floating, but no sail of any ship. Again the night came, and the moon was out and the wind lulled, but the waves were still rough.

"We will not row," said Ulric, when they inquired of him. "There are coasts now not far away. When the dawn cometh we will seek some bay or harbor. I have heard that there are villages of North folk hereaway, and they would be friendly."

So said they all save Tostig the Red, who laughed somewhat grimly and replied:

"I think there are villages upon many coasts whereof the folk are willing to be friendly to a crew like this. The seax hath many acquaintances who are willing to see him stay quietly in the belt."

"So hath the ax," growled old Biorn the Berserker. It was rare for him to speak, but he was leaning upon the long handle of his weapon, and when he lay down on the deck the ax slept beside him.

It was after the middle watch that night, and Ulric was at the helm. He was steering a straight course southward and the ship was slipping quietly over the waves. He was awake, truly, but somehow he seemed to himself to be dreaming almost, and his eyes were downcast. "The runes upon the sand," he muttered. "I can see them now, before the wave washed them away. When and where am I to see them again, and to know that my voyage is ended? Who shall read runes, and how shall I be sure that I am not mistaken? For Hilda will not be there – "

Even as he spoke there came to his ears a sound, and he looked suddenly up, gripping hard the tiller.

"Faint and far away," he exclaimed, "but it was a trumpet! There are three in the hall at the house and Oswald taught me their soundings. Up, all! Rowers to the oars! I will send an answer!"

Long and powerful was the horn blast that went out across the moonlit sea. Clearer and louder than before was the trumpet voice which instantly responded from the right – and that was toward the British shore. The men shouted not, for they were listening, and those who knew were telling the younger vikings that the jarl had heard from the Romans. It was good news to hear, after long waiting, and the rowers put out the long oars eagerly.

"The dawn draweth near," shouted Ulric, after blowing his horn again. "We will steer toward yonder trumpet. There will be much music with the sun's rising. We will see if the gods of Rome are better than the gods of the North in the seas of Britain."

Loud voices answered him bidding him lead on; for the blood of the vikings was rising hotly, and Biorn the Berserker sharpened the edge of his great ax while he beat the deck with his feet and out through his thickly bearded lips there poured, low, but swelling, a song of the skalds at the gate of battle.

Red grew the edges of the eastern sky as *The Sword* pressed her iron beak to the crests of the waves and sprang forward. Joyously rang out the war horn of warrior after warrior, for on board were vikings of high descent who would not have chosen for their jarl any of less degree than a son of Odin. They were men entitled to go forward into the feast of swords shoulder to shoulder with kings and with chiefs of renown. Said one of them to Ulric:

"Jarl Ulric, many spears from the stowage. The Romans cast well and their spears are heavy. I mind not their light javelins nor their arrows. Close not with any trireme at the first."

"I will be prudent," replied Ulric; "but bring out the spears. There are arrow sheaves enough and stones for slinging."

"Let them not ram *The Sword*," continued the old fighter. "Her ribs are strong, but so is the beak of a war galley of Rome. Strike her not save amidships."

Well was it for older men to counsel so young a leader, but Ulric had been taught from his infancy not only by Brander the Brave and Oswald, but by all the sea kings and berserkers to whom he had listened while they talked of war around the mid-fire in the old hall. Naught had they said or sung but he had made its teachings his own against an hour like this.

"A trireme!" shouted Knud the Bear as the daylight brightened. "She is of the largest. Helmets and standards and the shields of a cohort of a legion. They are more in number than we are."

"Twice more," said the old counselor, "and her bulk is nearly thrice that of *The Sword*. Beware, O jarl!"

"I see her well," responded Ulric. "She is heavy in the water. I think she is overburdened."

"They are swift also," said Tostig the Red, "but that keel cannot turn as nimbly as can our own. Let us go nearer!"

"Within a spear's cast!" shouted Ulric, fiercely. "We will not pass her without a blow. Wulf, take thou the helm. I will go to the fore deck."

There he stood in the morning light, as the two keels neared each other. The Roman trumpets sounded at intervals, and they were answered by the war horns of the vikings.

"She is a splendid war vessel," said Ulric to those who were with him. "Never yet have we builded her like. Her bulwarks are higher than ours and her sail is many times broader. It is made of woven stuff. Her prow is a ram. We must not let her strike us."

"Neither will we strike her," said Biorn the Berserker, "unless we can hit her amidships. She is a danger. O jarl, beware! I do not think we may take that trireme, but we can get away from her."

So did not think the trierarch and the centurion on board the trireme. He who was captain of the vessel was of one accord with the officer in charge of the legionaries whom she was conveying. If Ulric could have heard them converse as *The Sword* came toward them, he would have learned somewhat of the estimation in which such as he were held by the wolves of Rome.

"A Saxon pirate, O Lentulus," said the trierarch to the man in armor at his side. "It is early in the season for them to be seen in these waters. They are the scourges of the sea."

"And of the shore, friend Comus," replied the centurion. "We will make short work of this one. It is of good size, and it swarmeth with men as with bees."

"Hast thou ever met them in fight?" asked Comus, "or is this thy first sight of them?"

"This is my first service in these waters," replied Lentulus, "but I have heard much of them. I would we had some legions of them to send against the Parthians, or into Africa. Laurentius had a cohort of them with him in Spain. They make the best of gladiators; Cæsar hath used them in the arena. But it is hard to take them. Let us see if we cannot send him a present of these pirates for the summer games. He is ever in need of good swordsmen."

"Little thou knowest of them," laughed Comus. "We may capture a few wounded men. The rest will die fighting."

Even while he spoke Tostig the Red was remarking to his friends at the stern of *The Sword*, just forward of the deck: "A fine stone for my sling is this. I will strike that high-crested one. There is often much treasure on a trireme, if Thor will let us take her. But the men we want not, nor the keel."

"Burn her," they said, "and throw the soldiers overboard; but the Romans die where they stand. We shall take no prisoners but the rowers. The jarl will slay them." So without thought of mercy on either side did the two keels draw nearer.

They were not yet within a spear's cast when they who were with Tostig stood away from him to give him slinging room. "He is the best slinger," they said, "on all the North coast. Let us see what he can do. He is not a boaster."

As the vessel climbed a wave Tostig poised himself, swinging slowly the leathern thong which upheld the square apron in which his pebble rested. Two pounds only in weight it may have been, but it was smooth and round from much chafing on the shore of the fiord with other pebbles as the sea waves had tossed them to and fro in many storms. Over the crest of the wave went *The Sword*, and as she did so the sling began to whirl swiftly in the hand of Tostig. Hand went to hand to give it double force, and then, as the downward plunge of the keel went with him, he gave his might to it and threw.

None saw the stone, so swiftly did it pass, but the trierarch said to the centurion:

"O Lentulus, thou art said to be as good a spearman as Pontius of Asia. Have thy pilum ready and try thy fortune."

"It is too far," said Lentulus, poising his pilum. "I was in battle once with that same Pontius. Hercules! I am slain!"

Loud clanged his brazen helmet and prone he fell upon the deck. He did not move again. The stone hurled by Tostig had left him but life enough for that one outcry as it smote him.

"May all the gods forbid!" exclaimed Comus. "What ill fortune is this? He is dead! Toward the pirate! Strike her through and through!"

Even as he spoke a legionary at his side went down before a second stone from the sling of Tostig, and the shouts of the vikings mingled with the clangor of their war horns.

Deft was the steering of Wulf and the swift rush of the trireme was avoided, *The Sword* passing her stern so near that every spearman might make a cast. But the legionaries, pilum in hand, had faced the further bulwark, thinking their foe came that way, and not so many of them were at good stations. Their bowmen also had been deceived, and their greater number was of no account. Nevertheless, many Roman spears flew well, being mostly of the lighter javelins used by them in the beginning of a fight. Easily were these caught upon the broad shields of the vikings, as if it were in a mere game at home, and no harm was done by them or by the arrows. Closer were they when they did their own throwing, and a hundred heavy spears went hurtling in among the legionaries.

"Follow!" shouted Comus. "Have ready the grapplings! Strike and then board her!"

A good officer was he, and the rowers as well as the legionaries obeyed him angrily, for they deemed the Northmen insolent in assailing such superior force.

