

ROBERT

MICHAEL

BALLANTYNE

ERLING THE BOLD

Robert Michael Ballantyne

Erling the Bold

«Public Domain»

Ballantyne R.

Erling the Bold / R. Ballantyne — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	8
Chapter Three.	16
Chapter Four.	22
Chapter Five.	26
Chapter Six.	32
Chapter Seven.	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

R. M. Ballantyne

Erling the Bold

Chapter One.

In Which the Tale Begins Somewhat Furiously

By the early light of a bright summer morning, long, long ago, two small boats were seen to issue from one of the fiords or firths on the west coast of Norway, and row towards the skerries or low rocky islets that lay about a mile distant from the mainland.

Although the morning was young, the sun was already high in the heavens, and brought out in glowing colours the varied characteristics of a mountain scene of unrivalled grandeur.

The two shallows moved swiftly towards the islands, their oars shivering the liquid mirror of the sea, and producing almost the only sound that disturbed the universal stillness, for at that early hour Nature herself seemed buried in deep repose. A silvery mist hung over the water, through which the innumerable rocks and islands assumed fantastic shapes, and the more distant among them appeared as though they floated in air. A few seagulls rose startled from their nests, and sailed upwards with plaintive cries, as the keels of the boats grated on the rocks, and the men stepped out and hauled them up on the beach of one of the islets.

A wild uncouth crew were those Norsemen of old! All were armed, for in their days the power and the means of self-defence were absolutely necessary to self-preservation.

Most of them wore portions of scale armour, or shirts of ring mail, and headpieces of steel, though a few among them appeared to have confidence in the protection afforded by the thick hide of the wolf, which, converted into rude, yet not ungraceful, garments, covered their broad shoulders. All, without exception, carried sword or battle-axe and shield. They were goodly stalwart men every one, but silent and stern.

It might have been observed that the two boats, although bound for the same islet, did not row in company. They were beached as far from each other as the little bay into which they ran would admit of, and the crews stood aloof in two distinct groups.

In the centre of each group stood a man who, from his aspect and bearing, appeared to be superior to his fellows. One was in the prime of life, dark and grave; the other in the first flush of manhood, full grown, though beardless, fair, and ruddy. Both were taller and stouter than their comrades.

The two men had met there to fight, and the cause of their feud was—Love!

Both loved a fair Norse maiden in Horlingdal. The father of the maid favoured the elder warrior; the maid herself preferred the younger.

In those days, barbarous though they undoubtedly were, law and justice were more respected and more frequently appealed to in Norway than in almost any other country. Liberty, crushed elsewhere under the deadweight of feudalism, found a home in the bleak North, and a rough but loving welcome from the piratical, sea-roving! She did not, indeed, dwell altogether scathless among her demi-savage guardians, who, if their perceptions of right and wrong were somewhat confused, might have urged in excuse that their light was small. She received many shocks and frequent insults from individuals, but liberty was sincerely loved and fondly cherished by the body of the Norwegian people, through all the period of those dark ages during which other nations scarce dared to mention her name.

Nevertheless, it was sometimes deemed more convenient to settle disputes by the summary method of an appeal to arms than to await the issue of a tedious and uncertain lawsuit such an appeal

being perfectly competent to those who preferred it, and the belief being strong among the fiery spirits of the age that Odin, the god of war, would assuredly give victory to the right.

In the present instance it was not considered any infringement of the law of liberty that the issue of the combat would be the disposal of a fair woman's hand, with or without her heart. Then, as now, women were often forced to marry against their will.

Having gone to that island to fight—an island being a naturally circumscribed battlefield whose limits could not conveniently be transgressed—the two champions set to work at once with the cool businesslike promptitude of men sprung from a warlike race, and nurtured from their birth in the midst of war's alarms.

Together, and without speaking, they ascended the rock, which was low and almost barren, with a small extent of turf in the centre, level, and admirably suited to their purpose. Here they faced each other; the one drew his sword, the other raised his battle-axe.

There was no sentiment in that combat. The times and the men were extremely matter-of-fact. The act of slaying gracefully had not yet been acquired; yet there was much of manly grace displayed as each threw himself into the position that nature and experience had taught him was best suited to the wielding of his peculiar weapon.

For one instant each gazed intently into the face of the other, as if to read there his premeditated plan of attack. At that moment the clear blue eye of the younger man dilated, and, as his courage rose, the colour mounted to his cheek. The swart brow of the other darkened as he marked the change; then, with sudden spring and shout, the two fell upon each other and dealt their blows with incredible vigour and rapidity.

They were a well-matched pair. For nearly two hours did they toil and moil over the narrow limits of that sea-girt rock—yet victory leaned to neither side. Now the furious blows rained incessant on the sounding shields; anon the din of strife ceased, while the combatants moved round each other, shifting their position with elastic step, as, with wary motion and eagle glances, each sought to catch the other off his guard, and the clash of steel, as the weapons met in sudden onset, was mingled with the shout of anger or defiance. The sun glanced on whirling blade and axe, and sparkled on their coats of mail as if the lightning flash were playing round them; while screaming seamews flew and circled overhead, as though they regarded with intelligent interest and terror the mortal strife that was going on below.

Blood ere long began to flow freely on both sides; the vigour of the blows began to abate, the steps to falter. The youthful cheek grew pale; the dark warrior's brow grew darker, while heaving chests, labouring breath, and an occasional gasp, betokened the approaching termination of the struggle. Suddenly the youth, as if under the influence of a new impulse, dropped his shield, sprang forward, raised himself to his full height, grasped his axe with both hands, and, throwing it aloft (thus recklessly exposing his person), brought it down with terrific violence on the shield of his adversary.

The action was so sudden that the other, already much exhausted, was for the moment paralysed, and failed to take advantage of his opportunity. He met but failed to arrest the blow with his shield. It was crushed down upon his head, and in another moment the swarthy warrior lay stretched upon the turf.

Sternly the men conveyed their fallen chief to his boat, and rowed him to the mainland, and many a week passed by ere he recovered from the effects of the blow that felled him. His conqueror returned to have his wounds dressed by the bride for whom he had fought so long and so valiantly on that bright summer morning.

Thus it was that King Haldor of Horlingdal, surnamed the Fierce, conquered King Ulf of Romsdal, acquired his distinctive appellation, and won Herfrida the Soft-eyed for his bride.

It must not be supposed that these warriors were kings in the ordinary acceptance of that term. They belonged to the class of "small" or petty kings, of whom there were great numbers in Norway in those days, and were merely rich and powerful free-landholders or udallers.

Haldor the Fierce had a large family of sons and daughters. They were all fair, strong, and extremely handsome, like himself.

Ulf of Romsdal did not die of his wounds, neither did he die of love. Disappointed love was then, as now, a terrible disease, but not necessarily fatal. Northmen were very sturdy in the olden time. They almost always recovered from that disease sooner or later. When his wounds were healed, Ulf married a fair girl of the Horlingdal district, and went to reside there, but his change of abode did not alter his title. He was always spoken of as Ulf of Romsdal. He and his old enemy Haldor the Fierce speedily became fast friends; and so was it with their wives, Astrid and Herfrida, who also took mightily to each other. They span, and carded wool, and sewed together oftentimes, and discussed the affairs of Horlingdal, no doubt with mutual advantage and satisfaction.

Twenty years passed away, and Haldor's eldest son, Erling, grew to be a man. He was very like his father—almost a giant in size; fair, very strong, and remarkably handsome. His silken yellow hair fell in heavy curls on a pair of the broadest shoulders in the dale. Although so young, he already had a thick short beard, which was very soft and curly. His limbs were massive, but they were so well proportioned, and his movements so lithe, that his great size and strength were not fully appreciated until one stood close by his side or fell into his powerful grasp.

Erling was lion-like, yet he was by nature gentle and retiring. He had a kindly smile, a hearty laugh, and bright blue eyes. Had he lived in modern days he would undoubtedly have been a man of peace. But he lived “long long ago”—therefore he was a man of war. Being unusually fearless, his companions of the valley called him Erling the Bold. He was, moreover, extremely fond of the sea, and often went on viking cruises in his own ships, whence he was also styled Erling the Sea-king, although he did not at that time possess a foot of land over which to exercise kingly authority.

Now, it must be explained here that the words Sea-king and Viking do not denote the same thing. One is apt to be misled by the termination of the latter word, which has no reference whatever to the royal title king. A viking was merely a piratical rover on the sea, the sea-warrior of the period, but a Sea-king was a leader and commander of vikings. Every Sea-king was a viking, but every viking was not a Sea-king; just as every Admiral is a sailor, but every sailor is not an Admiral. When it is said that Erling was a Sea-king, it is much as if we had said he was an admiral in a small way.

Chapter Two.

Introduces, among others, the Hero and Heroine, and opens up a View of Norse Life in the Olden Time

Ulf of Romsdal had a daughter named Hilda. She was fair, and extremely pretty.

The young men said that her brow was the habitation of the lily, her eye the mirror of the heavens, her cheek the dwelling-place of the rose. True, in the ardour of their feelings and strength of their imaginations they used strong language; nevertheless it was impossible to overpraise the Norse maiden. Her nut-brown hair fell in luxuriant masses over her shapely shoulders, reaching far below the waist; her skin was fair, and her manners engaging. Hilda was undoubtedly blue-eyed and beautiful. She was just seventeen at this time. Those who loved her (and there were few who did not) styled her the sunbeam.

Erling and Hilda had dwelt near each other from infancy. They had been playmates, and for many years were as brother and sister to each other. Erling's affection had gradually grown into a stronger passion, but he never mentioned the fact to anyone, being exceedingly shamefaced and shy in regard to love. He would have given his ears to have known that his love was returned, but he dared not to ask. He was very stupid on this point. In regard to other things he was sharp-witted above his fellows. None knew better than he how to guide the "warship" through the intricate mazes of the island-studded coast of Norway; none equalled him in deeds of arms; no one excelled him in speed of foot, in scaling the fells, or in tracking the wolf and bear to their dens; but all beat him in love-making! He was wondrously slow and obtuse at that, and could by no means discover whether or not Hilda regarded him as a lover or a brother. As uncertainty on this point continued, Erling became jealous of all the young men who approached her, and in proportion as this feeling increased his natural disposition changed, and his chafing spirit struggled fiercely within him. But his native good sense and modesty enabled him pretty well to conceal his feelings. As for Hilda, no one knew the state of her mind. It is probable that at this time she herself had not a very distinct idea on the point.

Hilda had a foster-sister named Ada, who was also very beautiful. She was unusually dark for a Norse maiden. Her akin indeed was fair, but her hair and eyes were black like the raven's wing. Her father was King Hakon of Drontheim.

It was the custom in those warlike days for parents to send out some of their children to be fostered by others—in order, no doubt, to render next to impossible the total extirpation of their families at a time when sudden descents upon households were common. By thus scattering their children the chances of family annihilation were lessened, and the probability that some members might be left alive to take revenge was greatly increased.

Hilda and Ada were warmly attached. Having been brought up together, they loved each other as sisters—all the more, perhaps, that in character they were somewhat opposed. Hilda was grave, thoughtful, almost pensive. Ada was full of vivacity and mirth, fond of fun, and by no means averse to a little of what she styled harmless mischief.

Now there was a man in Horlingdal called Glumm, surnamed the Gruff, who loved Ada fervently. He was a stout, handsome man, of ruddy complexion, and second only to Erling in personal strength and prowess. But by nature he was morose and gloomy. Nothing worse, however, could be said of him. In other respects he was esteemed a brave, excellent man. Glumm was too proud to show his love to Ada very plainly; but she had wit enough to discover it, though no one else did, and she resolved to punish him for his pride by keeping him in suspense.

Horlingdal, where Ulf and Haldor and their families dwelt was, like nearly all the vales on the west of Norway, hemmed in by steep mountains of great height, which were covered with dark pines and birch trees. To the level pastures high up on mountain tops the inhabitants were wont to send

their cattle to feed in summer—the small crops of hay in the valleys being carefully gathered and housed for winter use.

Every morning, before the birds began to twitter, Hilda set out, with her pail and her wooden box, to climb the mountain to the upland dairy or “saeter”, and fetch the milk and butter required by the family during the day. Although the maid was of noble birth—Ulf claiming descent from one of those who are said to have come over with Odin and his twelve godars or priests from Asia—this was not deemed an inappropriate occupation. Among the Norsemen labour was the lot of high and low. He was esteemed the best man who could fight most valiantly in battle and labour most actively in the field or with the tools of the smith and carpenter. Ulf of Romsdal, although styled king in virtue of his descent, was not too proud, in the busy summertime, to throw off his coat and toss the hay in his own fields in the midst of his thralls (slaves taken in war) and house-carles. Neither he, nor Haldor, nor any of the small kings, although they were the chief men of the districts in which they resided, thought it beneath their dignity to forge their own spearheads and anchors, or to mend their own doors. As it was with the men, so was it with the women. Hilda the Sunbeam was not despised because she climbed the mountainside to fetch milk and butter for the family.

One morning, in returning from the fell, Hilda heard the loud clatter of the anvil at Haldorstede. Having learned that morning that Danish vikings had been seen prowling among the islands near the fiord, she turned aside to enquire the news.

Haldorstede lay about a mile up the valley, and Hilda passed it every morning on her way to and from the saeter. Ulfstede lay near the shore of the fiord. Turning into the smithy, she found Erling busily engaged in hammering a huge mass of stubborn red-hot metal. So intent was the young man on his occupation that he failed to observe the entrance of his fair visitor, who set down her milk pail, and stood for a few minutes with her hands folded and her eyes fixed demurely on her lover.

