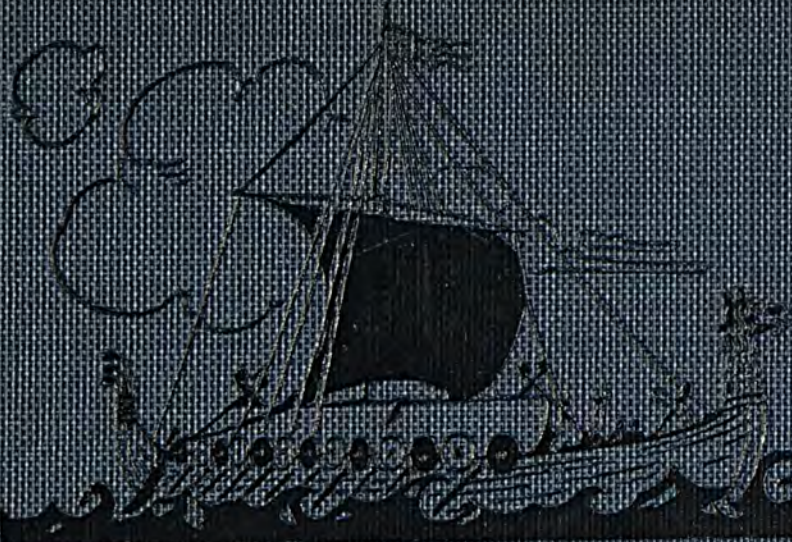
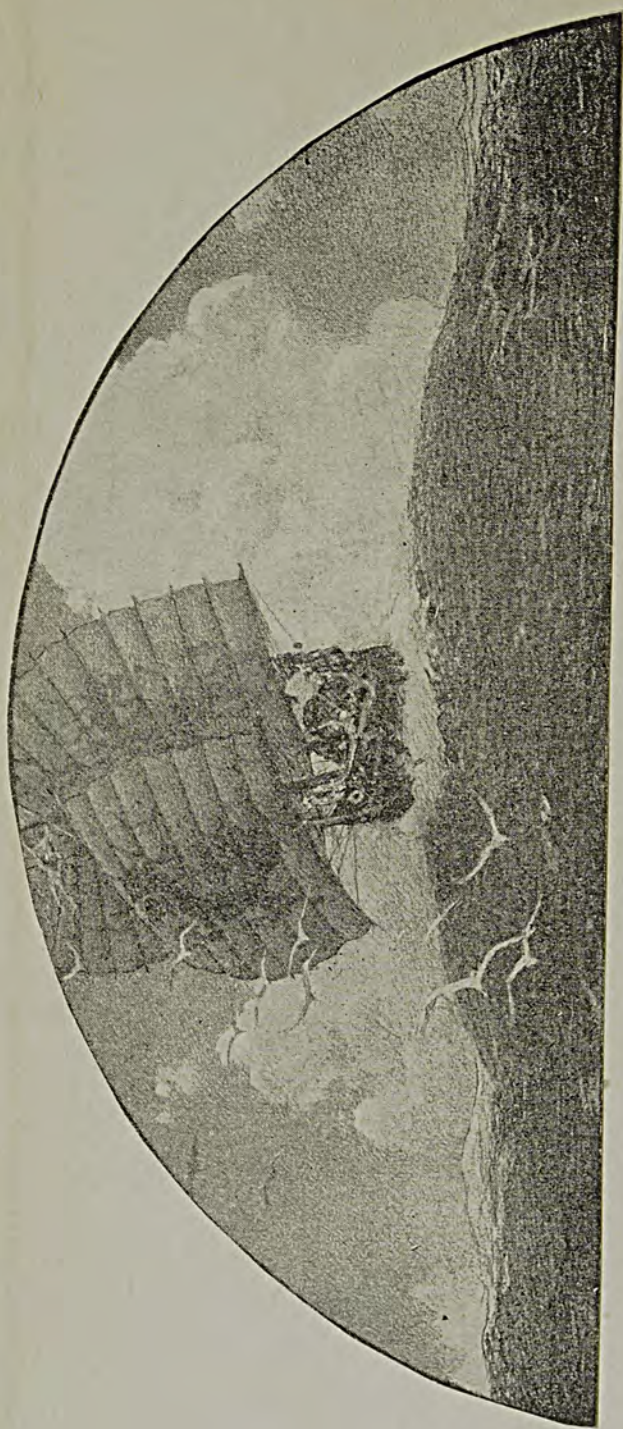




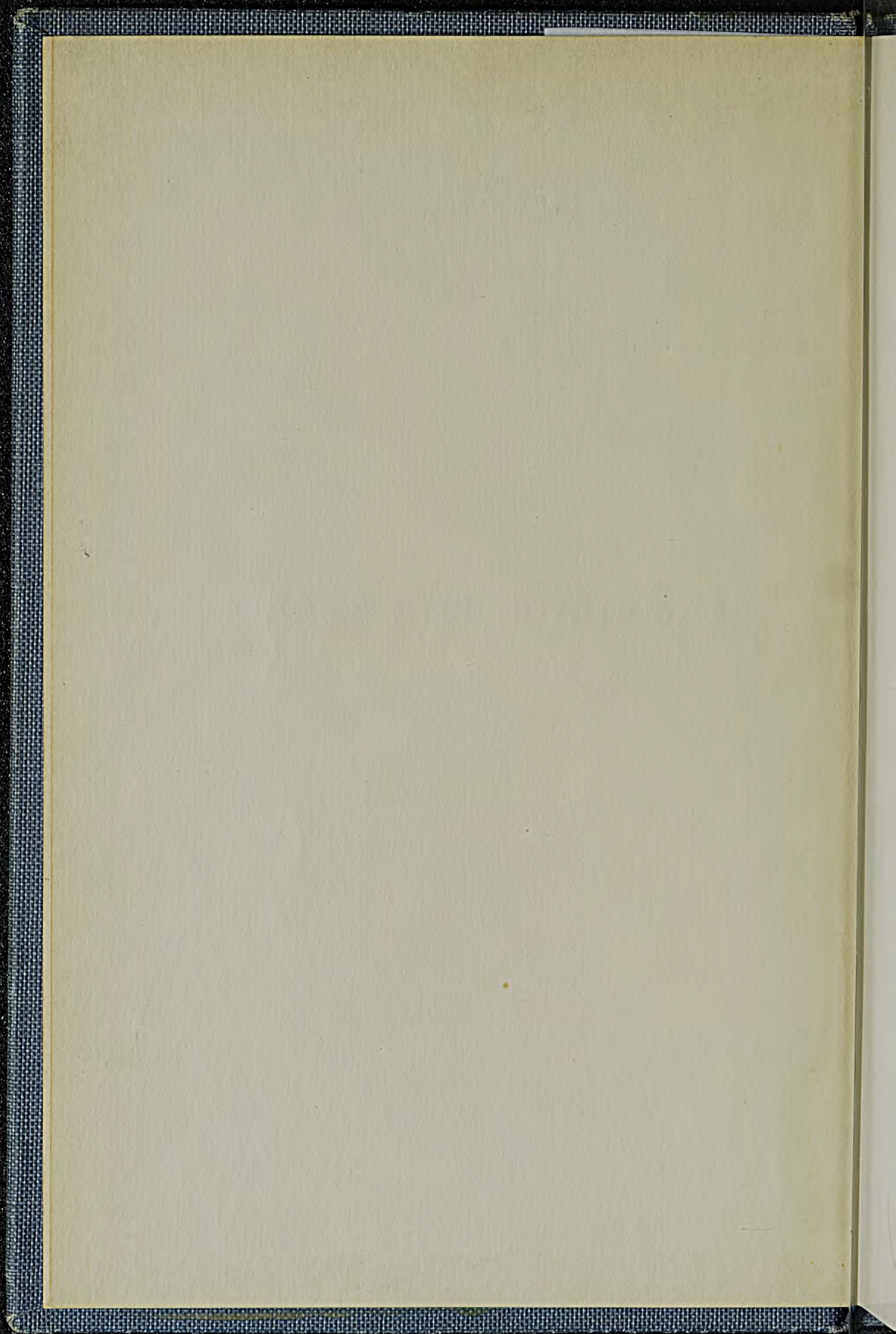
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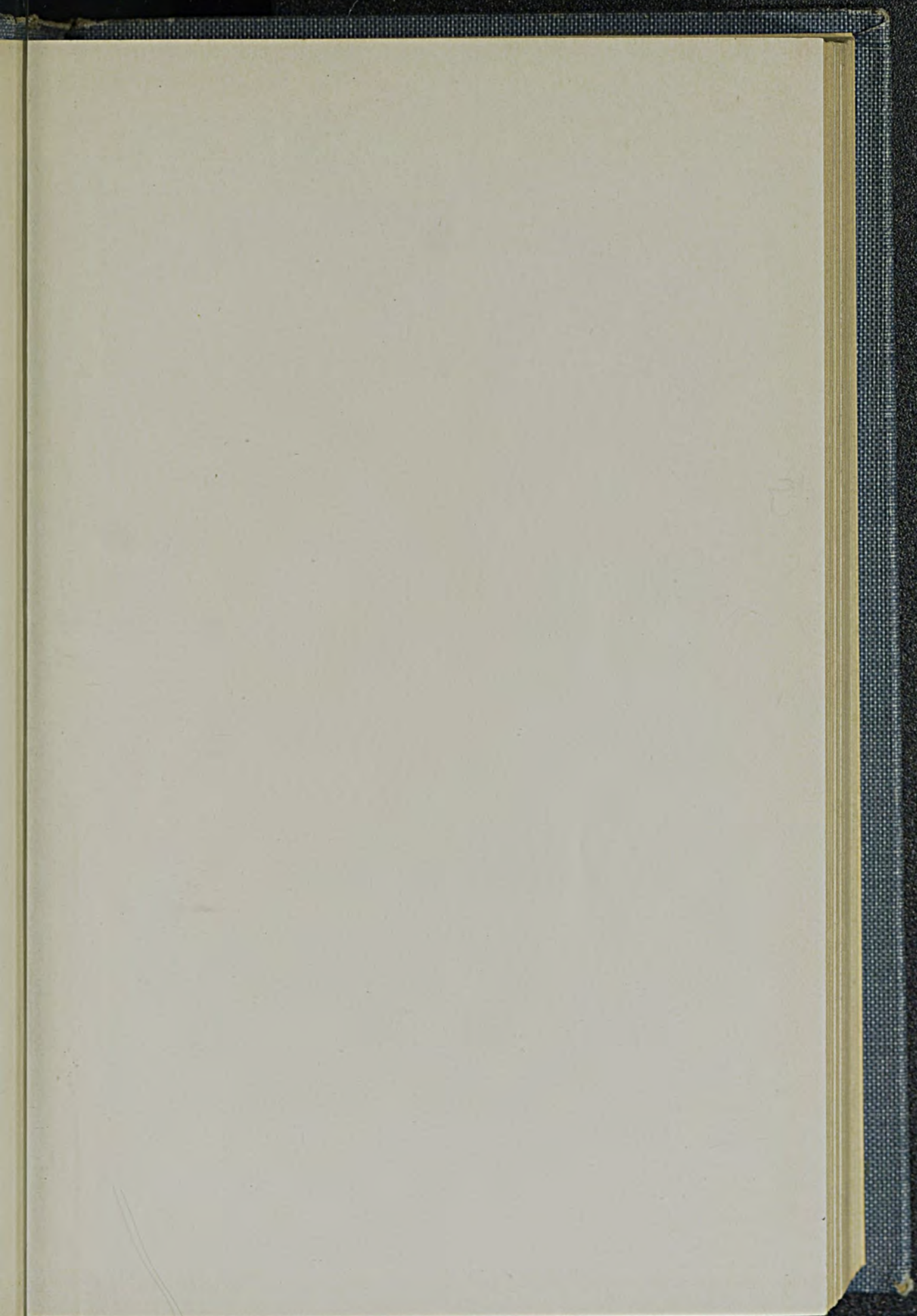
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Flamehair the Skald

A Tale of the Days of Hardrede

1044 A.D.

By
H. BEDFORD-JONES

Illustrated By
DAN SAYRE GROESBECK



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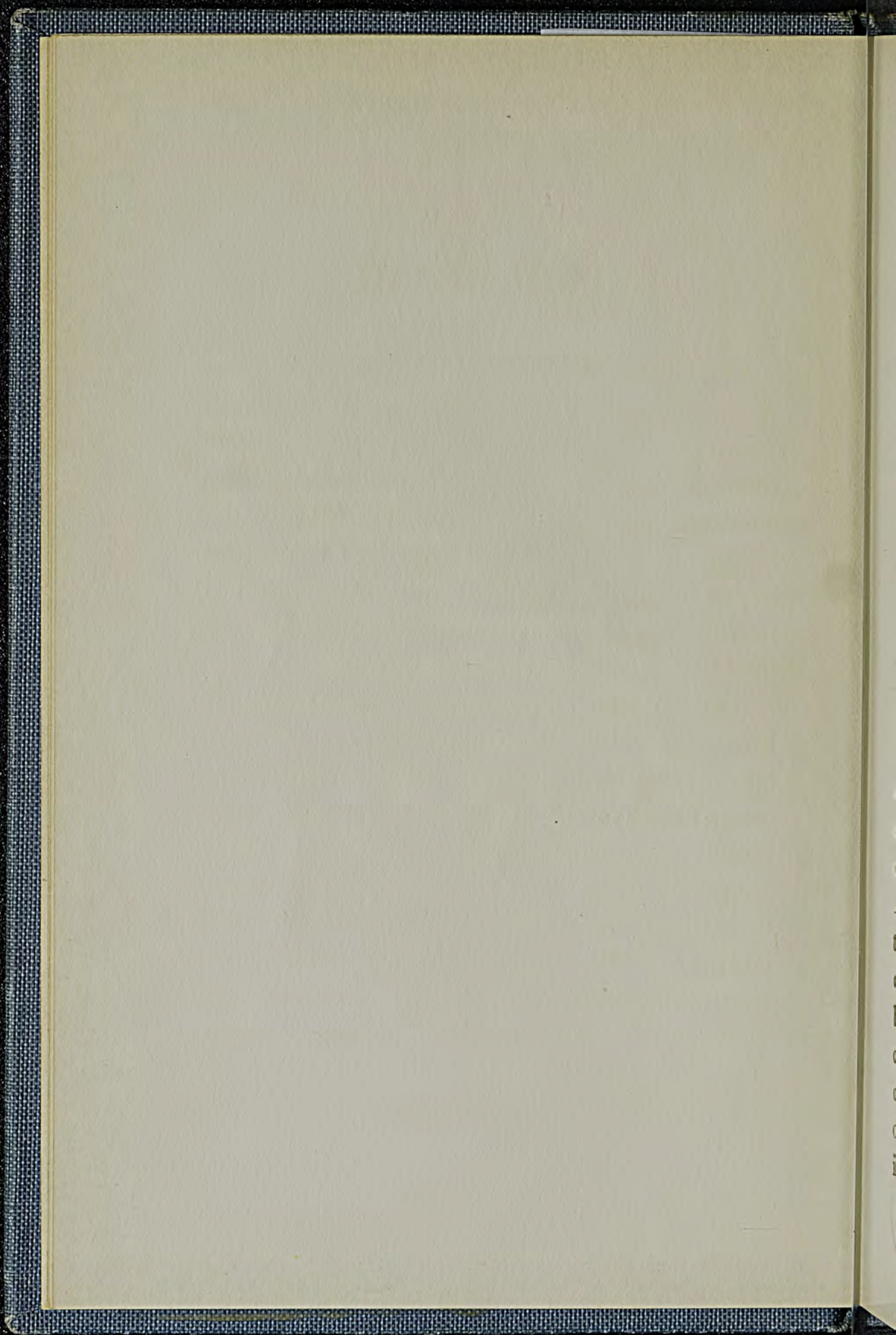
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Dedicated to
MY FATHER



INTRODUCTION

The story of King Harald Hardrede of Norway is one of the least-known of all the old Viking tales, but it best displays the rugged courage and daring which led those Viking wanderers across the world. King Harald is better known as the Harald killed by the last Saxon king of England; but the manner of that killing is not always told, and reflects no great credit on Harald the Saxon.

