

**INMAN
HERBERT
ESCOTT**

WULNOTH THE
WANDERER

Herbert Inman
Wulnoth the Wanderer

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Herbert Escott-Inman

Wulnoth the Wanderer / A

Story of King Alfred of England

FOREWORD

The song of Wulnoth, the born thrall, who was called the Wanderer; the song of the nameless and the landless man who aided two kings to gain kingdoms.

"The song of his friendship for Guthred the prince; the song of his wanderings to find his friend. The song of his perils and warrings, and of his slaying of Hungwar the Dane. The song of his friendship with Alfred the Bretwalda of the West Saxons, and of his love for Edgiva the Beautiful. The song of his turning to the Life Giver; the song of his last fight with Jarl Eric, on the field of the great slaughter. This is the song.

"And this song did Gyso the Gleeman sing by command of Edward the King, the son of Alfred, that the name and the deeds of Wulnoth might not perish, but be remembered by all men."

CHAPTER I

How Wyborga the Wise spoke with King Hardacnute

Far across the dark sea which rolls its waters to the northeast of this England of ours, there rise the dark cliffs and frowning heights of Norway's shores; and there, in the days of old, lived Hardacnute the King.

Far inland did his lands extend, fair with many a fertile field where broad streams flowed, and grim with snow-clad peaks, from which the torrents roared and foamed their way down to the sea.

On the cliff-top his castle was built, and around, on many a height, could be seen the halls of jarl and lord, each mighty in war, and each owning Hardacnute as master and overlord.

By night and by day did the warders guard his towers; by night and by day were his long ships ready to put to sea; by night and by day did a hundred shields gleam in his halls, and a hundred spears rest beside them; and by night and by day were there a hundred strong hands ready to grasp the one or to prise the other. For across the dark waves was the way of the sea-kings, and no man could say when their long ships might come sailing from Denmark or Juteland to carry fire and sword along the coast.

Well it became the King to be watchful; and for his watchfulness was there now peace in the land.

A great flaxen-haired man was this King, whose blue eyes could gleam with anger or sparkle with merriment; terrible was he in battle, and yet mild in the hall, and dearly did he love Wulfreda his fair wife, and little Guthred his son, who played in the great courtyard with a tiny shield and spear, which Hald the Constable had fashioned for him.

Blue-eyed and golden-haired was Guthred, with more of his mother's gentle nature than of his father's strong passion, so that Hardacnute frowned sometimes, and said that the boy was too timid, and that he feared pain; but old Hald would laugh and answer —

"Let be, O King; the tender shoot hath not the rough bark of the old tree. Let be. Guthred will prove a brave holda yet."

Now, some way from the King's castle there dwelt a wise woman, one who knew many things that other people could not understand, yet one who used her power well, and did not seek to cast spells upon man or beast; and it chanced that one day this wise woman came along the road by the castle as the King came riding home from the hunting, with his dogs leaping and the slain bear carried between two sturdy carls. Some of the dogs were fierce, but they tried not to harm old Wyborga; and the King saw, as he rode past on his great horse, that she looked pale and weary, as if from a journey.

So the King called to one of his followers to light from his steed, and he bade Wyborga ride with him to the castle; and he took her to the hall and treated her with honor, and gave her food and sweet mead, for King Hardacnute was ever kind to the old and the young, and to women.

And while Wyborga sat at meat, little Guthred came and played at her side, and laughed up into her face, and the wise woman placed one hand on his fair head and looked into his eyes and sighed, so that the King said —

"Why do you sigh, O mother, when you look into the eyes of this my son?"

"Because of what I see there, O King," answered the wise woman. And the King asked again —

"And what is it that you see, O mother?"

"A long journey to a far land, for a kingdom," answered Wyborga; and at that the King laughed heartily.

"Why, truly, mother, that is but a little thing, for the sea is the road of the sea-kings; and though Guthred will be king in my place when I have passed to the storm land, yet it may well be that he will carry fire and sword across the sea, and conquer other lands."

"Not fire nor sword will Guthred carry across the sea, O King," she answered, "nor will he reign as king here in thy stead, though he shall be king of a greater realm than thine. The thrall collar shall he wear, and the thrall's part shall he play, yet shall he become a king in his day, and a thrall shall help him to his kingdom."

Now, at that the King paused and pondered, and his brow was troubled, but he said at last —
"Thy riddle is too hard for me, mother, and it seems dark with evil, for how shall my son become a thrall?"

"Thrall makers ride the sea, O King," she answered. And the King said —

"Yet where shall the King be when they come, O mother?" And again she made reply —

"The sword has a death-song for each in turn, O King."

"Now truly, mother," cried the King, "this is a hard thing you say to me, after you have eaten at my table. Evil did I do to bring you here as my guest."

"Not evil, O King," Wyborga answered, "but good. And now listen to my words, O King. This thing will not be yet, and before it comes, over the Westarweg shall come wanderers seeking food and shelter. Be they poor or be they rich, high or low, let thy hand be to them, King, for of their number one will be the friend of Guthred the Prince. A thrall shall take the thralldom from the Prince, and that a thrall who shall mate with a king's daughter; and now — I go in peace, and thanks for thy kindness."

So Wyborga went her way, and the King pondered and was troubled. Much that she had said he could not understand, but this one thing seemed clear: the wise woman had foretold that foes would come and slay him and carry his little son away into captivity, and that seemed heavy tidings to King Hardacnute. Therefore he called in all his servants, and had great stores of food prepared for siege, and night and day kept watch and ward for the foe who should come across Westarweg, as they called the dark sea.

But no foes came; not a single dark sail appeared, not a single shield shone over the waves to catch the gleams of the sun; and at last the King laughed away his fears, and said that surely Wyborga the Wise must have lost her wisdom.

But in that the King was wrong, for had not Wyborga said that this would not be yet, and that ere the foe arrived wanderers would come seeking shelter and succor? King Hardacnute had forgotten that part of the prophecy.

But when the summer waned and the sea grew wild with the winter gales, when the ice came down from the North, to gleam ghost-like as it slowly floated by, when even the bravest of the sea-kings would have trembled to launch his stout ships — then, one day, as the pale sun died away and the fierce tempests sprang up, the warder came to say that out on the sea a ship of some sort was to be seen; and at that all men ran to their posts, for perchance this might be the enemy that the wise woman had foretold.

But when the King reached the castle walls and gazed out into the storm wrack, there, beating and buffeted and sore tried, he saw one poor boat, such as the fisher folk use, drifting almost at the mercy of the tempest, and yet seeking to make its way to the shelter of Lethra Fiord.

"Now who can these be?" cried the King. "What madman would put to sea in such a craft on such a night?" But to that old Hald answered —

"Not all who put to sea do so willingly, O King. These are some poor castaways; and it minds me that the wise woman foretold the coming of some such. So I will get me down to the water with some stout hearts, and render them what aid I may."

Then the King gave permission, and Hald and his men went down and launched one of the King's ships to the storm, and with straining oars and slanting sail they came round and rendered help to the storm-beaten ones, and got them safely back, and carried them into King Hardacnute's hall and set them in his presence, so that he might see them for himself.

And the King stared, and perchance he frowned a little, for it seemed a foolish thing to endanger his stout hearts to rescue these travellers, seeing that they were but three, and poorly dressed like carls, and, moreover, two of them wore the collars of thralls.

There was a man, big and stalwart, with bold defiant eyes, and erect head, and he had a thrall collar; and there was a woman, fair and timid; and between them they held a child, a boy of about the young Prince's age, but more stalwart and well-knit, and he also had around his little neck the badge of slavery.

The three stood there waiting for the King to speak, and yet for the moment the King made no sound, for he gazed upon that child. A bold daring child he seemed. Tender of years though he was, his eyes were blue as the bluest summer sky, and his long hair shone yellow gold, as though the sun had kissed it; and the King looked and wondered, and thought that he had never seen so fair a child, no, not even when he looked at his own little son, Prince Guthred.

And while he sat looking, the Prince himself ran into the hall brandishing his tiny spear and shield, and seeing a little one of his own age, he ran to him, flourishing his baby weapons.

But the little stranger did not flinch; though the spear-head grazed his arm, he only smiled. And then Guthred slipped and fell, and his shield and spear went flying across the hall, so that the little stranger ran and gathered them up and then aided the Prince, and gave him his weapons back and stood beside him, his arm round the other's neck, as though he were holda and noble, and not a churl's child. Thereat the King frowned, and then he turned to the man and spoke and asked him whence he came, and who he was, and how came he to be in the boat, with woman and child, on such a stormy day?

"Wast thou washed away against thy will?" he asked, "and dost thou desire to be safely sent back to thy lord?" And at that the face of the man darkened, and the woman began to weep, while the child seized the baby spear, and cried so that even the King heard his shrill voice —

"My father, better this than to go back now."

"Now," said the King, "truly we have a young wolf cub here. Tell me your story, friend, that I may learn that from which you flee, and why this child, who is little more than a babe, talks so largely of choosing the kiss of the spear before return to that place from whence ye came. Methinks this means that we have thralls who have fled from their thralldom."

And then the man stepped forward, and he spoke, and his voice sounded strong and clear; nor, though he was in the presence of the King, did he show any fear.

"Truly, O King, this child speaks well," he said; "for there is no going back for us. And, truly, as thou sayest, we are thralls, and thralls who have fled from thralldom, seeing that is worse than death. Know, O King, that I am Cerdic, the son of Elchere; and this woman is Olfa, and this child is our son Wulnoth —"

"Thou art Saxon, then, if thy name speaks truly," said the King. "How comes one of the name of the noble Cerdic to wear a thrall's collar?"

"This is the matter of it, O King," Cerdic answered. "Of the blood of Cerdic am I; yet, as thou perchance knowest, the sons of Cerdic sailed across the Westarweg to the land of East Anglia, leaving Tholk to rule in the place where they were born. Yet Tholk was unworthy, and made a league with Berwulf the Viking; whereat I and others rebelled, and were therefore made landless and nameless, and the thrall collars were placed upon us. Yet this I might have abided, though the blood of jarls was in my veins; but this Berwulf broke his treaty, and put Tholk to death and made himself lord in his place; and because I would not own him he had me beaten with rods, and would have had me slain but that I burst my bonds and struck him down with his own axe; and then, escaping, made to the sea with my wife and my son. For it was better to trust to the fury of the winter storms than to abide the cruel wrath of Viking Berwulf. For six long days and nights have we battled with the tempests, while the storm sisters have ridden around us; and then we sighted thy walls, O King. And, now that

we are here, either slay us or send us on our way if thou canst not keep us here; but send us not back to Berwulf, who, methinks, would be as much thy foe as mine."

Then did King Hardacnute swear a mighty oath by Thor's hammer that no harm should come to Cerdic or his while he bided in Lethra.