"Away!" shouted Ulric. "Hael to thee, O Tostig. Get thee to the stern and pitch thy pebbles among her rowers."

Tostig was toiling hard, and so were other good slingers, of whom the trireme seemed to not have any, but *The Sword* swept on out of range while her enemy was turning.

"O jarl," said Biorn, "she is not clumsy, but her steersman went down. Let us gain what distance we may. That was a good blow, but we may not strike the next so easily."

The older vikings looked watchfully, as did Biorn, and again they said: "Our jarl is young, but this was well done."

"Westward!" shouted Ulric to Wulf. "We must lead them toward the land. I would I knew this coast."

"That do I," said Biorn, "if we are where I think. There are high cliffs, but there is also much marsh land; and off the coast there are great shallows, worse for a ship than any rocks might be. Watch for them."

"They are our friends," said Ulric, "but they are not friendly to a deep vessel like yonder trireme."

"Aye," said Biorn, "it is our old way of battling such as she is, but there is an evil among these shallows. Hast thou not heard of the sand that is alive? There is much of it hereaway."

"My father warned me of it," replied Ulric. "If horse or man setteth foot upon it, it will seize him and suck him down. But it could not swallow a ship."

"Were she a mountain!" exclaimed Biorn. "The living sand would be worse than a Roman trireme for *The Sword* to escape from. Yonder is a land line at the sky's edge, and I think I see breakers."

The rowers were rowing well and *The Sword* had gained a long advantage before the Roman oarsmen had recovered from their confusion. Now, however, Ulric upon the foredeck was measuring distances, wave after wave, and he spoke out plainly to his men.

"Swift is *The Sword*," he said. "I had thought that no keel on earth could be swifter, but we are laden heavily; so is the trireme, that she turneth not nimbly, but in a straight course she is swifter than are we. She hath many rowers and she is sharp in the prow. She gaineth upon us little by little."

"Woe to her," responded the vikings. "She moveth too fast for her good."

"The land riseth fast," said Biorn. "The breakers are not far away. Under them are sand shoals."

"The Roman is but a hundred fathoms behind us," replied Ulric. "Wulf the Skater, steer thou through the breakers. Let us see if she will dare to follow."

Comus, the trierarch, was overeager, or he would have remembered that which he seemed to have forgotten. They who were with him were stung by the death of Lentulus and by the ravages of the Saxon spears and stones. None counseled him to prudence, and he dashed on in the foaming wake of *The Sword*.

"Breakers, but no rocks," muttered Wulf, as he grasped his tiller strongly. "Now, if we fill not, we shall dash through. Pull! For the Northland pull!"

Hard strained the rowers. High sprang the curling breakers on either hand. Loud rang the shouts and the war horns. But *The Sword* rose buoyantly over the crown of a great billow and passed on into smoother water.

"Odin!" roared Biorn the Berserker. "The trireme is but fifty paces –"

"Struck!" shouted Ulric. "On, lest we ourselves may be stranded!"

"Deep water here, Jarl Ulric," calmly responded an old seaman near him. "We have passed the sand bar. It may be the tide is falling. The gods of the sea are against that Roman keel."

"Or they are not with her to-day," said Ulric. "She is held fast. Cease rowing and put the sail up again. We will see if there is aught else that we may do. I like not to let her escape me."

Up went the sail, and for an hour *The Sword* did but cruise back and forth, only now and then venturing near enough for the hurling of a stone or the sending of an arrow. It was then too far for any harm to the Romans, but they could hear the taunting music of the horns.

"Low tide," said Biorn at last, "and she lieth upon bare sand. We are well away. We can do no more."

"Watch!" said Ulric. "They are troubled."

"She lieth too deeply. What is this?" So asked the Roman seamen of their captain as they leaned over their bulwarks and studied that bed of sand. He answered not, but one, a legionary in full armor, stepped down from the ship to examine more closely – and an unwise man was he. In places the sandy level seemed firm enough, and a horse may gallop along a sandy beach after the tide is out and leave but a fair hoofprint. That way armies have marched and chariots have driven. There were other patches, however, whereon the sand seemed to glisten and to change in the sunlight, and here

there was potent witchcraft working. At these had the sailors been gazing, but the soldier did not reach one of them.

"Back!" shouted Comus. "It is the living sand! We are all dead men! Back!"

The legionary strove to wheel at the word of command, but his feet obeyed him not. Even the vikings were near enough to see that the sand was over his ankles.

"The under gods have seized him," muttered Ulric. "It is from them that the sand liveth. They are angry with him.

"*Vale! Vale! Vale!*" shouted the legionary. "O Comus, I go down! They who dwell below have decreed this. See thou to the ship and follow not the Saxons."

"Follow them?" exclaimed Comus. "*Vale*, O comrade! But the trireme lieth a handbreadth deeper. She is sinking! O all the gods! Have we come to this ending? Who shall deliver us?"

"None, O Comus," said a man of dark countenance who leaned over the bulwark at his side. "We have offended the gods and they have left us to our fate."

Lower sank the wooden walls of the great vessel, while her helpless crew and the soldiery stared despairingly at the pitiless sand and at the White Horse flag of the vikings dancing lightly over the sea so near them.

"Form!" commanded Comus, and the legionaries fell into ranks all over the vessel. "Put ye the body of Lentulus upon the deck," he said, "and bring me the eagle of the legion. O Lentulus, true comrade, brave friend, we salute thee, for all we who were of thy company go down to meet thee. Behold, we perish!"

Silent sat the rowers at their oars. The standards fluttered in the wind. The trierarch took the eagle and went and stood by the body of Lentulus.

"They are brave men, yonder," said Biorn the Berserker. "They will to die in line. So do the Romans conquer all others except the men of the North."

"They have one trireme the less," replied Tostig the Red. "But they have many more. This is not like burning one. I see no honor to us in this."

"Honor to the gods," said Ulric. "She was too strong for us and Odin destroyed her."

"It is well to have him on our side," said Tostig; but Knud the Bear laughed loudly, as was his wont, and said: "Odin is not a sea god. What hath he to do with sand and water? Some other god is hidden under the living sand. We shall leave him behind us when we go away – "

"Her bulwarks go under!" shouted one of the vikings. "Hark to the trumpets! They go down!"

The trumpet blast ceased and there was a great silence, for the like of this had never before been seen.

"Oars!" commanded Ulric. "We will search the coast. Such a warship as was this came not hitherward without an errand. She may have had companions."

The old vikings all agreed with him, and an eager lookout was set, but behind them as they sailed away they saw nothing but a bare bed of sand, over which the tide was returning.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Saxon Shore

"O jarl!" exclaimed Knud the Bear, in a morning watch, "we have wasted days in this coasting. The weather hath been rough and the men are weary, for we are tightly packed in this ship."

"No longer shouldst thou prevent us from seeking the shore," said another. "I would hunt, and get me some fresh meat." There were also voices of impatience and of discontent among the crew.

The jarl listened, and thoughtfully he responded: "I have not forgotten that the Romans sail in fleets. We are one keel. If now we have avoided any trireme that was company for the one which was swallowed by the sand, we have done well. We will steer toward the shore. My father told me of such a coast as this."

"As the sun riseth higher," said Biorn the Berserker, "I think I can see a low headland. This is not my first cruising in these seas."

"It is well," said the jarl. "We will go within the headland. If we find a good shore, we will land, for I am of one mind with you."

All the older vikings approved of his prudence, for they knew the Romans better than did the younger warriors, full of eagerness. Even now the sailing of *The Sword* was with caution. The noon drew near and they were close to the headland. It was neither high nor rocky, and on it was a forest; but here was a surprise, for the trees growing down to the beach were in full leaf.

"The winter tarried late in the Northland," said the vikings. "We have also been many days upon our way. The summer is near."

They might also discern patches of green grass, and now Knud shouted from the fore deck: "A deep cove, O jarl! It is very deep."

Ulric was at the helm, and he responded: "Thou hast good eyes, O Bear. Watch thou for rocks and shoals and give me word. Let all eyes watch also for boats or men."