Erling had thrown off his jerkin and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt of coarse homespun fabric, in order to give his thick muscular arms unimpeded play in wielding the hammer and turning the mass of glowing metal on the anvil. He wore woollen breeches and hose, both of which had been fashioned by the fingers of his buxom mother, Herfrida. A pair of neatly formed shoes of untanned hide—his own workmanship—protected his feet, and his waist was encircled by a broad leathern girdle, from one side of which depended a short hunting-knife, and from the other a flap, with a slit in it, to support his sword. The latter weapon—a heavy double-edged blade—stood leaning against the forge chimney, along with a huge battle-axe, within reach of his hand. The collar of his shirt was thrown well back, exposing to view a neck and chest whose muscles denoted extraordinary power, and the whiteness of which contrasted strikingly with the ruddy hue of his deeply bronzed countenance.

The young giant appeared to take pleasure in the exercise of his superabundant strength, for, instead of using the ordinary single-hand hammer with which other men were wont to bend the glowing metal to their will, he wielded the great forehammer, and did it as easily, too, with his right arm as if it had been but a wooden mallet. The mass of metal at which he wrought was thick and unyielding, but under his heavy blows it began to assume the form of an axe—a fact which Hilda noticed with a somewhat saddened brow. Erling’s long hair, rolling as it did down his shoulders, frequently straggled over his face and interfered slightly with his vision, whereupon he shook it back with an impatient toss, as a lion might shake his mane, while he toiled with violent energy at his work. To look at him, one might suppose that Vulcan himself had condescended to visit the abodes of men, and work in a terrestrial smithy!

During one of the tosses with which he threw back his hair, Erling chanced to raise his eyes, which instantly fell upon Hilda. A glad smile beamed on his flushed face, and he let the hammer fall with a ringing clatter on the anvil, exclaiming:

“Ha! good morrow to thee, Hilda! Thou comest with stealthy tread, like the midnight marauder. What news? Does all go well at Ulfstede? But why so sad, Hilda? Thy countenance is not wont to quarrel with the mountain air.”

“Truly, no!” replied the girl, smiling, “mountain air likes me well. If my looks are sadder than usual, it is because of the form of the weapon thou art fashioning.”

“The weapon!” exclaimed Erling, as he raised the handle of the hammer, and, resting his arms on it, gazed at his visitor in some surprise. “It is but an axe—a simple axe, perchance a trifle heavier than other axes because it suits my arm better, and I have a weakness that way. What ails thee at a battle-axe, Hilda?”

“I quarrel not with the axe, Erling, but it reminds me of thy love of fighting, and I grieve for that. Why art thou so fond of war?”

“Fond of war!” echoed the youth. “Now, out upon thee, Hilda! what were a man fit for if he could not fight?”

“Nay, I question not thine ability to fight, but I grieve to see thy love for fighting.”

“Truly there seems to me a close relationship between the love of war and the ability to fight,” returned the youth. “But to be plain with thee: I *do not* love war so much as ye think. Yet I utter this in thine ear, for I would not that the blades of the valley knew it, lest they might presume upon it, and I should have to prove my ability—despite my want of love—upon some of their carcasses.”

“I wish there were no such thing as war,” said Hilda with a sigh.

Erling knitted his brows and gazed into the smithy fire as if he were engaged in pondering some knotty point. “Well, I’m not sure,” said he slowly, and descending to a graver tone of address— “I’m not sure that I can go quite so far as that. If we had no war at all, perchance our swords might rust, and our skill, for want of practice, might fail us in the hour of need. Besides, how could men in that case hope to dwell with Odin in Valhalla’s bright and merry halls? But I agree with thee in wishing that we had less of war and more of peace *at home*.”

“I fear,” said Hilda, “we seem likely to have more of war and less of peace than usual, if rumours be true. Have you heard that Danish vikings have been seen among the islands?”

“Aye, truly, I have heard of them, and it is that which has sent me to the smithy this morning to hasten forward my battle-axe; for I love not too light a weapon. You see, Hilda, when it has not weight one must sometimes repeat the blow; especially if the mail be strong. But with a heavy axe and a stout arm there is no need for that. I had begun this weapon,” continued the youth, as if he were musing aloud rather than speaking to his companion, “with intent to try its metal on the head of the King; but I fear me it will be necessary to use it in cracking a viking’s headpiece before it cleaves a royal crown.”

“The King!” exclaimed Hilda, with a look of surprise, not unmingled with terror, “Erling, has ambition led thee to this?”

“Not so; but self-preservation urges me to it.”

The maiden paused a few seconds, ere she replied in a meditative voice— “The old man who came among us a year ago, and who calls himself Christian, tells me that his god is not a god of war, like Odin; he says that his god permits no war to men, save that of self-defence; but, Erling, would slaying the King be indeed an act of self-preservation?”

“Aye, in good sooth would it,” replied the youth quickly, while a dark frown crossed his brow.

“How can that be?” asked the maiden.

“Hast such small love for gossip, Hilda, that the foul deeds and ambitious projects of Harald Haarfager have not reached thine ear?”

“I have heard,” replied Hilda, “that he is fond of war, which, truly, is no news, and that he is just now more busy with his bloody game than usual; but what does that matter to thee?”

“Matter!” cried the youth impatiently, as he seized the lump of metal on which he had been at work, and, thrusting it into the smouldering charcoal, commenced to blow the fire energetically, as if to relieve his feelings. “Know ye not that the King—this Harald Fairhair—is not satisfied with the goodly domains that of right belong to him, and the kingly rule which he holds, according to law, over all Norway, but that he means to subdue the whole land to himself, and trample on our necks as he has already trampled on our laws?”

“I know somewhat of this,” said Hilda.

“No one,” pursued Erling vehemently, and blowing the fire into a fervent heat—“no one denies to Harald the right to wear the crown of Norway. That was settled at the Ore Thing¹ in Drontheim long ago; but everyone denies his right to interfere with our established laws and privileges. Has he not, by mere might and force of arms, slain many, and enslaved others, of our best and bravest men? And now he proposes to reduce the whole land to slavery, or something like it, and all because of the foolish speech of a proud girl, who says she will not wed him until he shall first subdue to himself the whole of Norway, and rule over it as fully and freely as King Eric rules over Sweden, or King Gorm over Denmark. He has sworn that he will neither clip nor comb his hair, until he has subdued all the land with scatt (taxes) and duties and domains, or die in the attempt. Trust me! he is like to die in the attempt; and since his Kingship is to be so little occupied with his hair, it would please me well if he would use his time and his shears in clipping the tongue of the wench that set him on so foul an errand. All this thou knowest, Hilda, as well as I; but thou dost not know that men have been at the stede to-day, who tell us that the King is advancing north, and is victorious everywhere. Already King Gandalf and Hako are slain; the two sons of King Eystein have also fallen, and many of the upland kings have been burned, with most of their men, in a house at Ringsager. It is not many days since Harald went up Gudbrandsdal, and north over the Doverfielde, where he ordered all the men to be slain, and everything wide around to be given to the flames. King Gryting of Orkadal and all his people have sworn fidelity to him, and now—worst news of all—it is said he is coming over to pay us a visit in Horlingdal. Is not here cause for fighting in self-defence, or rather for country, and laws and freedom, and wives, and children, and—”

The excited youth stopped abruptly, and, seizing the tongs, whirled the white mass of semi-molten steel upon the anvil, and fell to belabouring it with such goodwill that a bright shower of sparks drove Hilda precipitately out of the workshop.

The wrongs which roused the young Norseman’s indignation to such a pitch are matters of history.

The government of the country at that time involved the democratic element very largely. No act or expedition of any importance could be done or undertaken without the previous deliberation and consent of a “Thing”, or assembly of landed proprietors. There were many different Things—such as General Things, District Things, House Things of the King’s counsellors, and Herd Things of the Court, etcetera, and to such of these there was a distinct and well-known trumpet call. There were also four great Things which were legislative, while the small district Things were only administrative. In addition to which there was the Ore Thing of Drontheim, referred to by Erling. At these Things the King himself possessed no greater power than any of the bonders. He was only a “Thing-man” at a Thing.

No wonder, then, that the self-governing and warlike Norsemen could not bring themselves tamely to submit to the tyranny of Harald Haarfager, or Fairhair, King of Norway by hereditary right, when he cast aside all the restraints of ancient custom, and, in his effort to obtain more power, commenced those bloody wars with his subjects, which had the effect of causing many of his chief men to expatriate themselves and seek new homes in the islands of the great western sea, and which ultimately resulted in the subjugation (at least during that reign) of all the petty kings of Norway. These small kings, be it observed, were not at that time exercising any illegal power, or in the occupation of any unwarrantable position, which could be pleaded by King Harald in justification of his violent proceedings against them. The title of king did not imply independent sovereignty. They were merely the hereditary lords of the soil, who exercised independent and rightful authority over their own

¹ The great assembly, or parliament, which was considered the only “Thing” which could confer the sovereignty of the whole of Norway, the other Things having no right or powers beyond their circles. It was convened only for the special purpose of examining and proclaiming the right of the aspirant to the crown, but the King had still to repair to each Law Thing or Small Thing to obtain its acknowledgement of his right and the power of a sovereign within its jurisdiction.

estates and households, and modified authority over their respective districts, subject, however, to the laws of the land—laws which were recognised and perfectly understood by the people and the king, and which were admitted by people and king alike to have more authority than the royal will itself. By law the small kings were bound to attend the meetings of the Stor Things or Parliaments, at the summons of the sovereign, and to abide by the decisions of those assemblies, where all men met on an equal footing, but where, of course, intellectual power and eloquence led the multitude, for good or for evil, then just as they do now, and will continue to do as long as, and wherever, free discussion shall obtain. To say that the possession of power, wealth, or influence was frequently abused to the overawing and coercing of those assemblies, is simply to state that they were composed of human beings possessed of fallen natures.

So thoroughly did the Northmen appreciate the importance of having a right to raise their voices and to vote in the national parliaments, and so jealously did they assert and maintain their privileges, that the King himself—before he could, on his accession, assume the crown—was obliged to appear at the “Thing”, where a freeborn landholder proposed him, and where his title to the crown was investigated and proved in due form. No war expedition on a large scale could be undertaken until a Thing had been converged, and requisition legally made by the King for a supply of men and arms; and, generally, whenever any act affecting national or even district interests was contemplated, it was necessary to assemble a Thing, and consult with the people before anything could be done.

It may be easily understood, then, with what an outburst of indignation a free and warlike race beheld the violent course pursued by Harald Fairhair, who roamed through the country with fire and sword, trampling on their cherished laws and privileges, subduing the petty kings, and placing them, when submissive, as Jarls, i.e. earls or governors over the districts to collect the scatt or taxes, and manage affairs in his name and for his behoof.

It is no wonder that Erling the Bold gathered his brow into an ominous frown, pressed his lips together, tossed his locks impatiently while he thought on these things and battered the iron mass on his anvil with the amount of energy that he would have expended in belabouring the head of King Harald himself, had opportunity offered.

Erling’s wrath cooled, however, almost instantly on his observing Hilda’s retreat before the fiery shower. He flung down his hammer, seized his battle-axe, and throwing it on his shoulder as he hurried out, speedily overtook her.

“Forgive my rude manners,” he said. “My soul was chafed by the thoughts that filled my brain, and I scarce knew what I did.”

“Truly, thou man of fire,” replied the girl, with an offended look, “I am of half a mind not to pardon thee. See, my kirtle is destroyed by the shower thou didst bestow upon me so freely.”

“I will repay thee that with such a kirtle as might grace a queen the next time I go on viking cruise.”

“Meantime,” said Hilda, “I am to go about like a witch plucked somewhat hastily from the fire by a sympathising crone.”

“Nay; Herfrida will make thee a new kirtle of the best wool at Haldorstede.”

“So thy mother, it seems, is to work and slave in order to undo thy mischief?”

“Then, if nothing else will content thee,” said Erling gaily, “I will make thee one myself; but it must be of leather, for I profess not to know how to stitch more delicate substance. But let me carry thy pitcher, Hilda. I will go to Ulfstede to hold converse with thy father on these matters, for it seemed to me that the clouds are gathering somewhat too thickly over the dale for comfort or peace to remain long with us.”

As the young man and maiden wended their way down the rocky path that skirted the foaming Horlingdal river, Hilda assumed a more serious tone, and sought to convince her companion of the impropriety of being too fond of fighting, in which attempt, as might be supposed, she was not very successful.

“Why, Hilda,” said the youth, at the close of a speech in which his fair companion endeavoured to point out the extreme sinfulness of viking cruises in particular, “it is, as thou sayest, unjust to take from another that which belongs to him if he be our friend; but if he is our enemy, and the enemy of our country, that alters the case. Did not the great Odin himself go on viking cruise and seize what prey he chose?”

Erling said this with the air of a man who deemed his remark unanswerable.

“I know not,” rejoined Hilda. “There seems to me much mystery in our thoughts about the gods. I have heard it said that there is no such god as Odin.”

The maiden uttered this in a subdued voice, and her cheek paled a little as she glanced up at Erling’s countenance. The youth gazed at her with an expression of extreme surprise, and for a few minutes they walked slowly forward without speaking.