Most of the characters in this volume are historical. That of Flamehair is not, nor are one or two others, such as Svein Arnison; in other respects I have followed the sagas closely, save as regards the scene of Svein Arnison's death. As for the scenes in Byzantium, the revolt of the Varangars, as well as the capture of the Emperor, are well vouched for by the Sagaman, Snorri. I have softened the character of Harald a trifle, and by the introduction of Sigurd Thick into the tale, endeavored to clear up a puzzling bit of the Saga itself.

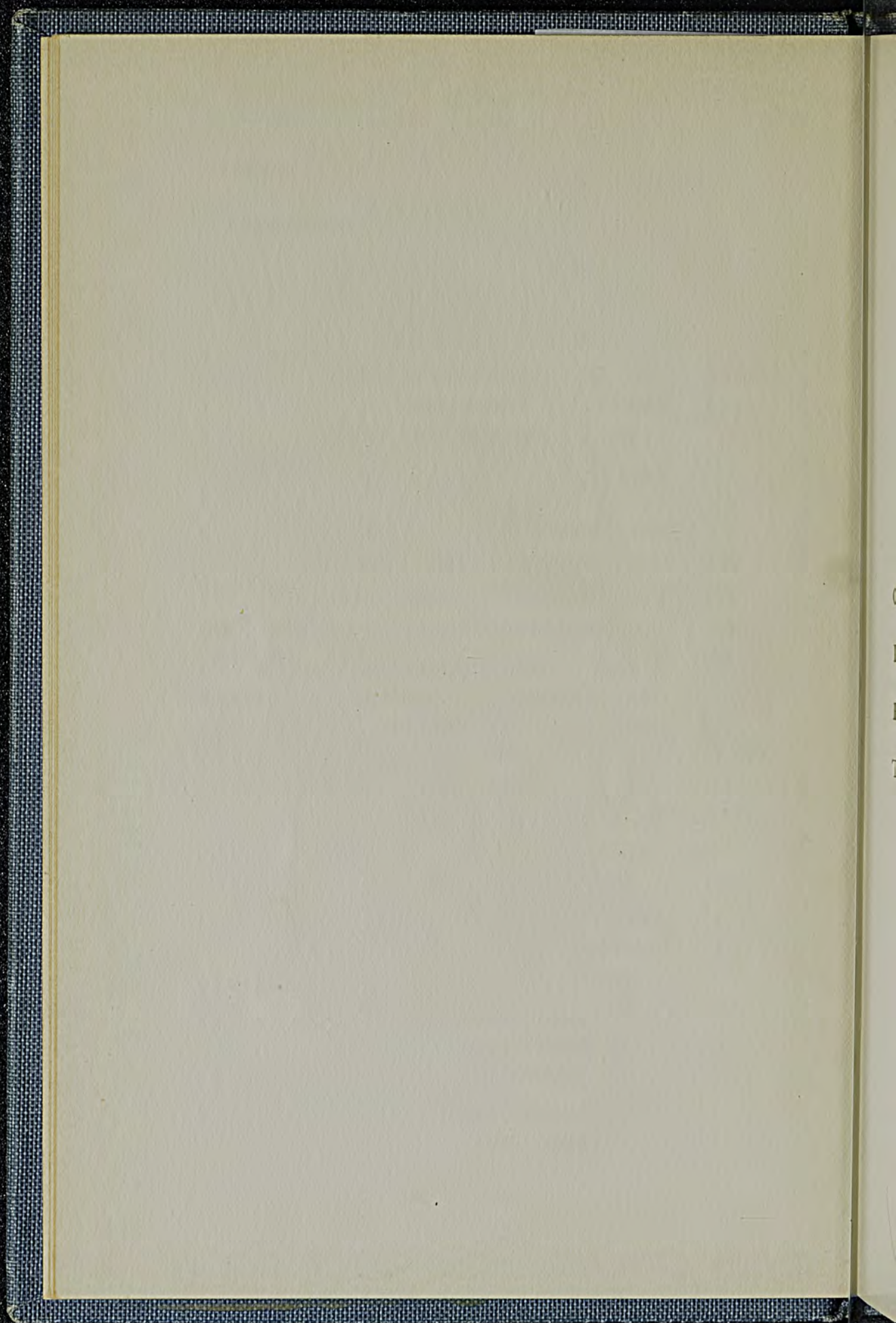
Introduction

Harald's life was even more wild than that of Olaf Tryggvison. Fighting at his King-brother's side as a boy, exiled to Russia at fifteen, in command of ships and armies under Jarisleif, then speeding down to Byzantium, becoming Acolyth of the Emperor's guard, leading cruises in the Mediterranean and conquering the Holy Land — finally to sweep up to a throne and die as he had lived, at the head of his men and disdaining to seek shelter! Blots on his character there may have been, but Harald Hardrede was a man, and a great one! And it may be that Flamehair the Skald, despite his youth, shared in no small measure that greatness — although on this point the Saga is silent.

—THE AUTHOR.

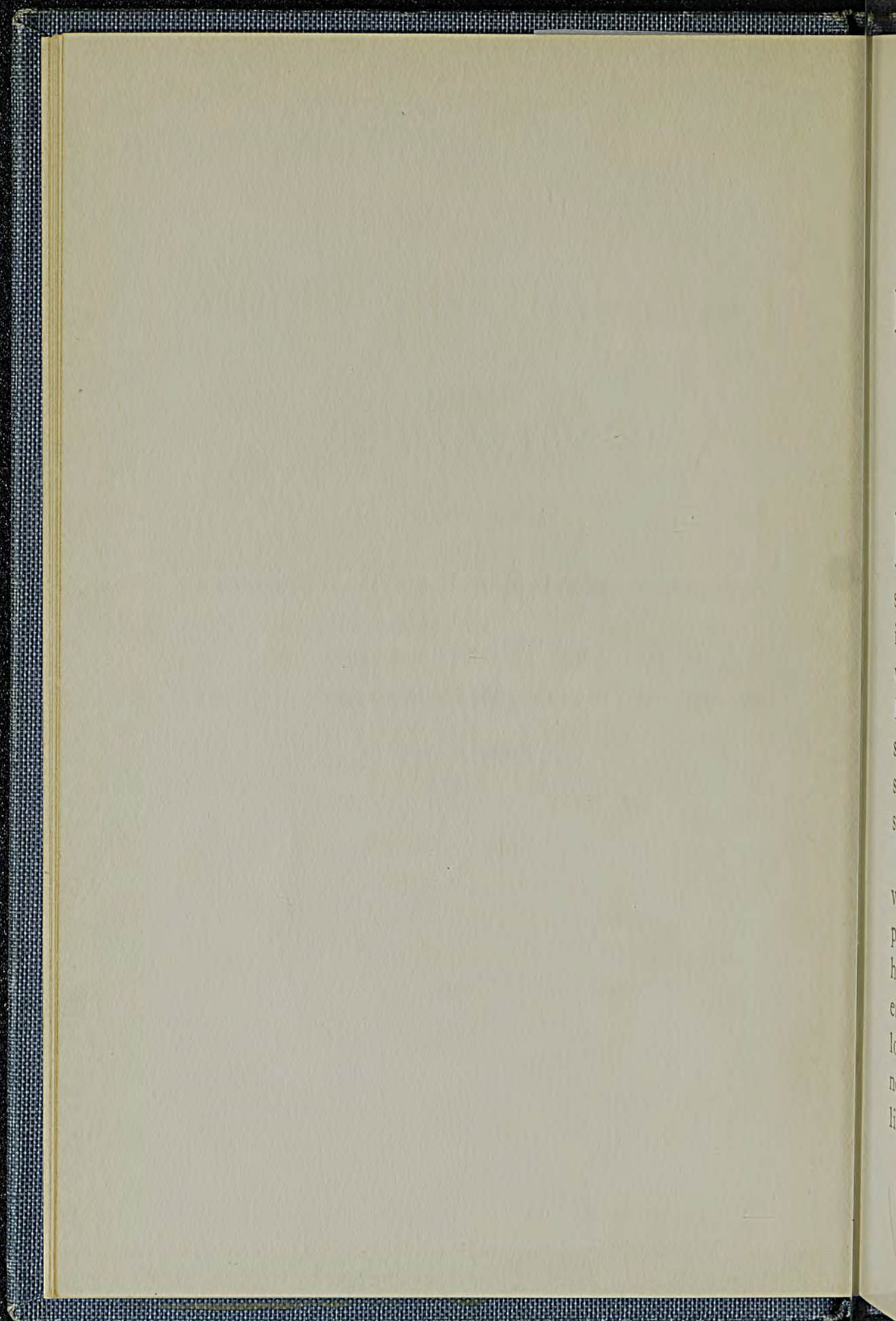
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Flamehair the Skald

CHAPTER I

THE RAVEN SHIP

IN the little bay to the east of the great harbor of the island of Chios lay a small ship, the like of which had not often been seen in the Aegean Sea. She was long and low, very different from the high, heavy galleys of Byzantium. Instead of the sweeping lateen sails of Mohammedan or southern craft, the sail flapping idly at her mast was cut long and square, hanging from a single yard.

On either side extended long oars, moving very slowly, and glittering in the sun. The prow of the ship ended in a high black figure-head shaped like that of a bird, while the stern ended in a carved wooden bird's tail. As the long oars moved silently, the ship appeared not unlike some huge bird of prey flapping listlessly and slowly along the heavy swells.

The ship was filled with men — dark-haired

fellows, most of them — who pulled at the oars or sat about cleaning ring shirts and weapons. Their shields hung beside the oars, on the outer bulwarks. But up on the high poop deck in the stern there were but two figures.

One of these stood at the helm. A tall, bronzed old sea wolf he was, with black hair blowing about his face and knotted hand easily controlling the heavy steering-oar, while the sun glittered on his woven ring shirt and golden arm rings. The other figure was that of a boy of some sixteen years.

Golden-haired and blue-eyed, there was no trace of weakness in his browned face. His nose was well shaped and curved like an eagle's beak, while the merry lips and strongly chiseled chin beneath betokened that this lad was of no common mould. As he sat beside the helmsman his long fingers swept across the strings of a harp, and the men below paused in their talk to listen eagerly.

Thin and fine is the far blue line where the
daughters of Ran lie waiting
To clutch and smother and downward reel
With heroes torn from the dragon-keel!
Ho for the feel and the clash of steel, and the
splintering bulwarks' grating —

Of a sudden the boy ceased and laid down the harp. As he did so there came a quick clash of steel from the deck below and a shout.

"More, Saxon! Sing us the stave of Beowulf! More!"

"Not now," returned the boy, shaking his head decidedly. "Wait till it is cooler!"

There was a low mutter and a growl, and the boy turned to the friendly helmsman with a smile.

"Do Vikings never tire of songs, Atli?"

"Nay, Alfgar," rejoined the old Viking, "not from such golden throats as yours! Well indeed was it for you that you were born a skald, else had your bones been lying in the smoking rafters of the monks' roost back yonder."

"True enough," nodded Alfgar, a look of sadness overspreading his face. "Think you I will ever see England again?"

"Perchance, if Odin so wills," and the harsh voice softened. "Yet methinks you have much to be grateful to us for, young Christian. You have learned sword play and oar play, and you who were a weakling have become wellnigh a man in these few months. I have

taught you more of sword skill and foot skill than even my comrades deem."

"Yes, old friend," returned Alfgar, his blue eyes gazing up into the stern black ones above, "you have indeed been a second father to me, and I thank you most warmly. Yet — yet —" The boy fell silent, gazing across the waters to the wooded hillsides of the fair island.

Alfgar's story was not an uncommon one in those days of strife. His parents dead, he had been educated by the good monks of Carth-friars, and had learned more than most boys of that age knew. Then had come the terrible night when the Vikings of Raud the Red swept in from the sea and laid the monastery in ashes, sparing none of the monks and rifling the place of all it held.

By chance they had found that Alfgar was a skald, so Raud and his men carried off the Saxon lad in the *Raven*. About his neck, instead of the iron collar of a thrall, was riveted one of thin gold; yet it was the mark of slavery, and the freeborn English boy chafed under the yoke.

Out to sea they had gone, across the channel to France, down south, and farther south, halt-

ing here and there to burn and plunder. Then they had come to Gibraltar, or Norfasund, and after prolonged discussion Raud and his men had determined to sweep across the Mediterranean. Now, the *Raven's* hold loaded with plunder, the Vikings were eager to return to Denmark with their slaves and booty. One more ravage, one more scene of blood and fire, and the *Raven* would head for home.

Through it all Alfgar had passed as in a dream. Instead of being a thegn, a ward of his own King, a ruler in his own land, he was a slave, a thrall. Still, the Vikings had been kind enough to him, in their way; they had not forced him to adopt their religion, and Atli the Farsighted in particular had befriended him. He had learned the ways of war, although he had taken no part in the forays, and his skill in juggling and in the dangerous "oar walking" had made him a prime favorite among the men.

"Think you there are other Vikings in these seas?" asked the boy idly, after a time. The old warrior shook his head.

"Nay, lad. Men say that a ship from Norway swept through Norfasund a few years

since, but that may be idle rumor. We have accomplished a great deed, Alfgar Flamehair, and men will talk long of us."

"Still," persisted the boy, "there is the Varangar Guard, the bodymen of the Emperor yonder," and he jerked his thumb north toward Byzantium. "Many from England and Denmark and Norway go thither — nay, my own mother's brother, Eadgar, joined it when he was outlawed from England by King Harald, Canute's son."

"Harald was a bad enough King," assented Atli with a nod. "Yet the Varangars are not Vikings, lad, for they are Christian men all. I have heard men say that Harald, the brother of King Olaf Stout of Norway, fled to this part of the world after Olaf fell in battle. If that be true, we should hear of him. Harald was a kingly boy at the time, and must be a man by now."

A hoarse laugh sounded behind them, and Alfgar twisted about to see Raud the Red standing almost at their side. He had emerged from the cabin as they were speaking, and his flaming red beard and hair glowed almost crimson in the light of the falling sun.

"Aye, Atli Farseer," he chuckled in a deep voice, "that Harald you speak of was a kingly lad indeed. Well I mind me how we marched up against King Olaf —"

"We?" broke in Alfgar in surprise. "How was that?"

"I was in Thrandheim at the time," said Raud, his little red eyes sweeping the shores of the wooded island. "When the army of the rebels went out to meet Olaf I went along for the sport. And by Odin we got it! Olaf all but whipped us, until Thorer Hund got him down. The young Harald fought like a wolf, and wellnigh sent his spear through me. I hope we may meet him ere we return!"

As Alfgar gazed on the giant form that towered above him, noting the cruel face, the mighty hands, the long, gold-hilted sword that had taken so many lives, he felt a thrill of apprehension for the other when that meeting should come to pass. And he knew, too, that the Harald in question was hardly older than himself in years when he was first a leader of men.