"These Danish pirates," he cried, "are foes to all honest men, and each should help the other against them. Bide thou here in safety, Cerdic, son of Elchere, thou and thine, and no harm shall come to thee. But as for thy thrall collar, it was put on by thy lord because thou didst rebel against him; and it is not meet that I should take it off until thou hast proved thyself in the man's game, making the sword sing the death song in the ears of thy foes."

"That will I do when the time comes, O King," answered Cerdic. "For the rest, I am content, and my service is thine."

"Thou shalt have house and a piece of land," said the King, "and my Stallere shall allow thee grazing; and as for thy little son –"

But then a little voice spoke, and Prince Guthred ran to his father's side, crying —

"Wulnoth must stay with me, O father. Wulnoth must stay and be my playmate." And at that the King laughed and said that it should be so.

So this is how little Wulnoth, the child of a fugitive and a thrall, and himself wearing a thrall collar, came to dwell in the King's hall and to play with Guthred the Prince; and though some of the jarls and warriors frowned and said that this thing should not be, the King took little heed; and the Queen smiled on the boy who played with her own son, and the two lads were happy together.

And all this time there was peace in the land, and no sign of the viking lords coming with fire and sword; and all this time did the King have watch and ward kept.

But sometimes, as he stood on his tower and looked over the long, rolling waves of the Westarweg, he would think of the words of Wyborga, and wonder within himself whether they would ever come true.

Now, this is how Wyborga the Wise prophesied evil tidings to the King; and this is how Cerdic, and Olfa his wife, and Wulnoth their son, came from the storm-sea to dwell in the King's land.

CHAPTER II

How Wulnoth saved Edgiva from the Bear

So Cerdic the Saxon took service with the King of Lethra; and the King gave him a cottage and a piece of land, where he lived with Olfa his wife. But Wulnoth his son was most of his time up in the King's hall playing with the little Prince Guthred; and, though some of the nobles frowned, a great friendship sprang up between the two children, so that they called each other brother, and each shared the other's joys and sorrows; and it was hard to say whether Guthred was most happy when he was with Wulnoth in Cerdic's cottage, or Wulnoth, when he was in the King's courtyard with the Prince.

And three years passed away with their sun and their snow, and still it was peace in the land, and the vikings did not appear. For some had gone to Angle Land, where there were fertile fields to be seized; and some had followed the mighty Hrolf – who was called The Walker, because he was so heavy that no horse could bear his weight – into Normandy to war against Charles the Simple; and others, again, had journeyed over the mighty river and the snow-clad mountains to carry fire and sword into the provinces of the Romans.

And in those three years the two boys grew strong and sturdy, and now they were each fourteen years old; yet still Wulnoth was the stronger.

If Guthred could run swiftly, Wulnoth could beat him. If Guthred could wrestle with any son of the jarls, Wulnoth could throw Guthred. If Guthred could send an arrow to the mark, Wulnoth could split the Prince's shaft from feather to head; so that the King said that the wolf cub would grow into a fine wolf one of these days and do great deeds in the land.

And though Wulnoth could best the Prince in most things, there was neither jealousy nor quarrellings; but the two boys loved like brothers, though Wulnoth never forgot that he was but a thrall's son, and wore thrall collar. The Prince would forget that, but Wulnoth never did, and he ever spoke of his companion as "my friend and Prince."

Now, you must know that about the time that Cerdic had first come to Lethra, the little Princess Edgiva was born; so that now she was three years old; and throughout all the land, yea, and throughout all wide Norway, there was not another child so beautiful as Edgiva, the daughter of Hardacnute.

Her skin was like the pink blush of the morning sky, or the tender leaf of the rose-bud; her teeth were like the purest pearls, and her eyes blue as the rarest sapphire; while, as for her hair, never spider spun thread so fine, never gold gleamed and played in the sunlight so brightly, and never down of the thistle, or wool of the sheep, was so soft.

The scalds sang songs in her praise, and said that when she grew up she would be the fairest woman in all the world, fit to become bride of the mightiest of kings.

And a dear, sweet, loving child she was, with a smile for all and a frown for none, except those who did wrong; and of all in Lethra she smiled most upon the little thrall-boy, Wulnoth; and Wulnoth was never so happy, no, not even when playing with Guthred, as when he was sitting watching Edgiva.

It was his strong brown hand that first held her as she tried to walk; and when they bought a little pony for her, it was Wulnoth who walked by her side and held the bridle, lest the creature should rear and throw his precious burden.

And at this some of the lords were more angry than ever; for they said it was a high honor for any lad to attend Princess Edgiva, and that their sons should come before a mere churl. And perchance the King would have listened to their speech, but that Wulfreda, the Queen, said their daughter liked the boy, and that it was a princess's right to choose her own servant; while as for old Hald the Constable, he laughed until the tears came into his fierce eyes, and he cried —

"By Odin! but some people are ever jealous, let what may happen. The boy is right, O King; and he has the thews of a young viking and the heart of a hero; and there is no peril would touch Edgiva while Wulnoth stood unwounded."

Hald, old and renowned as he was, had a big heart, and he did not forget that though he was noble and jarl now, his own father had been a churl until the day of his death.

So, despite frowns and grumblings, Wulnoth walked by the side of the Princess; and he and Guthred called themselves her knights, and waited upon her pleasure and delighted to do her bidding.

Now, all this time nothing had been seen of Wyborga the wise woman; for she had been a journey to places afar, as was her custom at certain seasons, despite her age; and the King had forgotten all about her dark sayings, or, if ever he remembered them, it was but as the idle tale of a poor old crone, whose wits had gone with the years that were fled. King Hardacnute ruled wisely and well, and was at peace with his neighbors, and the land was happy.

Only sometimes Hald and other old warriors would shake their heads when they took counsel together, and they would say —

"The times are too easy, and the people are too slow. They forget the hardships of war-time, and if the sword came into the land again, it would go hard with us."

Well, one summer's day, when the fields were bright with flowers and the corn grew high, almost ready for the reaping, and when the kine stood knee deep in the long grass in the valleys, Prince Guthred and Wulnoth set out for a long ramble, and between them, on her little pony, Edgiva rode, a garland of white blossoms, which Wulnoth had fashioned, upon her beautiful hair.

All the world seemed bright and beautiful: the sun shone, and the birds sang, and the brooks rippled, and all seemed to say to them — "Waes heal to you, little travellers — waes heal to the three fair ones." The squirrels played in the branches, and the sea-birds screamed as they passed overhead, and the great, lazy pigs grunted as they rolled in the woodland shade, and all seemed to say — "Waes heal to the three fair ones."

So they went through the meadow-land; and they went through the woodland glade, where the great ferns spring up and the good people hide from men's eyes all the day long, waiting for the gloaming, to creep out and dance their fairy dances; and yet, though they looked carefully and peered into many a tiny glen and sat without the least sound for quite ten minutes, never one of the good people could they see, but only the rabbits and the wild birds, and the little darting lizards.

And presently they came to a dell, and there they sat and ate their cakes, which they had brought with them, and drank from the skin of milk, which Wulnoth had brought especially for Edgiva — for he and the Prince would have had the cool water from the brook, only the Princess insisted that they three, who were friends, should share all things equally.

And while they sat there, a stick cracked in the woods, and Wulnoth started up, ready to guard the Princess if need be: for if a stick cracked some foot must have pressed it.

But no foe, either man or beast, came into the glade, but only an old woman with gentle face and kindly eyes, and hair white as the snow from the north; and this woman said, as she surveyed the children —

"Greeting to you, little ones. All good greeting to you." And they answered her —

"All good greeting to you also, good mother."

"And who are you, and how are you called?" asked the woman; "and how is it that a prince and princess have a thrall for their playmate?"

Then the Prince looked angry, for he did not like people to speak so to his dear Wulnoth; and even little Edgiva looked pained. But Wulnoth only laughed, and he made reply —

"Good mother, the great and high, if they are good and true, may hold out hand to the poor and gain no dishonor thereby. And those who are lowly born may take such friendship, and yet no harm be done; and so it is in this case."

"Thou hast answered well and truly, Wulnoth, son of Cerdic," the woman said; and at that Wulnoth stared, and demanded how she knew his name.

"I know many things," answered the woman, who was really old Wyborga returning from her travels to her own house. "I know many things, and this is one of them – many wonderful things."

"Tell us some more of thy wonderful things, good mother," pleaded the little Princess. "Tell us, for we are fond of wonder tales."

"Not now, little Princess," answered the wise woman; "go on with your play. And you, little Prince, when you get back home, say to your father the King that Wyborga sends him greeting, and says that the time draws nigh."

"What time, good mother?" asked Guthred curiously; but Wyborga shook her head.

"A dark time, little Prince, for thee and for thine, of which thou mayst not know now. But remember when sorrow and tears come, as come they will, that manhood and honor are better than a throne. Remember that a prince's word, and the word of every true man, must be kept, though death be the price of the keeping. Prince Guthred, remember this."

"Now truly, good mother," cried Wulnoth, "you do speak very hard things; and, truly, methinks you had little need to ask our names, seeing that without being told you have mentioned them all to us." And at that Wyborga smiled again.

But then little Edgiva drew close to her, and she again asked her of her wonder stories.

"Cannot you tell us even one?" she said; "not one about Odin or Thor and the heroes who dwell in Walhalla? For these are the most wonderful stories of all."

"Not the most wonderful, nor the most beautiful of all, little Princess," was the answer. "I know of one far better, far more wonderful, and far more beautiful." And at this they all three asked eagerly what this wonderful story could be.

"Oh, so wonderful and so beautiful," answered Wyborga. "The hearing of it turns sorrow to joy, and makes darkness become light, and weakness turn into strength. But you may not hear it yet; for, if I told it to you, you would not understand it. Yet this I promise, that one day you all three shall hear it."

"And will sorrow become joy, and weakness strength, and darkness light, when we hear it?" cried Wulnoth. And Wyborga nodded and said: "It will indeed."

"But when and where shall we hear it?" the children asked. "Shall we come to you again?"

"Nay," answered the wise woman; "you will hear it from other lips, and in another land."

"But what shall be the sign that we shall hear it?" asked the Prince, "and how shall we know that it is the story when it is told?"

"Because it will turn weakness into strength," said Wulnoth. "We are sure to know then."

"And sorrow into joy, and darkness into light," added Edgiva. "Oh, we shall be sure to know, brother."

"I will give you a sign," the wise woman said. And she took two little pieces of rough wood from the ground, and with a piece of grass, she bound them together in the form of a cross. Then she plucked a little spray of wild thorn and wound it round her cross and held it up; and she said, and her voice was soft and sweet, like the sigh of the summer wind amidst the forest leaves, "This is the sign, dear children. One day you will come to this sign, and then you will hear the most wonderful and the most beautiful story in all the wide world; and when you hear that, you will never want to hear of Odin or Thor any more."