The rowers rowed easily and *The Sword* slipped on into the cove. Here was dense forest on either side, and there were rocks, but the trees were large and old and there seemed to be little undergrowth, nor was there any sign of the dwellings of men.

"The Britons," said an old viking, "build not often on the shore. They are not seamen. They have no forts but wooden palisades, and they dwell inland, where they are more safe. They fight well, but they have little armor, and their steel is soft. They are no match for the legions of Rome."

It was exceedingly still as *The Sword* went forward. Away at the left a herd of red deer came out under a vast oak and stared at the newcomers. At their head was a stag with branching antlers.

"Now know we," said Biorn the Berserker, "that no men are near this place, for these creatures are exceedingly timid. But their venison is of the best. In Britain are also wild cattle in abundance, and wild swine. We will have great hunting before we sail to other places."

Swiftly away sped the red deer, for the prow of *The Sword* touched the strand and Wulf the Skater sprang ashore, followed by a score of vikings.

"On, up the bank!" shouted the jarl. "Return and tell what thou seest. All to the shore and stand ready if he findeth an enemy."

"A prudent jarl," murmured Biorn the Berserker. "He will not be surprised."

Nevertheless, the younger men laughed scornfully, for they liked not well the hard discipline of the jarl, and he brooked no manner of disobedience, as was his right.

Back came one from Wulf the Skater. "O jarl!" he shouted. "A fine spring of water. An open glade. Wulf asketh if he shall now cut the saplings."

"I come soon," replied the jarl, "but cut stakes for a palisade leading down to this beach on either hand. Though there be no Romans here, there are Britons not far off."

Axes were plying speedily, and while the first fires were kindling many sharp stakes were driven, to be woven between with flexible twigs and branches. Such was ever the custom of the Saxons upon a new land, for behind such a wattle-work defense a few warriors may withstand many, and light palisades guard well against horsemen. Not all could work in these matters, and twoscore were selected by lot for the first hunting, going out in four parties, with a command not to venture too far. They were bowmen, but they went in their armor. Before the sun set there was a good stockade from tree to tree around the spring, with arms that reached out on either hand almost to the shore.

"We will make it stronger," said the jarl, "but behind it we are safe; for we might also retreat to the ship if there were need."

No red deer save one stag and a doe did the hunters bring in, and there would have been a lack of meat but for the slaying by another party of four black cattle, fat and good.

"O jarl," said the men. "Did we not tell thee? This is better than being packed so tightly in *The Sword*. This is good venison."

Well contented was he also, and he saw that he must humor the men if he were to command them well thereafter. For this reason, therefore, other and larger hunting parties went out the next day, and they came home heavily laden.

"O jarl," said Tostig the Red, for his party, "we have also found paths, but no men. We saw hills beyond, but a river is between us and them, and a great marsh. I think no Britons come hither across the marsh."

"On the morrow I will go," said Ulric. "I will leave Biorn in command of the camp. I have no need for hunting, but I must know the land."

Barrels of ale had been brought to the shore, and that night was a feast, with songs and sagas. After the feast the jarl went and lay down to sleep under an oak, but his eyes would not close for thinking of the Northland, and of the Middle Sea, and of Asgard.

"This landing is well," he thought, "and I am glad to be in Britain. But here I may not linger too long. O Hilda of the hundred years, not yet hast thou visited me. I wonder if thou or the gods could find me this night under this oak tree. Who should tell thee where to come if thou wert seeking me? The gods see everywhere. Biorn sayeth that the gods of Britain are gods of the woods, and we are from the sea. I care not much for wood gods."

Then he rested, but he arose early and chose the men who were to go with him.

"Guide me to the river and the marsh," he said to Wulf the Skater.

"I will, O jarl," said Wulf; "but Tostig saw a wild boar yesterday and he hath gone out after him. A vast one, he sayeth, with tusks like a walrus. He will fight well if they can bring him to a fighting."

"Let Tostig win his boar," said Ulric. "We go to the left and we hunt not. I am full of thoughts about this place."

A score of vikings were with them, and they marched on in order, two and two, as if they had an errand. Grand were the trees, and high, with branches whose foliage made a gloom to walk in.

"Are we nearly at the marsh?" asked Ulric at last. "Here are rocks."

"I know not, O jarl," said Wulf. "We came not so far southerly yesterday."

"Hael, Northmen! Hael! But sound no horn! Who are ye?"

As if he had suddenly arisen through the ledge of rocks before them, upon it stood a tall shape in full armor, spear in hand. From under his helmet tangled white hair fell down to his shoulders, but his right hand, holding the spear, was lifted as by one who giveth a command.

Again he spoke: "I am Olaf, the son of Hakon, of Droningsfiord. Who are ye?"

"Northmen of thine own land," said the jarl. "I am Ulric, the son of Brander. Our ship, *The Sword*, lieth at the shore. How camest thou where thou art, and who is with thee?"

"None are with me," said Olaf, sternly. "We were many, but the Romans have smitten the Saxon shore of Britain and our villages are gone. They have smitten many of the Britons also, and they

march to smite them again this day. Tell me, O Jarl Ulric, hast thou seen aught of certain triremes which were to come? I would know if there are more Romans near than I have already counted."

"One hath perished, as I will shortly tell thee," said Ulric. "I have seen no other."

"Good!" said Olaf. "There floateth one in a harbor not far away, but they who came in her are fewer than when they landed. Twain came, with a cohort. One hath sailed. Their force was sent to slaughter the Druids at their great sacrificing, but first they struck our village at our harbor. We fought, but they were too many. I cut my way through the ranks of their lighter spearmen, and they followed me not far because of the nearness of the Britons."

Olaf was now descended from the rock and was become as one of them. Great was his wonder at the story of the living sand and the trireme.

"The gods of the Britons are strong at times," he said, "but they are not to be depended on. They have done this because of the great sacrifice, that the Romans may not hinder it. Therefore come thou with me a little distance and I will show thee a matter. The Romans are tangled in a wood. Meddle not thou and thine, however, for thou hast another work to do."

"I meddle not," said the jarl, "but I thank these Druid gods. We were closely pushed and in peril when they ensnared the trireme with their sand. I will offend them not, but I would see these great sacrifices and I also would offer my token."

"That the Druids will forbid thee," said Olaf. "Follow me quickly to the crown of this ridge, for it is on the bank of the river."

Even as he spoke there came to their ears a clangor of trumpets, as if many sounded at once.

"Romans!" exclaimed Ulric.

"Sounding first were they," said Olaf, "but these hoarse ones, very loud, are blown by the Druids. Hear, also, the harping. Now look thou, for thou art a captain."

The river before them was but narrow, although it might be deep, and on the other side was a broad open space surrounded by a forest with dense undergrowths of bushes, as if it were marshy. In the open was arrayed a cohort of Roman soldiers, well ordered, but beyond and in their front might be seen and heard much larger numbers of such as they were, all disarrayed and scattered by the copses. None assailed the cohort in the open, but all the forest swarmed with half-armed Britons, hurling darts and plying their light blades. Arrows, also, were flying, and there was a great tumult of mingled sound.

"The men in white robes, keeping afar," said Olaf, "are the Druid priests. This is as an ambush, and the Romans are falling."

"Their commander hath some wisdom, I think," said Ulric. "His trumpets call back his men for a retreat. He will escape."

"He loseth half his force," said Olaf; "he will lose more as he retreateth."

Fiercer and fiercer arose the sounds of the combat, the shouting, the howling, the twanging of loud harp strings, and the braying of the trumpets. Hard was it for the vikings that they might not have a part in such a battle.

"The Romans are outnumbered," said Olaf, "but they fight well. Their retreat will be to the river mouth, where was my village. There have they a camp in our own stockade, and they have also increased it with a rampart of earth and palisades. There we must strike them. It is but a little distance. Come and see."

"But first," said Ulric, "I would see the end of this battle, and I would have speech with a Druid concerning the sacrifices."

"That thou mayest not this day," said Olaf, "and the Romans are cutting their way through the tumult of half-naked spearmen. Lo, how they slay the Britons! But the ranks of their cohort will be thin when the remnant reacheth the fort. So hath it often been in their warfare in Britain, but each new commander of legionaries cometh here a proud one, thinking only of easy victory."