At this moment their attention was distracted by a quarrel that arose among the men

in the waist of the ship. Blows were exchanged, then there came the flash of steel, and a sharp clash. With a roar Raud the Red leaped from the quarterdeck into the midst of the throng, laying about with his huge fists, and as by magic the men scattered. Alfgar, watching, wondered if the time would ever come when brute strength would no longer be the greatest thing in the world. And there was good cause for the suppressed sigh that he uttered as he turned from the scene to gaze at the quiet island.

In the year of our Lord 1044 but small part of the world was civilized. England was half Saxon and half Dane; the Arabs were sweeping up through Spain into France; Denmark and Norway were still half-savage, and were Christian but in name; while the bulwark of the Cross was the Greek Empire, still strong and upheld by the Saxons, Danes, and other westerners who poured into the Varangar ranks.

That the greatest of them all was even now biding his time to seize a throne, the boy in the Viking ship knew not. He knew nothing of the wars waged in the Holy Land by Greek

and Moslem, of the conquests that had been made by the Greek leader, and the stern training which the latter was going through. To him, the civilized world seemed fallen to pieces in the hands of barbarians; and many a wiser man thought the same in those dark times.

In the north, Olaf Tryggvison had fallen, and after him Olaf the Saint, fighting for the Cross. Ireland groaned under the hand of the Viking, and England was seething with discontent. The dominion of Charlemagne was scattered to the winds. Small wonder that Eadgar of Northumbria, outlawed by a cruel king fifteen years before, had never turned his face toward England again!

Thus thought the boy in the stern of the *Raven*, as the ship slowly beat her way past fishing villages and olive groves, which were not worth plundering, toward the head of the little bay. The sun was halfway to its setting, and was almost hidden by the trees on the hill above. Beyond lay a wooded promontory stretching ahead of them.

Suddenly Atli, worthy of his nickname, gave a shout and pointed to this promontory.

"Ho, Raud! What is that gleam among the trees?"

In an instant the bows were lined with men, as were the port bulwarks. The Vikings hastily donned their byrnies, or ring-mail shirts, for here danger might betide at any instant. Raud, springing up beside the helm, gazed long and earnestly under his hand.

"By the hammer of Thor!" he cried suddenly. "It is the gilded prow of a ship on the other side of yonder headland! Arm, men!"

Alfgar saw a dull gleam among the trees, a twinkle of gold that blazed and then died suddenly. But the warning had been sufficient. Already the men were emptying chests of arrows, bringing up spears from the hold, and tearing down their shields; bows were strung, the Greek slaves forward were driven below, and Raud with his chosen berserkers posted themselves on the forecastle. Atli Far-seer had charge of the stern.

"Quick, Flamehair," he cried sharply to Alfgar. "Into your byrnie, lad! Use my spare sword, the one I took from the Moslem chief!"

"Why?" exclaimed the Saxon boy, surprised. "What need of all this —"

"Need enough," broke in Atli. "Have we ever seen a ship with gilded figurehead since leaving our own land? Yonder is a Sea-snake, or I —"

The Viking did not finish. Even as he spoke, something came around the headland that drew a subdued gasp from the men, while Alfgar stood and stared.

It was a ship, not unlike the *Raven*, save that it was larger in every way. That it had once been a dragon ship was evident, for the gilded tail still curled above the stern, the shields overlapped like scales, the oars formed the crawling feet of the beast; but instead of a dragon prow the sunlight blazed on a great gilded cross, and on the square sail was another of blood-red. Alfgar heard a startled cry from Raud.

"Harald of Norway! By Baldur — down, men, and quickly!"

Save for helmsman and one man in the bow, the approaching ship seemed deserted, although the oars moved slowly. But the man in the bow — what a man! thought the Saxon

boy, with a deep breath of admiration. Taller than any of the Vikings, taller than Raud himself, with sweeping crimson cloak and golden helm bearing a dragon with outstretched wings, and with long golden hair that hung about his shoulders, this commander of the strange ship was one to awaken the interest of any beholder. Then Alfgar heard a sudden, tense whisper from Raud the Red, a whisper that thrilled back through the whole ship.

“Out bows, men! At his throat, remember — before he suspects us!”

CHAPTER II

ALFGAR'S CHALLENGE

“**W**HO are ye who sail under the raven of Odin?”

The deep, hard, yet musical voice lifted across the waters to the Viking ship. As yet the crew of the *Raven* were crouched at the oars or beneath the bulwarks, but at a sudden motion of Raud's hand Alfgar saw the arrows fitted to the bows. Not until then had he comprehended the plan of the sea wolf, and with a little gasp of horror he realized that in another moment the splendid figure —

“Down, Harald, down!”

Hardly conscious that he had screamed forth the words, Alfgar leaped to the stern as the Vikings rose. The tall figure disappeared, and a storm of arrows sang where he had stood a moment before. Then Alfgar felt the heavy hand of Atli dash him aside and a spear sank quivering in the deck. Raud, in the bow, was poising a second spear as Alfgar came to himself.

Without an instant's hesitation the Saxon boy flung off his cloak and leaped overboard. He dove deeply, but as he came to the surface something tore through his hair and he went down again. When he emerged for the second time Raud the Red had something else with which to busy himself.

The shore was not far and Alfgar soon gained the shelving beach. Wading up to the water's edge, he seated himself on a rock to watch the combat, with bated breath. For, like some monster awakened from a sleep, the strange ship had sprung into sudden life. Her decks were covered with steel-clad men, and with every long oar spurning the water she swept down on the *Raven*.

Raud's men lashed their oars, but before they could gain headway the prow of the other ship crashed into them and the air was filled with arrows. Alfgar saw the tall figure in the golden helm leap from his post down into the Viking ship, and as if by magic the defense seemed to melt away. But when it came to taking the stern and the forecastle, where Raud and Atli were, it was a very different matter.

Harald led his men to the attack, but time after time they were beaten back. Then Alfgar saw the tall young leader leap back to his own ship, shout an order, and for an instant he thought the attack was to be abandoned, as the ship drew away. But only for an instant; even as an exultant yell went up from the Vikings, the Cross ship leaped forward again, and this time her forecastle lay alongside that of the Viking, and the grappling-irons bound the two ships closely.

Over the bulwarks went Harald, and Raud the Red met him, sword in hand. A moment the sunlight sparkled on clashing steel, then of a sudden the Viking leader disappeared. A peal of warhorns, and Harald's men poured into the *Raven*.

With the fall of Raud the combat was over. The Viking crew either yielded or fought on stubbornly in berserk rage to the end. Alfgar saw three or four hold the prow until they were cut down, then the fight swept to the stern. Here Atli Farseer defended himself for a brief space, but it was hopeless. Some of his men leaped overboard, others surrendered, and Alfgar saw the old helmsman yield at last

to Harald himself. Then, slipping again into the water, the Saxon boy swam out to the ships.

He was greeted by a shout from the men and a peal of horns, while Harald himself pulled him over the side, the men crowding around. Then for the first time Alfgar found himself facing one of the greatest men of his own times.

Taller than the Saxon by head and shoulders, and broad in proportion, the Norseman was truly gigantic. His golden helm had been cloven, and his long yellow hair, fairer than that of Alfgar, dripped blood. But Alfgar barely noted this, for his eyes were fastened on the proud, handsome face of the young leader. High of brow, long of chin, with a great curved nose — these details were lost in the light from the blue eyes, which almost seemed to send forth sparks, so hard and cold and level were they. Then Alfgar found himself clasping a hand of iron.

"Thanks, friend!" said Harald, smiling. "That was a well-aimed word of yours, and mayhap it saved my life. Who are you?"

In a few words Alfgar told his story. As

he finished, Harald drew his knife and quickly cut the soft gold collar about the boy's neck.

"There!" he laughed, "no longer a thrall, but one of Harald's men! Wilt take service with the Emperor, Englishman?"

"Not I," returned Alfgar. A cry of surprise and a mutter of rage rose from the men crowding around. A flash of terrible anger leaped into Harald's face.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Do you presume —"

"Wait," smiled Alfgar, catching the two hands of the young leader and falling to his knees. Placing his hands between those of Harald, he went on, "I take no service with the Emperor, Harald, but with you."

"Skoal! Skoal!" A tremendous shout of approval rang, while the delighted warriors clashed their weapons together. Harald looked down into the boy's face, smiling, and gently loosed his hands.

"So be it, Alfgar of England. Stay — what name do men give thee?"

"Flamehair, Harald," came the voice of old Atli from behind. "And a right worthy skald is he."

"Then you shall be my skald," laughed Harald, shaking back his hair. "Art skilled with weapons?"

At this question Atli laughed, but Alfgar hesitated to answer. He knew well that he could have held his own with any of those around, but he hesitated to declare his skill, as yet untried in battle. His silence was misinterpreted by the men around, and one of them clapped his hand down on Alfgar's shoulder with an oath.

"We'll teach the Saxon wolfing how to fight!" he laughed harshly, and the tone more than the words were offensive. "He'll forget his monk-bred daintiness and faint-heart ways soon enough —"

Flushing with anger, Alfgar whirled about and struck at the man. But the warrior caught his hand and brushed it aside, to go staggering back the next instant beneath a blow from Harald.

"Peace, wolves!" roared the leader, and the men shrank from him. "If the Saxon be a weakling, remember that he is my man!"

"We want no weaklings in Tsargrad," went up a mutter. Alfgar, at once ashamed of his

loss of temper, sprang before Harald and faced them.

"I am no weakling, Varangars!" he cried proudly, his hand on his sword. "Let your best man stand up to me, and you shall take back that word!"

A shout went up from the men eager to witness such a contest.

"Accept it, Harald! He has challenged! He has challenged! You are our champion — accept it!"

Alfgar heard a faint groan from Atli, who now stood at his back. Then Harald, half-smiling, turned to him.

"You are over-bold, Flamehair! Take back the challenge, for you knew not what you said. Harald of Norway cannot fight with him who saved his life."

Alfgar gazed up at the handsome face of the young giant, but he was desperate. Unless he removed the stigma, he knew well, it would cling to him through his life. "Alfgar the Weakling!" The thought stung him like a blow.

"What I have said, I have said," he answered calmly, although his face was pale.

For an instant Harald met his gaze, then turned to his men.

"So be it. Men, clear the ships and put out the oars. Let those of the Vikings who will accept the White Christ enter my service. When we have left the bay behind we will take up this challenge."

"An oar walk!" howled the men as they broke up, and Alfgar clasped hands with Atli Farseer as he turned. Following Harald at his command, the two went aboard the *Cross-beak*, as the other ship was named. Behind them, the *Raven* was quickly stripped of its dead, the shattered oars were replaced by sound ones, and with the wounded of both crews lying on the deck of the captured vessel the two ships slowly left the island.

"May Odin speed you, Flamehair," muttered old Atli, standing beside Alfgar in the stern. "Evidently this Harald is some great champion, for the men are eager. But you have more skill than any I have yet seen, in the oar walk, and it may well be that you will come out unscathed."

"I trust so, old friend," rejoined Alfgar quietly, loosening his belt and taking off his

shoes. "There is little breeze, and it will not be so hard as on the *Raven*, I think."

Now, although the Saxon knew it not, Harald was at that time famous for his skill in all exercises. No man could stand before him in combat, and at the "oar walk" his rivals were few. This sport was dangerous in the extreme, and only those of great skill dared attempt it.

It consisted in walking along the blades of the oars while these were being rowed by the men, and was the greatest feat of a Viking. A single slip or a mis-step meant certain death, for if the walker fell he would surely be struck by the other oars and ground down. Atli had taught the art to Alfgar, and the quick-footed Saxon had proven an adept at it on the long voyage down from England.

The sun was just setting as the two ships gained the open sea. Barely a dozen of the Vikings remained alive. As their religion meant little to them, they accepted service willingly enough with the famous chief of the Varangers who had conquered Raud, and were already looking forward to gaining huge booty under his command.

Alfgar stood ready as Harald appeared. The latter had removed his arms and was clad only in a skirted crimson garment, belted at the waist. Atli nudged the Saxon.

"By Thor! He disdains to remove his leg-gings! This must be a little thing to him, Flamehair! Now remember—wait for the back-swing, and keep well above the water line on the oars!"

Alfgar nodded as Harald approached and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Ready, Saxon? Think ere it is too late."

"All ready," laughed Alfgar. Then he glanced at the hair of the Norseman. "But your head, Harald? Will it not disadvantage you?"

"Only a scratch," said the other carelessly. "All right, men! Fall into slow stroke, and bear steady!"

"Trust us, Harald," came the answer from the rowers, while the men crowded the bulwarks and the *Raven* drew close to see the fun. Harald stepped to one side of the stern and Alfgar to the other, they poised a moment on the bulwark, then each stepped on the last oar as it swung.

Steadily and carelessly Harald walked, but Alfgar kept even place with him, amid a surprised murmur from the men and a shout from the other ship. At the prow Harald met him with a word of approval, then took from one of the men two daggers. This time, as he walked back along the oars, he juggled the knives without missing!

Alfgar watched with the rest. As the men turned to him with a roar of delight, he took, not two knives but three, and amid a breathless hush performed the feat. As he finished he was met with a storm of yells, while from the *Raven* came shouts and the sound of horns.

But Harald, with a quiet smile, took his two knives and a long sword, and juggling these as he went, returned to the bow. The Vikings went wild over this feat, and when the applause quieted Alfgar seized a sword and two knives, pale but determined. Before he could step from the bulwark Atli gripped his shoulder.

"Harald! Stop the lad! Surely he has done enough, and a sword he has never tried. It would be murder!"

Alfgar twisted away, but Harald had run

back along the rowers' benches, and seized his hand.

"Flamehair," he smiled, gazing deep into the Saxon's gray eyes, "you have far surpassed all my own men in skill, so fear not that any will name you weakling after this!" A hoarse murmur of assent arose from the men "Not my man, but my friend, Flamehair! And it may be that I shall need that quick eye of yours if —"

As Harald paused a roar went up from the men, a roar of delighted joy.

"Skoal!" they bellowed, pressing around. "Skoal to Harald of Norway!"

And the prows were headed for Tsargrad, for so the Vikings called Byzantium, the city of the Emperor.

CHAPTER III

THE ACOLYTH OF THE VARANGARS

THE three days' trip to the Golden Horn was uneventful. In that short time Harald and Alfgar became firm friends. The former, who was the "Acolyth" or commander of the Varangars, had with a handful of men conquered Sicily and Palestine for the Empress, Zoe the Great; but instead of finding him a bloodthirsty Viking like Raud, Alfgar found him a lonely man, stern but kindly. A fugitive at the age of ten, his rightful throne of Norway in other hands, it was small wonder that the young leader was nicknamed "Hardrede," or "stern counsel."

Of his family, none had remained with him. This in itself formed a bond between him and the young Saxon; and when Alfgar told of his uncle Eadgar, exiled years before, he found that Eadgar was in command of the palace "squad" or bodyguard, and was in high repute.

The more Alfgar saw of his new leader,

the more he admired him. The men loved Harald absolutely, and obeyed him with implicit confidence; while Harald lived as one of them and shared their privations fully. On the third evening Atli, Alfgar, and Egil Thordson, Harald's forecastle man, were standing in the prow watching the shores on either hand and the passing galleys.

"Harald cannot stay quiet," chuckled Egil. "No sooner were we back from Jerusalem than he would take a cruise with us Northmen. We sacked many Mohammedan places and took many ships, but the *Raven* was the goodliest of them all in booty."