Then she turned and walked away, and not another word could they get from her. So they turned to start on their homeward way, wondering what that strange sign could possibly mean, and what this story could be about.

And as they journeyed on, back through the woodlands, suddenly Edgiva's little pony stopped and planted its forefeet firmly and laid back its ears, snorting and trembling as if with fear.

"What can be the matter with him?" asked Prince Guthred. "There is nothing to frighten him."

"Be not so sure of that, Prince," said Wulnoth. "The pony may see more than we can; I have heard that animals can see warlocks and wizards when they are invisible to mortal eyes."

"Then what shall we do for Edgiva?" cried Guthred. "We must not let warlocks harm her."

"Let me get down and pat him," Edgiva said. "I will gather him a handful of sweet grass and then he will go on."

So they helped her to alight; but alas, no sooner had her foot touched the ground than they heard a dreadful sound, a deep, angry growl of rage and hate; and there, emerging from the undergrowth, with eyes ablaze and with yellow gleaming fangs, they saw an immense old he bear, a real wood-roamer, a honey-finder, who now was seeking for no honey.

And the pony, with a snort of terror, started off as fast as it could go, leaving the children alone there, with the monster approaching them.

For a moment Prince Guthred stood bewildered, and little Edgiva clasped her tiny hands in terror; for, indeed, this seemed a very dreadful creature, and its size was so vast and its claws so long, and it seemed to be saying to itself as it came along —

"Ho, ho! Here is a fine meal for me. This is better than risking the swineherd's spear when I go stealing the pigs. Ho, ho! This is much better."

Of course, the bear did not really say that; but that is what it seemed to the children; so it is no wonder that they were frightened.

"Run, Guthred! Run! Take Edgiva and run!" screamed Wulnoth frantically. "I will stay here and keep the bear busy."

But even in his terror Prince Guthred remembered that Wulnoth was his friend, and it seemed a hard thing to him to run away and leave him alone.

But Wulnoth cried again – "Run with thy sister, Prince. Edgiva must be before all."

So Prince Guthred caught up Edgiva in his strong arms and began to run, while Wulnoth threw a stone at the bear to make him turn his way. But the bear did not turn; perhaps he thought that two children were better than one – but he commenced to rush after Guthred, with great roars of rage; and Wulnoth ran after the bear, calling him a coward and a nothing, and bidding him stop and fight; and, as he ran, he unsheathed his stout knife and held it ready. It was the only weapon he had, and the stoutest hunters might have been forgiven if they had feared to attack such a monster with no better arms. But Wulnoth did not think of that. Edgiva must be saved, and he and that knife must save her.

And just then Guthred caught his foot in a trailing bramble, and fell, and the bear was now very nigh them. But Wulnoth was also very near to the bear, running so swiftly that the blades of grass had not even time to bend beneath his weight before he had passed on, and the gleaming knife was ready in his hand.

Now Wulnoth knew full well that the bear would not harm the others without first rising on his hind legs – for that is the way in which the bears always attack – and for that he was ready and waiting.

The bear stopped with a clumsy jerk just as Guthred scrambled to his feet, and it opened its great paws wide to seize the boy. But Wulnoth was there, and he pushed Guthred aside and darted under the bear's paws, and buried his knife in its broad, hairy chest, once, twice, and yet a third time, swifter than the lightning plays or the adder darts. Then the bear roared, and strove to bite with its wide-open, slaving jaws, and it dug its long claws deeply into Wulnoth's back, and tore muscle and flesh to the bone. But that was all it could do. It had no strength left, and it fell on its side and struggled and died; and Wulnoth uttered a mighty shout of joy, and thought nothing of his painful wounds, for he had done a man's deed and had saved Edgiva and his friend the Prince.

And Guthred and Edgiva came to him and strove to check the blood that dripped from his hurts, and the Princess would make him sit while she used her own scarf for this purpose.

"Oh, Wulnoth!" cried Guthred, "surely here is the story already, for weakness has become strength, and you have conquered the waster while I fled like a nothing."

"Wulnoth has been brave," said Edgiva, "but you have naught to grieve for, dear brother. As for the story, this cannot be it, for the sign of the thorn and the cross are not here."

"Let us not worry about stories," laughed Wulnoth, and he was as happy as could be. Indeed, his only sorrow was that Guthred had not slain a bear also, so that they could have been alike. "Let us skin this monster and take his coat home for the Princess to have a rug for her feet."

So they set to work, the two boys, and though it was a long job, they got the bear's skin, together with its mighty head and paws; and then they found the pony again, for that was grazing in a field hard by, and they put the skin on its back and Edgiva on the skin, and set off again.

And when they reached the castle, and the soldiers saw the skin, they clustered round in wonder, asking who had killed the monster. Wulnoth would have said little, but Guthred said much, and the men caught Wulnoth up and cried, "Skoal" to him, and carried him into the hall and set him down before the King, and laid the head and the claws and the great skin on the floor.

And now again Wulnoth would have said little, for he was modest and did not like to boast, and besides, he did not want to seem braver than the Prince, who would have done as he had done if the chance had been his. But Guthred and Edgiva stood at the King's side and told of the fight, and made Wulnoth show his wounds, and the King said that Wulnoth had done a man's deed, and asked him what his reward should be.

Now, the King had expected that the boy would ask that the thrall collar should be taken from his neck and from his father's, but Wulnoth made no such request.

"O King," he said, "if, as thou sayest, I have done a man's deed, let a man's weapons be given to me now, and let it be my place to guard Edgiva thy daughter, and to sleep across the threshold at night."

Then, for a moment, the King paused and frowned, for a memory came of the words of Wyborga that a thrall should marry a king's daughter; and he wondered whether that thrall was to be this boy, and the king's daughter Edgiva; for if he had thought that, though Wulnoth had slain the bear and preserved the Princess, he would have driven his spear through him as he stood, and so have made an end of the matter.

Then, when the jarls heard this thrall-boy's words, they cried out that he should be beaten with sticks for his presumption.

"Shall the son of a churl be made the Princess's guardian?" they cried. "Are there no sons of noble birth in the land, O King?"

But Wulnoth stood out, and turned and showed them the deep wounds made by the claws of the bear, and he cried —

"Many there be more noble in the land, but are there any who would have dared more? Did the bear wound me more lightly than he would have wounded any man? Are these wounds less painful to the churl than they would be to the noble? The King asked me what I desired, and I have answered. I want no other gift, and if this may not be, then let be."

"He talks like a man," some laughed; but old Hald, who liked the boy, answered —

"And by the hammer of Thor, he acts like one, and I am minded that our Edgiva would have little to fear with Wulnoth the son of Cerdic as her armed man."

"The thing shall be," answered the King, and when that was said all had to obey. "Wulnoth shall be given sword and spear and shield, and his shall it be to guard the Princess, and if any harm comes to her, then his head shall pay the penalty. I have spoken, and the thing is."

So Wulnoth the boy was given the war tools of a man, and he was appointed the guardian of the Princess, which is just what he had appointed himself in the past, only then he had no weapons save his knife.

But when King Hardacnute heard the message which Wyborga had sent to him, his face grew very grave, for it showed him that if he had forgotten, the wise woman had remembered, and that the time was drawing near when war time should be in the land.

And also the children spoke of the wonder tale that Wyborga had hinted at, and of the strange thorn cross which she had made; and the King listened and answered —

"By Thor, I can make nothing of it! 'T is like her other tale, and it may be that the one has as much in it as the other."

Now, this is how Wulnoth saved Edgiva from the bear, and how he won the man's tools and was appointed watcher over the Princess. And this is how Wyborga the Wise came again into the land, and showed the three children the sign of the thorn-crowned cross.

CHAPTER III

How Wulnoth journeyed by the Birds' Road

So Wulnoth became the guard to watch over Princess Edgiva, and some of King Hardacnute's warriors were wroth, and said that the thing was a shame, and that even if it were not so, a boy like Cerdic's son should not be given such an honorable task when many a young noble would have been glad to accept such trust.

But though Wulnoth was indeed a boy in years, yet in stature and in strength he was a match for many above his age, so tall and so lusty was he. And old Hald laughed again when he heard these words, and he said —

"The wolf cub is almost grown; let those beware its fangs who would pull its ears."

And amongst those who were angered at the King's choice was the keeper of the arms, Æthelmar; and he, to spite the boy, gave him the weapons of the strongest — the heaviest spear and the weightiest sword and shield; and he in his turn laughed and said to himself —

"Now we shall see how Hald's wolf cub will bear the weight of the toys he has asked for."

Wulnoth knew his weapons were too heavy, but he was too proud to seek to have them altered, and he would have borne them in patience but that Hald saw him; and the old Constable stopped and stroked his beard, and asked him who it was who gave him his man's tools.

"Now, these are too weighty for you," he said when Wulnoth had answered him, "and it was but a poor trick of Æthelmar's to give such to you. You must have lighter ones, my young warrior."

But Wulnoth answered that since he had been given these he would keep them, and even Æthelmar should see that his strength was equal to his task.

"Not so," said the Constable, quietly, when he heard the boy's words. "That only comes from a proud heart, and the Princess must not be endangered because of your pride."

"How could the Princess be endangered?" cried Wulnoth. "I do not see that, Hald."

"Weapons that you cannot use are as if you had no weapons at all, Wulnoth," replied Hald. "How, if you had to use that long spear, which is too clumsy for you, or that sword which is too heavy? The Princess might suffer harm because you could not well protect her. We must have this remedied, my son."

And Hald was as good as his word, and gave Wulnoth man's tools more suited to his strength, and he said —

"Let not pride make thee fall, Wulnoth. If they laugh at thee for having these, thou canst the better show them thy skill when the day of testing comes."

At that Wulnoth was content, and though some laughed at him, he answered laugh with laugh, and never bore himself like a boaster, nor was led to talk of what he could do, but he only answered when such questions were put to him —

"One cannot say what he will do until the test comes. When the hour is, then I hope I shall not prove a nithing, and meanwhile I cannot do better than watch such skilled warriors as you who now laugh at my youth."

Now, that showed that Wulnoth was wise, for had he answered angrily he would but have been laughed at the more, and would have made many enemies, whereas now the soldiers said that he was modest and well-spoken, and they taught him many things relating to war; and Cerdic his father, each day when the boy used to visit him, made him exercise both with sword and spear, and in running and wrestling; and Prince Guthred would exercise with him, so that he, too, might become a mighty champion in his day, and go to the wars with his friend.

But the Prince was not so cunning nor so strong as Wulnoth, and, moreover, he was more gentle and tender; and sometimes the King his father would be angry, and say that he was more fitted to

handle a distaff than to hurl a spear. But the King was wrong – the boy was gentle and kind, but his heart was brave, and he was patient, more patient than Wulnoth even, and he who has learnt patience has learnt a mighty lesson.