There was reason for this silence on both sides. Hilda was naturally of a simple and trustful nature. She had been brought up in the religion of her fathers, and had listened with awe and with deep interest on many a long winter night to the wild legends with which the scalds, or poets of the period, were wont to beguile the evening hours in her father’s mansion; but about a year before the time of which we write, an aged stranger had come from the south, and taken up his abode in the valley, in a secluded and dilapidated hut, in which he was suffered to dwell unmolested by its owner, Haldor the Fierce; whose fierceness, by the way, was never exhibited except in time of war and in the heat of battle!

With this hermit Hilda had held frequent converse, and had listened with horror, but with a species of fascination which she could not resist, to his calm and unanswerable reasoning on the fallacy of the religion of Odin, and on the truth of that of Jesus Christ. At first she resolved to fly from the old man, as a dangerous enemy, who sought to seduce her from the paths of rectitude; but when she looked at his grave, sad face, and listened to the gentle and—she knew not why—persuasive tones of his voice, she changed her mind, and resolved to hear what he had to say. Without being convinced of the truth of the new religion—of which she had heard rumours from the roving vikings who frequented Horlingdal—she was much shaken in regard to the truth of her own, and now, for the first time, she had ventured to hint to a human being what was passing in her mind.

At this period Christianity had not penetrated into Norway, but an occasional wanderer or hermit had found his way thither from time to time to surprise the inhabitants with his new doctrines, and then, perchance, to perish as a warlock because of them. Erling had heard of this old man, and regarded him with no favour, for in his sea roving he had met with so-called Christians, whose conduct had not prepossessed him in their favour. As for their creed, he knew nothing whatever about it.

His mind, however, was of that bold, straightforward, self-reliant, and meditative cast, which happily has existed in all ages and in all climes, and which, in civilised lands, usually brings a man to honour and power, while in barbarous countries and ages, if not associated with extreme caution and reticence, it is apt to bring its possessor into trouble.

It was with astonishment that Erling heard sentiments which had long been harboured in his own mind drop from the lips of one whose natural character he knew to be the reverse of sceptical in matters of faith, or speculative in matters of opinion. Instead of making a direct reply to Hilda’s remark, he said, after a pause:

“Hilda, I have my doubts of the old man Christian; men say he is a warlock, and I partly believe them, for it is only such who shun the company of their fellows. I would caution thee against him. He believes not in Odin or Thor, which is matter of consideration mainly to himself, but methinks he holdeth fellowship with Nikke, (Satan, or the Evil One) which is matter of consideration for all honest men, aye, and women too, who would live in peace; for if the Evil Spirit exists at all, as I firmly believe he does, in some shape or other, it were well to keep as far from him as we may, and specially to avoid those erring mortals who seem to court his company.”

“The old man is misjudged, believe me,” replied the girl earnestly; “I have spoken much with him and oft. It may be he is wrong in some things—how can a woman judge of such matters?—but he is gentle, and has a kind heart.”

“I like him not,” was Erling’s curt reply.

The youth and maiden had now reached a part of the valley where a small footpath diverged from the main track which led to Ulf’s dwelling. The path ran in the direction of the hayfields that bordered the fiord. Just as they reached it, Hilda observed that her father was labouring there with his thralls.

“See,” she exclaimed, stopping abruptly, and taking her pitcher from Erling, “my father is in the hayfield.”

The youth was about to remonstrate and insist on being allowed to carry the pitcher to the house before going to the field; but on second thoughts he resigned his slight burden, and, saying “farewell”, turned on his heel and descended the path with rapid step and a somewhat burdened heart.

“She loves me not,” he muttered to himself, almost sternly. “I am a brother, nothing more.”

Indulging in these and kindred gloomy reflections, he advanced towards a rocky defile where the path diverged to the right. Before taking the turn he looked back. Hilda was standing on the spot where they had parted, but her face was not directed towards her late companion. She was looking steadily up the valley. Presently the object which attracted her attention appeared in view, and Erling felt a slight sensation of anger, he scarce knew why, on observing the old man who had been the subject of their recent conversation issue from among the rocks. His first impulse was to turn back, but, checking himself, he wheeled sharply round and hurried away.

Scarcely had he taken three steps, however, when he was arrested by a sound that resembled a crash of thunder. Glancing quickly upwards, he beheld an enormous mass of rock, which had become detached from the mountain side, descending in shattered fragments into the valley.

The formation of Horlingdal at that particular point was peculiar. The mountain ranges on either side, which rose to a height of at least four thousand feet, approached each other abruptly, thus forming a dark gloomy defile of a few hundred yards in width, with precipitous cliffs on either side, and the river roaring in the centre of the pass. The water rushed in white-crested billows through its rock-impeded bed, and terminated in a splendid foss, or fall, forty or fifty feet high, which plunged into a seething caldron, whence it issued in a troubled stream to the plain that opened out below. It here found rest in the level fields of Ulfstede, that lay at the head of the fiord. The open amphitheatre above this pass, with its circlet of grand glacier-capped mountains, was the abode of a considerable number of small farmers, in the midst of whose dwellings stood the residence of Haldor, where the meeting in the smithy just described took place.

It was in this narrow defile that the landslide happened, a catastrophe which always has been and still is of frequent occurrence in the mountain regions of Norway.

Hilda and the old man (whom we shall henceforth call Christian) cast their eyes hastily upwards on hearing the sound that had arrested Erling’s steps so suddenly. The enormous mass of rock was detached from the hill on the other side of the river, but the defile was so narrow that falling rocks often rebounded quite across it. The slip occurred just opposite the spot on which Hilda and the old man stood, and as the terrible shower came on, tearing down trees and rocks, the heavier masses being dashed and spurned from the hillside in innumerable fragments, it became evident that to escape beyond the range of the chaotic deluge was impossible.

Hilda understood the danger so well that she was panic stricken and rooted to the spot. Erling understood it also, and, with a sudden cry, dashed at full speed to the rescue. His cry was one almost of despair, for the distance between them was so great that he had no chance, he knew, of reaching her in time.

In this extremity the hermit looked round for a crevice or a rock which might afford protection, but no such place of safety was at hand. The side of the pass rose behind them like a wall to a height

of several hundred feet. Seeing this at a glance the old man planted himself firmly in front of Hilda. His lips moved, and the single word "Jesus" dropped from them as he looked with a calm steady gaze at the avalanche.

Scarcely had he taken his stand when the first stones leaped across the gorge, and, striking on the wall of rock behind, burst into fragments and fell in a shower around them. Some of the smaller *débris* struck the old man's breast, and the hands which he had raised to protect his face; but he neither blanched nor flinched. In another instant the greater part of the hurling rubbish fell with a terrible crash and tore up the earth in all directions round them. Still they stood unhurt! The height from which the ruin had descended was so great that the masses were scattered, and although they flew around over, and close to them, the great shock passed by and left them unscathed.

But the danger was not yet past. Several of the smaller masses, which had been partially arrested in their progress by bushes, still came thundering down the steep. The quick eye of the hermit observed one of these flying straight towards his head. Its force had been broken by a tree on the opposite hill, but it still retained tremendous impetus. He knew that there was no escape for him. To have moved aside would have exposed Hilda to almost certain destruction. Once again he murmured the Saviour's name, as he stretched out both hands straight before his face. The rock struck full against them, beat them down on his forehead, and next instant old man and maid were hurled to the ground.

Well was it for Erling that all this occurred so quickly that the danger was past before he reached the spot. Part of the road he had to traverse was strewn so thickly with the rocky ruin that his destruction, had he been a few seconds sooner on the ground, would have been inevitable. He reached Hilda just in time to assist her to rise. She was slightly stunned by the shock, but otherwise unhurt.

Not so the hermit. He lay extended where he had fallen; his grey beard and thin scattered locks dabbled with blood that flowed from a gash in his forehead. Hilda kneeled at his side, and, raising his head, she laid it in her lap.

"Now the gods be praised," said Erling, as he knelt beside her, and endeavoured to stanch the flow of blood from the wound; "I had thought thy last hour was come, Hilda; but the poor old man, I fear much he will die."

"Not so; he recovers," said the girl; "fetch me some water from the spring."

Erling ran to a rill that trickled down the face of the rock at his side, dipped his leathern bonnet into it, and, quickly returning, sprinkled a little on the old man's face, and washed the wound.

"It is not deep," he remarked, after having examined the cut. "His hands are indeed badly bruised, but he will live."

"Get thee to the stede, Erling, and fetch aid," said Hilda quickly; "the old man is heavy."

The youth smiled. "Heavy he is, no doubt, but he wears no armour; methinks I can lift him."

So saying Erling raised him in his strong arms and bore him away to Ulfstede, where, under the tender care of Hilda and her foster-sister Ada, he speedily revived.

Erling went out meanwhile to assist in the hayfield.

Chapter Three.

Shows how Chief Friends may become Foes, And Cross-Purposes may Produce Cross Consequences, involving Worry and Confusion

When Christian had been properly cared for, Hilda sent Ada to the hayfield, saying that she would follow her in a short time. Now it so happened, by one of those curious coincidences which are generally considered unaccountable, that as Ada ascended the track which led to the high field above the foss, Glumm the Gruff descended towards the same point from an opposite direction, so that a meeting between the two, in the secluded dell, where the tracks joined, became inevitable.

Whether or not this meeting was anticipated we cannot tell. If it was, the young man and maiden were inimitable actors by nature, for they appeared to be wholly unconscious of aught save the peculiar formation of the respective footpaths along which they slowly moved. There was, indeed, a twinkle in Ada's eyes; but then Ada's eyes were noted twinklers; besides, a refractory eyelash might account for such an expression.

As for Glumm, he frowned on the path most unamiably while he sauntered along with both hands thrust into the breast of his tunic, and the point of his sword rasping harshly against rocks and bushes. Glumm was peculiar in his weapons. He wore a double-handed and double-edged sword, which was so long that he was obliged to sling it across his back in order to keep it off the ground. The handle projected above his left shoulder, and the blade, lying diagonally across his person, extended beyond his right calf. The young man was remarkably expert in the use of this immense weapon, and was not only a terror to his foes, but, owing to the enormous sweep of its long blade, an object of some anxiety to his friends when they chanced to be fighting alongside of him. He wore a knife or dagger at his girdle on the right side, which was also of unusual size; in all probability it would have been deemed a pretty good sword by the Romans. There were only two men in the dale who could wield Glumm's weapons. These were Erling and his father, Haldor. The latter was as strong a man as Glumm, Erling was even stronger; though, being an amiable man he could not be easily persuaded to prove his strength upon his friends. Glumm wore his hair very short. It was curly, and lay close to his head.

As he sauntered along he kicked the stones out of his way savagely, and appeared to find relief to his feelings in so doing, as well as by allowing his sword to rasp across the rocks and shrubs at his side. It might have been observed, however, that Glumm only kicked the little stones out of his way; he never kicked the big ones. It is interesting to observe how trifling a matter will bring out a trait of human nature! Men will sometimes relieve their angry feelings by storming violently at those of their fellows who cannot hurt them, but, strangely enough, they manage to obtain relief to these same feelings without storming, when they chance to be in the company of stronger men than themselves, thereby proving that they have powers of self-restraint which prudence—not to say fear—can call into exercise! commend this moral reflection particularly to the study of boys.

After Glumm had kicked all the *little* stones out of his way, carefully letting the big ones alone, he came suddenly face to face with Ada, who saluted him with a look of startled surprise, a slight blush, and a burst of hearty laughter.

"Why, Glumm," exclaimed the maiden, with an arch smile, "thou must have risen off thy wrong side this morning. Methinks, now, were I a man, I should have to look to my weapons, for that long blade of thine seems inclined to fight with the rocks and shrubs of its own accord."

Poor Glumm blushed as red as if he had been a young girl, at being thus unexpectedly caught giving vent to his ill-humour; he stammered something about bad dreams and evil spirits, and then, breaking into a good-humoured smile, said:

“Well, Ada, I know not what it is that ails me, but I do feel somewhat cross-grained. Perchance a walk with thee may cure me, I see thou art bound for the hayfield. But hast thou not heard the news? The Danish vikings are off the coast, burning and murdering wherever they go. It is rumoured, too, that their fleet is under that king of scoundrels, Skarpedin the Red. Surely there is reason for my being angry.”

“Nay, then, if thou wert a bold man thou wouldst find reason in this for being glad,” replied Ada. “Is not the chance of a fight the joy of a true Norseman’s heart? Surely a spell must have been laid on thee, if thy brow darkens and thy heart grows heavy on hearing of a stout enemy. It is not thus with Erling the Bold. His brow clears and his eye sparkles when a foe worthy of— But what seest thou, Glumm? Has the Dane appeared in the forest that thy brow becomes so suddenly clouded? I pray thee do not run away and leave me unprotected.”

“Doubtless if I did, Erling the Bold would come to thine aid,” replied the young man with some asperity.

“Nay, do not be angry with me, Glumm,” said the girl, laughing, as they reached the field where Haldor and his stout son were busily at work assisting Ulf, who, with all his thralls and freemen, was engaged in cutting and gathering in his hay.

“Hey! here come cloud and sunshine hand in hand,” cried Erling, pausing in his work, as Glumm and his pretty companion approached the scene of labour.

“Get on with thy work, then, and make the hay while I am shining,” retorted Ada, bestowing on the youth a bright smile, which he returned cheerfully and with interest.

This was the wicked Ada’s finishing touch. Glumm saw the exchange of smiles, and a pang of fierce jealousy shot through his breast.