"The darts fly in showers," said Ulric, but Wulf the Skater urged him.

"O jarl!" he exclaimed. "The village! The fort! The trireme! Why wait we here? Let us go with Olaf!"

The jarl answered not, but walked rapidly, and the rocky ledge grew higher as they went; but there came an end of it.

"We have walked far," said Ulric. "The way of the Romans was shorter. There come they and their array is not broken. I can see their commander ordering them."

"Thor the Thunderer!" exclaimed Olaf, "what havoc the Britons have made among them! The gods of the Druids have protected their sacrifices."

"Every Roman left behind hath perished," said Ulric. "Only these are alive."

"Not so," said Olaf. "Not a wounded man or one entrapped hath been slain. He belongeth to the gods at the place of sacrifice."

"With them as with us," said the jarl. "That is the old North custom. I have seen men slain at the stone of Odin. He who is captured must lose his head. It is well –"

"Seest thou?" loudly demanded Olaf. "The ruins of our village are yet smoking, although three days have passed. I saw thy ship on the sea yesterday, but knew not of thy landing. I meant to watch for thee or for the coming triremes after seeing the battle."

"Yonder trireme at anchor," replied the jarl, "floateth well out from the river mouth. She is large. How shall I take her? For there are yet Romans enough to hold her well. I must come to her by night in *The Sword*."

Long and thoughtfully gazed Ulric, studying the position of the trireme and the arrival of the beaten Romans at the fort.

"O jarl," said Biorn the Berserker, "knowest thou not that I am a fish? The trireme is held but by an anchor and a cord of hemp. Go thou and bring *The Sword*. When thou art at hand to strike thou mayest have the trireme drifting with the outgoing tide. Strike not when the tide runneth in?"

"Thou canst swim," said Ulric, "and thy seax will sever hemp; but if thou waitest here until I come, how wilt thou know in the dark of my coming, or how wilt thou know where to ply the sharp edge?"

"When I hear thee whistle thrice," said Biorn, "as if thou wert calling thy hawk, I will know of thy coming. If the whistle is from this shore, I meet thee here. If it is from seaward, I swim to the trireme. Thou wilt know the hemp is severed when thou hearest my own falcon call."

"I go with thee, O jarl!" shouted Olaf, eagerly, "that I may be thy pilot."

"Well for thee, O Biorn the Berserker," said Ulric; "thou art of the heroes!"

"Here sit I down," replied Biorn. "It is a pleasant place. I think this taking of the trireme will depend upon thee and thy sword more than upon a man a fish cutting hemp!"

"Haste, now," said Ulric to his men. "*The Sword* is far from us and this is to be a night of great deeds, and not of ale and feasting."

Olaf led, as the guide of their rapid marching, and Biorn sat down upon a rock to gaze at the doings around the river mouth and at the fort.

"There come the Britons out of the woods," he said to himself. "If they had been well led they would have pursued more closely – only that few care to press too hard upon even the wreck of a Roman army. Now are all the Romans within the stockade."

The Britons were many, but their prey had escaped them. The camp fort was too strong for them to storm, and their showers of darts flew over the palisades without much harm to any within. The taunting clangor of their harps and trumpets sounded furiously for a while, and then the multitude swiftly vanished as if it had melted away.

"If these Britons had a captain," said Biorn, "instead of a herd of priests, and if he would arm them well, the Romans would disappear from Britain. But I think Ulric the Jarl will find many swords on yonder trireme. Even now they go out in small boats. Biorn the Berserker will be with him when the Saxons are on the Roman deck!"

CHAPTER IX.

The Taking of the Trireme

The night was at hand when the jarl and his party arrived at the camp, and already all others were around the camp-fires.

"O jarl!" shouted Tostig. "Come thou and see this mighty one! We hauled him hither upon a bundle of branches, and he wearied us with his weight."

"Never saw I such a one!" exclaimed Ulric, gazing at the great boar which lay at the fire by the spring. "Was he for thy spear alone?"

"For mine!" said Tostig. "Now am I even with thee concerning the white bear, for this one fought as did the son of the ice king. He nearly overcame me after he had slain Nef, the son of Ponda, and had rent him in pieces. He had no wound from Nef."

"We did watch them," said a viking, "and to Tostig is the honor. If his spear had broken, as did thine in the bear, I think Tostig would have lost the battle."

"Then had I felt those great tusks," laughed Tostig, "But it will take all the night to roast him well."

"He will roast while we fight," replied the jarl; "and some of us will eat not of him, but in Valhalla. To the ship, all! We go to attack a Roman trireme. Let those eat now who have not eaten, taking their meat with them. I leave not a sword here!"

"He who would stay behind is nidering!" shouted Tostig the Red. "We will follow our jarl to the feast of swords, and they who return may find the boar roasted. Hael to thee, O jarl! Thou bringest good tidings."

Not until all were in the ship, however, did Ulric explain to his men fully and carefully the errand upon which they were going. Wild was their enthusiasm, and once more the young and the discontented were satisfied with their jarl.

"He is a son of the gods," they said, "and he will lead us to victory."

"Or to Valhalla," growled Knud the Bear. "Not all of you will eat the roasted boar's flesh."

The rowers rowed with power and *The Sword* went swiftly. Ulric was at the helm, and Olaf was at the prow sending back words of direction. The distance to be traveled was less on the water than on the land, through the forests.

"I would I knew of the doings of Biorn," said one, as the ship rounded a point and entered the harbor at the river mouth.

The jarl answered not, but shortly he put his fingers to his lips and whistled thrice.

"Row slowly, now," he said, "till an answer shall come. I am glad the moon is not yet arisen. We go on behind a curtain."

The jarl's signal had been heard by a man upon whom was only a belt, to which hung a sheathed seax and a war horn. He stood at the water's edge at the harbor side.

"The jarl cometh!" he whispered, and he went into the water, making no sound. Before that he had crept along the shore, landward, bearing his arms and his armor, and now he had but sixty paces to swim. The Roman sentinel on the deck of the trireme heard only the ripple of the outgoing tide against her wooden walls.

Knife upon hemp cutteth silently, but soon the sentinel turned with a sharp exclamation, for out of the seaward silence there came a long, vibrating whistle, another, another, and then from the hollow of a dark wave near the trireme there sounded a fourth like unto these three. This last he answered with a shout, and he hurled his pilum at that darkness in the water, but the trireme herself responded with a lurch and a yawing as she began to be swept away by the tide. There were rowers on board, and they quickly sprang to the oars, but they were few and there was yet no steersman. There

were many soldiers also, but their officer ordered a number of them to the oars, that he might get the ship under control. When, therefore, there came gliding swiftly out of the shadows the unlooked-for warship of the Saxons she was alongside and her grapplings were made fast with none to hinder.

From the opposite side of the Roman vessel, as it were from the water itself, now sounded furiously the war horn of Biorn the Berserker. Full half of the legionaries rushed in that direction and their hurled spears were too hastily lost in the sea. Terribly rang out the war horns and the battle shouts of the Saxons, but the first man of them on board of the trireme was Ulric the Jarl, and down before his ax fell whoever met him. Close behind him were his followers, so that the nearer Romans were not only surprised, but outnumbered.

Up the side, near the stern, climbed Biorn the Berserker, and for a moment he was alone, so quickly had fallen twain who were there. Taking in hand the helm, "Biorn! Biorn the Berserker!" he shouted. "O jarl, I am here! The ship is ours!" Hard fought the remaining Romans, nevertheless, against such odds, but all the rowers were slain at their oars.

"It is done!" said Ulric. "Silence, all! I have called twice for Biorn. Where is he?"

"O jarl, son of Brander the Brave!" came faintly back from the after deck, "hast thou fully taken this trireme?"

"We have her!" answered Ulric. "Thanks to thee, O Biorn! She is thine!"

"Odin!" shouted back the old berserker. "Then bear thou witness for me, at feast and in song, that Biorn, the son of Nar, the sea king, died not by drowning, but by the driven spear of a Roman, in all honor. I go to Valhalla as becometh me. Rejoice, therefore, and smite thou these Romans once more for me. I die!"