But in all this time no sign of the sea-kings was seen, though by day and night watch was kept, and all along the coast the great beacons were piled ready for the lighting should the long ships of the pirates be sighted upon the waves.

And the King laughed, and said that surely Wyborga the Wise was wise no longer, for her stories, though they were ill-omened, did not come true.

As for the skin of the wood-roamer, that was made into a foot rug for Edgiva, and the head and the paws were placed in the King's hall, with a rude writing beneath, made by Reinbaldus the Scald, to tell how Wulnoth, the son of Cerdic, slew the monster with his knife.

So the days passed away, and now Wulnoth was fifteen, and his little Princess was nigh five years old, and so beautiful to gaze upon that the buds of the flowers would open as she passed, so that they might look at that which was more beautiful than they were; and the wild birds would gather o'er her head, and sing their songs in honor of the fairest of children; and already the jarls spoke to their young sons and bade them strive to excel in strength and in war, so that when the time came for Edgiva to be given in marriage they might be amongst the mightiest who should strive for her hand.

Now it chanced one day that Guthred the Prince, and his sister, and Wulnoth her watcher went together into the woods nigh to the spot where they had met the bear – for they feared no bear now, nor yet the surliest of the wild boars – and while they tarried in the woodland shade Wyborga the Wise came and greeted them, and asked how they fared. And Edgiva went to her side and answered —

"O good mother, we fare well, but we have not yet heard the wonder tale, nor have we found the sign – the thorn-covered cross – though we have looked long and searched far for it."

"The sign will come, and the tale will come, Princess – all in good time will it surely come," was the answer; and then Wyborga gathered the three around her and told them of many things – of wonders from far lands, of the birds' talk and the beasts' talk, and things that men know nothing of; and while they talked there came a blowing of horns, and the King rode by on the chase, and reined his horse and spoke to the wise woman with kind, good humor.

"Greeting, Wyborga," he said. "Our watch fires are piled, but they are unlighted; our warders watch, but give no alarm; our swords are keen, but they sing no song. Surely thy wisdom was at fault when thou didst prophesy evil for the land."

"Art thou so impatient for the evil to come, O King?" she answered sadly. "It will come sure, if it comes slow. God moves not quickly."

"God?" answered the King lightly. "Why, Wyborga, we have many gods, of whom Odin and Thor are the mightiest – which of them dost thou speak of? They move fast enough for me, for they ride the storm wind so swiftly that all the storm sisters are left far behind in their path. Which god do you speak of, Wyborga?"

Then Wyborga stooped, and with the end of her wand which she used to aid her steps she marked on the ground, and the marks that she made formed a cross.

"The God of this sign, O King," she said. And at that the King shook his head, and thought with pity that surely poor old Wyborga was mad, for of all the gods of the Northland was there none whose sign was a cross.

"Now, good mother," he said aloud, "I understand not thy sign. Canst thou give me no other by which I shall know when the time is near?"

Then Wyborga bent her head in thought, and was silent for a space, and after that she looked up and spoke, and said to the King —

"So be it. I will give you one sign, and when you see that, then be sure that soon the sword shall sing the death song in the land."

"Good!" cried the King. "Give me this sign."

Then Wyborga pointed to where Wulnoth stood near, and she said —

"This is the sign, O King. When this boy treads the birds' road, then be sure that the time has come." And at that the King laughed aloud.

"Now, by my beard," he said, "if that were possible, then would I do well to slay Wulnoth, son of Cerdic, and so the evil should never come. But no mortal foot has trodden the birds' road yet, and none ever shall, so let Wulnoth live, and let the evil be far off; and now greeting, mother."

"Greeting, King," she answered, and Wulnoth and the Prince cried "Skoal" to the King, and Edgiva kissed her hand to him, and so Hardacnute and his men rode on, laughing to themselves; for how could old Wyborga speak of any treading the birds' road without wings? and where was there a man in the world winged like the eagle or raven?

And Wulnoth and the Prince and Edgiva went back to the hall, and they wondered also, pondering over the strange things spoken by Wyborga the Wise.

And yet that which the wise woman spoke came to pass, and this was the manner of its coming. There was in the hall of King Hardacnute a young noble of Denmark, a dark, black-haired young holda, who had journeyed across the mountains seeking adventure, as he said, and had been well received and given an honorable place by the King, in spite of the warnings of his jarls, and especially of old Hald.

"A viper stings sooner or later," said the Constable, "and a Dane plays false. Kill the stranger or send him on, for we want no spying Haco here."

But the King answered that a man's hall must ever be open to the wanderer, and that it did not become brave men to be inhospitable; and so this youth, whose name was Osbert, tarried in Lethra — a big, bragging young giant, and over fond of the drink horn.

Now, one day, as Wulnoth stood guarding the couch of Edgiva, for she had fallen asleep in the shade of the courtyard, lo, there came Osbert the Dane striding along, all flushed with wine. Now, Osbert looked upon Wulnoth with scorn, because he was a boy and a thrall, and also because he knew that his father had smitten Berwulf with his own axe in the hall of Tholk, son of Cerdic — for Osbert was of the blood of Berwulf.

Therefore, seeing Edgiva sleeping there and guarded by Wulnoth, Osbert thought to make mock of the boy, and he strode up and seized Edgiva and kissed her, so that she cried out partly in fear and partly in anger at being so rudely aroused; and Wulnoth started forward, and presented his spear, and cried fiercely —

"Set down the Lady Edgiva instantly, thou rude Dane, or I will pierce thee with this spear."

Then did Osbert place the Princess down, and he drew his heavy sword, and swung his shield from his back to his arm, and he laughed right scornfully.

"Thou wilt pierce me, thou carl. That will we see," and with that he made at Wulnoth fiercely.

But Hald the Constable was nigh, and when he heard the signs of strife he seized his great sword and strode into the courtyard, and struck the weapons apart, and demanded sternly how it came that any dared to fight in the courtyard of the King.

"This dog insulted me," cried the Dane fiercely, "and for it, by Thor, he shall die!"

"By Thor, he shall not die!" answered Hald, "until we know the truth of this business; but, for that matter, thou mightest find it hard to slay him, Dane."

So Wulnoth told how he came to have a quarrel with Osbert, and the brow of Hald grew dark when he heard of the slight to Edgiva, who now stood weeping, and he commanded the Dane to be carried before Hardacnute, that the King might say his pleasure.

And when the King heard, he said sternly —

"Osbert, stranger amongst us, hadst thou been one of my people, I would surely have had thy head smitten off. But thou art a stranger, and one who has been my guest, and I may not do this thing. Yet this I will do. Thy arms shall be taken from thee and broken as the arms of a nithing, and thou

shalt be scourged with rods, a blow for every tear that the Lady Edgiva has shed, and thou shalt be driven from my lands; and if thou comest here again, then thou shalt be slain."

And the King's word was obeyed, and the Dane's weapons were broken, and he was scourged with rods, a blow for each tear that the Princess had shed; and when the scourging was ended the King bade him begone as he valued his life.

And Osbert, smarting with the beating, and mad with rage, spoke boldly and said —

"Perchance this scourging I deserve, O King, for letting the wine horn make me into a weakling; yet bitter shall be the price paid for it, O King. For each blow of the rod blood shall flow, and the sword sing its song. Now I go as thou hast said, for indeed I could not remain longer; but be sure that thou wilt hear of me again, ere long, O King, and our greeting will be brief."

But the King laughed scornfully. "Big words from an angry boy," he said. "Get thee gone while thou art safe." And Osbert turned and went.

And a few days after that, Wulnoth and Guthred and Edgiva went to the top of the great Raven Rock, from whence they could see for many a mile, and at the foot of which the sea fretted and chafed and broke itself into foam at the high tide; and here they sat watching the sea-birds circle as they trod the birds' road down to the water, and up to the crags where their nests were built.

Not a sign of living man was there; all was peaceful and calm; and Wulnoth lay on the ground, watching the Princess, who had strayed to gather wild blossoms, whilst Guthred cautiously bent over the height, seeking to steal the eggs from a seamew's nest.

And while thus they were all serene and safe, suddenly a shadow fell upon Wulnoth, and a dark face looked down upon him, and a strong hand seized him, and the voice of Osbert hissed in his ear —

"Thou dog of a Saxon thrall – die!"

And then came the sharp bitter bite of a knife in the side, and a red mist rose before Wulnoth's eyes, and a wicked laugh echoed in his ear.

And it seemed as though he were sinking into the storm-land, when a sound called his spirit back, and that sound was the scream of the Princess Edgiva. He heard also Guthred shout, and he heard Osbert cry —

"Greeting to thee, Prince. Yonder lies thy thrall friend slain, and here is the Princess, thy sister. Go and tell thy father – for this I spare thy life – that I have sent her to the storm-land by the birds' road."

Then Wulnoth managed to stagger to his feet; and he saw, – oh, the horror of it, – he saw that nothing lift Edgiva the Beautiful high in the air, and send her over the Raven Rock into the angry sea so far below; and he uttered a great cry, and all his strength seemed to come back, so that he picked up his spear and hurled it, and it smote Osbert a fierce blow in the shoulder, making him cry out and turn and flee, plucking out the weapon and casting it aside as he went.

"Run, run," cried Wulnoth to Guthred. "Run so that the grass feels not thy touch. Nay, not after that nothing," as the Prince was starting after the wounded Osbert. "We have more to think of than him. Run to the shore and bid them launch a boat and come to the aid of Edgiva. I go to her now."

"Alas, how canst thou, my friend?" cried Guthred. "The way to the water is long and the path hard; and even if she lives now she will have died ere thou canst reach her."

"The way is short and the path easy," cried Wulnoth, as he cast off his tunic. "Tell thy father, my lord the King, that Wyborga's words have come true, for I go by the birds' road."

And with that he stood on the verge of the mighty Raven Rock, and he saw far below, a gleam of gold in the water, as when the salmon play in the sunlit waves; and then, while Guthred stood in wonder and silence, he dived straight and true, speeding to the perishing Edgiva along the birds' road.

And this is how Osbert the Dane brought trouble into the land, and how Wulnoth fulfilled the prophecy of Wyborga the Wise.

CHAPTER IV

The Coming of Hungwar and Hubba

Down into the angry waves went Wulnoth, treading the birds' road; for only thus could he hope to reach Edgiva in time to save her. Down he went, and he smote the waves and sank, even to the very bottom of the depths, while the surges roared and thundered above him.

Weak was he from loss of blood and sore pain, for the knife of Osbert the Dane had bitten deeply; but strong was he with his devotion for Edgiva, and the strength overcame the weakness.

Down, down he went; then he rose and came to the surface and shook the water from his eyes and glanced around; and there, floating away now on the ebbing tide, her golden hair rising and falling on the waves, he saw the jewel of Lethra, the Princess Edgiva.