“The cloud sometimes darts out lightning,” he muttered angrily, and, turning on his heel, began to toss the hay with all his might in order to relieve his feelings.

Just then Hilda entered the field, and Glumm, putting strong constraint on himself, accosted her with extreme cheerfulness and respect—resolved in his heart to show Ada that there were other girls in Horlingdal worth courting besides herself. In this game he was by no means successful as regarded Ada, who at once discerned his intention, but the shaft which flew harmlessly past her fixed itself deep in the breast of another victim. Glumm’s unusual urbanity took the kind-hearted Hilda so much by surprise, that she was interested, and encouraged him, in what she conceived to be a tendency towards improvement of disposition, by bestowing on him her sweetest smiles during the course of the day, insomuch that Erling the Bold became much surprised, and at last unaccountably cross.

Thus did these two men, who had for many years been fast and loving friends, become desperately jealous, though each sought to conceal the fact from the other. But the green-eyed monster having obtained a lodgment in their bosoms, could not be easily cast out. Yet the good sense of each enabled him to struggle with some success against the passion, for Glumm, although gruff, was by no means a bad man.

The presence of those conflicting feelings did not, however, interrupt or retard the work of the field. It was a truly busy scene. Masters, unfreemen, and thralls, mistresses and maidens, were there, cutting and turning and piling up the precious crop with might and main; for they knew that the weather could not be trusted to, and the very lives of their cattle depended on the successful ingathering of the hay.

As we have here mentioned the three different classes that existed in Norway, it may be well to explain that the masters were peasants or “bonders”, but not by any means similar to peasants in other lands; on the contrary, they were the udal-born proprietors of the soil—the peasant-nobility, so to speak, the Udallers, or freeholders, without any superior lord, and were entitled to attend and have

a voice in the “Things” or assemblies where the laws were enacted and public affairs regulated. The next class was that of the “unfreemen”. These were freed slaves who had wrought out or purchased their freedom, but who, although personally free, and at liberty to go where and serve whom they pleased, were not free to attend the legislative assemblies. They were unfree of the Things, and hence their apparently contradictory designation. They, however, enjoyed the protection and civil rights imparted by the laws, and to their class belonged all the cottars on the land paying a rent in work on the farm of the bonder or udaller, also the house-carles or freeborn indoormen, and the tradesmen, labourers, fishermen, etcetera, about villages and farms. Thralls were slaves taken in war, over whom the owners had absolute control. They might sell them, kill them, or do with them as they pleased. Thralls were permitted to purchase their freedom—and all the descendants of those freed thralls, or unfreemen, were free.

The clothing of the unfreemen was finer than that of the thralls. The legs and arms of nearly all were bare from the knees and elbows downward, though a few had swathed their limbs in bands of rough woollen cloth, while others used straw for this purpose. Nearly all the men wore shoes of untanned leather, and caps of the same material, or of rough homespun cloth, resembling in form the cap of modern fishermen. The udallers, such as Haldor, Ulf, and their children, were clad in finer garments, which were looped and buttoned with brooches and pendants of gold and silver, the booty gathered on those viking cruises, against which Hilda inveighed so earnestly.

The work went on vigorously until the sun began to sink behind the mountain range that lay to the north-westward of the dale. By this time the hay was all cut, and that portion which was sufficiently dry piled up, so Ulf and Haldor left the work to be finished by the younger hands, and stood together in the centre of the field chatting and looking on.

Little change had taken place in the personal appearance of Ulf of Romsdal since the occasion of that memorable duel related in the first chapter of our story. Some of his elasticity, but none of his strength, was gone. There was perhaps a little more thought in his face, and a few more wrinkles on his swarthy brow, but his hair was still black and his figure straight as the blade of his good sword. His old enemy but now fast friend, Haldor the Fierce, had changed still less. True, his formerly smooth chin and cheeks were now thickly covered with luxuriant fair hair, but his broad forehead was still unwrinkled, and his clear blue eye was as bright as when, twenty years before, it gleamed in youthful fire at Ulf. Many a battle had Haldor fought since then, at home and abroad, and several scars on his countenance and shoulders gave evidence that he had not come out of these altogether scathless; but war had not soured him. His smile was as free, open, and honest, and his laugh as loud and hearty, as in days of yore. Erling was the counterpart of his father, only a trifle taller and stouter. At a short distance they might have been taken for twin brothers, and those who did not know them could scarcely have believed that they were father and son.

Close to the spot where the two friends stood, a sturdy thrall was engaged in piling up hay with an uncommon degree of energy. This man had been taken prisoner on the coast of Ireland by Ulf, during one of his sea-roving expeditions. He had a huge massive frame, with a profusion of red hair on his head and face, and a peculiarly humorous twinkle in his eye. His name was Kettle Flatnose. We have reason to believe that the first part of this name had no connection with that domestic utensil which is intimately associated with tea! It was a mere accidental resemblance of sound no doubt. As to the latter part, that is easily explained. In those days there were no surnames. In order to distinguish men of the same name from each other, it was usual to designate them by their complexions, or by some peculiarity of person or trait of character. A blow from a club in early life had destroyed the shape of Kettle’s nose, and had disfigured an otherwise handsome and manly countenance. Hence his name. He was about thirty-five years of age, large-boned, broad-shouldered, and tall, but lean in flesh, and rather ungainly in his motions. Few men cared to grapple with the huge Irish slave, for he possessed a superabundant share of that fire and love of fight which are said to characterise his countrymen even at the present time. He was also gifted with a large share of their characteristic

good humour and joviality; which qualities endeared him to many of his companions, especially to the boys of the neighbourhood. In short, there was not a better fellow in the dale than Kettle Flatnose.

“Thy labour is not light, Kettle,” observed Ulf to the thrall as he paused for a few moments in the midst of his work to wipe his heated brow.

“Ill would it become me, master,” replied the man, “to take my work easy when my freedom is so nearly gained.”

“Right, quite right,” replied Ulf with an approving nod, as the thrall set to work again with redoubled energy.

“That man,” he added, turning to Haldor, “will work himself free in a few weeks hence. He is one of my best thralls. I give my slaves, as thou knowest, leave to work after hours to purchase their freedom, and Kettle labours so hard that he is almost a free man already, though he has been with me little more than two years and a half. I fear the fellow will not remain with me after he is free, for he is an unsettled spirit. He was a chief in his own land, it seems, and left a bride behind him, I am told. If he goes, I lose a man equal to two, he is so strong and willing.—Ho! Kettle,” continued Ulf, turning to the man, who had just finished the job on which he had been engaged, “toss me yonder stone and let my friend Haldor see what thou art made of.”

Kettle obeyed with alacrity. He seized a round stone as large as his own head, and, with an unwieldy action of his great frame, cast it violently through the air about a dozen yards in advance of him.

“Well cast, well cast!” cried Haldor, while a murmur of applause rose from the throng of labourers who had been instantly attracted to the spot. “Come, I will try my own hand against thee.”

Haldor advanced, and, lifting the stone, balanced it for a few moments in his right hand, then, with a graceful motion and an apparently slight effort, hurled it forward. It fell a foot beyond Kettle’s mark.

Seeing this the thrall leaped forward, seized the stone, ran back to the line, bent his body almost to the ground, and, exerting himself to the utmost, threw it into the same hollow from which he had lifted it.

“Equal!” cried Ulf. “Come, Haldor, try again.”

“Nay, I will not try until he beats me,” replied Haldor with a good-natured laugh. “But do thou take a cast, Ulf. Thine arm is powerful, as I can tell from experience.”

“Not so,” replied Ulf. “It becomes men who are past their prime to reserve their strength for the sword and battle-axe. Try it once more, Kettle. Mayhap thou wilt pass the mark next time.”

Kettle tried again and again, but without gaining a hair’s-breadth on Haldor’s throw. The stalwart thrall had indeed put forth greater force in his efforts than Haldor, but he did not possess his skill.

“Will no young man make trial of his strength and skill?” said Haldor, looking round upon the eager faces of the crowd.

“Glumm is no doubt anxious to try his hand,” said Erling, who stood close to the line, with his arms resting on the head of his long-hafted battle-axe. “The shining of the Sunbeam will doubtless warm thy heart and nerve thine arm.”

Erling muttered the latter part of his speech in a somewhat bitter tone, alluding to Hilda’s smiles; but the jealous and sulky Glumm could appreciate no sunbeams save those that flashed from Ada’s dark eyes. He understood the remark as a triumphant and ironical taunt, and, leaping fiercely into the ring formed by the spectators, exclaimed:

“I will cast the stone, but I must have a better man than thou, Kettle, to strive with. If Erling the Bold will throw—”

“I will not balk thee,” interrupted the other quickly, as he laid down his axe and stepped up to the line.

Glumm now made a cast. Everyone knew well enough that he was one of the best throwers of the stone in all the dale, and confidently anticipated an easy victory over the thrall. But the unusual

tumult of conflicting feelings in the young man's breast rendered him at the time incapable of exerting his powers to the utmost in a feat, to excel in which requires the union of skill with strength. At his first throw the stone fell short about an inch!

At this Ada's face became grave, and her heart began to flutter with anxiety; for although willing enough to torment her lover a little herself, she could not brook the idea of his failing in a feat of strength before his comrades.

Furious with disappointment and jealousy, and attributing Ada's expression to anxiety lest he should succeed, Glumm cast again with passionate energy, and sent the stone just an inch beyond the thrall's mark. There was a dispute on the point, however, which did not tend to soothe the youth's feelings, but it was ultimately decided in his favour.

Erling now stood forth; and as he raised his tall form to its full height, and elevated the stone above his head, he seemed (especially to Hilda) the *beau-idéal* of manly strength and beauty.

He was grieved, however, at Glumm's failure, for he knew him to be capable of doing better than he had done. He remembered their old friendship too, and pity for his friend's loss of credit caused the recently implanted jealousy for a moment to abate. He resolved, therefore, to exert himself just sufficiently to maintain his credit.

But, unhappily for the successful issue of this effort of self-denial, Erling happened to cast his eye towards the spot where Hilda stood. The tender-hearted maiden chanced at that moment to be regarding Glumm with a look of genuine pity. Of course Erling misconstrued the look! Next moment the huge stone went singing through the air, and fell with a crash full two yards beyond Glumm's mark. Happening to alight on a piece of rock, it sprang onward, passed over the edge of the hill or brae on the summit of which the field lay, and gathering additional impetus in its descent, went bounding down the slope, tearing through everything in its way, until it found rest at last on the sea beach below.

A perfect storm of laughter and applause greeted this unexpected feat, but high above the din rose the voice of Glumm, who, now in a towering passion, seized his double-handed sword, and shouting—

“Guard thee, Erling!” made a furious blow at his conqueror's head.

Erling had fortunately picked up his axe after throwing the stone. He immediately whirled the heavy head so violently against the descending sword that the blade broke off close to the hilt, and Glumm stood before him, disarmed and helpless, gazing in speechless astonishment at the hilt which remained in his hands.

“My good sword!” he exclaimed, in a tone of deep despondency.

At this Erling burst into a hearty fit of laughter. “My bad sword, thou must mean,” said he. “How often have I told thee, Glumm, that there was a flaw in the metal! I have advised thee more than once to prove the blade, and now that thou hast consented to do so, behold the result! But be not so cast down, man; I have forged another blade specially for thyself, friend Glumm, but did not think to give it thee so soon.”

Glumm stood abashed, and had not a word to reply. Fortunately his feelings were relieved by the attention of the whole party being attracted at that moment to the figure of a man on the opposite side of the valley, who ran towards them at full speed, leaping over almost every obstacle that presented itself in his course. In a few minutes he rushed, panting, into the midst of the throng, and presented a baton or short piece of wood to Ulf, at the same time exclaiming: “Haste! King Harald holds a Thing at the Springs. Speed on the token.”

The import of this message and signal were well understood by the men of Horlingdal. When an assembly or Thing was to be convened for discussing civil matters a wooden truncheon was sent round from place to place by fleet messengers, each of whom ran a certain distance, and then delivered over his “message-token” to another runner, who carried it forward to a third, and so on. In this manner the whole country could be roused and its chief men assembled in a comparatively short time. When, however, the Thing was to be assembled for the discussion of affairs pertaining to war, an arrow

split in four parts was the message-token. When the split arrow passed through the land men were expected to assemble armed to the teeth, but when the baton went round it was intended that they should meet without the full panoply of war.

As soon as the token was presented, Ulf looked about for a fleet man to carry forward the message. Several of the youths at once stepped forward offering their services. Foremost among them was a stout, deep-chested active boy of about twelve years of age, with long flaxen curls, a round sunburnt face, a bold yet not forward look, a merry smile, and a pair of laughing blue eyes. This was Erling's little brother Alric—a lad whose bosom was kept in a perpetual state of stormy agitation by the conflict carried on therein between a powerful tendency to fun and mischief, and a strong sense of the obedience due to parents.

“I will go,” said the boy eagerly, holding out his hand for the token.

“Thou, my son?” said Haldor, regarding him with a look of ill-suppressed pride. “Go to thy mother's bower, boy. What if a fox, or mayhap even a wolf, met thee on the fell?”

“Have I not my good bow of elm?” replied Alric, touching the weapon, which, with a quiver full of arrows, was slung across his back.

“Tush! boy; go pop at the squirrels till thou be grown big enough to warrant thy boasting.”