There was a silence of a moment on the ship, but then the oldest viking of all blew triumphantly his horn and shouted: "We have heard! Biorn, the hero, hath gone to the hall of the heroes. He died by the spear, and not a cow's death. Good is his fortune. Hael to thee, O Biorn! And hael to Jarl Ulric, the leader of men."

Clashed loudly then the shields and spears, but already Saxon hands were upon the oars and Tostig the Red was at the helm, with Olaf by him. Only it might be a dozen warriors had been named by the valkyrias to go to Valhalla with Biorn the Berserker, but the Romans whose bodies were cast into the sea were ten times as many.

The Sword and the trireme were now going out with the tide into the open sea and into the darkness, but there had been much sounding of trumpets in the camp of the Romans. Few as were the remaining legionaries, they had marched to the shore ready for action. There were small boats at the beach, but it was all too late for any use of these. Those who patrolled and inquired, however, found at the side of a rock a helmet like a bear's head, a shirt the hide of a bear, two heavy spears, an ax – the trophies to them of Biorn the Berserker. These were brought to the centurion in command and he examined them with care.

"The pirates of the North are here," he said. "Woe is me that ever I came to this death coast! Here shall we leave our bones, for the Britons will come like locusts, and we have lost our trireme!"

"Another ship cometh soon," said his friends. "We may hold the fort well until her arrival. All is not lost."

"Know ye that?" replied the centurion. "If the trireme of Lentulus were above the water, she would have arrived long since. He hath never failed an appointment. I think it was his evil demon and not the favor of the proconsul that made him the count of the Saxon shore. The fates are against us."

So darkly brooded the Romans over their many disasters, while Ulric the Jarl ordered the steering of his two ships up the coast and into the cove where he had first landed.

"I would have speech with a Druid, if I may," he said to Olaf. "It is strongly upon my mind that I must see this great sacrifice to their gods. Manage thou this for me. Thou hast been in league with them."

"What I can do in such a matter I will do," said Olaf. "But, O jarl, I have somewhat to say to thee concerning this trireme. Consider her well, for she is a strong warship and there is much room in her."

"Also much plunder," said Ulric; "but that must wait for the day. Each man hath his share, and the shares of the slain go to their kindred when we return."

"So is the North law," said Olaf; "but where shall any man stow that which may be his prize? *The Sword* is but a nutshell. Thou wilt think of this matter, for thou art jarl."

The night waned toward the dawn and all had need of rest. The ships were anchored, therefore, and the cove was still.

The trumpets at the Roman camp greeted loudly the sun's rising. The sentinels were changed and the patrols came in from the edges of the forest to report that no enemy seemed to be coming. The soldiers sullenly attended to the customary morning duties of the camp, now and then glancing seaward as if they hoped to see a sail. The centurion in command walked along the lines of his intrenchments, studying them, but his eyes more often sought the earth. A stalwart man was he, in splendid armor, and his face bore scars of battle. Well had he fought the Britons the day before, but now he loudly exclaimed:

"O my imprudence! I should have waited for Lentulus and a greater force. Will he never come? But, if he come, the fault of this defeat is not his, but mine. He will be acquitted, and I am left alone to account to Cæsar for a lost eagle of a legion!"

He smote upon his breast and again he walked onward, downcast and gloomy. Once more he spoke, with exceeding bitterness:

"How shall I answer for the loss of the trireme here in the bay? Will not all men say that I kept no watch?"

He stepped upon the rampart and stood still. Near at hand were the ruins of the Saxon village, but they had ceased smoking and lay black and bare as witnesses of the ruthless blow which he had smitten upon the Northmen of the Saxon shore. Beyond were fields which would not be cultivated this season as formerly. There were many corpses yet unburied, for the slayers had spared none save boys and girls for the slave market. The very young, the very old, even the middle-aged women, had been slain, and the fighting men had fallen with their weapons in their hands. The prisoners were guarded in a kind of pen at the left, and they were many.

"Petronius," shouted the centurion to an officer of rank, "take with thee ten and slay all. We have no conveyance for them. Let not one escape."

One order was as another to a Roman soldier, and Petronius answered not, but marched away into the camp, seeking his ten who with him were to butcher the prisoners.

"I am dishonored!" said the centurion. "Fate and fortune are against me. I can give no reason for the loss of the trireme. I will go down to the shades."

Slowly he drew his short-bladed, heavy gladius from its sheath. He looked at it, trying its edge, and he said:

"Thou hast been with me through many battles, O sword! Thou hast drunk the blood of more lives than I can count. Be thou true to me now, for all else is lost."

Then he knelt upon the rampart and placed the hilt firmly in the earth, the blade point leaning toward him. He braced himself and cast his weight with force. A gasp, a shudder, a struggle of strong limbs, and Petronius was in command of the Roman camp, for his superior officer was dead.

There were many screams at the prison pen, but afterward all was quiet, and Petronius returned, to be told of this new misfortune which had befallen.

"Keep ye good watch," he said, "lest the Britons take us unawares. There is more than one trireme yet to come. But now we will raise the funeral pile of him who lieth here, for he died in all honor."

Orders were given and the soldiers brought much wood, but they came and went in silence, for their fates were dark before them.

So was it with the camp of the Romans; but at the camp of the Saxons, at the cove and spring, there was high feasting, for they found the wild boar well roasted and the venison was abundant. They needed but harps and harpers, for the spirit of song came upon all singers, and it was a day of triumph. Not even the older vikings could say that they had ever heard of the taking of a Roman warship in this wise.

"Some have the sea kings rammed to sinking," they said. "Some have they driven ashore and some have they burned; but the Romans themselves ever burn any keel that they are leaving. Hael to *The Sword*, the victor!"

"The smiters of my kindred have themselves been smitten," said Olaf, the son of Hakon, but he sat with a fierce fire burning in his eyes and his seax lay bare at his side.

"We have smitten them upon the sea," said Ulric the Jarl, "but not yet upon the land. I may not yet leave Britain. Not until I have kept the counsel of Hilda and my promise to my father at his tomb."

"Do as thou hast said," replied Olaf, "lest evil fortune come to thee. But go thou now and look at the trireme. Is she not thine, to do with as thou wilt?"

"I will go," said Ulric, and with him went only Knud the Bear, by his ordering.

First went they upon *The Sword*, for she was nearer, and she was now lashed side by side with the trireme. High above the low bulwarks of the ship from the Northland arose the strong sides of the war vessel of Cæsar, and her greater force in fight or in rough seas was evident. Ulric looked and he thought of the sayings of Olaf, the son of Hakon, for a shrewd suggestion sprouteth in the mind of a wise man like a seed sown in a garden.

"Truly we were overcrowded," said Ulric, standing upon the fore deck of *The Sword*. "We are thrice too many souls for so small a ship as this. There was too little room for provisions or for sleeping. There is none at all for the storage of spoils. The men will not brook the burning of the shares which may fall to them. They like not my hard ruling even thus far."

"O jarl," said Knud, "what sayest thou? Let us not burn good plunder. What good to win it if we carry it not home with us? I would now go on board the trireme."

"Come," said Ulric, and they climbed up over her high bulwark, noting how thick it was and well joined together. Thus they passed from stem to stern and in and out of cabins, examining all things – the oars, the ropes, and the sails.

"She is provided for a long voyage," said the jarl. "Sawest thou ever such armor and such store of weapons? We may need them in the southern seas."

"That will we," replied Knud; "but I am an old seaman and I was thinking of yonder sails. There are twain. They are of strongly woven stuff – not skins, like our sail. They will save much rowing. There are good anchors also. Thou sayest well, we are too many in *The Sword*."

Yet she seemed very beautiful as she lay at the side of the trireme, and the jarl remembered how his heart had gone out to her while she was building. She had borne him well, also, and she had proved herself. What might he do with the vessel that he loved? He went on board of her again and he stood by the hammer of Thor on the fore deck.

"What thinkest thou?" asked Knud. "What if I – for I am a smith – put now the anvil and the hammer on the fore deck of the trireme? Will she not then be *The Sword*? Will not Thor and Odin go with her?"

"Do even as thou hast said!" loudly exclaimed Ulric. "So the gods go with us what matter for a wooden keel?"

But his heart smote him sorely.

"I would," he thought, "that I might have speech with Hilda. I will go on shore and question Olaf. He is old."