"Well might she be," returned Atli. "But these Varangars — are they all Northmen like ourselves?"

"Nay," rejoined Egil scornfully. "There be Saxons, Franks, Russland men, and others, but Harald loves best us who speak his own tongue, and next the Saxons. Your uncle, Flamehair, is a right worthy warrior."

"I have heard talk among the men," said Atli slowly, "of Harald and the Empress. What of it, Egil?"

"This," and Egil lowered his voice. "The

Empress, Zoe, would fain marry our Harald — ”

“What!” broke from the others.

“Aye, and make him Emperor,” went on Egil earnestly. “But this Harald will not do. It is in his mind to return to Norway some day, and he has great store of treasure in his ships. Besides, we came down through Russland, you know, and Elizabeth, daughter of the Russian King Jarisleif — well, Harald will not forget her easily!”

“Skoal to King Harald!” cried Alfgar excitedly. A light step sounded behind them, and turning, the confused Saxon saw the young leader himself.

“Not so loud, my friends,” smiled Harald. His face sobered quickly. “Listen, Egil and Atli. When we are home again do you bid our Northmen choose between me and Tsar-grad, but keep silence to the rest. If they will, we may yet return north some day, and then — ”

Suddenly Atli turned from the speaker and put up his hand to shield his eyes from the setting sun. Gazing in surprise, the others could see a glint of gold in the north, and rapidly

approaching, while over the gold was a splash of red.

"What ship is this," cried Atli, "decked with gold and bearing a crimson sail?"

"Well-named, Farseer!" exclaimed Harald approvingly. "Surely the sail is crimson, therefore it is a state galley, bearing tidings from the Empress!" He turned to the crew. "Ready to salute, men!"

The Northmen, who had small love for the Greeks they served, went to their quarters with muttered curses, while Alfgar eagerly watched the approaching galley. The *Crossbeak* was now not far from the city. To their left lay the Golden Horn and the outstretched walls and buildings, still dim in the distance. A mile behind was the *Raven*, bearing full half of Harald's men, for the *Crossbeak* was easier to row than the ship of Raud, and they were proceeding against the wind.

When the galley was only a bowshot distant her sail came down, and it was evident that she wished to speak them. At the same instant Atli pointed off to the left.

"See, Harald! Right under that building you called the Acropolis!"

Turning, they all saw a small boat which seemed to be rowing in desperate haste toward them. There were barely a dozen men in her, and Harald paid her scant attention.

"To the helm, Egil!" he called. "Careful of the bulwarks — better sheer off after I'm aboard. Come, Flamehair, if you wish to see real magnificence."

And as the two ships drew side to side Alfgar drew a sharp breath. Never in his life had he dreamed of such a ship! Her shape was quite unlike that of the *Raven*, and she had three tiers of oars. Her decks were a blaze of gold and silver decoration, and her poop deck and cabins seemed to be gilded solidly. Her upper deck hid the rowers from sight, and only a small group of splendidly clad persons stood waiting to receive the acolyth.

Slowly the ships drew alongside, Egil at the tiller of the *Crossbeak*. The port oars of the galley suddenly flashed in, the starboard oars of the viking ship dropped back, and with barely a bump the two were together. Harald instantly leaped over the bulwarks, and Alfgar followed. The next instant the

oars were out again and the ships were separated.

The officers, for such they seemed to be, bowed low to Harald and spoke to him in Greek. He assented, and turned to his follower.

"Come, Flamehair, into the cabin. There is a letter from the Empress for me."

Nothing loath, Alfgar followed to the cabin door. Before Harald stooped to enter, their attention was caught by the small boat, the rowers of which were standing up and shouting.

"I wonder what that boat can want?" said Harald.

"No doubt a fisherman who wants to drive a bargain," laughed one of the Greeks in the Northman's tongue. Harald smiled, and entered the cabin. Alfgar saw that it was dimly lit and filled with rich hangings, then one of the officers motioned him to a couch. Harald stood beneath a hanging lamp, for it was almost dusk, and impatiently tore open a packet reverently handed him.

Alfgar gazed about with great wonder and interest. The hanging lamp was of rich sil-

ver; silks and tapestries, which he had seldom before seen, were all about him, and it was with a start that he came to himself at a quick exclamation from Harald.

"By the gods of Asgard! This is too much!"

Sitting up, Alfgar suddenly realized that there was now only one man with them, he who spoke their language. He caught sight of Harald's face and sprang to his feet, for never had he seen such anger in a man as that expressed by his leader.

"What does this mean, Michael?" went on Harald furiously. "I am to obey you in all things, says the Empress. Explain!"

The officer bowed, extending his hands in deprecation.

"The orders of the Empress, lord! Is an officer of the palace to know her mind?"

"What are your orders, fool?" roared Harald.

"To conduct you to the summer palace at Blanchernae, lord. There the Empress will see you, if it is her will."

Harald put forth one hand, gripped Michael by the shoulder, and threw him into

the corner with a crash. At the same instant came a faint noise from without — the sound of Norse warhorns.

“Your sword, Flamehair!” shouted Harald, springing to the door. It was fastened, but flinging himself back the giant burst it open with a single blow of his fist, and stumbled out. After him came Alfgar, sword in hand.

They paused, astonished at the sight before them. Instead of an empty deck, the galley was crowded with men, and more were appearing from below. They were out of bow-shot of the *Crossbeak*, and the *Raven* was farther still from them. Harald dropped his weapon with a groan.

“Trapped, Flamehair! No use fighting, lad. What a blind fool I was! We can do naught save obey and trust to our luck. Come back.”

He drew Alfgar back within the cabin before the crew of the galley had observed them. So rapidly had all transpired that Michael was just getting to his feet as they reentered, and Harald helped him up with a careless laugh.

"Come, Michael, you had planned better than I thought. I will obey the commands of the Empress to the letter. My men are somewhat excited, it seems; shall I not send this lad back with a message of peace?"

The cunning Greek smiled. He clearly saw through the stratagem of the Norseman, and shook his head.

"Nay, lord, but you might write a word reassuring them."

Harald assented, and Michael procured parchment and a quill. Harald signed what he wrote without reading, and with a low bow the Greek departed to send off a small boat to the *Crossbeak*.

"Why do things look so badly?" asked the puzzled Alfgar. "Surely a visit to the Empress is not a hard thing to perform?"

"You do not know the Empress," laughed Harald harshly. "The summer palace is in reality a private prison for those of high birth. There, I suppose, she would keep me until I promise to marry her."

"Is there no Emperor, then?" persisted the Saxon.

"He is a puppet in her hands," returned

Harald. "She would put him aside or mayhap kill him. What a woman she is! But she has trapped me fairly enough, and it seems to me that some day there will be a reckoning for this deed."

"Could but the Varangars learn you were a prisoner and where," mused Alfgar, "they might be able to do something."

"Aye, but how can they learn?" retorted Harald bitterly. "Everything was provided against, it seems! No, we are helpless. Perchance I may use craft with the Empress, but I doubt me."

"Come, it is not your way to be downcast," Alfgar laughed cheerfully. "Could I but get away tonight —"

Harald sprang to his feet.

"The very thing — but impossible. No, you are a stranger here, you do not know the language, you would be recaptured certainly." He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, and his voice softened. "Thanks, Flamehair, but it could not be done."

"And yet it is the only chance," urged the boy earnestly. "I am more than willing to run the risk, Harald. Methinks it would be

slight. I could drop overboard and swim to the shore easily. In the morning I could find the Varangars —”

Harald began pacing up and down the cabin, playing with his swordhilt and thinking deeply. Finally he paused before Alfgar.

“Flamehair, you shall try it. There is one chance in a hundred that you will have the luck to make it. If you do, seek out the quarters of the Varangars, get hold of Egil, your uncle, Ulf Uspakeson, or his friend Haldor. These last are Iceland men, and trusty. Take this armring and it will pass you anywhere among my men.”

He took a light gold ring from his arm and slipped it over that of Alfgar. The latter saw that it was graven with runes, and nodded. There was a strange excitement in the lad's heart, for he knew that should he succeed in this attempt he would be accounted a full man by the Northmen, and the very danger thrilled him.

He gave little heed to the fact that he was in a strange land, among strange peoples, that his very hair would betray him should search

be made. It was North against South here, he thought exultantly, and the difference of race was forgotten instantly.

"Now, how will you get overboard?" said Harald, knitting his brows. "It is in my mind that we are well watched here."

"Let us walk on the deck," laughed Alfgar, shaking his golden-red hair back from his face and unloosing his mail coat. "I will make ready should the chance come."

At the door they found Michael posted, and he saluted Harald deeply. There was no reason why his lord should not go out on deck, he said with a smile, and the three were in the open air.

The sun had long since fallen. To right and left, before and behind them, glittered the lights of Byzantium, while the trireme ploughed onward toward the northern end of the city, where lay the palace of Blanchernae. The galley was speeding swiftly under her oars, and the two captives took up their post in the stern beside the helmsman, a Greek.

"This fellow does not know our tongue," said Harald. "Think you that you can swim to shore?"

"Easily," smiled Alfgar, loosening his tunic. "I am not a fast swimmer, though."

"That matters little," replied Harald. "Once away, and they will lose you in the darkness. Now watch! Do you see that blaze of light to the left? That marks the Great Palace, and the quarters of the Varangars are there. If you are ready, this would be a good time to go."

The words meant little, but as Alfgar gripped Harald's hand he felt how much the young leader appreciated his efforts, by a handclasp that told more than words. One quick glance at the helmsman, and Alfgar sprang to the rail. A shout from the watchful Michael, a rush of feet, and with a quick vision of Harald holding a crowd of men at bay the young Saxon dove out and into the blackness of the Golden Horn.

CHAPTER IV

THE WINDOW IN THE WALL

ALFGAR swam under water as long as he could, then came up for breath. From behind came the sound of shouts and a flare of torchlight, but he was beyond its circle and struck out for the shore. He had not counted on the tide, however, which swept him along strongly, and when he felt the ground beneath his feet he was far out of his course for the palace.

In front was a black mass, which resolved itself into fishing boats and small docks. There seemed to be no one around, however, and with a sigh of relieved weariness Alfgar drew himself up on a wooden pier and lay there resting for some moments.

The young Saxon knew little of cities beyond what he had seen on the voyage from England, but as soon as he gained the narrow street he knew that he was in the poorer quarter of the capital. The houses were small and close and the streets were vile. In every

doorway clustered groups of folk who stared strangely upon him, so that Alfgar drew his sword and cast many a look over his shoulder.

He was not molested, much to his relief. After ten minutes he came to streets which were dimly lit by cressets, and ahead of him came a confused babel of voices together with a wider flare of light. Making his way toward this, he found himself in a street of bazars and shops, which were doing a thriving trade.

Around him were men of all countries — merchants from Persia and Genoa, Jews from Syria and Germany, Moorish traders from Sicily or Spain — whose gay attire imparted a festal air to the scene. But the anxious boy had small thought for this. Where was the Palace?

Twice he stopped men with the question, but received only a shake of the head and a brusque reply in Greek. Finally he stopped before the shop of an armorer where a crowd of men were gathered, trusting to find among them one of the Varangars.

"Which way to the Great Palace?" he cried, plucking the sleeve of one. Instantly

the man turned on him with a shout of rage and with drawn dagger. Instinctively, Alfgar leaped back. As he did so the crowd came at him with a yell, and the frightened lad took to his heels.

Bewildered, Alfgar took shame to himself as he ran, but it was too late. Something in the yells behind sent a thrill of fear through him, though he did not know their import, and he fled the faster. As he ran, he drew his sword and the sight of the fleeing Saxon with naked weapon brought more pursuers in his train.

Doubling corners, twisting here and there aimlessly, Alfgar could not shake off the howling mob behind him. Suddenly he turned into a wider street, and heard a clatter of hoofs. Before him was a chariot, drawn by four white horses, and knowing that this must be a great man the Saxon sped to the side of the car.

"Help!" he gasped to the sole occupant, a bearded, eagle-eyed man who stared at him in surprise. But the other shook his head as the first of the mob appeared. The horses plunged, and the chariot was off. As Alfgar

turned desperately he felt a hand on his arm and a commanding voice in his ear.

“Hold!”

The tongue was that of the monks, which he had learned at the monastery, and Alfgar clasped a thin, hair-clothed figure which stood beside him with uplifted hand.

“Save me!” he cried in Latin. “I have done nothing!”

A stone crashed against the wall beside him as the mob poured into the street, then the figure of the monk advanced. Abashed, the crowd pushed back with a confused cry. The monk turned to Alfgar.

“Are you a thief, as they say?”

“Nay,” panted the Saxon, “I but plucked the sleeve of one to ask my way, being a stranger, and they came upon me in rage, I know not why.”

With a commanding gesture the monk whirled upon the mob and under the evident sting of his words they slunk away. Not until the street was clear did the monk turn to the lad by the wall.

“And now, my son —?”

Alfgar poured out his story, corroborated

by his dripping garments. As he finished the monk shook his head sadly.

"I dare not mingle in the intrigues of the court," he said slowly. "As for saving you from these men, that was but my duty, lad, but I cannot be seen guiding you, for I myself am in danger."

"You! In danger!" echoed Alfgar, amazed.

"You know not this city," answered the monk, his face darkening. "I tell you, destruction shall come upon it! Christians are persecuted, while heretics — but enough. Your way lies yonder, along this street. Follow it and you will come to the Palace. Farewell."

And the monk was gone in the darkness. As one in a dream Alfgar turned and walked along, wondering. The street was all but deserted, for he was out of the bazar quarter. The few who passed gave him but a glance, there being many strangers in Byzantium, and Alfgar believed that his troubles were past.

He realized that those around the armorer's booth had thought him a cutpurse, and his cheeks burned at the thought. As he remem-

bered the man in the chariot, and his refusal of aid, they burned again, but with anger this time.

"If I ever meet him again," thought the Saxon, "I'll make him remember that churlish deed!"

His way took him past many houses, and soon he came to a high wall, which continued without a break, save for a window here and there. As he passed one of these he heard the sound of sobbing, and paused involuntarily. Listening, the sound came again, and Alfgar spoke on the impulse of the moment.

"Who is there? What is the matter?"

Instantly he regretted the speech, remembering that his tongue was unknown here, and realizing the foolishness of the act. But his regret turned to amazement at hearing an answer softly spoken, but in good honest Saxon:

"Who are you speaking?"

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Alfgar, his heart leaping. "Are you English?"

"Aye, and a captive! Can you help me?"

"You are a woman!" whispered the Saxon in astonishment. "What is this place? Where are you? I but arrived here tonight."

"My name is Sigrid," came the low answer. "I am no Saxon, but from England. My father is Hrolf, one of the Varangars, and two days since I was taken for a hostage by the Empress, for the loyalty of the Varangars is in doubt."

Alfgar gave a whistle of surprise. Evidently the Empress had not neglected anything! The trap for Harald had been well planned, and doubtless there were others of the families of the Varangars who were in the same case with Sigrid.

"Listen!" said the Saxon, thinking quickly. "Harald is a prisoner, and I bear the tidings. I must hasten on now, but if aught can be done I will do it."

"Tell my father I am in the quarters of the Princess Maria," came back the reply, "with the rest. There is no —"

Something seized Alfgar around the waist and bore him away from the window. He found himself in the grasp of two men, who must have stolen on him as he listened at the window. Despite his struggles they carried him silently along until they came to a cresset in the wall. A moment later his hands were

bound and they were inspecting him curiously. Both were Greeks, and he could not understand their questions.