“Father,” said Alric with a look of glee, “I'm sure I did not boast. I did but point to my poor weapons. Besides, I have good legs. If I cannot fight, methinks I can run.”

“Out upon thee—”

“Nay, Haldor,” said Ulf, interrupting the discussion, “thou art too hard on the lad. Can he run well?”

“I'll answer for that,” said Erling, laying his large hand on his brother's flaxen head. “I doubt if there is a fleeter foot in all the dale.”

“Away then,” cried Ulf, handing the token to Alric, “and see that ye deserve all this praise. And now, sirs, let us fare to the hall to sup and prepare for our journey to the Springs.”

The crowd at once broke up and hurried away to Ulfstede in separate groups, discussing eagerly as they went, and stepping out like men who had some pressing business on hand. Alric had already darted away like a hunted deer.

Erling turned hastily aside and went away alone. As soon as he reached a spot where the rugged nature of the ground concealed him from his late companions, he started up the valley at his utmost speed, directing his course so as to enable him to overshoot and intercept his brother. He passed a gorge ahead of the boy; and then, turning suddenly to the left, bore down upon him. So well did he calculate the distance, that on turning round the edge of a jutting cliff he met him face to face, and the two ran somewhat violently into each other's arms.

On being relieved from this involuntary embrace, Alric stepped back and opened his eyes wide with surprise, while Erling roared with laughter.

“Ye are merry, my brother,” said Alric, relaxing into a grin, “but I have seen thee often thus, and may not stop to observe thee now, seeing that it is nothing new.”

“Give me an arrow, thou rogue! There,” said Erling, splitting the shaft into four parts, handing it back to the boy, and taking the baton from him. “Get thee gone, and use thy legs well. We must not do the King the dishonour to appear before him without our weapons in these unsettled times. Let the token be sent out north, south, east, and west; and, harkee, lad, say nothing to anyone about the object of the assembly.”

Alric's countenance became grave, then it again relaxed into a broad grin. Giving his brother an emphatic wink with one of his large blue eyes, he darted past him, and was soon far up the glen, running with the speed of a deer and waving the war-token over his head.

Chapter Four.

Describes Warlike Preparations, and a Norse Hall in the Olden Time—Tells also of a Surprise

Instead of returning to Ulfstede, Erling directed his steps homeward at a brisk pace, and in a short space of time reached the door of his forge. Here he met one of his father's thralls.

"Ho! fellow," said he, "is thy mistress at home?"

"Yes, master, she is in the hall getting supper ready against your father's return."

"Go tell her there will be no men to eat supper in the hall to-night," said Erling, unfastening the door of the forge. "Say that I am in the forge, and will presently be in to speak with her. Go also to Thorer, and tell him to get the house-carles busked for war. When they are ready let him come hither to me; and, harkee, use thine utmost speed; there may be bloody work for us all to do this night before the birds are on the wing. Away!"

The man turned and ran to the house, while Erling blew up the smouldering fire of the forge. Throwing off his jerkin, he rolled up his sleeves, and seizing the axe on which he had been engaged when Hilda interrupted him, he wrought so vigorously at the stubborn metal with the great forehammer that in the course of half an hour it was ready to fit on the haft. There was a bundle of hafts in a corner of the workshop. One of these, a tough thick one without knot or flaw, and about five feet long, he fitted to the iron head with great neatness and skill. The polishing of this formidable weapon he deferred to a period of greater leisure. Having completed this piece of work, Erling next turned to another corner of the forge and took up the huge two-handed sword which he had made for his friend Glumm.

The weapon was beautifully executed, and being highly polished, the blade glittered with a flashing light in the ruddy glare of the forge fire. The young giant sat down on his anvil and put a few finishing touches to the sword, regarding it the while with a grim smile, as if he speculated on the probability of his having formed a weapon wherewith his own skull was destined to be cloven asunder. While he was thus engaged his mother Herfrida entered.

The soft-eyed dame could scarcely be called a matronly personage. Having married when about sixteen, she was now just thirty-eight years of age; and though the bloom of maidenhood was gone, the beauty of a well-favoured and healthy woman still remained. She wore a cloak of rich blue wool, and under it a scarlet kirtle with a silver girdle.

"How now, my son," she said; "why these warlike preparations?"

"Because there is rumour of war; I'm sure that is neither strange nor new to you, mother."

"Truly no; and well do I know that where war is, there my husband and my son will be found."

Herfrida said this with a feeling of pride, for, like most of the women of that time and country, she esteemed most highly the men who were boldest and could use their weapons best.

"Twere well if we were less noted in that way, and more given to peace," said Erling half-jestingly. "For my own part, I have no liking for war, but you women will be for ever egging us on!"

Herfrida laughed. She was well aware of what she was pleased to term her son's weakness, namely, an idea that he loved peace, while he was constantly proving to the world that he was just cut out for war. Had he ever shown a spark of cowardice she would have regarded those speeches of his with much anxiety, but as it was she only laughed at them.

"Erling, my boy," she said suddenly, as her eye fell on the axe at his side,— "what terrible weapon is this? Surely thou must have purchased Thor's hammer. Can ye wield such a thing?"

"I hope so, mother," said Erling curtly; "if not, I shall soon be in Valhalla's halls."

"What are these rumours of war that are abroad just now?" asked Herfrida.

Erling replied by giving his mother an account of King Harald's recent deeds, and told her of the calling of the Thing, and of the appearance of the Danish vikings off the coast.

"May good spirits attend thee, my son!" she said, kissing the youth's forehead fervently, as a natural gush of tenderness and womanly anxiety filled her breast for a moment. But the feeling passed away as quickly as it came; for women who are born and nurtured in warlike times become accustomed and comparatively indifferent to danger, whether it threatens themselves or those most dear to them.

While mother and son were conversing, Thorer entered the smithy, bearing Erling's armour.

"Are the lads all a-boun?" (armed and ready) enquired Erling as he rose.

"Aye, master; and I have brought your war-gear."

The man who thus spoke was Haldor's chief house-carle. He was a very short and extremely powerful man of about forty-five years of age, and so sturdy and muscular as to have acquired the title of Thorer the Thick. He wore a shirt of scale armour, rather rusty, and somewhat the worse of having figured in many a tough battle by land and sea. A triangular shield hung at his back, and his headpiece was a simple peaked helmet of iron, with a prolongation in front that guarded his nose. Thorer's offensive armour consisted of a short straight sword, a javelin and a bow, with a quiver of arrows.

"How many men hast thou assembled, Thorer?" asked Erling as he donned his armour.

"Seventy-five, master; the rest are up on the fells, on what errand I know not."

"Seventy-five will do. Haste thee, carle, and lead them to my longship the Swan. Methinks we will skate upon the ocean to-night. (Longships, or war-vessels, were sometimes called ocean-skates.) I will follow thee. Let every man be at his post, and quit not the shore till I come on board. Now fare away as swiftly as may be, and see that everything be done stealthily; above all, keep well out of sight of Ulfstede."

Thus admonished, Thorer quickly left the forge; and a few seconds later the clanking tread of armed men was heard as Erling's followers took their way to the fiord.

"Now I will to the hall, my son, and pray that thou mayst fare well," said Herfrida, once more kissing the forehead which the youth lowered to receive the parting salute. The mother retired, and left her son standing in the forge gazing pensively at the fire, the dying flames of which shot up fitfully now and then, and gleamed on his shining mail.

If Erling the Bold was a splendid specimen of a man in his ordinary costume, when clad in the full panoply of war he was truly magnificent. The rude but not ungraceful armour of the period was admirably fitted to display to advantage the elegant proportions of his gigantic figure. A shirt or tunic of leather, covered with steel rings, hung loosely—yet, owing to its weight, closely—on his shoulders. This was gathered in at the waist by a broad leathern belt, studded with silver ornaments, from which hung a short dagger. A cross belt of somewhat similar make hung from his right shoulder, and supported a two-edged sword of immense weight, which was quite as strong, though not nearly so long, as that which he had forged for Glumm. It was intended for a single-handed weapon, though men of smaller size might have been constrained, in attempting to wield it, to make use of both hands. The youth's lower limbs were clothed in closely-fitting leather leggings, and a pair of untanned leather shoes, laced with a single thong, protected his feet. On his head he wore a small skull-cap, or helmet, of burnished steel, from the top of which rose a pair of hawk's wings expanded, as if in the act of flight. No gloves or gauntlets covered his hands, but on his left arm hung a large shield, shaped somewhat like an elongated heart, with a sharp point at its lower end. Its top touched his shoulder, and the lower part reached to his knee.

This shield was made of several plies of thick bull-hide, with an outer coat of iron—the whole being riveted firmly together with iron studs. It was painted pure white, without device of any kind, but there was a band of azure blue round it, near the margin—the rim itself being of polished steel. In addition to his enormous axe, sword, and dagger, Erling carried at his back a short bow and a quiver full of arrows.

The whole of this war gear bore evidence of being cherished with the utmost care and solicitude. Every ring on the tunic was polished as highly as the metal would admit of, so that the light appeared to trickle over it as its wearer moved. The helmet shone like a globe of quicksilver, and lines of light gleamed on the burnished edge of the shield, or sparkled on the ornamental points of the more precious metals with which the various parts of his armour were decorated. Above all hung a loose mantle or cloak of dark-blue cloth, which was fastened on the right shoulder with a large circular brooch of silver.

The weight of this panoply was enormous, but long habit had so inured the young Norseman to the burthen of his armour that he moved under it as lightly as if it had been no heavier than his ordinary habiliments. Indeed, so little did it impede his movements that he could spring over chasms and mountain streams almost as well with as without it; and it was one of the boasts of his admiring friends that “he could leap his own height with all his war gear on!”

We have already referred to Erling’s partiality for the axe as an offensive weapon. This preference was in truth—strange though the assertion may appear—owing to the peculiar adaptation of that instrument to the preservation of life as well as the taking of it!

There are exceptions to all rules. The rule among the Northmen in former years was to slay and spare not. Erling’s tendency, and occasionally his practice, was to spare and not to slay, if he could do so with propriety. From experience he found that, by a slight motion of his wrist, the edge of his axe could be turned aside, and the blow which was delivered by its flat side was invariably sufficient, without killing, to render the recipient utterly incapable of continuing or renewing the combat—at least for a few days. With the sword this delicate manoeuvre could not be so easily accomplished, for a blow from the flat of a sword was not sufficiently crushing, and if delivered with great force the weapon was apt to break. Besides, Erling was a blunt, downright, straightforward man, and it harmonised more with his feelings, and the energy of his character, to beat down sword and shield and headpiece with one tremendous blow, than to waste time in fencing with a lighter weapon.

Having completed his toilet and concluded his meditations—which latter filled him with much perplexity, if one might judge from the frequency with which he shook his head—Erling the Bold hung Glumm’s long sword at his back, laid his huge axe on his shoulder, and, emerging from the smithy, strode rapidly along the bridle path that led to the residence of Ulf of Romsdal.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he had not yet tried the temper of his new weapon, so he stopped abruptly before a small pine tree, about as thick as a man’s arm. It stood on the edge of a precipice along the margin of which the track skirted. Swaying the axe once round his head, he brought it forcibly down on the stem, through which it passed as if it had been a willow wand, and the tree went crashing into the ravine below. The youth looked earnestly at his weapon, and nodded his head once or twice as if the result were satisfactory. A benignant smile played on his countenance as he replaced it on his shoulder and continued on his way.

A brisk walk of half an hour brought him to Ulfstede, where he found the men of the family making active preparations for the impending journey to the Thing. In the great hall of the house, his father held earnest discussion with Ulf. The house-carles busied themselves in burnishing their mail and sharpening their weapons, while Ada and Hilda assisted Dame Astrid, Ulf’s wife, to spread the board for the evening meal.

Everything in the hall was suggestive of rude wealth and barbarous warlike times. The hall itself was unusually large—capable of feasting at least two hundred men. At one end a raised hearth sustained a fire of wood that was large enough to have roasted an ox. The smoke from this, in default of a chimney, found an exit through a hole in the roof. The rafters were, of course, smoked to a deep rich coffee colour, and from the same cause the walls also partook not a little of that hue. All round these walls hung, in great profusion, shields, spears, swords, bows, skins, horns, and such like implements and trophies of war and the chase. The centre of the hall was open, but down each side ran two long tables, which were at this time groaning with great haunches of venison, legs of mutton,

and trenchers of salmon, interspersed with platters of wild fowl, and flanked by tankards and horns of mead and ale. Most of the drinking cups were of horn, but many of these were edged with a rim of silver, and, opposite the raised seats of honour, in the centre of each table, the tankards were of solid silver, richly though rudely chased—square, sturdy, and massive, like the stout warriors who were wont to quaff their foaming contents.

“I tell thee, Ulf,” said Haldor, “thou wilt do wrong to fare to the Thing with men fully armed when the token was one of peace. The King is in no mood just now to brook opposition. If we would save our independence we must speak him smoothly.”

“I care not,” replied Ulf gruffly; “this is no time to go about unarmed.”

“Nay, I did not advise thee to go unarmed, but surely a short sword might suffice, and—”

At this moment Erling entered, and Ulf burst into a loud laugh as he interrupted his friend: “Aye, a short sword—something like that,” he said, pointing to the huge hilt which rose over the youth’s shoulder.

“Hey! lad,” exclaimed his father, “art going to fight with an axe in one hand and a sword in the other?”