Old was he and crafty, for already he had been saying many things to the vikings. He had told them of keels overwhelmed in the storms of the southern seas, or crushed by the rams of Roman warships. He had spoken of hungers and thirsts because of lack of room for provisions, and of fights

lost because there were no more arrows to shoot or spears to throw. The young men heard him eagerly, and even the old warriors listened with care. They also called to mind such things and told of them, and all who chose to look could see the difference in size between the two vessels that floated in the cove.

CHAPTER X.

The Great Sacrifice of the Druids

In the deep forest stood Olaf, the son of Hakon, and before him stood a tall, venerable man clad in a robe of white which came down to his feet, whereon were sandals. On his head was naught save abundant gray hair and a circlet of beaten gold. On his arms were heavy rings of gold, deeply graven, and in his hand was a long white wand, gold tipped.

"Thou and thy Saxon friends have done well," he said in the Latin tongue. "But I like not this message from their jarl."

"He doth but ask of thee, O high priest," replied Olaf, "that he, who is not as another man, but is of the sons of the gods of the North, may reverence thy gods for the aid they have given him by sea and land, and that he may be present at the great sacrifice, as becometh him. If he may so do, he will give thee a thing the like of which thou hast never seen hitherto, and he will smite for thee the Romans."

"Cometh he then from Odin?" asked the Druid.

"From Odin," said Olaf; "and of higher rank than he is none among the Saxons."

"He is not a king," said the Druid, "but I know of jarls and of their pedigrees. The Romans at thy village are this day smitten by the Britons and we need not his sword. Well is it, however, for him to give a gift. Let him see to it that his offering be right precious. It is a day's journey to the sacred place. He may not come down to the valley of the gods, but he may stand upon the hill, among the oaks, and afterward I will receive his token."

"So be it, O high priest," said Olaf, and he turned away, as did also the Druid.

"Cunning is he," muttered Olaf, as he walked. "But in us also is there prudence and the jarl will be guided in the matter. I think he will not fall into this trap of the Britons. They plotted against us before the Romans came, and gladly would they see Saxon blood upon the stones of sacrifice."

So said he to the jarl at the camp late in the day, and Ulric listened, pondering.

"Olaf," he said, after a silence, "Wulf the Skater hath returned from looking at thy place. No other trireme hath arrived, but even while he was watching did the Britons swarm over the palisades. The Romans were too few to guard their lines, and it was in vain for them to resist a multitude. Thy vengeance is complete."

"The gods have done this," said Olaf. "But what wilt thou do in this other matter?"

"I will leave a strong guard with the ship," said the jarl, "but with the greater number I will go to look upon the sacrifices. Thou wilt guide by a road they know not, and we will defeat their cunning."

"They would not strike thee, I think," said Olaf, "until after the sacrifices. This is their reverence to their gods."

"I would I knew," said Ulric, "the name of one of their gods. I will not sacrifice to one to whom I may not speak. He is a breath."

"Thou mayest not enter the sacred valley," said Olaf; "but I have somewhat more to tell thee. Now do I know what is the name of thy captured trireme."

"The hammer of Thor is on her deck at this hour," said the jarl. "She is no longer Roman. But whose is that gilded shape under her beak? It seemeth a woman wearing a helmet."

"The Druid told me," said Olaf. "She is Minerva. She is to the Romans as are the Nornir. She is both wise and crafty, being a saga woman, and there are runes concerning her."

"She is, then, not of the sea," said the jarl. "I think she will not contend with Thor. It were ill fortune to disturb her, seeing she hath delivered to us the ship; but we must give to it the name of *The Sword* or Odin were justly angry, for we gave our keel to him."

"Thou hast decided well," said Olaf; "but if so, then there must remain one keel only, not twain. It was commanded thee to burn one ship in Britain, and thou mayest not break thy word to the dead and to the gods."

"That will I not," said Ulric; "but now we must speedily prepare this expedition."

Wise had been the work of the tongue of Olaf, for now came the vikings to Ulric to speak concerning *The Sword* and the trireme, so that this which was to be done appeared not as by his ordering, but as the counsel of all.

"Thou doest well," they told him, "to yield to us in this matter. We will have a larger ship. We will have room for our plunder. We care not overmuch for thy small keel, and we will burn her at the seaside. Thou art our jarl in battle, but thou mayest not rule in all things."

Nevertheless, they agreed with him all the more readily concerning the sacrifices, and those who were to go and those who were to stay by the ships were chosen by lot lest any should accuse the jarl of unfairness; for it was hoped that here was to be fighting. Not yet had there been any division of the spoils because all agreed to wait until a more convenient season, or even until the end of the voyage.

"They whom the valkyrias do not name," said one, "may apportion whatever may then be found in the ship. There will be fewer weapons, perchance, and fewer men."

In the dawn of the next day did the jarl lead out his men, and in the dusk did the march end. High and round-topped was the hill in the forest to which Olaf guided them, and below was a narrow valley, bare of trees. There was yet light to see that in the middle of the valley were many great stones. Some of these stood upright in a wide circle, like the burial stones of the North peoples, but much larger. Other stones, long and weighty, lay flat, upheld a little from the ground by bowlders under them at either end.

"They are stones of sacrifice," said Olaf. "On them do they slay both cattle and men. But seest thou the cages?"

"Penthouses of wood I see," said Ulric. "Very large, but of one story and roofed flatly. On the roofs and against the sides are heaps of wood. What are these?"

"Wait till thou seest," said Olaf. "Their shape on the ground is as the body and the arms and the legs of a man, and there is a meaning in it known to the Druids. They make this wooden man of sacrifice, and they fill him full of men and women and children that he may feast. They have made many war captives and they have condemned many for evil-doing or for speaking against the Druids."

"Great fires are lighting around the valley and near the stones," remarked Tostig the Red. "I have seen many men slain upon stones. It is the right place to slay them, where the gods can see all. We shall have a rare treat. But there are hundreds of Britons. They wear little clothing."

"They paint themselves blue, instead," said Olaf. "But it keepeth not out either the cold or a spear point."

More and more numerous grew the throngs in the valley, coming out from under the trees beyond. Not among them, but walking through them in a procession, came scores at a time of the white-robed Druids, bearing no arms, but leading with them human beings of both sexes, arm-fettered, defenseless, making no resistance. There was a loud sound of harping and chanting as the processions drew near the flat stones.

Behind each of these stood a Druid with a large knife, and before him, stone by stone, was laid a victim. Then fell the knives in quick succession, with a twanging of harps and a shout, but the Northmen saw no great difference between this offering and such as they had witnessed elsewhere. As the firelight brightened, however, they could discern that the walls of the wooden man in the middle were open, with wide crevices, through which might be seen the naked forms of those who were shut in. They were even crowded, and they uttered loud cries as they saw torches placed against the heaps of wood surrounding the pen.

"Dry wood," said Knud the Bear. "See how it kindleth! A hot fire! These are to be burned for their god? He is a bad one. I like it not. The Romans do well to kill these Druids. I would slay them myself."

So said all the vikings, and had there been more of them, they might have vented their anger at this thing. It was not good, even for a god, but the throngs of Britons were well armed, after their fashion, and Ulric's men were but few in comparison.

"We would not mind four or five to one," he said, "but we could not slay such a multitude. The fires burn terribly! It is not at all like kindly slaying with a sword."

"A cut on a man's neck is nothing," said Tostig. "He falleth and that is an end. I hope to fall by a sword some day."

The shrieks and cries of agony were dreadful, rising above the twanging of the harps and the chanting of the Druids. There was no help for any of these who were doomed. Among them, said some of the vikings, must be all the Roman prisoners if any had been taken. The burning roofs fell in and so did the red blazings of the side walls. Nor did the swarms of the Britons cease to yell with the pleasure of cruelty while they gazed upon the frantic struggles of these victims.

"We have seen enough," said Olaf, at last. "O jarl, we have far to go. I hope we may again strike the Romans shortly, but I care not much if good Saxon spears find many marks among the Druids. It would require a host of Saxons to hold this island, killing them all, but I am one who will go back to the North and come again, bringing stout slayers with me."