His heart bursting with rage and shame at being thus caught, Alfgar waited. Finally one questioned him in bad Latin.

"What are you doing here, Frank?"

"I am seeking the Palace," he replied calmly enough.

"The Palace! You!" The two burst into ribald laughter, and one struck him brutally across the mouth. Staggering back, Alfgar tore at his bonds, but in vain.

"Take him to the guardhouse," laughed one of the men. "We'll make some sport out of the dog tonight!"

"So you Franks think you own the Empire, eh?" hissed the other in Alfgar's face. "You lord it over the city — Varangars, forsooth! Aye, you shall dance a merry dance tonight, dog!"

Too late Alfgar remembered the tales he had heard aboard the *Crossbeak* of the strife between the Greek soldiers and the Northmen, of the one or two men who were missing every little while, and his heart sank. Each of the

men taking an arm, they hurried him down the street, but he resolved that whatever befell he would break away at the first chance.

But no opportunity seemed to offer, as they turned corner after corner, until with a muttered curse the man on his left slipped in a pool of muddy water. The other paused with a laugh, and as he did so Alfgar threw himself against him and sent the man staggering. The next instant he was running down the street.

There was a yell of rage behind him, and the chase was on. The desperate young Saxon knew that he was lost if he fell, and his bound arms held him back, but he kept well in the lead of the two. He had long since lost all sense of direction, and had but a blind hope of throwing off his pursuers.

Slowly but surely they gained on him, running silently after that first yell, and their silence made Alfgar fear them the more. He was among taverns and wine shops now, and twice drunken revelers tried to stop him. But he burst through their flower-strewn ranks each time, gasping for breath. Then a crowd of soldiers poured out of a tavern ahead, and as he broke through they took up the chase

with a howl of delight. The hunted boy groaned, for now there was small chance of escape.

Down side streets and around corners he darted, and presently a stone sang in his ears, then more. His breath was coming in sobs now, great sobs that seemed to tear his breast asunder, but he gritted his teeth and held on. He knew that he was staggering as he ran, and a stone that bruised his arm all but sent him headlong. As he turned a corner another stone struck him —

“By the Hammer of Thor!”

Dimly Alfgar heard the words from a low doorway. Over it were scrawled letters, and he knew it for a tavern. The words were Danish! Whirling with a last effort, Alfgar darted in the doorway as the first of the howling mob behind dashed around the corner.

He found himself in a low, wide room littered with tables. A quick shout rose at his entrance, and a huge red-bearded man caught the Saxon as he fell.

“Help!” he gasped hoarsely. “Harald — a captive —”

He fell forward, done up completely but

still conscious. He heard one wild shrill roar of rage as the crowd burst in, then a deeper roar and a rattle of steel.

"At them, Varangars! Beat the dogs down!"

This time a yell of stricken fear shrilled high in the room, as the Greeks, pressed forward by the mob outside, felt the Varangar steel. Shriek upon shriek went up, swords clashed on armor, and as Alfgar raised his head faintly he saw a dozen fair-haired giants cutting their way through the Greek mercenaries.

"Thor! The White Christ! Odin with us!" A strange mixture of battlecries, pagan and Christian, went up from the Northmen, and with a feeble smile Alfgar the Saxon dropped his head to the rushes that strewed the floor, unconscious.

"Gently, Ragnvald! Pour the ale into him, Olaf! There!"

Alfgar opened his eyes and pushed away the horn of ale as he sat up in the arms of the red-bearded Varangar. His breath still came in sobs, and his heart was pounding. Scattered around on the floor were men who

groaned or lay quiet, while the Northmen still held their unsheathed swords.

"Can you walk, lad?" questioned his holder. "We must begone before the guard is down upon us!"

"Aye, with a little help," and Alfgar struggled up. Once on his feet, his strength seemed to return all at once, and he gripped the hand of the Varangar gratefully.

"No time for that," muttered the man. "Hasten, you sea wolves! Come, lad."

They were in the open air now, and the crowd had vanished. Two of the men aided Alfgar to walk, although he needed their help but little, and after five minutes one of them pointed to a wall ahead.

"Here we are, wolf cub! Not the Emperor himself dare molest us at home! In with you, now."

CHAPTER V

BAD NEWS

A MOMENT later Alfgar was seated on a pile of skins, while around him crowded a mass of men — Norsemen, Danes, Saxons, and Franks. The building was of stone, the room with low ceiling but immense in size, and it plainly served as sleeping quarters for the men.

“Out with the tale, Fairhair,” commanded the red-bearded man, not unkindly. “How came those Greek dogs after you?”

“Who are you?” retorted Alfgar with a smile. “Have the *Crossbeak* men landed yet?”

“The *Crossbeak*?” went up a shout. “What? Is Harald home again?”

A thrill of dismay went through Alfgar. He did not know that incoming ships, even that of Harald, could not enter the harbor at night because of the great chain stretched across it. He stared at the men in perplexity and then asked:

"Is Haldor or Ulf of Iceland here? Or Eadgar of England?"

"Here am I," answered a voice, as a man pushed forward. Although he had not seen his uncle for years, Alfgar knew him at once and sprang up.

"Uncle!" he cried. "I am Alfgar!"

"What!" The other, whose brown beard was streaked with gray, looked into the Saxon's face, then threw both arms around him. "It is truth! He is my sister's son, comrades!"

Alfgar loosed himself from that bear's hug with a wry smile.

"Careful, uncle! Two well-aimed stones made me somewhat sore. Pardon, friends, I forgot to thank you for my rescue!"

"Never mind that," came a shout. "Give us the tale! Where is Harald?"

Alfgar hesitated. He realized now that if he delivered his message to these wild spirits, they would be capable of anything. An attack on the palace would mean Harald's death, and he turned to his uncle.

"Know you this?" He pulled up his sleeve and showed Harald's armring. With a mur-

mur of amazement the men pushed closer. "Uncle, I have a message for you and Ulf and Haldor in private."

"I am Ulf Uspakeson," said the red-bearded Viking. "Haldor is on duty. Come with us, lad."

While the wondering men made way, Alfgar followed the two chiefs across the room into another and smaller one. Eadgar stuck a torch into a holder on the wall and turned.

"Harald is a captive," said Alfgar. Speechless, the two men gazed at him. Then, giving them no time to talk, he plunged into his story and did not finish until the whole of it was related to them. Ulf fingered his great sword as he listened, and Eadgar's face darkened, but neither interrupted until the end.

"That is sorry news, Alfgar," said his uncle slowly. "You did well not to blurt it out before the men."

"Aye, the lad is keen of wit enough," spoke Ulf thickly. Then he whipped out his blade with a roar. "By the One-eyed! For a drachma I'd lead them against the Palace itself! The treacherous dogs!"

"Quiet, old friend," and Eadgar laid a re-

straining hand on his arm. "Hold! What is that noise?"

All three paused, listening. Outside came a low roar, then it grew suddenly and seemed to fill the building. There came the rushing of feet, the clashing of weapons, and then a furious pounding at the door.

"Ulf! Eadgar! Open! Hardrede is taken! Open quickly!"

Eadgar sprang to the door, the others following. An instant later they were in the big room, which was filled with a raging mass of men. Alfgar recognized among them many from the *Crossbeak*, and Egil Thordson burst through.

"To arms, Ulf! Harald is a captive! We landed outside the walls and fought our way through. To the Palace!"

"To the Palace!" echoed the shout, but Ulf and Eadgar sprang to the great doorway, motioning the men back.

"Hold, comrades," began the Saxon, but a shout interrupted him.

"To the prisons! A rescue!"

At length the chiefs calmed the tumult a trifle and made their voices heard.

"What use to storm the prisons?" cried Eadgar. "Harald is not there."

At this a wondering silence fell, for as yet the Vikings did not know where Harald was. Michael's note had not deceived them, however. Then Eadgar turned to Alfgar and bid him tell his tale. At its conclusion the men looked blankly at one another.

"He had best marry the Empress and have done," muttered a Frank, but a Dane turned on the man with a frown. As the chiefs heard reports from Egil, Alfgar greeted old Atli Farseer warmly. Meanwhile, questions about the young Saxon began to fly around, and the *Crossbeak* men noised abroad who the lad was, and his skill.

"Come!" suddenly cried a swarthy Norseman named Svein, drawing his sword. "To the Palace, comrades! If we wait we shall all be butchered here. To arms, and to the rescue!"

This started the tumult anew, and Svein resolutely pushed his way to the door. Alfgar, standing by, realized how the men might easily endanger Harald's life. So, putting out his foot, he quietly tripped up the Viking and

sent him sprawling. The others sent up a shout of laughter, for all their rage, but Svein regained his feet and made for Alfgar.

Gripping his sword, the lad waited, but Ulf sprang between and seized Svein.

"Are you mad!" he roared. "This is no Viking ship! Harald would be killed before we could reach him; put up your sword, Svein, and hear reason."

"Yes, yes," cried others, "this is no time for brawling. Shame, to draw sword on a lad!"

Alfgar saw old Atli grin, but Svein, with a sullen glance at the young Saxon, withdrew growling. So the matter blew over, and Alfgar thought no more of it for the time.

Astounded and dismayed at the news, the chiefs gathered in consultation. Ascertaining that nothing would be done that night, at all events, Alfgar begged his uncle to give him a sleeping place, for once the excitement was over, he was almost too weary to stand. Eadgar led him to his own room, and Alfgar flung himself down on a pile of skins.

While he slept, the quarters of the Varangars remained in a turmoil most of the night, as new men came in and heard the news. It

needed but little to stir the Northmen to the boiling point, for it was only two days since various members of their families had been taken, no one knew whence. It was strongly suspected that the Empress had seized on them as hostages for the loyalty of the troops, and in the light of Harald's capture this was no longer doubted. At length, however, the chiefs decided that until they had further news from Harald nothing could be done, nor would they risk endangering the hostages.

It was late the next morning before Alfgar awakened from his sleep and found his uncle beside him. When he had eaten, the two talked long of England and all that had happened there since Eadgar's outlawry by Canute's cruel and weak son.

"Well, there is naught for us there," sighed the older warrior at last. "Our lands are gone, and you and I alone are left of the old stock, lad. We must carve out our fortunes here, and already I have made a fair start."

"But what about Harald?" Alfgar started to his feet suddenly, remembering. "Have they done anything?"

"No," and Eadgar shook his head sadly.

"Atli and Egil tell me you have some skill as a skald, Flamehair. Come out and sing to the men."

"I have no heart for singing," responded Alfgar, worried. "There is too much to be done."

"Nonsense," rejoined the other with a smile. "The men are dispirited and downcast, lad. Thiodolf the Skald has been making sad music all night, until Haldor sent him on duty to get rid of him. Come, hearten the men with a song of home-coming, nephew!"

Smiling, Alfgar yielded and followed his uncle out to the large room. Here the men were sitting around in small groups. Some talked in low voices, others gambled moodily, with deep curses, while still others rubbed at their weapons or sat staring at the floor. There was discontent smouldering in the air, and just as they entered the room Ulf of Iceland was forcing a quarreling Frank and Saxon apart.

The men greeted Alfgar kindly enough, but they seemed to have lost their high spirits of the night before. One, sitting with his head in his hands, did not even look up. Eadgar

led the young Saxon to a raised dais where were a couch of wood and a small harp.

As the lad took up the instrument, one or two of the *Raven's* crew came forward and greeted him, spreading the word of his skill among the others. Alfgar tuned up the harp, wondering of what he would sing, when his uncle turned to him.

"Make it brisk and lively, Flamehair — sing of the sea and home!"

"Aye, sing of the sea and of home!" echoed the deep voice of Ulf, and as Alfgar struck a chord he smiled again at the red-bearded giant. Then the words came to him, and he broke into a swinging chant that brought the Vikings to their feet.

Home, home again, Varangar exiles! Strike
oars in the deep!

Smite the broad seas with the oar of tough Tyr-
hewn ash!

Up, up over the searim to Norway — our prows
nearer leap

With each curling crest, with each onrushing
foamcap's sweep!

Hasten, hasten, ye waves! Ah, sweet to our
ears is the crash

As the prow cleaves the sea, and sweet is the
spume-cloud it flings!

Hoist sail, till the dragon throws foam like a
steed from the lash;

Let the raven float free, bearing bane in the face
of the day!

Out shields! Let the dragon scales sing us to
sleep in their clash —

On, on till the Norway sun bids the sharp
dragon-claws flash!

Home, home to the sweep and the upsurging
swirl of the fray!

“Skoal to Flamehair the Skald! Skoal!”

A long howl of delight stormed through the hall, mingled with a great clash of weapons as Alfgar concluded, flushed with his own success. Around him crowded the men, begging for more, and he sang on until his fingers were tired. Suddenly the man who had been sitting with his head bowed in his hands leaped up with a wild shout.

“Death to the Empress! Blood and fire! Blood and fire!”

“Down, Hrolf!” roared Eadgar, tearing the bright sword from him. As Alfgar saw the man’s haggard face and heard his name, he sprang forward suddenly.

“Is your name Hrolf?” he cried excitedly.

"Are you a Dane from England, and have you a daughter named Sigrid?"

Staring at him, dumb with surprise, Hrolf stood for a moment. Then he leaped forward and gripped Alfgar's shoulder in a clutch of iron.

"What of her?" he shouted hoarsely. "What know you of me, Saxon? Quickly!"

"I know where she is!" Not until that moment had Alfgar recalled the window in the wall. Suddenly it all burst on him, and as a roar pealed up through the hall Alfgar twisted free.

"Uncle Ulf! Do you and Hrolf here come apart with me," he begged. At this the Varangars protested furiously, for many of them had friends or relatives among those taken for hostages, but the chiefs quieted them and with Alfgar and Hrolf withdrew to the smaller room.

Here the young Saxon told his story in detail. During the telling a fierce light sprang into Hrolf's eyes and his lips gnawed at his long mustache, but he said no word. As Alfgar finished, Ulf laid his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Be patient, old friend! We must not let the rest know where the hostages are confined until we are ready to act. Then we can let loose a flood on Tsargrad that will make the Empress tremble on her throne!"

Hrolf nodded, and clasped the hand of Alfgar.

"I — I cannot thank you for this," he said slowly, searching the lad's face. "Truly you have been sent to us, whether by Odin or by the White Christ I know not. When you need a friend, come to Hrolf Dagson."

And with a nod of reassurance to the chiefs, he left the room. Ulf gazed at Eadgar silently.

"We must talk with Haldor," said the latter quickly. "I will send for him."

"Will it be safe for me to go out?" asked Alfgar while his uncle was gone. "Methinks I would be safe enough by daylight, with one or two of the men. Where is Atli Farseer?"

"The man of Raud the Red?" replied Ulf. "He has gone out, I know not where. As for you, it would be better than good for you to stay here, Flamehair. They may be searching for you even now. Ah, here is Haldor!"

The Iceland man, summoned from the nearby Palace, came in with Eadgar. Haldor was one of Harald's most faithful men, but his face was marred and broken from a wound received during a siege some time before. He was a man of few words, and heard Alfgar's news calmly.

"Then we know all that is necessary," he said. "Harald is somewhere in the summer palace of Blanchernae, and the hostages are in the palace of Princess Maria. What had we best do?"

A hasty knock came at the door, and in response to a nod from Ulf, Alfgar opened it to find Atli there.

"News!" cried the old Helmsman hastily, when he had entered. "I went abroad with Egil Thordson, and all morning we have been seeking. An hour since we ran across a Greek soldier in a wineshop. He was blabbing a trifle, and after we had finished with him he blabbed more. Egil is taking care of him so he won't escape. Truly, we were lucky, however the day may end with him."