Then, cleaving the waves with strong arms, though every stroke left a crimson stain behind it, Wulnoth pressed forward, swift as the sturgeon takes its way. His eyes were fixed upon the fair little face, which was now slowly sinking beneath the waves; and he gave a loud cry and leaped sheer out of the water, as the salmon leaps when it climbs the falls, and his right hand snatched at her and lifted her above the water again; and then the heart of Wulnoth was very glad, for he felt that once more he should save Edgiva.

And now back to the land he turned and on he swam, but the tide ran fierce, and his blood oozed fast, and the way was long, and he was faint and could swim no more. So he turned on his back and floated, letting Edgiva's golden, crowned head rest on his bosom; and so he stayed while the sea-birds flew overhead and called to him, bidding him be of good cheer, for that help was coming.

And help was coming indeed; for the Prince had run swift as the arrow flies and had cried to Hald the Constable; and now one of the King's boats was coming over the waves, and strong arms were at the oars, while Hald stood shading his eyes and crying —

"Holloa! Holloa! Wulnoth son of Cerdic! Holloa!"

And Wulnoth heard as one who hears a sound from afar, when sleep presses upon his eyes; and he tried to answer but his voice was gone. But the sea-birds aided him, for they gathered over his head, screaming shrilly; and when Hald saw that, he knew that thither he must go, and he gave order and the boat sped on and came to the spot, and there floated Wulnoth, with Edgiva's head pillowed on his heart, and both with their eyes closed as in their last sleep.

Strong but tender hands lifted them in, and strong hands urged the boat back; and they were taken to the King's hall and tended by the Queen herself; for Queen Wulfreda was skilled in healing. And search was made through the land for the nithing who had done this thing; yet, though they rode throughout all the King's borders, they found no trace of Osbert the Dane.

And Wyborga the Wise also came, bringing medicines of her own; and so soon the sick ones awoke from their slumber, and Wulnoth was commanded to come before the King.

And there, in the great hall, with all the jarls around him, the King praised Wulnoth, and asked him what he would choose as his gift, and said that now he would take the thrall's collar from his neck.

But Wulnoth made answer, and his voice was low and sad, and he said that the collar should not be taken from his neck, but that instead of gifts he should be scourged, because he, being armed, and the Princess's watcher, had suffered harm to come to her.

"Not honor, but disgrace, do I deserve, O King," he said; "for I have proved myself a false watcher."

"Now, that may not be," cried the King, "for none would have dared to tread the birds' road as thou hast done." But to that Hald said —

"There is reason in the boy's words, O King. Therefore let it be as he says; but for his reward take the collar from his father's neck, and give Cerdic five hides of good land, so that he shall be noble." And all the redesmen said that the Constable's words were good words and that it was a wise saying.

So the King commanded that Cerdic should be given five hides of good land and that the thrall collar should be taken from his neck; and then Reinbaldus the scald made a song and sang it in the great hall while the King feasted, and this was the song he sang —

Over the storm wave, over the swan bath,
Cerdic the Saxon came, to Lethra fleeing
From the fierce anger of Berwulf the viking,
Fleeing with Olfa, and the child Wulnoth;
Thus came young Wulnoth to fair Lethra.

Wulnoth the boy thrall, friend of Prince Guthred,
Straying with Edgiva deep in the woodland,
Then came the waster roaring against them,
Fierce in his anger, he the death giver.
Woe for Prince Guthred! woe for Edgiva!
Swift to their succor came Wulnoth hasting,
Armed with a knife alone, slew he the monster,
Dead now before them lies the wood waster.

Nithing and traitor, Osbert the Dane came,
Wounded with coward blow, Wulnoth the watcher,
Cast from the Raven Rock, Lethra's Edgiva,
Into the stormy waves hurled he the fair one.
"Thus, tell ye Lethra's King, Osbert repays him."
Laughter to sorrow turned when the spear bit him,
Fleeing, like frightened hare, swiftly the Dane ran,
Wulnoth's love token bore he away with him.

Far 'neath the Raven Rock, in the wild swan bath,
There is Edgiva, Edgiva the Beautiful —
Who from the death sleep backward shall bear her?
Who by the birds' road rushes to save her?
Who from the angry waves bravely doth bear her,
While his own crimson blood marks out his pathway?
Wulnoth, Cerdic's son, Wulnoth the watcher,
He trod the birds' road, saving Edgiva,
Skoal then to Cerdic's son,
And skoal to Edgiva.

Such was the song which Reinbaldus sang; and the soldiers and the people said it was a fair song and a true song, and that Wulnoth was worthy of honor. And they called the Raven's Rock "Wulnoth's Road," because of the great leap which he took thence into the swan bath to rescue Edgiva.

Yet still Wulnoth himself felt darkened, for he reflected that he, being the Princess's watcher, ought to have been standing on guard rather than lying there taking his ease so that Osbert the Dane could come upon them; and though many strove to banish such thoughts from his mind, old Hald said —

"Let be. The boy will be all the better for thinking on it. I will warrant me he will never now be found asleep at his post, let the watch be as long as it will."

But now King Hardacnute was indeed grave, for here was Wyborga's prophecy fulfilled, and he looked for the foe to come.

But no enemy came, no, not for a week, nor two, nor a full month; and then, one morning, just as the King was beginning to think that it was but a fable after all, far out on the Westarweg six long ships appeared, each with its huge sail, each with its long pennon, each with its sides bright with the long rows of shields hung over the bulwarks, each propelled by banks of long oars; and from the foremost one floated a mighty banner with a great black raven upon it, so that all might know that these were ships of the sea-kings and pirates, lords from Juteland and Denmark.

"Now," said old Hald, as he stood on the tower and gazed seaward long and hard, "if these be the ships of Regner Lodbrok, the son of Sigurd, it will be a hard fight and a long that we shall have; for of all the sea-kings that carry fire and sword, there is none so mighty as the dragon slayer."

"Methinks 't is the banner of the son of Sigurd," said the King, who stood beside him, and old Hald nodded.

"By land or by sea, O King?" he asked. And the King mused —

"By sea if it would save the land from blood," he said, "but I fear it will not. My word is, meet them on land."

"And ere they land, every ship that Lethra possesses will be in flames," answered Hald. "If we must lose our ships, better to man them and lose them in the man's game than to sit like sheep and see them burn." And the King answered —

"Be it so."

So the war horns sounded, and the beacons blazed, and all men came trooping in, and the women and children gathered in the King's hall, for there alone might be found safety for them. And all the cattle were driven into the courtyard, or else turned loose in the deep forest where the foe would not be likely to find them.

"Guthred, my friend and brother," said Wulnoth, as he stood by the side of the Prince, "so at last we are really to see the man's game played and to take part in it! Is this Regner Lodbrok so mighty, then?"

"I have heard my father say that there lives no greater warrior, and that though he is terrible in battle he is just and loves brave men, and not cruel like some – not like his two sons, Hungwar and Hubba; for where they go there is the cry of the woman and the child, and the scream of the tortured one. Thou knowest that it was Regner Lodbrok who slew the dragon?"

"Nay," answered Wulnoth. "I know not the story. Tell it to me, I pray."

"This is how the scalds have it," answered the Prince. "You must know that this Regner Lodbrok, the son of Sigurd, loved a lady named Thora, who was the fairest woman who ever lived –"

"Not fairer than our Edgiva," cried Wulnoth jealously, and the Prince smiled.

"That I cannot say, seeing that Edgiva my sister is but a child, and this lady was a woman. But be that as it may. A warlock took the Lady Thora and carried her away, and left her guarded by a fiery dragon – a dreadful monster whom no man could overcome because it belched out flames at them. But Regner Lodbrok¹ heard of this, and he swore by Thor that he would slay the monster and free the Lady Thora. So he took skins of oxen, and thereof he made clothing to cover all his body, from the feet to the neck, and thus covered he went to the cave and rushed at the dragon. The monster spat fire at him, but Regner Lodbrok held his shield before his face, and the flames scorched the

¹ This story of Regner Lodbrok is one of the most noted in all the old sagas, and there are many concerning his wonderful deeds. Regner was called *Lodbrok* on account of thus wrapping himself up in skins to fight the dragon. Some old writers who wrote in Latin translate the name into *Villosa femoralia*, which means hairy trousers.

skins but harmed not him, and he buried his sword in the dragon's heart and slew him, and freed the Lady Thora and carried her back with him."

"How brave of him!" cried Wulnoth. "Surely 't was a man's deed, and if such a foe is coming, thou and I, O Prince, shall see some great deeds done to-day."

"We may, Wulnoth, my friend," answered Guthred. "But remember what Wyborga the Wise has said. In this battle the King, my father, is to be slain, and I am to become a slave," and at that Wulnoth had no word to say, for the grief of it was too much for him.

"Wulnoth," the Prince went on sadly, "if this thing is true, will you promise not to forget me? And if you may, afterwards come and seek me out and aid me. Wulnoth, we have been friends and brothers, will you promise me this?"

"That will I promise, Guthred," answered Wulnoth. "As soon as my trust to Edgiva is over, I will come."

"Poor Edgiva," sighed the Prince. "I wonder what fate will be in store for her."

Now, while the boys talked, all was hurry and bustle, and Hald went to the ships with the sailors, and King Hardacnute gathered the army on the shore, and Cerdic, and Hith, and Æthelmar, and others went into the hold to be able to succor the rest, should they have to flee, and then the war horns blew again, and the ships went to sea to meet the foe.

And when they neared each other, old Hald, standing in the prow, called across the water and said —

"Greeting, strangers! Sea-kings and pirates I trow ye are, and your message is war; yet tell us whom we war against lest we shame you by saying ye are nameless men."

Then a great warrior, yet a young man, standing in the poop of one of the foremost of the foe ships, laughed and replied —

"Little care we what you call us, warrior, yet know that we are the sons of Regner, called Lodbrok, Hungwar and Hubba, and we come to avenge injury done to Osbert the Dane. We come to war against Hardacnute for sheltering a thrall of Berwulf's named Cerdic and his family; and we come to carry away a fair child Edgiva, that when she is maiden grown she may mate with the best of the sea-kings' warriors. Now dost thou yield?"

"Thus do I yield, you wolves of Denmark," replied Hald, hurling his spear, but Hungwar caught it on his shield, and then the battle commenced.

Now, we have no time to talk long of that battle, for we have to follow the song of Wulnoth; but it was a brave and fierce one, when many hero deeds were done, and when the sword sang its death-song again and again. Yet in the end the ships of Hardacnute were destroyed and his sailors perished, and the Danes ran their own ships aground, and swarmed out to meet the forces of Hardacnute on land.