"Some of the white-robed ones come in this direction even now," responded the jarl. "Behind them are spearmen. They must not find us upon this hill, but the woods are overdark to march in."

"After we are well covered," said Olaf, "we may kindle torches, but the way by which I lead you is plain and wide, for the war chariots of the British kings have made it in the old days. The Romans now prevent them from having any chariots within their dominions, but there are free tribes beyond their borders. Come!"

"On!" said the jarl. "This hill was to have been their trap. They seek to march around that they may cut off our going. On!"

Swiftly marched the Saxons for a while, but the darkness of the forest was dense, and now they halted to kindle torches.

"The Druids and their men carried many and bright ones," said Ulric, "so that we saw them enter the woods, but we are too far now for them to discern our own."

After this there were pauses for resting, but the vikings marched on until the dawn. Then went they forward again, fasting, but at the noon they were greeted by the shouts of the men who held the palisades at the spring.

"O Tostig the Red," responded the jarl, "hath all been well with thee and with the camp?"

"Hael, O jarl!" said Tostig. "All is well. We have seen Britons at a distance among the trees, but none came near for speech. I think they are not overfriendly."

"That are they not, but treacherous," said Ulric. "But now let there be roasting and eating and sleeping, and then we shall have new matters upon our hands. We have seen things that are worth telling around a fire in the winter evenings. I like not these gods of the Britons. They are evil-minded."

Many were busy at the fires with venison and with fishes which had been caught, but they who had remained at the camp were cooks for the weary men who could tell of this sacrifice of the Druids. As for the jarl, he ate and drank and then he went on board *The Sword* and lay down to sleep upon the after deck, saying little to any man, and Tostig the Red came and sat down by him.

Orders had been given, moreover, and before the setting of the sun both keels were anchored some fathoms out from low-water mark, and only the small boats were at the beach. It was best, the jarl had said, to trust deep water rather than a stockade after the darkness should come. All the fires in the camp were heaped to burn long, and so were other large fires upon the strand. Then came all the

vikings on board the ship, and there could be no present peril. It was a night of peace, but the watchers saw both dark forms and white ones by the light of the fires, and knew that the Britons had come.

"The white ones are the Druids," said Wulf the Skater to his companions. "I am not afraid of their gods which have men roasted. I hope the jarl will find us a chance to spear priests before we sail away from this island."

The rest agreed with him, asking him many questions concerning the sacrifices.

"But for the prudence of the jarl," he also told them, "all we who went would have been taken at a disadvantage in the darkness of the forest. There would have been no fair fighting."

"He is a good battle jarl," they said, but it might be seen that among them were some who were not well pleased with his ways.

There, safe from all assailing, floated the two keels until the dawn. Then went some of the men ashore in the small boats, and the fires were replenished for cooking, but none were permitted to wander into the woods. On board the trireme there was much search going on and great was the delight of all over the plunder discovered. Rich indeed was the store of arms, as if it had been intended to refit a cohort or to arm new recruits.

"It is good, too," they said, "to be able to walk around. There was hardly elbow-room on our own keel. But we knew that we must lose some and that there would be less crowding when we came home."

"We can give a man to every oar of the trireme," said Ulric, "and yet leave threescore to the spears."

But he looked over the bulwark and down into the good ship *The Sword*, and his heart smote him sadly, for the very wood she was made of came from his own trees, and she seemed to look him in the face kindly.

Hours went by before there were any newcomers upon the shore, but Olaf said that there must be patience.

"Watch also," he warned Ulric, "and let not any Briton come on board. We will meet them in the small boats at the strand."

So it came to be, for at the noon the woods became alive with men. Foremost came the chief Druid, followed by some of lesser rank and by harpers. With them were chiefs of clans of the Britons, each one calling himself a king, but being really less than a Norse jarl in power, for he was as a slave to all Druids.

"These," told Olaf, "make the laws and enforce them. They alone know the sagas of the Britons and what is to be given to the gods. They sometimes burn a king if he worketh not their will, and they have magic arts which make the people fear them. I would slay all such if I were a king."

He and Ulric were in the same boat pulling to the strand; and the chief Druid was wise, for he came to meet them attended only by two other Druids and by seven of his harpers. Behind them under the trees clustered the British warriors. They formed no ranks, but they wore a fierce, warlike appearance. Among them were some in armor that was half Roman, as if taken in battle. More had Roman swords, but their own British blades were both short and light. All were armed with javelins, but their shields were of all sorts, only that most of them were made of wicker and hide.

"They are brave enough," said Olaf, "but the Romans seek to prevent them from getting weapons. A Briton might become as good a soldier as a legionary, with arms and with training. Cæsar is always cunning in government."

"Hael, O Druid!" shouted Ulric. "I am well pleased to see thee."

"O thou, the jarl of the vikings," sternly responded the chief Druid. "Too many came with thee. My permission was but to thee and to Olaf. Neither didst thou do reverence to my gods."

"O priest," said the jarl, "I came and I returned as I would. I like not thy gods. What is thy errand with me this day?"

The face of Ulric had flushed hotly upon hearing the haughty speech of the Druid, for he was not one to be lightly chidden by any man.

"O jarl," said the Druid yet more sternly, "I have this also against thee, that thou didst promise me a treasure the like of which I never saw before, and thou didst not deliver it. Where is thy great gift?"

"O Knud the Bear," shouted Ulric, "row now to the shore and bring to this priest the token of the son of Odin."

The second of the small boats came to the shore and Knud and eight other of the tallest vikings, ax in hand, bore out and spread upon the earth the tremendous hide of the white bear, the king of bears. From the skull, also, they had reft its whole cover, putting in eyes of bright leather. The hide seemed to be longer and broader than in life, as if it lay two fathoms from tail to nose.

"O jarl of the Saxons," exclaimed the Druid, "what is this? I have heard of these creatures, but never have I seen one."

"Then have I kept my promise," said Ulric. "Thou mayest hang it in thy house or in the house of thy gods, as thou wilt, but never was the like of it in Britain. He was a son of the ice king. He came from the long darkness, and I slew him with my own hand."

Around the jarl stood now a score of vikings; terrible men for a foe to look upon, for they were throwers of sudden spears. Still stood the chief Druid and his fellows and the harpers, gazing at the great skin, and the Britons in the edge of the wood shouted loudly.

"I agree with thee as to this," said the high priest, reluctantly. "I accept thy token, for in it is a meaning that thou knowest not. There is an old prophecy concerning the Northern Bear and Britain. Thou hast done well. My quarrel is now with Olaf, who standeth by thee."

"But for him thou wouldst have slain me and mine in thy forest trap on the hill, at the sacrifices," answered the jarl, angrily. "Thy quarrel is also with me!"

Then came the rush of the Britons from the woods, hurling javelins as they came, but the vikings were instantly in their boats, and the high priest and all who were with him lay upon the sand, so suddenly were they smitten. From the ships came showers of spears, arrows, stones, and the men in the small boats seemed to be unharmed, for their shields were up.

"Thou sittest very still," said Ulric to Olaf. "What sayest thou? Mine eyes were upon these blue ones."

"O jarl," said Knud the Bear, "we lifted him in, thinking there might still be life in him, but there is none. The spear of the high priest was strongly driven."

"Hael to thee, O hero!" shouted the jarl. "Olaf, the son of Hakon, hath gone to Valhalla! He hath died in his armor! Row to the ships. We will go hence and the body of Olaf we will bury in the sea. There shall be no lamenting for the son of Hakon."

Only this harm had befallen the Saxons from the treachery of the Druids, while the slain lying upon the beach were many. Loudly now arose the wailing of the Britons, for they had a strange death cry of their own, long and vibrating, that went far out across the sea.

"Their gods will be against us," said Wulf the Skater. "We may not now linger long in Britain."

"Very soon," said the jarl, "we will sail for the Middle Sea, but not with two keels. We are too few."

The Sword and the trireme, nevertheless, were now going out to sea with all oars, as if to show how many men were needed for this. The jarl was at the helm of the trireme and his face was clouded.

"Not yet," he said, "have I smitten the Romans upon the land of Britain. That must I do, and I know not how or where. The days go by and it will be winter before we reach the Middle Sea. The voyage is long."

CHAPTER XI.