"But the news, man!" cried Eadgar angrily. "What is it?"

"Harald is in the prison of Constantine, at the south end of Blanchernae!"

"The prison of Constantine!" repeated Haldor. "That is nothing but gardens, eh, Ulf?"

"Gardens," assented Ulf, "with a small summer-house in the center. I was on guard there when the Emperor Michael Catalactus was killed. The outside walls are guarded, and the Greek troops and mercenaries are quartered nearby."

"It would be a hard nut even for the Varangars to crack," said Eadgar gloomily, "even were it not for the hostages in the Empress' hands. I fear we can do nothing, comrades."

CHAPTER VI

HOW THE VARANGARS STRUCK

THERE was a long silence after that. Alfgar gazed from one to another, but read no encouragement in their faces. Ulf plucked at his beard nervously, Haldor fingered his sword and frowned, and Eadgar stared at the floor. Suddenly he looked up.

"By the way, Alfgar, you spoke of a man in a chariot who refused you help. What was he like?"

Alfgar briefly described the man as he remembered him. As he did so Eadgar looked black and the others muttered a curse.

"Did the chariot have little lions of ivory around the fore-rail, with gold bulwarks?" exclaimed Haldor. Alfgar nodded.

"It was he!" cried Ulf fiercely. "The Egyptian dog!"

"Who?" broke out the surprised Saxon. "Who was he?"

"Eumarchus of Alexandria," returned Eadgar. "He is a noble and of the Greens,

and is a suitor of the Princess Maria. Twice have our men been forced to whip his followers, and he no doubt recognized you as a Northman. But now, comrades, what are we to do?"

Again there fell a nervous silence, which was broken by Alfgar.

"It is in my mind, uncle, that we could do much if we struck at once."

"Speak out, Flamehair!" cried Ulf impatiently, as he paused. "If you have any plan, give it to us in the name of Odin!"

"Hardly in his name," smiled the young Saxon, the idea rapidly taking shape in his brain. "Are not the prison of Constantine and the quarters of the Princess at opposite ends of the city?"

"Nearly so," answered his uncle, eyeing him keenly.

"And how many ships have we in the harbor?"

"Six of our own," rejoined Haldor grimly, "and all the rest for the taking. Why?"

"Then here is my plan." Alfgar's eyes sparkled with eagerness, and he shook back his long hair as he leaned forward. "It is a

desperate venture, but we are in hard straits. First get together all the men who would go from the city with Harald. Is the prison of Constantine near the water?"

"Aye," came the reply.

"Then you, Haldor, could take Harald's men and load what ships would be needed for the —"

"All are loaded and provisioned," growled Haldor. "Come to the meat of it, lad."

"So much the better!" cried Alfgar. "You, Haldor, with Harald's men, could raid the quarters of the Princess after nightfall, to-night. Ulf, Eadgar, old Atli Farseer and I can go to the prison and free Harald. We can take to a boat and wait for you in the straits."

"Brave words," returned Ulf with a laugh. "But easier said than done, methinks."

"Why?" urged Alfgar. "A grapnel and a rope would take us over the wall and into the gardens. If there are guards, we can silence them; but as the mercenaries are nearby we must avoid rousing them. We must trust to skill rather than force. If there is an alarm from the quarters of the Princess, so

much the better for our plan, since that will draw off the troops."

A moment's silence, then Eadgar sprang to his feet.

"By the head of Canute! The plan is better than good!"

"Skoal, Flamehair!" shouted the others in huge delight, while Haldor wrung the young Saxon's hand.

"It is our only hope, at all events," he said decidedly. "Shall we try it, comrades?"

"Try it?" roared Ulf. "We will carry it out!" And Eadgar nodded.

Ulf flung open the door and vanished with a shout. Haldor smiled quietly, and followed, as did the two Saxons. But as the news spread among the Varangars there was none of the wild excitement of the night before. Instead, men spoke with grim earnestness. Those who chose to leave the Greek service were told off to warn their comrades on the ships and on duty at the Palace, while those who chose to remain offered all the help in their power. These latter were mainly Franks, Russians, and Germans; a few Saxons stuck to Eadgar and Alfgar, but the bulk of the rebels were

Danes and Northmen who had followed Harald through many a hard battle.

At the midday dinner in the guardroom the final plans were laid. The Palace guard for the night was chosen from the Franks, while all the rest were to aid the Northmen in the assault on the smaller palace of Princess Maria. Then the Frankish party would return while the rest, under Haldor, would embark after cutting the chain across the harbor mouth. They would pick up Harald and the other four on their way north through the straits.

Now the guardrooms sprang into sudden activity. The men who were departing gathered their possessions from their quarters, although most of their booty and valuables had been sent to the ships or dispatched to King Jarisleif in Russia months before. Harald had long contemplated returning to Norway, and it was whispered among the men that the treasures in Jarisleif's keeping were greater than any king in the North had ever before owned.

Quietly but rapidly the men prepared. There was sharpening of weapons and polish-

ing of armor. Eadgar took Alfgar into the armory and there fitted him with his war gear. As the departing men had their pick of the booty by common consent, Alfgar chose a rich gold-hilted sword, of fine steel from Spain, a plain steel helm with back-sweeping raven wings, and a byrnie of fine meshed rings which reached to his knees. As he picked out the latter Eadgar commended his judgment.

"See," he said, taking the mail-coat and placing it against the wall, "now take a spear and let drive."

Alfgar flung the spear, which rebounded with a crash. When they examined the byrnie it showed no sign of the blow, and Eadgar nodded.

"You would never get a better, Flamehair. I remember that Harald took it when we sacked a Saracen castle in Africa, across from Sicily. It is a bit long, but you will soon grow into it. Now for a shield."

As all Harald's men carried shields bearing a red cross, the choosing of this was not difficult. Alfgar then picked out a light but very strong axe, and they returned to the guard-room.

There were just enough men to man two of Harald's largest ships, the *Crossbeak* and the *Dragon*. The hopes of all were high, and both Alfgar and Thiodolf the Skald kept up the spirits of the men until they were called to the evening meal. It was a silent assemblage that gathered about the long tables in the dining-hall. Only some eighty out of the two hundred Varangars were remaining. The families of the rest were by now on board the ships, but there were few who had not some relative or friend among the hostages seized three days before. The fate of these latter would hang on this night's work, and the Varangars, soon to become Vikings once more, ate in a grim silence that boded ill for any who stood in their way.

"Now leave your shield with Haldor," ordered Ulf as they arose from the table. He picked up a long dark garment and flung it to Alfgar. "Put on this monk's robe and draw the hood over your helm; it is well to take no chances, and we have far to go."

During this afternoon Alfgar had heard the story of the day before. It seemed that Haldor had gained some inkling of the plot

against Harald, and the seizure of the hostages had also alarmed him. It was known that Harald was on his way home, and a few men had been despatched in a skiff to warn him, but they had been too late.

Atli, Ulf, Eadgar and Alfgar quietly left the palace by a side entrance, clad in their monk's robes. The night was just falling, and as they went along Alfgar's thoughts reverted to the evening before.

"What meant you," he whispered suddenly to his uncle, "by saying that Eumarchus, the Egyptian, was of the Greens? What race are they?"

"A race of Greeks, lad," smiled Eadgar. "Tsargrad is mad over chariot races, and the whole city is divided into two factions — the Blues and the Greens. At present the latter are in power, and there is great hatred among them for men of the old faith. Most of them hold to new doctrines, teachings of the heretics and doctors of the law, and their disputes enter the Palace itself. The Emperor is of the Blues, the Empress of the Greens. On racing days there are riots and free fights over half the city."

"I am sorry we go so soon," half sighed Alfgar. "It seems a shame to come to the greatest city in the world, only to leave it in a few hours."

"Nonsense," broke in the gruff voice of Ulf, who had been listening, "you were better off if you never had come, Flamehair. This is a place to sap men's hearts with gold and fill their veins with water. Faugh! You are liable to get a dagger in the back at any time."

"That is not much worse," spoke up Atli with a chuckle, "than being burned in your bed, if what I have heard of Iceland be true!"

"Open warfare is different," protested Ulf heatedly. "It is all very well to burn a man so long as he knows you are his foe — hello! There come a party of Greens! Drunken young nobles, by their looks."

Coming toward them along the street was a flare of torches, borne by flower-wreathed, staggering men who sang and danced carelessly. As they caught sight of the seeming party of monks, a yell of delight went up.

"Sport, comrades, sport! Bait the anchorites! Surround them!"

As the Varangars disdained to flee, the rev-

ellers were soon about them, dancing and shouting forth heretical taunts. As the four pressed through them, one, more sober than the rest, stepped out and clutched the robe of Alfgar.

"Hold them, brethren!" he cried. "Bring a torch!"

Although he did not understand the words, Alfgar started at the voice and looked again at the speaker. As one brought forward a torch, he gave an angry exclamation; the man was Eumarchus the Egyptian! Barely had he recognized the man when Eumarchus pulled away his cowl with a yell. There was a startled cry as Alfgar's helm and golden-red hair showed, then the drunken crowd pressed forward.

"Varangars! Heretics! Death to the heretics!"

Alfgar felt something strike him heavily and shiver on his byrnie. The cowardly thrust roused him to action, and with a single blow of his fist he sent Eumarchus headlong in the mud. Then Ulf threw back his cowl and seized his blade. The sight of that shaggy red beard sent the revellers back in panic.

"Out of the way, dogs!" snarled the Varangar, baring his blade. With a shriek of fear the Greeks turned and ran, while Eumarchus regained his feet and followed.

"Let him go," laughed Eadgar. "That was a goodly blow, lad, but next time strike on the chin or behind the ear."

"I lost my temper," admitted Alfgar, rubbing his knuckles and replacing his cowl. "However, I feel better now I have paid him out."

The attack on the palace of the Princess was to take place at midnight, and the four hurried onward. They were not molested again and went forward at a brisk walk for half an hour. Then Ulf drew them into the shadow of a building and pointed to a wall twenty feet ahead.

"There is the prison," he whispered. "We are nearly opposite the summer-house that serves as a guard-cell for those of noble blood. No doubt Harald is there. Let us watch here for the sentinel."

A moment later the figure of a guard appeared, pacing along the top of the wall. After giving him time to get well past, Atli ran

under the wall and cast up a muffled grapnel. At the second cast this caught, and the rope was dangling before them.

There were no words wasted. Ulf went up the rope hand over hand, and Eadgar after him. Alfgar followed, and when he reached the top he saw two forms struggling silently a dozen feet away. Then one went down with a faint clash of arms, and Ulf returned just as Atli came up.

"Take his helm and shield, Farseer," ordered the leader, "and do you keep ward in his place."

Atli nodded and left them. Pulling up the rope, Alfgar reset the grapnel and threw down the rope inside. One by one the three slipped down, and found themselves in deep shadow, among thick bushes.

"Follow me," whispered Ulf. "There may be guards in the place, though I think not. Step lightly!"

Eadgar followed him, then came Alfgar. A moment later they were out of the shadow of the wall. The night air was heavy with the scent of flowers, strange southern trees stood all about them, and Alfgar felt a curious sense

of unreality, as if he were moving in a dream. This was quickly dispelled as Eadgar stopped and gripped his arm.

“Listen!”

A strange, shrill, faint noise came to them from afar. As the three stood listening, Ulf suddenly drew a deep breath.

“Norse war horns, by the eye of Odin!”

The Varangars had struck.

CHAPTER VII

THE LOOSING OF HARALD

TO work, Ulf!" whispered Eadgar eagerly. "We have no time to lose!"

Without a word more the big leader turned and led the way. After five minutes of walking between bushes and trees they struck a gravel path, and now Ulf broke into a run. Then arose a dark mass before them.

"The summer-house!" grunted Ulf. "Steal up, Flamehair. You are lighter of foot than we — see if there are guards."

Alfgar obeyed, trembling with excitement. As he crept to the shadow of the walls, he saw that before him was a small house of one room, luxuriously furnished. The walls were made of growing trees, clipped on the inside, and he had no difficulty in seeing through the interstices.

Before him, on a rich couch, with rugs and silks all about, sat Harald Hardrede, his head in his hands. There were no guards in sight, and Alfgar tapped lightly on the wall. Harald

raised his head, and the Saxon was shocked at the thin, haggard, fierce features that met his gaze.

"Are you guarded?" he asked in a whisper.

Harald sprang to his feet, realizing whence the sound had come, flung open the door at one side, and a moment later held Alfgar in his arms. Then Ulf and Eadgar approached, but Harald for a moment was unable to speak to them.

"Thanks, comrades!" he said at length.

"There are no guards nearer than the walls. What is forward?"

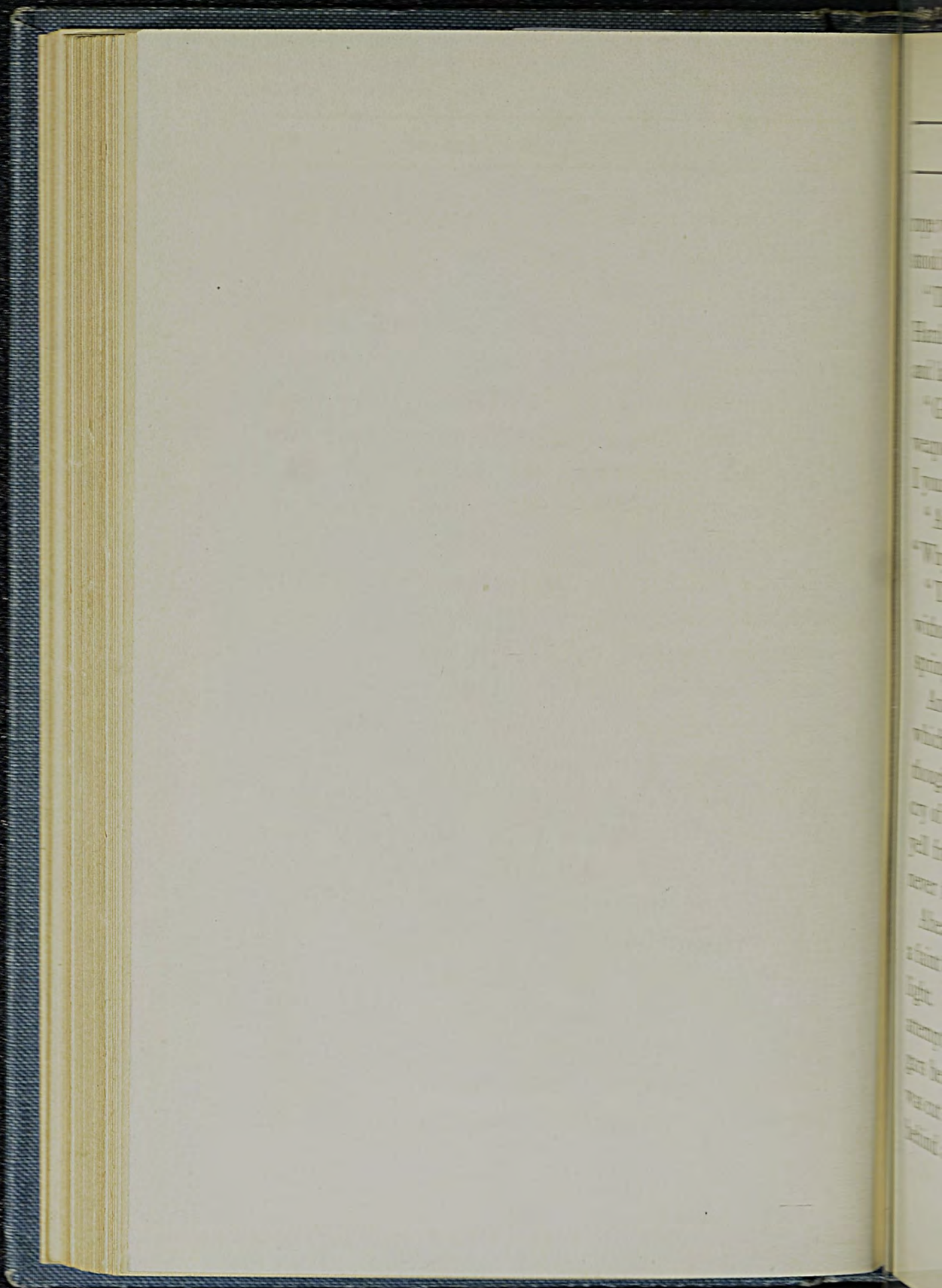
"That!" returned Eadgar grimly, motioning to the south. Faint but distinct, another burst of war horns came to them, and in the faint light Alfgar saw Harald quiver suddenly. Then Ulf explained their plan as they started back toward the walls.