And there, on land, a mighty war was waged, and many heroes fell; yet still the victory was with the Danes, and the men of Lethra were driven back, leaving many slain on the seashore.

Now while this battle was raging, Wulnoth was in the King's courtyard, when a man touched him on the arm; and the man was big and brawny and shaggy like some wild berserker, and this man said to Wulnoth —

"Are you Wulnoth, the watcher of the Princess?" and to this Wulnoth answered that he was.

"Then," said the man, "I have a message for thee, O Wulnoth," and Wulnoth asked whom the message was from.

"It is from Wyborga the Wise," answered the stranger, "and thus she says: 'Fire and sword are come, O Wulnoth, and by to-night will Edgiva be without father or mother. Now, therefore, bring her to me, and I will shelter her in safety, for Hungwar the Dane has sworn to carry her off and to make her his slave child. If my words are wrong, then can you have her back; but if they are right, then will the King know that his daughter is spared the fate which shall befall his son.'"

Now, when Wulnoth heard this, he sped to the Queen, and he told her all the truth. And Wulfreda answered and said —

"Now, if these words are true, and if the King my husband perish, then shall I rejoice to have the death-song sung to me also; and if that be so, then shall it be well that Edgiva has a friend to aid her. Therefore, take her to Wyborga, Wulnoth."

So Wulnoth and Guthred took Edgiva the Beautiful, and carried her away into the forest and gave her to Wyborga, and Wyborga said that they had done well. And then said Wulnoth —

"Why should not Guthred tarry here also, good mother, so that he will be safe?"

But Wyborga shook her head.

"Guthred must go back," she said, "for so the lines of his runes run. But let Guthred be of good cheer and brave heart, for he shall have a kingdom and a name in the end, and ye three shall meet again."

"When shall we meet?" cried Guthred. And for answer Wyborga again drew the cross on the ground and said —

"When you all understand this, then shall you meet, and then shall you be united."

And that was all she could say. So Wulnoth and Guthred hurried back, for the blood was hot in Wulnoth's veins, and he longed to be in the man's game. And they got back to the hall just as King Hardacnute's men were being driven in, and there they saw the brothers Hungwar and Hubba, the sons of Regner, mighty warriors, with long black moustachios and sweeping hair, and arms like the stout branches of an oak.

And also there did Wulnoth see Osbert the Dane, and he cried to him in a voice that rang over the din of the fight —

"Hi, there! Greeting to you, Osbert, nithing and attacker of little children. Come hither, for I have a greeting for thee, unless thou dost still fear my spear."

"By Thor's hammer!" growled Hungwar as he heard this. "Thou must answer this, Osbert. Go thou, whilst we rest a space, and silence that wolf cub." But Osbert looked as though he liked not his task.

Still he could not escape, and he advanced towards the keep; and Wulnoth sprang from the wall and ran to meet him.

"Now, now, Osbert," he cried, "never have I slain a man yet, but thou wilt do for a start!" And Osbert answered with a thrust of his spear.

But Wulnoth caught it on his shield and turned it aside, and then he struck once, and once only, and the blow pierced through shield and arm behind it, and Osbert gave a bitter cry and fell.

"Mercy! mercy!" he cried, and the Danes howled with anger. But the wild war madness was in Wulnoth's blood now, and he drew his sword and plunged it into the nithing's throat, crying out, "So shall all nithings and Danish pirates perish!"

"By Troth!" cried Hubba, "that is a gamesome young wolf. We must have him alive." But Wulnoth had fled back, and was let into the hold by the men, who cried "Skoal" to him.

And then did the man's game begin again, and still the fight was with the vikings. And Cerdic was slain by a sling stone, and one after another of the King's champions went to the storm-world, and the flames burst from the roofs, and the cries of the women sounded on the air, for the vikings slew and spared none.

In the courtyard Wulfreda stood by her husband's side and shielded him while he fought, and around him lay a ring of Danish slain. But he fell at last, and Hubba himself smote off his head.

"This is the King's son!" cried Hungwar, seizing Guthred. "I have an oath as regards this boy and his sister. They shall be thralls in my castle." But to that Guthred answered boldly —

"Thou Danish pirate, though thou hast me in thy power, thou shalt never have my sister, for she is beyond thy reach."

"That we will see," answered Hungwar. "Bind this boy with chains, and take him to my long ship."

Then he caught sight of Wulnoth, who had fought as a man fights and was sore wounded, and he cried aloud —

"By my beard, but 't is our little warrior wolf! — a boy, but thou must be of us. Now, methinks, thou art the son of that Cerdic that we came to seek, for thou hast Saxon blood in thee I will swear, and thou hast thrall collar on. But thou art a man and we will spare thee, and thou shalt be my servant. What dost thou say to that?"

"No servant of thine will I be, thou pirate of Denmark!" cried Wulnoth. "Thou art a champion and a sea-king, and I but a boy and a thrall, and only one of a few left of all Lethra's soldiers, yet thus and thus do I answer thee." And with that he rushed at the great Dane, and smote twice with his broken sword; and the first blow gashed Hungwar's brow, and the second pierced his arm, so that the champion of Denmark reeled backwards and would have fallen but that a soldier smote Wulnoth down with his axe, so that they thought him slain.

Then did the Danes gather together all the treasure of Lethra for their plunder, and they slew all, man, woman, and child, as many as they found, and they set fire to each house and hall, and spread the red flames through the land; and then they sailed away, and of all the people they took only some fair maids and the Prince, who Hungwar had sworn should live as a thrall, for the blows which Hardacnute had caused to be laid upon the back of Osbert the Dane.

Now, this is how the words of Wyborga the Wise came true, and Hungwar and Hubba carried fire and sword through the land of Lethra and took Guthred the Prince prisoner back to Denmark when they went away.

CHAPTER V

Of Wulnoth's Schooling

When Wulnoth opened his eyes again he was in a cool cave, through the entrance of which he could see the green glades of the forest, and there before him sat Wyborga the Wise, while Princess Edgiva played near by with a little wild fawn.

He raised himself on his elbow and glanced around in wonder, hardly able to remember anything of what had gone beside; and Wyborga rose and brought him a cooling drink, saying gently —

"So thou art better, Wulnoth! For many days has thy spirit hovered between life and death, but thou hast turned back, as I knew thou wouldst – for thy work is before thee, and thou must help to do great things."

"What things must I do, O mother?" he asked. And Wyborga took up her favorite symbol again – a little wooden cross – and planted it in the earth.

"So must thou help to plant this in another land, Wulnoth," she said. And he shook his head somewhat impatiently.

"Oh, good mother, I am weary of symbols and dark sayings. Tell me in plain words, for as for thy cross, I can make nothing of it."

"Not yet, Wulnoth. The time is not yet," she said. "But now thou must rest and grow strong, for there is much to do."

"And how went the fight after I was struck down?" he asked. "Methinks there was little fighting left to do."

"All too little," she answered. "Of all in Lethra, the Danes left not one alive saving only a few who escaped to the woods. Thy father and mother, and the King and Queen, and Hald and all the mighty ones have perished, and Lethra is ruin and ashes and desolation to-day. Such is the work of Hungwar and Hubba."

"Make me strong, O mother! make me strong if thou hast any skill!" cried Wulnoth. "For I will follow those pirates to the end of the world, if need be, and I will bring again Guthred, the Prince, from captivity."

"Not yet, Wulnoth. Thou hast much to learn, and Guthred has much to learn, ere ye two meet again, for so I read your lives. Now sleep, and when thou awakest, I will tell thee what there is to be done first."

So Wulnoth slept; and for a day and night and half a second day, he opened not his eyes. But then when he awoke he felt strong again, and he rose and said to Wyborga, who sat in the entrance of the cave —

"Good mother, I am strong, and I thank thee. Didst thou come and search me out?"

"I sent one to do it, Wulnoth," she answered. "One who found thee nigh to death and bore thee hither to me."

"And thou hast cured me! Now, mother, I am, as thou knowest, the watcher of the Princess, and though she has no realm to come to now, methinks she is still my Princess, and I must do my work. But then I am sworn to seek my friend the Prince. Now both I cannot do; therefore give me thy rede and tell me what to do."

"Wulnoth," answered the wise woman, "the Princess is very fair, and as she grows older there will be none so fair." And Wulnoth answered that it was so.

"Moreover, Wulnoth," said Wyborga, "methinks thou dost love her very much." And again he answered —

"She is my Princess, and I would give every drop of my blood for her."

"Ay, truly, and methinks the Princess is fond of thee. Now, thrones and power are small things. How wouldst thou like to give up all such thoughts, Wulnoth, and to abide here, and perchance when Edgiva is maid grown, to take her for thy wife?" and Wyborga looked gravely at Wulnoth.

But Cerdic's son drew himself up, and he answered quickly —

"Now, mother, that is a hard question, for of itself there would be no better thing than to live in peace beneath the green wood with Edgiva for my wife. But this may not be. For think, is it meet for a king's daughter to live her life like savage maiden? and is it right for a thrall, and a thrall's son, to ask a princess to be his mate? And is it meet that I should do this thing, even if I might, and forget my oath to the Prince, her brother? No, mother, this thing may not be."

Then Wyborga smiled and said —

"Thou hast answered well, Wulnoth, and this thing I said but to prove thee. Know if thou hadst yielded still it would never have been. But listen to my words. Thou canst not seek the Prince yet, for thou wilt have far to go, and thou wilt have to go amongst the champions of the earth. Thou must learn much first, Wulnoth, and be patient in thy learning."

Then answered Wulnoth and said, "What must I learn, mother, and who shall be my schoolmaster?"

So Wyborga went to the door and called softly, and a shadow fell before the entrance of the cave, and there entered the wild-looking man who had come to Wulnoth on the day of the battle.

"Wulnoth," he said, "I am Osth the berserker and the giant," — and truly he was a gigantic man, — "and Wyborga the Wise has bidden me to teach thee if thou wilt be taught; but the time will be long and the work hard, for he who would gain experience must gain it at hard cost, and he who would conquer others must conquer self."

Then said Wulnoth, "For how long must I learn, Osth?" and the berserker replied, "Until thou art perfect."

Then did Edgiva come to Wulnoth and place her arms round his neck, and call him her good Wulnoth, and bid him go; and Wyborga promised that each new moon he should come and see them in the cave. So Wulnoth consented and went away with Osth into the high mountain, along the goats' road, which is hard to climb and weary to walk.

And there in a cave the boy dwelt with the wild man, and he drank no wine nor milk, but only the clear water of the stream. And he ate wild fruit and goat's flesh; and each morning Osth set him to roll great stones up the hill, and as fast as he got them to the top they rolled down again, until at length he cried in anger —

"Of what use is this, Osth? The stones will not remain at the top, and if they did they are no use there," but to that Osth only grunted, and said he that would succeed must labor.