The Passing of Lars the Old

Sudden is the change from winter to summer in the Northland. The buds of the trees get ready under the frost and open to the sunshine as soon as a few days of warmth have told them that they may safely burst forth. No full leaves were as yet, but the grass was greening and the fisher boats were busy in the fiords.

In the hall of the house of Brander there were fewer to gather now, in the lengthening evenings, around the central fire, but Oswald's harp was always there. Hilda, from her chair, would often ask him to strike up, but there was a lack of spirit in his minstrelsy, and even when she spoke to him her voice was weaker and softer than of old. The wrinkles upon her face were deepening, and they who looked long at her said to one another that a light which did not come from the fire played now and then across her forehead and around her mouth. At other times she was shut up much in her own room, and it was said that she pored long and thoughtfully over polished sheepskins and fragments of gray stone whereon were graven runes that none else might read. Some of these, they said, had been brought by Odin's men when they journeyed from the East into the Northland. Who knew, therefore, but what the runes had been written in the city of Asgard by the hands of the Asas? It was not well to question over-closely about such things. They said naught to her of the matters which were her own, and only once did a little maiden yield to her own curiosity and follow the old saga woman when at night she walked out along the path which led to the stones of the mighty dead. Afterward she told her mother, and then all the village knew, that Hilda did but sit down by the tomb of Brander, weeping loudly and talking with him concerning his absent son.

"It is no wonder," said the villagers, "for she loved Ulric the Jarl. It is good for all our men that Hilda should speak to the gods concerning their welfare. She knoweth them better than we do, and she is to go to them soon. She getteth ready daily."

So fared it in the Northland, but many ships were putting to sea, and there was even jealousy here and there that Ulric and *The Sword* should have gotten away so much in advance of all others. But the ships of the vikings would now be so many as to bode ill for the fleets of Rome and for the merchantmen of the Middle Sea unless Cæsar should send force enough to prevent their coming.

"Olaf told me," said Ulric, talking to Tostig of such matters, "that the Romans fear the coming of the Saxons. Therefore against our villages as well as against the rebellious Druids came these triremes at this time. Cæsar's power in Britain groweth. Around his fortified camps are cities springing up, and he fortifieth also ancient towns. We must come with many keels and a great host when we take this island away from Cæsar."

"But I think we will destroy the Britons," said Tostig the Red, "for we have seen that we may not trust them. I like a place where there is so much good hunting."

Ulric had been scanning the shore line, for he was steering, and now he said:

"We will anchor for the night within yonder rocky point. There is a ledge there for which I have been seeking."

All day had the two ships been coasting slowly, and the men had wondered much what it might be that was in the mind of their jarl, for he was moody. He had also asked many questions of the older vikings. The two ships came to anchor not many fathoms out from the rocky point, but all men were forbidden venturing to the shore.

"It is not well," said Ulric to some who would have landed in the small boats. "If ye but look closely, ye will discern the glimmer of fires in the deep forest. Our movement this day hath been followed, and now a small party might meet too many of their spearmen. They are good fighters."

There was much grumbling among the younger men, for they despised this prudence of his which ever held them in and thwarted their hot wills, but they had no choice but to obey him concerning the boats.

More and more plainly through the night darkness might the watchers on the decks discern the fires that were kindled in the woods. The jarl gazed at them long, thinking many things concerning the Druids and the other Saxon villages of the shore of Britain. He slept after a while to the slow rocking of the ship, and when morn came Wulf the Skater stood by him.

"O jarl," he said, "the Britons build fires along the beach. They swim out to us. I have speared four of their swimmers. What do we next?"

Ulric arose and gave orders. Immediately a transfer began from *The Sword* to the trireme of all arms and provisions, and the men worked rapidly. Only that Wulf worked not, and that an old viking came and stood by him at the bulwark.

"I like it not," said Wulf, "but Ulric is jarl. What sayest thou, Lars the Old, the shipmaker?"

"Thou art a seaman," said Lars. "I am of thy mind. I toiled much in the shaping and the making of *The Sword*. My heart is heavy."

"So is mine!" exclaimed Wulf. "First of all men, after the jarl, did I take her helm. She is Odin's keel. There is bad fortune in leaving her."

"That do I fear," said Lars, "but I leave her not. I was sore smitten in the ribs in the fight with the Druids on the beach. I bleed well now. I shall not sail in this trireme."

"Good is thy fate," said Wulf. "Didst thou tell the jarl thou wert wounded?"

"Not so," replied Lars. "None know but a few of our old vikings. I thought not much of it at first, for I have oft been wounded. But now they will soon burn *The Sword*. I command thee that thou lay me upon the fore deck, where was once the hammer of Thor. That is my death place."

"That will I do," said Wulf. "So will say the jarl."

"So do I now say!" came to them in his own voice, for he also was leaning over the rail and he had heard. "O Lars, I knew not of thy hurt, thinking only of Olaf, the son of Hakon. Him have we buried in the sea this day, and thou shalt have thy will. *The Sword* is nearly emptied. We burn her on yonder rocks at the point as the tide falleth. We will lay thee upon her fore deck with thy arms and armor."

"Do thou thy duty by me," said Lars, "that it may be well with thee. But leave not *The Sword* until every timber shall be burned, lest some part of her shall fall into an enemy's hand."

"She is ready!" exclaimed Ulric. "We will lift the anchors and move both ships. There will be many to see the burning."

Trumpetings and harpings and angry shouts were answering from a throng of Britons gathering along the shore. Not any of them could guess as yet what would be the next move of the Saxons, but great was their wrath that they were able to do no harm.

"They would we might find reason for landing," said Ulric to Wulf, "but I care not to strike them at this place. We would gain nothing."

"O jarl," said Wulf, "Lars, the shipmaker, lieth down. The valkyrias are with him."

"He dieth not a cow's death," said Ulric, "but as a true warrior of the North. It is as he would will, but he still is breathing."

"Yea, but heavily," said Wulf. "I would I were as he is, that I might not leave *The Sword*."

"O Wulf," said the jarl, "thou hast many a feast of swords before thee. Cheer thee up."

"Jarl Ulric," said Wulf, "do I not know thee? Thou too lovest thy first keel. But I think thou doest wisely. The men have demanded this, and they may not be gainsaid. But I would there had been men enough for both ships, and then I would not have left mine own."

On moved the two keels toward the ledge of rocks, and the tide was falling. They would be bare before long.

"Row, now!" shouted the jarl. "Send *The Sword* far up upon the ledge. She must be lifted by the rocks till she is out of the water. There come the Britons toward the point. Be ready to strike them! The Druids have gathered an army!"

No sail was raised upon either of the ships, but the rowers of the trireme paused while those of *The Sword* pulled strongly. She was light now, having no stowage or ballast, and quickly her prow was thrust high up the ledge between two masses of dark gray stone. Then the trireme was grappled at her stern and many Saxons sprang out upon the ledge. There were several fathoms of water between this and the shore.

"Fast falleth the tide," said Ulric. "Lift ye now Lars the Old, the shipmaker, and bear him to the fore deck of *The Sword*. Lay by him his arms and his armor, breaking the sword and the spear and cleaving the shield and mail that no other may ever bear them."

The vikings carried the old warrior quickly, and he uttered no sound. They laid him upon the fore deck and did as Ulric commanded, but the hilt of the broken sword, having yet half the length of its bright blade, they put into his right hand. In the middle of the ship much wood was placed, heaping it, and in this heap a blazing torch was thrust. Then all the vikings left *The Sword*, and the greater part of her was already out of water.

"They come in swarms!" exclaimed Tostig the Red, gazing at the Britons who rushed along the shore toward the point. "Hael! the fire burneth well! They must not prevent it!"

Up leaped the long-armed flames, catching the fagots of pine splinters.

"Burn thou, O *Sword*!" shouted the jarl. "I give thee to Odin in the fire! Thou art mine own, O good ship from the Northland. I would I might have sailed in thee to the Middle Sea and to the city of the gods!"

"O jarl," said Wulf the Skater, "even so would I have sailed. I think we shall never see that city. The gods are far away, and I know not if they have any city. I am dark this day, and over me is a cloud."

The jarl spoke not again, but he looked earnestly at *The Sword*

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