“The sword is for Glumm, father. I owe him one after this morning’s work. Here, friend Glumm, buckle it on thy shoulder. The best wish that thou and I can exchange is, that thy sword and my axe may never kiss each other.”

“Truly, if they ever do, I know which will fare worst,” said Haldor, taking the axe and examining it, “Thou art fond of a weary arm, my lad, else ye would not have forged so weighty a weapon. Take my advice and leave it behind thee.”

“Come, come,” interrupted Ulf; “see, the tables are spread; let us use our jaws on food and drink, and not on words, for we shall need both to fit us for the work before us, and perchance we may have no longer need of either before many days go by. We can talk our fill at the Thing, an it so please us.”

“That will depend on the King’s pleasure,” replied Haldor, laughing.

“So much the more reason for taking our arms with us, in order that we may have the means of talking the King’s pleasure,” retorted Ulf with a frown; “but sit ye down at my right hand, Haldor, and Hilda will wait upon thee. Come, my men all—let us fall to.”

It is scarcely necessary to say that this invitation was accepted with alacrity. In a few minutes about fifty pairs of jaws were actively employed in the manner which Ulf recommended.

Meanwhile Erling the Bold seated himself at the lower end of one of the tables, in such a position that he could keep his eye on the outer door, and, if need be, steal away unobserved. He calculated that his little brother must soon return from his flying journey, and he expected to hear from him some news of the vikings. In this expectation he was right; but when Alric did come, Erling saw and heard more than he looked for.

The meal was about half concluded, and Ulf was in the act of pledging, not absent, but defunct, friends, when the door opened slowly, and Alric thrust his head cautiously in. His hair, dripping and tangled, bore evidence that his head at least had been recently immersed in water.

He caught sight of Erling, and the head was at once withdrawn. Next moment Erling stood outside of the house.

“How now, Alric, what has befallen thee? Hey! thou art soaking all over!”

“Come here; I’ll show you a fellow who will tell you all about it.”

In great excitement the boy seized his brother’s hand and dragged rather than led him round the end of the house, where the first object that met his view was a man whose face was covered with blood, which oozed from a wound in his forehead, while the heaving of his chest, and an occasional gasp, seemed to indicate that he had run far and swiftly.

Chapter Five.

The Viking Raid—Alric's Adventure with the Dane—Erling's Cutter, and the Battle in the Pass

“Whom have we here?” exclaimed Erling, looking close into the face of the wounded man. “What! Swart of the Springs!”

Erling said this sternly, for he had no liking for Swart, who was a notorious character, belonging to one of the neighbouring fiords—a wild reckless fellow, and, if report said truly, a thief.

“That recent mischief has cost thee a cracked crown?” asked Erling, a little more gently, as he observed the exhausted condition of the man.

“Mischief enough,” said Swart, rising from the stone on which he had seated himself, and wiping the blood, dust, and sweat from his haggard face, while his eyes gleamed like coals of fire; “Skarpedin the Dane has landed in the fiord, my house is a smoking pile, my children and most of the people in the stede are burned, and the Springs run blood!”

There was something terrible in the hoarse whisper in which this was hissed out between the man's teeth. Erling's tone changed instantly as he laid his hand on Swart's shoulder.

“Can this be true?” he answered anxiously; “are we too late? are *all* gone?”

“*All*,” answered Swart, “save the few fighting men that gained the fells.” The man then proceeded to give a confused and disjointed account of the raid, of which the following is the substance.

Skarpedin, a Danish viking, noted for his daring, cruelty, and success, had taken it into his head to visit the neighbourhood of Horlingdal, and repay in kind a visit which he had received in Denmark the previous summer from a party of Norsemen, on which occasion his crops had been burned, his cattle slaughtered, and his lands “herried”, while he chanced to be absent from home.

It must be observed that this deed of the Northmen was not deemed unusually wicked. It was their custom, and the custom also of their enemies, to go out every summer on viking cruise to plunder and ravage the coasts of Denmark, Sweden, Britain, and France, carrying off all the booty they could lay hold of, and as many prisoners as they wanted or could obtain. Then, returning home, they made slaves or “thralls” of their prisoners, often married the women, and spent the winter in the enjoyment of their plunder.

Among many other simple little habits peculiar to the times was that called “Strandhug”. It consisted in a viking, when in want of provisions, landing with his men on any coast—whether that of an enemy or a countryman—and driving as many cattle as he required to the shore, where they were immediately slaughtered and put on board without leave asked or received!

Skarpedin was influenced both by cupidity and revenge. Swart had been one of the chief leaders of the expedition which had done him so much damage. To the Springs therefore he directed his course with six “longships”, or ships of war, and about five hundred men.

In the afternoon of a calm day he reached the fiord at the head of which were the Springs and Swart's dwelling. There was a small hamlet at the place, and upon this the vikings descended. So prompt and silent were they, that the men of the place had barely time to seize their arms and defend their homes. They fought like lions, for well they knew that there was no hope of mercy if they should be beaten. But the odds against them were overwhelming. They fell in heaps, with many of their foes underneath them. The few who remained to the last retreated fighting, step by step, each man towards his own dwelling, where he fell dead on its threshold. Swart himself, with a few of the bravest, had driven back that part of the enemy's line which they attacked. Thus they were separated for a time from their less successful comrades, and it was not till the smoke of their burning homesteads rose up in dense clouds that they became aware of the true state of the fight. At once they

turned and ran to the rescue of their families, but their retreat was cut off by a party of the enemy, and the roar of the conflagration told them that they were too late. They drew together, therefore, and, making a last desperate onset, hewed their way right through the ranks of their enemies, and made for the mountains. All were more or less wounded in the *mêlée*, and only one or two succeeded in effecting their escape. Swart dashed past his own dwelling in his flight, and found it already down on the ground in a blazing ruin. He killed several of the men who were about it, and then, bounding up the mountain side, sought refuge in a ravine.

Here he lay down to rest a few moments. During the brief period of his stay he saw several of his captured friends have their hands and feet chopped off by the marauders, while a terrible shriek that arose once or twice told him all too plainly that on a few of them had been perpetrated the not uncommon cruelty of putting out the eyes.

Swart did not remain many moments inactive. He descended by a circuitous path to the shore, and, keeping carefully out of sight, set off in the direction of Horlingdal. The distance between the two places was little more than nine or ten miles, but being separated from each other by a ridge of almost inaccessible mountains, that rose to a height of above five thousand feet, neither sight nor sound of the terrible tragedy enacted at the Springs could reach the eyes or ears of the inhabitants of Ulfstede. Swart ran round by the coast, and made such good use of his legs that he reached the valley in little more than an hour. Before arriving at Ulfstede his attention was attracted and his step arrested by the sight of a warship creeping along the fiord close under the shadow of the precipitous cliffs. He at once conjectured that this was one of the Danish vessels which had been dispatched to reconnoitre Horlingdal. He knew by its small size (having only about twenty oars) that it could not be there for the purpose of attack. He crouched, therefore, among the rocks to escape observation.

Now, it happened at this very time that Erling's brother Alric, having executed his commission by handing the war-token to the next messenger, whose duty it was to pass it on, came whistling gaily down a neighbouring gorge, slashing the bushes as he went with a stout stick, which in the lad's eyes represented the broadsword or battle-axe he hoped one day to wield, in similar fashion, on the heads of his foes. Those who knew Erling well could have traced his likeness in every act and gesture of the boy. The vikings happened to observe Alric before he saw them, as was not to be wondered at, considering the noise he made. They therefore rowed close in to the rocks, and their leader, a stout red-haired fellow, leaped on shore, ascended the cliffs by a narrow ledge or natural footpath, and came to a spot which overhung the sea, and round which the boy must needs pass. Here the man paused, and leaning on the haft of his battle-axe, awaited his coming up.

It is no disparagement to Alric to say that, when he found himself suddenly face to face with this man, his mouth opened as wide as did his eyes, that the colour fled from his cheeks, that his heart fluttered like a bird in a cage, and that his lips and tongue became uncommonly dry! Well did the little fellow know that one of the Danish vikings was before him, for many a time had he heard the men in Haldorstede describe their dress and arms minutely; and well did he know also that mercy was only to be purchased at the price of becoming an informer as to the state of affairs in Horlingdal—perhaps a guide to his father's house. Besides this, Alric had never up to that time beheld a *real* foe, even at a distance! He would have been more than mortal, therefore, had he shown no sign of trepidation.

“Thou art light of heart, lad,” said the Dane with a grim smile.

Alric would perhaps have replied that his heart was the reverse of light at that moment, but his tongue refused to fulfil its office, so he sighed deeply, and tried to lick his parched lips instead.

“Thou art on thy way to Ulfstede or Haldorstede, I suppose?” said the man.

Alric nodded by way of reply.

“To which?” demanded the Dane sternly.

“T—to—to Ulf—”

“Ha!” interrupted the man. “I see. I am in want of a guide thither. Wilt guide me, lad?”

At this the truant blood rushed back to Alric's cheeks. He attempted to say no, and to shake his head, but the tongue was still rebellious, and the head would not move—at least not in that way—so the poor boy glanced slightly aside, as if meditating flight. The Dane, without altering his position, just moved his foot on the stones, which act had the effect of causing the boy's eyes to turn full on him again with that species of activity which cats are wont to display when expecting an immediate assault.

“Escape is impossible,” said the Dane, with another grim smile.

Alric glanced at the precipice on his left, full thirty feet deep, with the sea below; at the precipice on his right, which rose an unknown height above; at the steep rugged path behind, and at the wild rugged man in front, who could have clutched him with one bound; and admitted in his heart that escape *was* impossible.

“Now, lad,” continued the viking, “thou wilt go with me and point out the way to Ulfstede and Haldorstede; if not with a good will, torture shall cause thee to do it against thy will; and after we have plundered and burnt both, we will give thee a cruise to Denmark, and teach thee the use of the pitchfork and reaping-hook.”

This remark touched a chord in Alric's breast which at once turned his thoughts from himself, and allowed his native courage to rise. During the foregoing dialogue his left hand had been nervously twitching the little elm bow which it carried. It now grasped the bow firmly as he replied:

“Ulfstede and Haldorstede may burn, but thou shalt not live to see it.”

With that he plucked an arrow from his quiver, fitted it to the string, and discharged it full at the Dane's throat. Quick as thought the man of war sprang aside, but the shaft had been well and quickly aimed. It passed through his neck between the skin and the flesh.

A cry of anger burst from him as he leaped on the boy and caught him by the throat. He hastily felt for the hilt of his dagger, and in the heat of his rage would assuredly have ended the career of poor Alric then and there; but, missing the hilt at the first grasp, he suddenly changed his mind, lifted the boy as if he had been a little dog, and flung him over the precipice into the sea.

A fall of thirty feet, even though water should be the recipient of the shock, is not a trifle by any means, but Alric was one of those vigorous little fellows—of whom there are fortunately many in this world—who train themselves to feats of strength and daring. Many a time had he, when bathing, leaped off that identical cliff into the sea for his own amusement, and to the admiration and envy of many of his companions, and, now that he felt himself tumbling in the air against his will, the sensation, although modified, was nothing new. He straightened himself out after the manner of a bad child that does not wish to sit on nurse's knee, and went into the blue fiord, head foremost, like a javelin.

He struck the water close to the vessel of his enemies, and on rising to the surface one of them made a plunge at him with an oar, which, had it taken effect, would have killed him on the spot; but he missed his aim, and before he could repeat it, the boy had dived.

The Dane was sensible of his error the instant he had tossed Alric away from him, so he hastened to his boat, leaped into it, and ordered the men to pull to the rocks near to which Alric had dived; but before they could obey the order a loud ringing cheer burst from the cliffs, and in another moment the form of Swart was seen on a ledge, high above, in the act of hurling a huge mass of rock down on the boat. The mass struck the cliff in its descent, burst into fragments, and fell in a shower upon the Danes.

At the same time Swart waved his hand as if to someone behind him, and shouted with stentorian voice:

“This way, men! Come on! Down into the boats and give chase! huzza!”

The enemy did not await the result of the order, but pulled out into the fiord as fast as possible, while Swart ran down to the edge of the water and assisted Alric to land. It was not until they heard both man and boy utter a cheer of defiance, and burst into a fit of laughter, and saw them hastening at full speed towards Horlingdal, that the vikings knew they had been duped. It was too late, however,

to remedy the evil. They knew, also, that they might now expect an immediate attack, so, bending to the oars with all their might, they hastened off to warn their comrades at the Springs.

“Now, Swart,” said Erling, after hearing this tale to its conclusion, “if ye are not too much exhausted to—”

“Exhausted!” cried Swart, springing up as though he had but risen from a refreshing slumber.

“Well, I see thou art still fit for the fight. Revenge, like love, is a powerful stirrer of the blood. Come along then; I will lead the way, and do thou tread softly and keep silence. Follow us, Alric, I have yet more work for thee, lad.”

Taking one of the numerous narrow paths that ran from Ulfstede to the shores of the fiord, Erling led his companions to a grassy mound which crowned the top of a beetling cliff whose base was laved by deep water. Although the night was young—probably two hours short of midnight—the sun was still high in the heavens, for in most parts of Norway that luminary, during the height of summer, sinks but a short way below the horizon—they have daylight all night for some time. In the higher latitudes the sun, for a brief period, shines all the twenty-four hours round. Erling could therefore see far and wide over the fiord, as well as if it were the hour of noon.