"It shall not be my fault if I do not succeed," thought Wulnoth, and he set to work again, and rolled the stones all day long though he could not see any use in it, until one day the giant said to him —

"Seest thou yon oak tree, Wulnoth? Canst pull off a branch at one wrench?"

"Neither I nor any man could do that," answered Wulnoth; but the berserker said —

"Try."

So Wulnoth went to the oak, and he took a firm grip on a branch and pulled, and lo, the branch came away.

"Whence have I got this strength?" cried the youth in wonder. And the giant answered, "Rolling stones. Each stone added a little, and each little joined the rest, until thou canst do this. Thou must learn another lesson now."

So Osth set him to leap the precipices and to descend from point to point, until he was as surefooted as the goat, and then one day he bade him strip and wrestle.

Now Wulnoth wrestled hard, but he could not throw the giant, and each time the giant threw him so that he lost heart, and said —

"What use wrestling with thee, O Osth? I shall never conquer thee." But the giant answered with a grunt —

"He who would succeed must labor," and again Wulnoth was silenced.

And one day there came a bear, and the giant said, "Canst wrestle with yonder honey-finder, Wulnoth?"

"Nay," said Wulnoth. "Neither can any man." But Osth answered, "Go and try."

So Wulnoth went to the bear, and the honey-finder rose up and opened wide his paws. But Wulnoth took a good grip and squeezed his ribs, and threw him down, so that the honey-finder got up and ran off grunting. And Wulnoth said —

"Whence have I got this cunning?"

"Through being thrown by me," answered Osth. "Thou must learn another lesson now."

And he set him pulling against himself, until at length he could take a bullock by the horns and pull against it, and cast it over the hill, and so, day by day, did the giant make him work until his bones ached and his limbs grew weary, but he grew strong and mighty, and could run all day and not stop, and climb the steepest hill, and leap the widest chasm, and wield a club in either hand, and shatter a rock with every blow; and after each task in which he succeeded the giant laughed and grunted, and said that it was well.

And at every full moon Wulnoth went down to see Wyborga and Edgiva, and it seemed to him that Edgiva grew more and more in grace each time he saw her, until he cried to Wyborga —

"Oh, Wyborga, tell me what this thing does mean! A few months ago and Edgiva was a child, and now she is a woman, and so beautiful that it melts the heart to look at her."

Then did Wyborga laugh and answer —

"The riddle is not hard, Wulnoth. It is thus: For every moon that thou hast been yonder a year has sped. Canst thou not see that thou art a man?"

"I never thought of that, for the giant has kept me so busy," he answered. "I have been seven months with him."

"Seven years," answered Wyborga. "So swiftly has time flown. Thou art twenty-four, and Edgiva is fifteen now."

But then did Wulnoth look wroth, and he said —

"This is all well, mother, but what of my promise? I said that I would seek out my friend, and here I have tarried playing for seven years, and he is a slave. I have somewhat to settle with the sons of Regner, and seven years have been wasted."

"Not wasted," answered Wyborga. "Thou art now fitted for thy work. And now, before thou dost start, go and talk with Edgiva, for she has been learning too, and she now knows the wonder tale of which I spoke, and it has made darkness light, and sorrow has become joy, and weakness strength with her."

So Wulnoth went to Edgiva and said —

"My Princess, Wyborga has sent me to talk with you, that I may hear the story which she says you know. Though before she said that in another land alone I should hear it."

"Wulnoth," answered Edgiva gently, "there is hearing with the ears, and hearing with the heart; and which hearing thine will be I know not yet. But sit down beside me and listen to my story."

So Wulnoth obeyed, and Edgiva told him her story, and it was such a story as he had never thought of. For she told him how the gods of the North were false gods, and how there was but one true God Who made all things. And she told how this God had sent His Son, who was the Lord Christ, and the Bretwalda of all angels; and how men had put Him to death on the cross, and crowned Him with thorns, and how for His love He had suffered and not destroyed them. And she spoke of how His subjects must be lowly and gentle and forgiving and meek, until at last Wulnoth jumped up and cried in impatience —

"What story is this you tell me, O Edgiva the Beautiful? This is a tale for nithings and cowards! What man would stand and be buffeted and spat upon if his hand could grasp a good sword and strike a good blow? I like not the tale, and I like not Wyborga for telling it to thee. The gods of our Northland were men truly, and did heroes' deeds; but as for this Lord of thine, methinks he deserved to die for the nithing and the coward that He was. Put such things away, Edgiva. I go to search for thy brother. I have sworn, and I must fulfil; and thou canst either tarry here, or, if thou wilt come with me, I will be thy servant and thrall."

But Edgiva shook her head. "I want not servant or thrall, Wulnoth," she said. And he asked — "Then what dost thou want, Edgiva?"

"That I may not tell thee until thine own heart finds out, and thou wilt never truly find out until thou dost hear the wonder tale."

"I have just heard it," answered Wulnoth, "and I have told thee that I like it not. Fit for women and nithings perhaps, but for men and heroes it is an idle story. Edgiva, I must go to seek thy brother."

"That I know, Wulnoth," she said. "May fortune speed thy seeking. Now farewell."

"But what wilt thou do?" he cried. "Wilt thou tarry here with Wyborga?"

"I shall do as my Lord wills," she answered. And at that Wulnoth was angry, for who was this whom Edgiva called Lord? What lover had sought her in the woodlands, he wondered.

He strode away in wrath and pain, but then he thought that after all he had no right to be angry, for he was but a born thrall, and Edgiva was a princess.

Still, in those dark moments he knew that he loved her, and he felt that he must go back and tell her, and beg her to let him be her servant for ever.

So back, through the moonlight, Wulnoth went to the cave and called to Wyborga and to Edgiva, but no answer came. Then he entered and looked around, and no one was there!

He went into the woods and cried aloud, but only the echoes answered, and the night owl cried, and then he sat down and wept, for he thought that indeed Edgiva had gone to her Lord, and that he would see her no more.

And then he went back to the cave, and there was a strange stillness in the place, as though it mourned that Edgiva had gone – as though in going she had taken all life and light with her; and he sat down and wept, and cried her name aloud, and said that he loved her and would surely die now; and then he looked up and he saw Wyborga some way off in the wood, and she called to him and spoke —

"Listen, Wulnoth," she said. "The time for work is now, and you must wander forth to seek for Guthred. As for Edgiva, she has gone where her Lord wills, and some day you will meet her again, when you have fulfilled your task."

"My task!" he cried. "What task is that, Wyborga? To find the Prince?"

"Nay, more than that," she replied. "You have said that the Lord Christ is weakling and nithing. Now, therefore, go and search in the world, and when you have found the strongest and the noblest, and the bravest of all Lords, then know that you will see Edgiva again, and that your task will be nearly done."

"But, Wyborga!" he cried. But she had gone – the darkness of the forest had swallowed her up, and he was alone.

He went back to the giant's cave, but Osth was gone also, and he was alone – alone without a single friend, not knowing whither to go to search for Guthred, nor who might be the bravest and mightiest Lord upon earth.

Now, this is how Wulnoth served seven years with Osth the giant, and this is how he lost Edgiva the Beautiful and Wyborga the Wise.

CHAPTER VI

Of Wulnoth's Strange Wrestling in the Place of Desolation

For a day and a night did Wulnoth remain in that place, giving way to his sorrow, for a strange weakness had taken possession of him, and it seemed as though there was naught left to live for in this world. And in the long night hours did evil voices whisper in his ear, as though the wicked warlocks counselled him, and the storm sisters sped by on the wind, and they also seemed to mock at him.

"Of what use is it to think of searching for thy friend?" the voices said. "Of what use to remember Edgiva the Beautiful, who is a king's daughter? Of what use to remember the words of Wyborga, who has mocked thee? Thou art nameless and landless and thrall born, and hast only thy strength and no wisdom. Go to the hills and join the nameless ones and the masterless men, and be their leader, and spread fire and carry sword, and make thyself a name that shall be feared, and put all these dreams from thee. There are fair maidens to capture and strongholds to take, and thus thou shalt be strong. But if thou dost wander after the friend whom thou mayst never find, or seek the great one who may never be met with, then thou shalt be known as the Wanderer only, and no scald shall sing a song to thee."

And Wulnoth, seated there in the darkness of the forest, said to himself that this thing was best, and that he would go and join the nameless ones and the masterless men, and become a robber-lord to be feared.

But when the day dawned and the night shadows fled, then the birds began to sing in the woodlands and the earth smiled again, and better voices came to Wulnoth and spoke in the land-breeze and sang in the bird-song and whispered in the leaves-talk; and all these voices said —

"Why tarry here, O Wulnoth, when all the work is before thee – when the hours pass and are not used? Look up, and rise up, and go forth and begin."

"Yet I know not where to begin," said Wulnoth, and the voices seemed to answer —

"One step at a time, and the longest journey is completed. Rise up and search, for the seeker shall be the finder, if in seeking he weary not."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "this is surely right, for I do but waste time sitting idle, and even if I seek the masterless men, I shall not find them by staying here."

So Wulnoth rose, and he plucked a stout branch from a tree for a weapon, in case any sought to harm him; and he strode through the forest and came to the road, and then he knew that it was the road he had often walked by the side of Edgiva the Beautiful – the road back to Lethra.

"I will go and see the King's hall," he said. "Perchance some dwell there even now who may tell me of Guthred."

But alas, when he reached the place where Lethra had flourished, all was silence and ashes and desolation. Here stood the blackened walls, and there lay beam and iron, while down at the fiord, the weed-covered wrecks of the long ships could still be seen.

No living thing was there, for the work of the sea-kings had been thorough, and the vengeance of Hungwar and Hubba had been complete, and Lethra was the place of desolation now.

Then a deep anger filled the heart of Wulnoth as he stood surveying the ruins, and he cried aloud —

"I will find these pirates and make them pay for this, and I will find Guthred the Prince and set him back on his throne, and I will find Edgiva the Beautiful, though I have to wander the world o'er to do it."

And then a deep mocking laugh sounded, and he turned to behold who thus jeered at his words, for tears were gone and weakness had fled, and his heart burned for the man's game.

And there, seated amidst the dust and black ashes of the place of desolation, he saw a man – a great and mighty man – who sat and eyed him; and Wulnoth's heart was full of wonder, for this man was so like himself that it was as though he looked upon his own form in the clear forest pool or the well's cool depths.

"Why dost thou laugh at me? and who art thou who art so like myself that thou mightest be my brother? and by what name art thou called?" he cried. And the other laughed again.

"I am called Wulnoth, stranger," he answered. "Wulnoth, Cerdic's son, thou talker of big words and doer of little deeds." And at that Wulnoth answered in hot rage —

"Now in that thou liest, whoever thou art, for I am Wulnoth, Cerdic's son."