"So from here we go to the waterside and get a boat," he finished. "The ships will pick us up —"

"Peace!" laughed Harald softly, seizing the rope and going up as he spoke. When they were all on the wall, Atli joined them and the chief greeted him heartily. Then the

Harald
flung open
the
door





rope was reversed, and a moment later they stood in the street below.

"This way!" cried Ulf anxiously, as Harald started forward. Hardrede turned and laughed again.

"Give me your axe!" He poised the huge weapon and then swung it like a twig. "Am I your leader or no?"

"Aye," growled the perplexed Ulf. "Why —"

"Then think not that Harald slips away without leaving his mark," cried the chief, springing forward. "Follow, sea wolves!"

And then rose on the still night air that which the peace-loving Byzantines had never thought to hear so close to home — the battle cry of Hardrede. It was echoed by one wild yell from Ulf, then began a race that Alfgar never forgot through all his life.

Ahead of them, near two miles away, came a faint din of conflict and a spreading glare of light. It was a desperate thing Harald was attempting, for unless he reached the Varangars before their work was done, his escape was cut off. He ran easily, his long hair flying behind and his single weapon gleaming in the

moonlight, while after him came the others as best they might.

Alfgar had no fear about keeping up, running lightly and swiftly at his uncle's side despite the weight of his weapons. Atli Far-seer, old as he was, made no complaint and managed to stick close to the young Saxon.

But Byzantium was in wild uproar. The glare of the fire, no less than the sound of fighting, brought out the inhabitants from every house, and only the yells of Harald and the sight of those five wild figures cleared the way, the people shrinking back in terror. Never did Harald slacken his pace, and always Alfgar felt the hot breath of Atli on his neck. Once a band of Greek troops turned in from a side street, but as Harald crashed into them and his axe came down they fled with a shriek of terror, and the way was clear.

On and on ran the five, through dwelling streets, bazars, and markets, but ever the battle cry of Harald shrilled over the houses, and ever the crowds made room with shouts of fear. Alfgar wondered at the endurance of Harald, for he seemed tireless, and for all his shouting his breath came no quicker.

Once a dozen Arab bowmen, mercenaries, ran with them. But these Harald did not molest. He received a nod of recognition from the leader, and a few moments later the Arabs were left behind. Farther on, as the glare ahead seemed close to them, a little band of Venetians swung in behind and kept pace stoutly enough. Then, of a sudden, they came upon the scene.

Alfgar found himself running across a wide square, with a great stone building on the farther side. Part of this was in flames, and from the building itself came screams, shouts, the clash of steel and the ring of war horns. Outside lay a score of bodies on the stones, and as they came to these the Varangars poured from the doors, laden with rich plunder of every sort.

At sight of the five there was one wild yell of delight. Then a dozen men clutched Alfgar and the others, and a moment later each of the five was standing on a shield, held aloft by brawny, blood-stained arms. More of the Vikings poured out, then came a silence as Harald raised his hand.

"Comrades!" he shouted, and a quick yell

went up at the word. "Comrades, are the hostages retaken?"

"Aye, Harald," roared Haldor, stepping out. "And sent down to the ships ere now."

"Then," went on Harald, lifting his axe, "it is in my mind that the Emperor dwells in the Smaller Palace near the Hippodrome. Let us seek him! Harald is loosed!"

"Harald is loosed!" As the Acolyth leaped to the ground one wild yell echoed his words, and abandoning the palace to the flames the Varangars surged forward. By this time the square was half-filled with Greek and Arab troops, who made a faint-hearted stand. But when the Northmen struck them the ranks split apart with scarce a blow, and with Alfgar close at his heels Harald sped onward. It was a bad day for Byzantium, reflected the Saxon, when Harald Hardrede was trapped!

By this time the whole city was in an uproar. Alfgar gave all up for lost, thinking for a moment that the berserk fury was on Harald and his men, and that they had resolved to die like heroes. But he was mistaken, as he soon found. The terrible Varangars, although few in number, were the most dreaded fighting

men of the empire; their prowess had been proved on a hundred fields, and Harald's recent exploits in Syria were fresh in all minds. Nor was the actual cause of the revolt yet determined. There were shouts that the city was taken by the Moslem, others cried that the Empress was dead, others that the Greens and Blues were rioting again.

Only one thing occurred to Alfgar on the short dash to the Smaller Palace. This was when, as he ran, he stumbled and tripped another man. As he helped the latter up hastily, the man struck away his hand with an oath, and Alfgar knew him for Svein the Dane. There was no time to explain, so the lad hurried on with the rest, but he remembered later the scowl of rage on the Viking's face.

Upon reaching the Palace of the Emperor, a small building set in the midst of gardens and surrounded by walls, they met a check for the first time. The guard of Nubian archers, brave men all, sent more than one Northman reeling back with a shaft through his throat; but Harald charged them desperately and burst through. Alfgar crossed blades with a tall Greek officer and was pressed back

momentarily; then he remembered one of Atli's tricks, knocking up the other's sword and throwing forward his shield full in the officer's face, with all his weight behind it. The man staggered, then went over backward and Alfgar rushed on after Harald.

The corridors of the palace were full of half-wakened, frightened men and women. A few of the Nubians tried to hold back the Northmen, but their defense was brief. Ulf seized a torch as the last archer fell, and held it to a curtain. In a flash the flame ran up the silk to the cedar woodwork, and Alfgar knew that their stay must be brief indeed.

"Harald is loosed!" The terrible cry, mingled with the music of war horns, echoed as the men spread out to plunder. As if by magic, Eadgar and Atli appeared before Harald, Haldor and Alfgar, who had remained in the audience-hall, and behind them they dragged a man with weak, frightened face and trembling hands. It was the Emperor of the Eastern Empire himself!

A little thrill of awe ran through the Saxon lad as he gazed on this inheritor of the greatest throne in the world, dragged from the

midst of his guards by a handful of men. He wondered if he were in a dream, as he saw the purple-clad man clasp the knees of the Viking chief and beg for pity, with tears streaming down his upturned face.

Harald looked at him for a moment with contempt, then spurned him aside with his foot and turned to Atli and Eadgar.

"Take the cowardly dog to the ships," he ordered with a curl of the lip. Harald detested nothing in the world so much as a coward. "And get the men together. We must be off."

As the men saved their plunder from the flames and assembled, they found that the Greek troops were gathering fast. There was no time to be lost, and now Alfgar got a glimpse of the quick brain that had been behind so many of Harald's victories. Knowing well the nature of the Greeks, Harald ordered his men to scatter handfuls of the gold and jewels they were laden with into the midst of the opposing troops. As the latter broke their ranks in a mad scramble, the Vikings charged, the royal captive in their midst.

Before that mad assault the Greeks crum-

bled away. Alfgar, at the side of his uncle and Harald, sent down two who barred their way, and in the whirl of excitement the young Saxon lost sight of the fact that this was the first blood he had ever spilled. He knew only that there was a gleam of steel in front of him, he felt his sword crash upon armor, and then with a great shout the Varangars were through the foe. For a little way they ran at top speed, but found that there was no pursuit.

Here there was a brief halt while the two parties separated. The Franks and Saxons, with the others who were not returning to the Northland, bade their comrades farewell and swung off to the barracks. Harald put himself at the head of the others and led them toward the harbor, the royal prisoner in their midst.

Alfgar, breathing hard, was thrilled with a wild exultation such as he had never felt before. Now he realized for the first time the glory of victory behind a leader such as Harald; the long voyage from England had been wild enough in its way, but this was altogether different. Harald was setting forth to take a throne, with a little band of men and

two ships — setting forth half across the known world, and at the very start embroiling himself with the whole Greek Empire! And he, Alfgar the Saxon, was one of that little force destined to make history!

The monastery, the lessons, the quiet garden with its white-clad men, all seemed very dim and faint to him, as the war horns thrilled up over the raging city and the sky behind leaped into red flame. The streets were filled with excited crowds, chariots thundered past, but the Vikings were unmolested.

“What think you of our leader, Flame-hair!” chuckled Eadgar, as they swept along the streets.

“He is wonderful, uncle!” exclaimed the lad, eagerly. “Who but he would have dared capture the Emperor himself!”

“It is in my mind that he will gain Norway in like manner,” put in Ulf, behind. “What a night! Not since we drove the Saracens out of a city somewhere beyond Jerusalem, and fired the place after them, have we had such fun. How like you the Varangar service, lad?”

“Viking, rather,” laughed Alfgar. “The

Varangars, it seems to me, are about disbanded. How about the men at the ships, Ulf? Can they cut the chain across the harbor?"

"It is done," spoke up Haldor. "Stuf and Thiodolf took down the hostages to the ships, and they promised to cut the chain. But how about the other, the great chain across the narrow straits above the city?"

"That will be a different matter," rejoined Ulf. "But trust Harald to find some way."

"Is there a second chain?" cried Alfgar in wonder.

"Aye, thicker through than my body," growled the big chief. "It keeps out all ravagers from the north — ships from Russia and the like, each night. Ah, here we are!"

Alfgar saw a flare of tossing torches, two dragon ships drawn to the wharf ahead, and a crowd of Vikings rushing forward with a yell of delight, and knew that the danger was over. Harald smiled at his men, strode to the stone flagging of the wharf, swung his axe aloft and whirled it far out into the tossing waters.

"Harald is loosed!" he cried, turning to the men behind, a great light of exultation in

his eagle eyes. "Comrades, to Norway and a throne!"

"Skoal!" and Alfgar found himself yelling madly with the rest, "Skoal to Harald of Norway! Skoal to Harald Sigurdson! Skoal!"

CHAPTER VIII

TO NORWAY!

IN ten minutes all the Varangars were aboard the two chosen ships. Alfgar and his uncle, with Haldor, went aboard that of Harald, the *Crossbeak*, while Ulf took command of the *Dragon*. Atli Farseer, who was known personally or by reputation to many of the men, was made steersman of Harald's ship. Eadgar was given command of the fore-castle men, while Harald kept Alfgar by him in the stern, the half-dozen captives being placed in the cabin. When Ulf had likewise arranged his men, Harald gave a blast on his war horn and the ropes were cast off.

"So, wolf cub," muttered old Atli to the young Saxon, "you have had your first taste of battle! How did it like you?"

"I had small time to think," laughed Alfgar, laying aside his weapons, for they were now drawing out into the harbor. "In truth, Atli, it seems like a desperate venture!" he added, more seriously.

"Aye, with any save Harald," growled the Viking, his eye resting on the tall figure of Harald a few feet distant. "Best snatch a little sleep now, lad. There is little wind and we will be two or three hours in reaching the great cable, up the strait. You have had a hard day of it."

Alfgar laughed at this advice, but within a few moments he soon found it good. When the strain of the excitement was gone and the harbor lights with the flare behind died down to a glare upon the horizon, he suddenly realized that he was horribly tired, and sought the shelter of the cabin. The oars had been taken in and the ship was forging slowly ahead before a light breeze as Alfgar threw himself down on a pile of plunder-filled sacks and went off to sleep.

He was awakened by a heavy shock. Springing up, he seized his byrnie and drew it on as he gained the deck. The two ships were gunwale to gunwale, and the leaders were talking at the rail while the men clustered about. On either hand, in the clear starlight, Alfgar could see the dark line of the shores, while only a dim light on the horizon showed where

Byzantium lay. He made his way through the men to the side of his uncle, still rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"No use trying to cut it, Harald," Ulf of Iceland was saying. "We would have the Thracians and Libyans buzzing about our ears in no time. The best way is to land and rush the Thracian guard-house on the east shore. Then we can cast loose the chain and let the ships by."

"There are half a dozen war galleys up here, too," added Haldor thoughtfully. "It is a hard nut to crack, Hardrede."

Harald did not reply. Alfgar saw that he was frowning and playing with his sword hilt, and evidently the expedition had encountered some obstacle which all their leader's craft and skill was unable to surmount. For the moment he could not guess what it was, and plucked his uncle's sleeve with a low query.

"The great chain, lad. Yonder, ahead of us," and Eadgar pointed over the rail between the prows. Then for the first time Alfgar noticed a thin dark line stretching just in front of the ships and almost dipping into the waves — the mighty chain which guarded the straits.

"Best return past the city," growled a voice behind. "Then we can go on home past Spain and England. There will be more booty that way —"

"Silence!" exclaimed Harald angrily. "Who disputes my rule here?"

None answered, and all shrunk before his eye. Alfgar, turning hastily, caught sight of the fierce face of Svein near him, but he had no time for conjecture as a sudden idea leaped into his brain.

"Oh! If it dips —" he began impulsively, then stopped. Harald swung around and noted Alfgar's presence for the first time with a smile.

"Ah, skald, I missed you! What was that word of yours?"

"I thought of something," cried Alfgar eagerly, half afraid of being ridiculed.

"Out with it, Flamehair," laughed Ulf harshly. "Those thoughts of yours are like to prove of worth, it is in my mind."

A mutter of approval went up from the men, for all had heard of how the Saxon had planned Harald's escape, and Alfgar was already a prime favorite.

"Why," said the lad, hesitating, "I remembered something in the Saga of King Olaf, your brother, that Atli taught me on the voyage from England. You remember, Harald, how he trapped the Swede when he was a lad?"

"You mean by the chain that he drew up underneath the ship, overturning her?" answered Harald, puzzled.

"Yes," assented Alfgar eagerly, as his idea took shape. "Would n't this chain dip in the middle?"

"Right!" and Harald gave him a clap on the shoulder that sent him staggering against Eadgar. The quick brain of the leader caught the plan instantly, and without giving Alfgar a chance to proceed he turned to the others with rapid orders.

"Ulf, put all your men in the stern, save only the rowers. When we find where the chain dips in the center of the channel row straight over it, then have the men run forward instantly. It will go hard but the ships will run over the chain without trouble!"

There was a murmur of approbation, then Ulf leaped back to his own vessel and the two

ships parted company. Hurriedly the men crowded into the stern while the oars were put out, and five minutes later the chain disappeared beneath the waves for a space of thirty or forty feet. When this was located the rowers backed water, then made a spurt ahead.

There came a slight shock, the keel scraped along the chain and the prow of the *Crossbeak* rose high in air. Without waiting for the order the Vikings dashed forward into the bow, and the ship slid across the chain easily. A low shout of delight rose from the men as the *Dragon* came close behind, but the shout changed to a horror-struck silence.