“Nothing in sight!” he exclaimed in a tone of chagrin. “I was a fool to let thee talk so long, Swart; but there is still a chance of catching the boat before it rounds the ness. Come along.”

Saying this hurriedly, the youth descended into what appeared to be a hole in the ground. A rude zigzag stair cut in the rock conducted them into a subterranean cavern, which at first seemed to be perfectly dark; but in a few seconds their eyes became accustomed to the dim light, and as they advanced rapidly over a bed of pebbles, Swart, who had never been there before, discovered that he was in an ocean-made cave, for the sound of breaking ripples fell softly on his ears. On turning round a corner of rock the opening of the cave towards the sea suddenly appeared with a dazzling light like a great white gem.

But another beautiful sight met his astonished gaze. This was Erling’s ship of war, the Swan, which, with its figurehead erect, as though it were a living thing, sat gracefully on the water, above its own reflected image.

“All ready?” asked Erling, as a man stepped up to him.

“All ready,” replied Thorer.

“Get on board, Swart,” said Erling; “we will teach these Danes a lesson they will not forget as long as the Springs flow. Here, Alric—where are ye, lad?”

Now, unfortunately for himself, as well as for his friend, Alric was almost too self-reliant in his nature. His active mind was too apt to exert itself in independent thought in circumstances where it would have been wiser to listen and obey. Erling had turned with the intention of telling his little brother that he had started thus quietly in order that he might have the pleasure of capturing the scouting boat, and of beginning the fight at the Springs with a small band of tried men, thus keeping the enemy in play until reinforcements should arrive; for he shrewdly suspected that if the whole valley were to go out at once against the vikings, they would decline the combat and make off. He had intended, therefore, to have warned Alric to watch the Swan past a certain point before sounding the alarm at Ulfstede. But Alric had already formed his own opinions on the subject, and resolved to act on them.

He suspected that Erling, in his thirst for glory, meant to have all the fun to himself, and to attack the Danes with his single boat’s crew of fifty or sixty men. He knew enough of war to be aware that sixty men against six hundred would have very small chance of success—in fact, that the thing was sheer madness—so he resolved to balk, and by so doing to save, his headstrong brother.

When Erling turned, as we have said, he beheld Alric running into the cave at full speed. Instantly suspecting the truth, he dashed after him, but the boy was fleet, and Erling was heavily armed. The result was, that the former escaped, while the latter returned to the beach and embarked in the Swan in a most unenviable state of mind.

Erling's "longship" was one of the smaller-sized war vessels of the period. It pulled twenty oars—ten on each side—and belonged to the class named Snekiars, or cutters, which usually had from ten to twenty rowers on a side. To each oar three men were apportioned—one to row, one to shield the rower, and one to throw missiles and fight, so that her crew numbered over sixty men. The forecastle and poop were very high, and the appearance of height was still further increased by the figurehead—the neck and head of a swan—and by a tail that rose from the stern-post, over the steersman's head. Both head and tail were richly gilt; indeed, the whole vessel was gaudily painted. All round the gunwales, from stem to stern, hung a row of shining red and white shields, which resembled the scaly sides of some fabulous creature, so that when the oars, which gave it motion, and not inaptly represented legs, were dipped, the vessel glided swiftly out of the cavern, like some antediluvian monster issuing from its den and crawling away over the dark blue sea. A tall heavy mast rose from the centre of the ship. Its top was also gilded, as well as the tips of the heavy yard attached to it. On this they hoisted a huge square sail, which was composed of alternate stripes of red, white, and blue cloth.

It need scarcely be said that Erling's crew pulled with a will, and that the waters of the fiord curled white upon the breast of the Swan that night; but the vikings' boat had got too long a start of them, so that, when they doubled the ness and pulled towards the Springs, they discovered the enemy hurrying into their ships and preparing to push off from the land.

Now, this did not fall in with Erling's purpose at all, for he was well aware that his little Swan could do nothing against such an overwhelming force, so he directed his course towards the mouth of a small stream, beside which there was a spit of sand, and, just behind it, a piece of level land, of a few acres in extent, covered with short grass. The river was deep at its mouth. About a hundred yards upstream it flowed out of a rugged pass in the mountains or cliffs which hemmed in the fiord. Into this dark spot the Northman rowed his vessel and landed with his men.

The vikings were much surprised at this manoeuvre, and seemed at a loss how to act, for they immediately ceased their hurried embarkation and held a consultation.

"Methinks they are mad," said Skarpedin, on witnessing the movements of the Swan. "But we will give them occasion to make use of all the spirit that is in them. I had thought there were more men in the dale, but if they be few they seem to be bold. They have wisely chosen their ground. Rocks, however, will not avail them against a host like ours. Methinks some of us will be in Valhalla to-night."

Saying this Skarpedin drew up his men in order of battle on the little plain before referred to, and advanced to the attack. Erling, on the other hand, posted his men among the rocks in such a way that they could command the approach to the pass, which their leader with a few picked men defended.

On perceiving the intention of the Danes to attack him, Erling's heart was glad, because he now felt sure that to some extent he had them in his power. If they had, on his first appearance, taken to their ships, they might have easily escaped, or some of the smaller vessels might have pulled up the river and attacked his ship, which, in that case, would have had to meet them on unequal terms; but, now that they were about to attack him on land, he knew that he could keep them in play as long as he pleased, and that if they should, on the appearance of reinforcements, again make for their ships, he could effectively harass them, and retard their embarkation.

Meditating on these things the young Norseman stood in front of his men leaning on his battle-axe, and calmly surveying the approaching foe until they were within a few yards of him.

"Thorer," he said at length, raising his weapon slowly to his shoulder, "take thou the man with the black beard, and leave yonder fellow with the red hair to me."

Thorer drew his sword and glanced along its bright blade without replying. Indeed, there was scarce time for reply. Next moment the combatants uttered a loud shout and met with a dire crash. For some time the clash of steel, the yells of maddened men, the shrieks of the wounded, and the wails of the dying, resounded in horrible commotion among the echoing cliffs. The wisdom of Erling's tactics soon became apparent. It was not until the onset was made, and the battle fairly begun, that

the men whom he had placed among the rocks above the approach to the pass began to act. These now sent down such a shower of huge stones and masses of rock that many of the foe were killed, and by degrees a gap was made, so that those who were on the plain dared not advance to the succour of those who were fighting in the pass.

Seeing this, Erling uttered his war-cry, and, collecting his men together, acted on the offensive. Wherever his battle-axe swung, or Thorer's sword gleamed, there men fell, and others gave way, till at last they were driven completely out of the pass and partly across the plain. Erling took care, however, not to advance too far, although Skarpedin, by retreating, endeavoured to entice him to do so; but drew off his men by sound of horn, and returned to his old position—one man only having been killed and a few wounded.

Skarpedin now held a council of war with his chiefs, and from the length of time they were about it, Erling was led to suspect that they did not intend to renew the attack at the same point or in the same manner. He therefore sent men to points of vantage on the cliffs to observe the more distant movements of the enemy, while he remained to guard the pass, and often gazed anxiously towards the ness, round which he expected every minute to see sweeping the longships of Ulf and his father.

Chapter Six.

Evening in the Hall—The Scald tells of Gundalf’s Wooing —The Feast Interrupted and the War Clouds Thicken

It is necessary now that we should turn backwards a little in our story, to that point where Erling left the hall at Ulfstede to listen to the sad tale of Swart.

Ulf and his friends, not dreaming of the troubles that were hanging over them, continued to enjoy their evening meal and listen to the songs and stories of the Scald, or to comment upon the doings of King Harald Haarfager, and the prospects of good or evil to Norway that were likely to result therefrom.

At the point where we return to the hall, Ulf wore a very clouded brow as he sat with compressed lips beside his principal guest. He grasped the arm of his rude chair with his left hand, while his right held a large and massive silver tankard. Haldor, on the other hand, was all smiles and good humour. He appeared to have been attempting to soothe the spirit of his fiery neighbour.

“I tell thee, Ulf, that I have as little desire to see King Harald succeed in subduing all Norway as thou hast, but in this world wise men will act not according to what they wish so much, as according to what is best. Already the King has won over or conquered most of the small kings, and it seems to me that the rest will have to follow, whether they like it or no. Common sense teaches submission where conquest cannot be.”

“And does not patriotism teach that men may die?” said Ulf sternly.

“Aye, when by warring with that end in view anything is to be gained for one’s country; but where the result would be, first, the embroiling of one’s district in prolonged bloody and hopeless warfare, and, after that, the depriving one’s family of its head and of the King’s favour, patriotism says that to die would be folly, not wisdom.”

“Tush, man; folk will learn to call thee Haldor the Mild. Surely years are telling on thee. Was there ever anything in this world worth having gained without a struggle?”

“Thou knowest, Ulf, that I am not wont to be far from the front wherever or whenever a struggle is thought needful, but I doubt the propriety of it in the present case. The subject, however, is open to discussion. The question is, whether it would be better for Norway that the kings of Horlingdal should submit to the conqueror for the sake of the general good, or buckle on the sword in the hope of retrieving what is lost. Peace or war—that is the question.”

“I say war!” cried Ulf, striking the board so violently with his clenched fist that the tankards and platters leaped and rang again.

At this a murmur of applause ran round the benches of the friends and housemen.

“The young blades are ever ready to huzza over their drink at the thought of fighting; but methinks it will not strengthen thy cause much, friend Ulf, thus to frighten the women and spill the ale.”

Ulf turned round with a momentary look of anger at this speech. The man who uttered it was a splendid specimen of a veteran warrior. His forehead was quite bald, but from the sides and back of his head flowed a mass of luxuriant silky hair which was white as the driven snow. His features were eminently firm and masculine, and there was a hearty good-humoured expression about the mouth, and a genial twinkle in his eyes, especially in the wrinkled corners thereof, that rendered the stout old man irresistibly attractive. His voice was particularly rich, deep, and mellow, like that of a youth, and although his bulky frame stooped a little from age, there was enough of his youthful vigour left to render him a formidable foe, as many a poor fellow had learned to his cost even in days but recently gone by. He was an uncle of Ulf, and on a visit to the stede at that time. The frown fled from Ulf’s brow as he looked in the old man’s ruddy and jovial countenance.

“Thanks, Guttorm,” said he, seizing his tankard, “thanks for reminding me that grey hairs are beginning to sprinkle my beard; come, let us drink success to the right, confusion to the wrong! thou canst not refuse that, Haldor.”

“Nay,” said Haldor, laughing; “nor will I refuse to fight in thy cause and by thy side, be it right or wrong, when the Thing decides for war.”

“Well said, friend! but come, drink deeper. Why, I have taken thee down three pegs already!” said Ulf, glancing into Haldor’s tankard. “Ho! Hilda; fetch hither more ale, lass, and fill—fill to the brim.” The toast was drunk with right good will by all—from Ulf down to the youngest house-carle at the lowest end of the great hall.

“And now, Guttorm,” continued Ulf, turning to the bluff old warrior, “since thou hast shown thy readiness to rebuke, let us see thy willingness to entertain. Sing us a stave or tell us a saga, kinsman, as well thou knowest how, being gifted with more than a fair share of the scald’s craft.”

The applause with which this proposal was received by the guests and house-carles who crowded the hall from end to end proved that they were aware of Guttorm’s gifts, and would gladly hear him. Like a sensible man he complied at once, without affecting that air of false diffidence which is so common among modern songsters and story-tellers.

“I will tell you,” said the old man—having previously wet his lips at a silver tankard, which was as bluff and genuine as himself—“of King Gundalf’s wooing. Many years have gone by since I followed him on viking cruise, and Gundalf himself has long been feasting in Odin’s hall. I was a beardless youth when I joined him. King Gundalf of Orkedal was a goodly man, stout and brisk, and very strong. He could leap on his horse without touching stirrup with all his war gear on; he could fight as well with his left hand as with his right, and his battle-axe bit so deep that none who once felt its edge lived to tell of its weight. He might well be called a Sea-king, for he seldom slept under a sooty roof timber. Withal he was very affable to his men, open-hearted, and an extremely handsome man.

“One summer he ordered us to get ready to go on viking cruise. When we were all a-boun we set sail with five longships and about four hundred men, and fared away to Denmark, where we forayed and fought a great battle with the inhabitants. King Gundalf gained the victory, plundered, wasted, and burned far and wide in the land, and made enormous booty. He returned with this to Orkedal. Here he found his wife at the point of death, and soon after she died. Gundalf felt his loss so much that he had no pleasure in Raumsdal after that. He therefore took to his ships and went again a-plundering. We herried first in Friesland, next in Saxland, and then all the way to Flanders; so sings Halfred the scald:—

“Gundalf’s axe of shining steel
For the sly wolf left many a meal.
The ill-shaped Saxon corpses lay
Heap’d up—the witch-wife’s horses’ prey.
She rides by night, at pools of blood,
Where Friesland men in daylight stood,
Her horses slake their thirst, and fly
On to the field where Flemings lie.”

(Note. Ravens were the witch-wife’s horses.)

The old warrior half recited half sang these lines in a rich full voice, and then paused a few seconds, while a slight murmur arose from the earnest listeners around him.

“Thereafter,” resumed Guttorm, “we sailed to England, and ravaged far and wide in the land. We sailed all the way north to Northumberland, where we plundered, and thence to Scotland, where we marauded far and wide. Then we went to the Hebrides and fought some battles, and after that south to Man, which we herried. We ravaged far around in Ireland, and steered thence to Bretland,

which we laid waste with fire and sword—also the district of Cumberland. Then we went to Valland, (the west coast of France) from which we fared away for the south coast of England, but missed it and made the Scilly Isles. After that we went to Ireland again, and came to a harbour, into which we ran—but in a friendly way, for we had as much plunder as our ships could carry.