"Thou Cerdic's son! Thou art a nothing to weep at sorrow's touch, to faint at difficulty, and to listen to night voices. Thou Cerdic's son!"

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "who am I? Has Wyborga cast some strange spell upon me, or did the night wanderers bewitch me in yonder forest? And if I be not Wulnoth, then who am I?"

"Well, wanderer," this strange man said at length, "dost thou own that thou hast spoken falsely? Dost thou still call thyself Cerdic's son?"

"That do I," replied Wulnoth. "Whoever thou art, thou art not Wulnoth."

"Whoever thou art, thou liest," came the reply. "I am Wulnoth, and I mean to gather a band of masterless men, and in this place of desolation to build Lethra again and here to reign as king."

"That thou shalt not," answered Wulnoth quickly. And the other laughed and asked him why he should not.

"Because I am Wulnoth," replied he, "and because I go to seek Guthred the Prince, and to bring him here to reign in his father's halls once more."

"That thou shalt not," answered the other. "It seems to me, nameless one who callest thyself Wulnoth, that there is not room for us twain in the world, and that one of us must conquer the other. Therefore cast aside thy club and come holmgang with me. Yea, here in the place of desolation, with no arms but our strength, will we fight until one shall overcome the other."

"I am well content," replied Wulnoth, and he cast aside the club. "Let it be as thou sayest, thou who callest thyself Wulnoth and who speakest a lie."

"Deeds, not words, thou man with a woman's tongue," growled the other; and then they faced each other, and gripped, and swayed, and strained, while the black ashes and the gray dust of the ruins of Lethra rose in clouds about them.

Now Wulnoth was strong, and he thought within himself that after his wrestling with Osth the giant, and his conquering of the bear, this would be but an easy matter, but to his surprise he found that the stranger was strong as he, and knew every one of his tricks, and could match him in every way, so that Wulnoth, strive as he might, could gain no victory.

All the day they fought, until the evening shadows crept from the cloudland, and then they paused, and flung themselves panting on the ground, and the stranger laughed and said —

"Well wrestled, Wanderer. Thou hast tried, but thou canst not succeed, and when the day dawns we will fight again, and I shall conquer thee, and then I will either slay thee or make thee my thrall, and thou shalt know that I am Wulnoth, Cerdic's son."

"Though you conquer and slay me," answered Wulnoth, "that will I not know. You may be warlock or mountain troll who has stolen my shape and who uses magic against me, but Wulnoth, the son of Cerdic, you are not."

"Tarry till the morning and I will prove it," said the other. But Wulnoth answered —

"Nay, why should we tarry; by night as by day can we fight. Come, prove it now."

"I am hungry and weary, and desire to quaff from the wine horn," the other replied. "Let us do that first and fight afterwards."

"Not so," answered Wulnoth. "We will make an end of this matter, and that at once."

"Now, evil seize thee," growled the other. "For this I will surely slay thee. Yet fight, if it is in thy mind to do so."

So they gripped again, and wrestled, and strove, yet still Wulnoth could gain no victory; and as the night deepened, it seemed that the other grew the stronger, so that he cast Wulnoth to the earth and laughed and said —

"I conquer! I conquer, Wanderer, and bitter shall be the drink in which you pledge me. Now cry for mercy."

"I cry for no mercy," answered Wulnoth, speaking short and hoarse. "Come, let us make an end of this."

So there on the ground they wrestled, the stranger on top and Wulnoth beneath seeking to cast him off, and so they struggled until the sun rose; and then stronger and stronger Wulnoth seemed to grow, and weaker and weaker the stranger became, until he fell, and said —

"I can fight no more. Thou hast beaten me. Yet thou wouldst not have done this save for that shadow."

He pointed, as he spoke, to the earth, and Wulnoth looked and wondered; for two of the timbers of the ruined king's hall still stood, and they caught the beams of the rising sun, and upon the ground their shadows fell just where the two had struggled, and the shadows formed — a cross, the sign of the weak one whom Wulnoth had called nothing!

Then cried Wulnoth and said —

"O stranger, who didst take my name and whom I have conquered, can you tell me this riddle, for I am weary of mysteries. Whence comes it that yonder shadow made me strong and you weak?"

"T is the sign of the mightiest and the strongest," answered the other, and at that Wulnoth laughed aloud in mockery —

"T is the sign of one who was a nothing," he said; "and yet, if it made me strong, why did it not make thee strong also?"

"Thou wouldst not understand even if I told thee, Wanderer," was the reply. And Wulnoth spoke again —

"Now confess that thou didst lie when thou didst take my name." But the other replied —

"I lied not, for of a surety I am Wulnoth, Cerdic's son!"

"Now this passes all!" cried Wulnoth. "Then who may I be, if thou art Wulnoth?"

"The Wanderer, and thou shalt wander until thy task is done. Yet remember that again thou hast rejected the Strong, and called Him the weak. Hither was I sent to meet thee and to conquer thee, and thou hast conquered me. Well for thee that thou hast conquered Wulnoth, Cerdic's son, for unless thou hadst done this, thou wouldst never have conquered others; and it was for this purpose that Wyborga the Wise sent thee to tarry with Osth the giant to learn strength."

"Thou wilt bewilder me with words," cried Wulnoth impatiently. "I tell thee that I am Wulnoth. Moreover, it was Wulnoth whom Osth did teach, and since thou ownest that he taught me, thou ownest that I am Wulnoth, and thou provest thyself false."

"I may not explain this to thee," was the answer. "Some day thou shalt understand it."

"Some day!" was Wulnoth's angry reply. "Why are all the good things promised thus? The future must be stored with them, and the now has never a one."

"The future has all golden store, Wulnoth, since so thou wilt have it. And now farewell."

"Not so fast," cried Wulnoth. "I have conquered thee, and thou art my man now."

"And truly so, and truly I shall serve thee even though thou mayst not know it. Yet beware of one thing — thou must watch me, for I may yet turn and smite thee. I tell thee, Wulnoth, that I am thy best friend and thy worst foe — weak am I and yet I am thy strength. Seek not to keep me now."

"Oh, go thy way! Thou art like all the rest, filled with riddles and dark sayings. Yet before thou dost go tell me one thing, and plainly, if it be in thee to speak to the point."

"Ask thy question," said the other. And Wulnoth went on —

"Whither must I turn to seek for Guthred son of Hardacnute, who was King of Lethra in his day – canst thou tell me that?"

"By Hungwar and by Hubba was he carried off," answered the other. "From them must you seek him. Seek the Danes, Wanderer, yet in seeking hold thy counsel, for Hungwar hath a long memory, and his face still beareth a scar of a wound made by a broken sword once in this very spot. And, moreover, the names of Cerdic, thrall of Berwulf, and of Wulnoth, the son of Cerdic, might be remembered. So keep thy counsel, and call thyself the Wanderer if thou come to the Danish sea-kings." And with that this strange man turned and hastened away, leaving Wulnoth seated there wondering, yet sore spent with his fight.

"Now, this is passing strange," Wulnoth reflected. "Yet the advice is good, for where shall I glean tidings of the Prince save from the Danes who carried him off?"

Then he paused a moment and cried out —

"Now, by my word! Who so mighty and strong as Regner Lodbrok? There is Wyborga's rede! I will seek Regner Lodbrok the Dane, and to him will I give service."

Then he rose, and lo, his eye fell upon the shadow again, and he frowned and shook his head.

"There is some dark rede in all this," he mused, "and I must try and come by its meaning. 'T is but a shadow, yet as it fell upon me I grew strong and conquered yonder strange being."

He stood pressing his feet idly into the dust and pondering, and presently his foot struck something buried in the ashes, and he stooped and put down his hand. And then he uttered a cry of joy, for he drew out a mighty sword with good handle, fashioned so that the fingers could grip it well, and with long, well-tempered blade, pointed and double-edged, which the dry ashes, piled high over it, had preserved bright and free from rust.

"By Thor, a right good weapon!" he laughed, as he swung it round, making it sing its song in the air. "A right good weapon, and how it makes the heart rejoice to feel the fingers clasp such a friend! Now I have a long road to tread, and none can say what may befall in the journey or at its close, yet the way is clear thus far – I must seek Regner Lodbrok the Danish sea-king, and from him shall I glean tidings of Guthred the Prince." And with that Wulnoth, who called himself the Wanderer, turned from the place of desolation, carrying the great sword in his hand.

Now, this is how Wulnoth wrestled with one who called himself by his name, and this is how he started to seek for Regner Lodbrok, the mightiest of all the sea-kings of Denmark.

CHAPTER VII

Of the Coming of Wulnoth to the Danish Sea-kings

For many days did Wulnoth journey southward, for though Lethra was nigh the sea, and the journey over the Westarweg was the shortest road, yet he had no boat in which to sail, and, moreover, the time of the storms was coming, and he knew that to sail alone was to seek for death.

So by land he was forced to go, and the way was long and hard, and many were the times that he felt he would abide where he was, and give up this vain search.

And strange was it that whenever these thoughts came to him, then also came the strange being who was so like himself, and he would cry to Wulnoth to wrestle with him ere he went farther, and only when Wulnoth had wrestled and conquered was he able to go on again.

Many were the adventures which he met with, and many the perils he encountered, yet, still, in spite of all, he went his way over the long, long leagues towards the southern sea, where he must perforce take ship of some kind if he wished to reach the sea-king's land on the other side of the wild Baltic, whereon the storm-king makes his dwelling-place and rides in his flying palace of lightning and tempest.

He made himself a light spear of hard wood, and with this he hunted the wild goats and the forest swine, and took their flesh for his food, and on this and on the wild berries did he live, and for his drink he had the runnels of clear water and nothing else.

By day he journeyed and by night he slept in the hollow trees or in caves, living like a wild man and a berserker, and, moreover, looking like one also, since his face was all grown with a wild beard and his hair hung in tangled masses to his shoulders.

In those dark nights, when the storms raged and the forest groaned beneath the buffets of the blast, evil voices called and made mock, urging him to give up so wild a journey, but in the day time the better voices always answered and encouraged him; and oft in his dreams Edgiva the Beautiful would stand beside him and smile, and beckon him on, whispering to him in tones like the sweet music of the scald's harp —

"Be brave, Wulnoth! Be patient, Wulnoth, for fame, and honor, and love, and that which is better than fame or honor or love await thee in the end."

And when Edgiva stood thus, it ever seemed that she ever held that little cross of wood, bound with grass and wreathed with thorn spray, which Wyborga the Wise had fashioned in the days long past.

So through the forests and across the mountains and over dreary wastes did Wulnoth go, and of those whom he met his only question was whether he was journeying towards the sea-king's land.

"Thou art going aright," he was answered each time he asked that question. "Thou wilt come to the sea, and there thou must take ship. But beware what thou doest in the sea-king's land, for fierce and cruel are the vikings, and their swords sing loudly."

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