“Now, while we were there, a summons to a Thing went through the country, and when the Thing was assembled, a queen called Gyda came to it. She was a sister of Olaf Quarram, who was King of Dublin. Gyda was very wealthy, and her husband had died that year. In the territory there was a man called Alfin, who was a great champion and single-combat man. He had paid his addresses to Gyda, but she gave for answer that she would choose a husband for herself; and on that account the Thing was assembled, that she might choose a husband. Alfin came there dressed out in his best clothes, and there were many well-dressed men at the meeting. Gundalf and some of his men had gone there also, out of curiosity, but we had on our bad-weather clothes, and Gundalf wore a coarse over-garment. We stood apart from the rest of the crowd, Gyda went round and looked at each, to see if any appeared to her a suitable man. Now when she came to where we were standing, she passed most of us by with a glance; but when she passed me, I noticed that she turned half round and gave me another look, which I have always held was a proof of her good judgment. However, Gyda passed on, and when she came to King Gundalf she stopped, looked at him straight in the face, and asked what sort of a man he was.

“He said, ‘I am called Gundalf, and am a stranger here!’

“Gyda replies, ‘Wilt thou have me if I choose thee?’ He answered, ‘I will not say No to that;’ then he asked her what her name was, and her family and descent.

“‘I am called Gyda,’ said she, ‘and am daughter of the King of Ireland, and was married in this country to an earl who ruled over this district. Since his death I have ruled over it, and many have courted me, but none to whom I would choose to be married.’

“She was a young and handsome woman. They afterwards talked over the matter together and agreed, and so Gundalf and Gyda were betrothed.

“Alfin was very ill pleased with this. It was the custom there, as it is sometimes here, if two strove for anything, to settle the matter by holm-gang. (Note: or single combat: so called because the combatants in Norway went to a holm, or uninhabited isle, to fight.) And now Alfin challenged Gundalf to fight about this business. The time and place of combat were settled, and it was fixed that each should have twelve men. I was one of the twelve on our side. When we met, Gundalf told us to do exactly as we saw him do. He had a large axe, and went in advance of us, and when Alfin made a desperate cut at him with his sword, he hewed away the sword out of his hand, and with the next blow hit Alfin on the crown with the flat of his axe and felled him. We all met next moment, and each man did his best; but it was hard work, for the Irishmen fought well, and two of them cut down two of our men, but one of these I knocked down, and Gundalf felled the other. Then we bound them all fast, and carried them to Gundalf’s lodging. But Gundalf did not wish to take Alfin’s life. He ordered him to quit the country and never again to appear in it, and he took all his property. In this way Gundalf got Gyda in marriage, and he lived sometimes in England and sometimes in Ireland. Thikskul the scald says in regard to this:—

“King Gundalf woo’d Queen Gyda fair,
With whom no woman could compare,
And won her, too, with all her lands,
By force of looks and might of hands
From Ireland’s green and lovely isle
He carried off the Queen in style.
He made proud Alfin’s weapon dull,
And flattened down his stupid skull—

This did the bold King Gundalf do
When he went o'er the sea to woo.”

The wholesale robbery and murder which was thus related by the old Norse viking appeared quite a natural and proper state of things in the eyes of all save two of those assembled in the hall, and the saga was consequently concluded amid resounding applause. It is to be presumed that, never having seen or heard of any other course of life, and having always been taught that such doings were quite in accordance with the laws of the land, the consciences of the Northmen did not trouble them. At all events, while we do not for a moment pretend to justify their doings, we think it right to point out that there must necessarily have been a wide difference between their spirits and feelings, and the spirits and feelings of modern pirates, who know that they are deliberately setting at defiance the laws of both God and man.

It has been said there were two in the hall at Ulfstede who did not sympathise with the tale of the old warrior. The reader will scarce require to be told that one of these was Hilda the Sunbeam. The other was Christian the hermit. The old man, although an occasional visitor at the stede, never made his appearance at meal-times, much less at the nightly revels which were held there; but on that day he had arrived with important news, just as Guttorm began his story, and would have unceremoniously interrupted it had not one of the young house-carles, who did not wish to lose the treat, detained him forcibly at the lower end of the hall until it was ended. The moment he was released the hermit advanced hastily, and told Ulf that from the door of his hut on the cliff he had observed bands of men hastening in all directions down the dale.

“Thy news, old man, is no news,” said Ulf; “the token for a Thing has been sent out, and it is natural that the bonders should obey the summons. We expect them. But come, it is not often thou favourest us with thy company. Sit down by me, and take a horn of mead.”

The hermit shook his head.

“I never taste strong liquor. Its tendency is to make wise men foolish,” he said.

“Nay, then, thou wilt not refuse to eat. Here, Hilda, fetch thy friend a platter.”

“I thank thee, but, having already supped, I need no more food. I came but to bring what I deemed news.”

“Thou art churlish, old man,” exclaimed Ulf angrily; “sit down and drink, else—”

“Come, come,” interrupted Haldor, laying his hand on Ulf’s arm, “Let the old man be; he seems to think that he has something worth hearing to tell of; let him have his say out in peace.”

“Go on,” said Ulf gruffly.

“Was the token sent out a baton or a split arrow?” asked the hermit.

“A baton,” said Ulf.

“Then why,” rejoined the other, “do men come to a peaceful Thing with all their war gear on?”

“What say ye? are they armed?” exclaimed Ulf, starting up. “This must be looked to. Ho! my carles all, to arms—”

At that moment there was a bustle at the lower end of the hall, and Alric was seen forcing his way towards Ulf’s high seat.

“Father,” he said eagerly, addressing Haldor, “short is the hour for acting, and long the hour for feasting.”

Haldor cast his eyes upon his son and said—

“What now is in the way?”

“The Danes,” said Alric, “are on the fiord—more than six hundred men. Skarpedin leads them. One of them pitched me into the sea, but I marked his neck to keep myself in his memory! They have plundered and burnt at the Springs, and Erling has gone away to attack them all by himself, with only sixty house-carles. You will have to be quick, father.”

“Quick, truly,” said Haldor, with a grim smile, as he drew tight the buckle of his sword-belt.

“Aye,” said Ulf, “with six hundred Danes on the fiord, and armed men descending the vale, methinks—”

“Oh! I can explain that” cried Alric, with an arch smile; “Erling made me change the baton for the split arrow when I was sent round with the token.”

“That is good luck,” said Haldor, while Ulf’s brow cleared a little as he busked himself for the fight; “we shall need all our force.”

“Aye, and all our time too,” said Guttorm Stoutheart, as he put on his armour with the cheerful air of a man who dons his wedding dress. “Come, my merry men all. Lucky it is that my longships are at hand just now ready loaded with stones:—

“O! a gallant sight it is to me,
The warships darting o’er the sea,
A pleasant sound it is to hear
The war trump ringing loud and clear.”

Ulf and his friends and house-carles were soon ready to embark, for in those days the Norseman kept his weapons ready to his hands, being accustomed to sudden assaults and frequent alarms. They streamed out of the hall, and while some collected stones, to be used as missiles, others ran down to the shore to launch the ships. Meanwhile Ulf, Haldor, Guttorm, and other chief men held a rapid consultation, as they stood and watched the assembling of the men of the district.

It was evident that the split arrow had done its duty. From the grassy mound on which they stood could be seen, on the one hand, the dark recesses of Horlingdal, which were lost in the mists of distance among the glaciers on the fells; and, on the other hand, the blue fiord with branching inlets and numerous holms, while the skerries of the coast filled up the background—looming faint and far off on the distant sea. In whatever direction the eye was turned armed men were seen. From every distant gorge and valley on the fells they issued, singly, or in twos and threes. As they descended the dale they formed into groups and larger bands; and when they gained the more level grounds around Haldorstede, the heavy tread of their hastening footsteps could be distinctly heard, while the sun—for although near midnight now it was still above the horizon—flashed from hundreds of javelins, spears, swords, and bills, glittered on steel headpieces and the rims of shields, or trickled fitfully on suits of scale armour and shirts of ring mail. On the fiord, boats came shooting forth from every inlet or creek, making their appearance from the base of precipitous cliffs or dark-mouthed caves as if the very mountains were bringing forth warriors to aid in repelling the foe. These were more sombre than those on the fells, because the sun had set to them by reason of the towering hills, and the fiord was shrouded in deepest gloom. But all in the approaching host—on water and land—were armed from head to foot, and all converged towards Ulfstede.

When they were all assembled they numbered five hundred fighting men—and a stouter or more valiant band never went forth to war. Six longships were sufficient to embark them. Three of these were of the largest size—having thirty oars on each side, and carrying a hundred men. One of them belonged to Haldor, one to Ulf, and one—besides several smaller ships—to Guttorm, who chanced to be on viking cruise at the time he had turned aside to visit his kinsman. The warlike old man could scarce conceal his satisfaction at his unexpected good fortune in being so opportunely at hand when hard blows were likely to be going! Two of the other ships were cutters, similar to Erling’s Swan, and carrying sixty men each, and one was a little larger, holding about eighty men. It belonged to Glumm the Gruff; whose gruffness, however, had abated considerably, now that there was a prospect of what we moderns would call “letting the steam off” in a vigorous manner.

Soon the oars were dipped in the fiord, and the sails were set, for a light favourable wind was blowing. In a short time the fleet rounded the ness, and came in sight of the ground where Erling and Skarpedin were preparing to renew the combat.

Chapter Seven.

The Tale Returns to the Springs—Describes a Great Land Fight, and Tells of a Peculiar Style of Extending Mercy to the Vanquished

In a previous chapter we left Skarpedin discussing with his chiefs the best mode of attacking the small band of his opponents in the pass of the Springs. They had just come to a decision, and were about to act on it, when they suddenly beheld six warships sweeping round the ness.

“Now will we have to change our plans,” said Skarpedin.

Thorvold agreed with this, and counselled getting on board their ships and meeting the enemy on the water; but the other objected, because he knew that while his men were in the act of embarking, Erling would sally forth and kill many of them before they could get away.

“Methinks,” said he, “I will take forty of my best men, and try to entice that fox out of his hole, before he has time to see the ships.”

“Grief only will come of that,” says Thorvold.

Skarpedin did not reply, but choosing forty of his stoutest carles he went to the pass and defied Erling to come out and fight.

“Now here am I, Erling, with forty men. Wilt thou come forth? or is thy title of Bold ill bestowed, seeing thou hast more men than I?”

“Ill should I deserve the title,” replies Erling, “if I were to meet thee with superior force.”

With that he chose thirty men, and, running down to the plain, gave the assault so fiercely that men fell fast on every side, and the Danes gave back a little. When they saw this, and that Erling and Thorer hewed men down wherever they went, the Danes made a shield circle round Skarpedin, as was the custom when kings went into battle; because they knew that if he fell there would be no one so worthy to guide them in the fight with the approaching longships. Thus they retreated, fighting. When Erling and his men had gone far enough, they returned to the pass, and cheered loudly as they went, both because of the joy of victory, and because they saw the warships of their friends coming into the bay.

King Haldor and his companions at once ran their ships on the beach near the mouth of the river, and, landing, drew them up, intending to fight on shore. Skarpedin did not try to prevent this, for he was a bold man, and thought that with so large a force he could well manage to beat the Northmen, if they would fight on level ground. He therefore drew up his men in order of battle at one end of the plain, and Haldor the Fierce, to whom was assigned the chief command, drew up the Northmen at the other end. Erling joined them with his band, and then it was seen that the two armies were not equal—that of the Northmen being a little smaller than the other.

Then Haldor said, “Let us draw up in a long line that they may not turn our flanks, as they have most men.”

This was done, and Haldor advanced into the plain and set up his banner. The Danes in like manner advanced and planted their banner, and both armies rushed to the attack, which was very sharp and bloody. Wherever the battle raged most fiercely there King Haldor and Erling were seen, for they were taller by half a head than most other men. Being clothed alike in almost every respect, they looked more like brothers than father and son. Each wore a gilt helmet, and carried a long shield, the centre of which was painted white, but round the edge was a rim of burnished steel. Each had a sword by his side, and carried a javelin to throw, but both depended chiefly on their favourite weapon, the battle-axe, for, being unusually strong, they knew that few men could withstand the weight of a blow from that. The defensive armour of father and son was also the same—a shirt of leather, sewed

all over with small steel rings. Their legs were clothed in armour of the same kind, and a mantle of cloth hung from the shoulders of each.

Most of the chief men on both sides were armed in a similar way, though not quite so richly, and with various modifications; for instance, the helmet of Thorvold was of plain steel, and for ornament had the tail of the ptarmigan as its crest. Skarpedin's, on the other hand, was quite plain, but partly gilded; his armour was of pieces of steel like fish scales sewed on a leathern shirt, and over his shoulders he wore as a mantle the skin of a wolf. His chief weapon was a bill—a sort of hook or short scythe fixed to a pole, and it was very deadly in his hands. Most of the carles and thralls were content to wear thick shirts of wolf and other skins, which were found to offer good resistance to a sword-cut, and some of them had portions of armour of various kinds. Their arms were spears, bows, arrows with stone heads, javelins, swords, bills, and battle-axes and shields.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.