Turning to watch the other ship, Alfgar saw her prow slide up, black against the stars. But her men waited too long, or she had slid too far, for even as Alfgar looked to see her slide over, there came a sudden rending crash and a wild yell as the *Dragon* split in twain.

"Back oars!" roared Harald. The order was not needed, for already the men were working desperately. Alfgar threw his weight on an oar, but the other ship had gone down like a stone, heavy-laden as she was. Most of the men still wore their heavy armor and had

gone down with her, only some twenty being picked up.

Alfgar, leaning over the rail with the others and helping the rescued men over the side, suddenly felt a quick, sharp thrust that all but sent him into the waves below. Fortunately, one of the other men caught him as he lost his balance, and he whirled about angrily.

But no one seemed to be paying him any attention. Bewildered, Alfgar at length concluded that one of the crew, running past, had bumped against him and he said nothing. Still, busy as he was with the rescued men, the young Saxon felt that that shove had come from no friendly hand. The thought angered him, but he was helpless and deemed it best not to speak of the happening to Eadgar or Atli. After all it might have been an accident, he decided; but he was soon to find out his mistake.

With saddened hearts but undaunted spirits the Vikings left the spot where their comrades had perished. Few but had lost a friend or old companion, and bitter were the words directed toward the cabin, where lay the captive Emperor of the East.

Alfgar was no longer sleepy and he sat on the deck beside Atli, enjoying the night immensely. It was hard for him to realize that a splendid ship and two-thirds of her crew had just gone down into the black waters, but as his gaze fell upon the lonely figure of Harald staring at the sky ahead Alfgar comprehended something of the bitterness that must be raging within his leader's breast. As the ship sped to the north the men sat moodily about the decks, reclothing those saved from the waves and talking in low voices. Their hilarity was gone now, for even the most reckless had been sobered by the sudden fate that had come to their friends.

"It is strange to think of all that has taken place within the last week," said Alfgar to the steersman. "Here Raud and all his Vikings save a few are gone, we have had a brief glimpse of the greatest city in the whole world, and now we are in almost unknown waters and bear in the cabin the Emperor of the Roman Empire, a captive!"

"And the world is ours for the taking also," added Atli drily. "In sooth, Flamehair, I would follow Hardrede back to Tsargrad if

he said the word; if half the stories his men tell are true he is the greatest leader and hardest fighter Norway has ever produced. They say he has sent vast treasures ahead to Jarisleif of Russia, and that this is not so mad a venture as we had thought."

"What is Russia?" asked Alfgar. "I have heard little of it save from a few of our old men in Raud's ship. Is it civilized?"

"Civilized?" chuckled Atli Farseer. "Why, lad, Kiev is called the 'city of four hundred churches' and is nearly as great as Tsargrad! It is Jarisleif's capital, and worthy of him. They say he has given his people unheard-of laws, such as the Greeks have, that his power is immense, and that his land is far more civilized even than your England.

"When Harald's brother, King Olaf, was first driven from Norway he found a refuge in Russia, and after he fell at Stiklestad Harald fled to Jarisleif. I understand that they are firm friends and that Harald is thinking of marrying Elizabeth, Jarisleif's daughter. I wonder what Harald will do with the Emperor?"

Alfgar, too, wondered what would be the

fate of their hapless prisoner. There seemed to be no pursuit, but he felt a sudden pity at the thought of the weak ruler, torn from his palace in the night and carried off to an unknown destination. Would Harald simply hold him as hostage? Too well Alfgar knew the Viking nature, and how the loss of the *Dragon* had implanted longings for fierce revenge in the men's hearts which might flame out against the captive.

Thinking thus, he leaned back against the bulwark. The ship heeled over slightly under a freshening breeze that sang softly through the ropes in answer to the rippling music of the waves beneath, and little by little Alfgar for the second time that night dropped off to sleep.

He opened his eyes with a strange sense of unreality. He was rolled up in Atli's scarlet cloak, and over him waved the green boughs of a tree! Sitting up, surprised at the absence of motion, Alfgar found that the ship was lying at rest moored to a high bank, that many of the men were on the shore, and that the sun was well up. As he gained his feet Eadgar approached.

"Well, Flamehair, how do you feel after the night's work?"

"I feel just as though I had dreamed it all," smiled Alfgar. "But I suppose it is really true. What are we doing here?"

"Harald is sending back the Emperor and the other prisoners," rejoined his uncle.

"Unharmed?"

"Yes, and with the message that next time the Empress tries to hold Harald Hardrede a prisoner she had best look to her throne," chuckled the Saxon grimly. "We are waiting for Harald and the men to return. They took the captives inland a bit. Around the point, ahead, lies the open sea that the Greeks call the Euxine, though the Russians call it the Black Sea. Our way lies across that, lad, and then our journey will really be begun."

"And is it far, uncle?" asked Alfgar. He knew nothing of this land of the east, and indeed there were few men in his day who did, save those who dwelt in the east itself.

Eadgar nodded gravely. He himself knew no more of what lay ahead than he had picked up from Harald and the rest, most of whom had come to Byzantium from Russia by the

same route. To the mouth of the Dnieper was some five hundred miles, and they would ascend the river about the same distance to Kiev, the southern Russian capital. The real capital of Jarisleif was Novgorod, six hundred miles farther north, where they would end their journey.

A thousand miles by boat and not less than six hundred by land was no small thing to attempt in those days, especially when enemies might be lying in wait on every hand. Hitherto, Alfgar had been carried off his feet by the mad rush of events. In the heat of enthusiasm, with eager comrades on every side, with excitement burning in his veins, he had thought and cared little for what might come. But now, talking soberly and quietly with his uncle Eadgar, he sought Atli's words of the night before for assurance.

"Atli?" repeated Eadgar. "Why, lad, the old steersman is like all the rest, sturdy Viking that he is. They are but children after all, in their passions and sympathies. If Harald bid them leap overboard, they would do it gladly. If he did one of them an injustice they would turn against him just as gladly."

"But surely," cried Alfgar in dismay, "they would never do that?"

"No," agreed Eadgar, "I hardly think so, for they have followed him too long, and they love him too much. Still, they have the tremendous assurance of physical strength. They know, or rather believe, that they can conquer ten times their number. To sweep up to Norway seems a little thing to them, although it may well be that Harald will never win his throne. His nephew Magnus is living, you know."

"I do n't know," answered Alfgar. "Is Magnus king?"

"As to that we know nothing," returned Eadgar. "Our last news was that Edward ruled England, but that the Danes still held Norway firmly. Before he died, King Olaf, Harald's older brother, promised that Magnus and Harald should share Norway between them when it was recovered from the Dane, but it was never recovered. However, we can leave all that until we reach Kiev and know what the situation is."

Their conversation was interrupted by a shout from the men on shore, and Harald ap-

peared at the head of a party, coming down through the woods. He ordered the men aboard at once, explained to Eadgar that the Emperor had been given in charge of a small band of Greek soldiers, and after directing Haldor and Ulf to steer north across the Black Sea, entered the cabin to gain some much-needed sleep. Atli appeared from below, where he had also been recuperating, and in half an hour the *Crossbeak* was sailing north under a stiff breeze and the headlands of the Bosphorus were vanishing in the distance.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE OPEN

WHILE Alfgar had slept, Harald had decided that he would send the captive Emperor back with a message calculated to wound the pride of the Empress. Some of the men had inflated hopes of an immense ransom, but Harald knew that the Emperor was but a figurehead and of little value as a hostage. However, the pride of the Vikings was fully equal to their cupidity, and they were well satisfied to let the Emperor go safe with his message.

The young Saxon found this voyage very different from the trip down from England. Harald's object was not plunder and rapine, as had been Raud's. Most of the men were loaded down with the spoils of their campaigns, and the entire spirit of the crew was wholesome and vigorous in the extreme. Every man was a seasoned warrior, and both Alfgar and his uncle thought they had never seen a finer body of men.

"In any case," said Eadgar that afternoon, as he and Alfgar stood on the stern, "we will not be so badly off. I have won enough to return to England if I so desire, and now that we alone remain of the old house I may do so after this venture is finished. But the country will be strange to me, my old friends and comrades will be gone, and it may well be that should Harald gain Norway I will remain with him."

"It matters little to me," added Alfgar. "I remember scarcely anything of my father and mother, and I know that our lands are in the hands of Danes. I have never met anyone whom I would sooner follow than Harald, and yet—well, we will see how things turn out, uncle. It may be that a strong Saxon will rule in England, and if so we may regain our own. Edward is half French, and Earl Godwin is our Saxon hope."

"Fair weather, skald!" cried Harald, emerging from the cabin. "Will you challenge me to the oar walking again?"

"Not I," laughed Alfgar, glancing at Atli with a smile. "I'm stiff enough now after wearing that armor all last night!"

"You 'll get used to that," chuckled Harald, glancing down at his own byrnie which he had not removed even to sleep. "By the way, Thiodolf was somewhat wounded during the fray, and cannot use a harp. Come, Flamehair, speed us onward with a rousing song!"

His clear voice carried the words to the men, who at once sent up a cheer and came crowding aft. Alfgar, after some search, located his harp among the baggage and set it into shape for use. Many were the suggestions put forward as to the song, but old Atli settled it finally.

"Give us the wise words of Brynhild, lad," he exclaimed. "That bit of the Sigurd saga I taught you first—the wisdom of the warrior!"

"Aye, give us that!" cried a number of voices, and with a smile Alfgar obeyed, singing to his harp-music the unrhymed, rugged old words that Farseer had taught him.

Hear, Warrior, of my wisdom!
First, with all thy kinfolk
Be open, guileless ever;
Let not thy wrath be hasty
Despite of wrong thee-toward,
But keep thee friends with kinfolk.

My second rede would teach thee
Trust not the hasty swearer;
Give thou an oath and keep it,
But give it slowly ever,
For he who swears unthinking,
The wolf of vows, is witless!

When unwise man derides thee
Hold peace, yea, though he speed forth
Fair lies about thy doings.
But when the time grows ripest
Then drive the life from out him
And pay him for his lying!

Hear now my last rede, Warrior!
Deal naught with men a-drinking,
For ale words are but ill words;
Naught but grief they bring thee,
Naught but bane and sorrow;
Wine steals wit from all men!

"Skoal! Skoal to Flamehair the Skald!"
rang out the shout as Alfgar laid down his
harp. Weapons clashed their approval and
although the young skald shook his head,
Harald turned to him with a smile.

"Come, lad! Why so greedy of your
wealth? Are there no songs in thy England?
Surely it can not be so sorry a country!"

"Aye," responded Alfgar instantly, "songs

there are and enough, but I know them not, for them the monks for all their learning did not teach me."

"Nonsense," interrupted old Atli impatiently. "Prove your skaldship, lad! It were a sorry skald who had to keep his verses in mind! Give him a subject, comrades!"

"Silence!" shouted Harald as a roar went up, each man crying to Alfgar for some favorite subject. "Flamehair, make me a song on the daughter of Jarisleif!"

A howl of approval rose, but Alfgar looked blank indeed.

"I've never even seen her, Harald!" he protested. "Not the best of skalds could be expected —"

His words were drowned in shouts and the clashing of steel, and Harald laughed again as he answered:

"No matter — prove your skaldship! A test!"

"So be it then," and Alfgar thought a moment. The men quieted down instantly as they observed his acceptance of the challenge, and a moment later Alfgar swept a wild, shrill chord on his harp, and broke into a chant:

I fain would have kissed the broad spears, that
glittered and flashed through the air,
That drank the hot blood of my Vikings, and
paused not to save or to spare;
I greeted the hiss of the arrows, as, shot with
the swiftness of light,
They left a red stream of my heroes' life blood
at the end of their flight —
For they seemed like the far-flashing eyes of my
love, in the sunlight's rich gleam!

I embraced the swift flame of the swords, and
their sharp-darting lightning was sweet;
Then a blade bit deep in my shoulder and beck-
oned my spirit so fleet;
And a second crashed into my helmet, and a
third tore into my shield,
But the touch of the sword blades was dear, as
I sank on the bloody-red field —
For I thought that thy arms were about me, so
near did'st thou seem!
And then I awoke — and behold, the long fight
was a dream!

“Good!” came Harald's voice through the
din of applause, and Alfgar felt his hand
swiftly seized. Harald, in his delight, had
taken off a heavy armring of gold and slipped
it over the wrist of the Saxon, while the men
greeted the act with loud shouts. That Alfgar
had proved his power there was no doubt, and

the quiet smile on the face of old Atli betrayed no small pride in his pupil. Harald seized the harp and broke into a chant of his own deeds, proving himself to be no slight skald as well as warrior; indeed, a few of Harald's verses have been preserved even to this day.

The *Crossbeak* was running out of sight of land, but toward evening the wind shifted from south to west, and began to blow up strongly. By morning the sky was gray and dark, with frequent shifts of wind, and dim on the east appeared the coast of southern Russia. It was evident that they were in for a bad blow, and after a conference with Atli and Haldor, Hardrede decided to run in to the land for shelter. Although the *Crossbeak* was stout and seaworthy enough, it was known that the Black Sea was highly treacherous and Harald refused to take any risks at this juncture.

So the prow was turned to the east, and toward noon they were running past a heavily wooded country, where mountains loomed far away and no sign of human life appeared. Harald explained to Alfgar that the sway of Jarisleif did not extend over this more south-

ern land, which was inhabited by wandering nomad tribes, the descendants of Huns and Goths who had swept across the Empire centuries before. They had no rule and knew no law, and were a constant menace to the Byzantine towns along the coast.

Shortly before the storm broke, the dragon rounded a long headland, and before her lay a long narrow bay, which the men greeted with a shout of joy. The square sail was quickly run down and the oars put out, and in a few minutes the *Crossbeak* was rowed into the mouth of a small river at the head of the bay, just as the storm burst. Alfgar felt glad indeed that they had escaped its fury, for a worse storm he had seldom experienced, although it seemed to promise to be of short duration.

The weapons and armor were stowed away out of reach of the rain and the ship was moored in shallow water close to the shore. For half an hour the rain and hail drove over them furiously, then ceased altogether, although the wind continued stronger than ever. Part of the men now leaped overboard and waded ashore, pulling the ship closer in,

and Harald ordered a temporary camp made on the river bank.

"We'll have to stow everything away and make her shipshape," he said, "and it might as well be done now. We have a long voyage ahead of us and if we ran foul of an enemy while we were encumbered with all this plunder it would go hard with us."

Alfgar easily saw the force of this. Not only the hold and cabins, but even the deck, was littered with the loot of Byzantium. The Varangars had not neglected their opportunity on that last wild night, and the Saxon was amazed at the variety and richness of the spoil. Most of the men wore heavy gold armrings, necklaces, and other articles; there were cups and goblets of every description from the Emperor's palace, all of the precious metal; while silks, hangings, and wondrous textiles lay everywhere. To the Northmen these latter articles were fully as valuable as gold, or would be when they arrived home, and scarcely a man had not availed himself of the chance at plunder.

When the violence of the wind was somewhat abated, a temporary camp was made on

shore and the water casks were filled with fresh water from the river. The sacks and bundles of loot were taken ashore by Harald's orders, and despite some grumbling from a number of the men all the contents was sorted out and a systematic loading begun, a general division being promised at the end of the voyage.

Now for the first time Alfgar noticed a number of women, and suddenly remembered the hostages, wives and relatives of the Varangars, who had been rescued from their prison. The greater number of these had belonged to the Varangars who had remained behind, not more than a dozen having gone on board the two ships. Alfgar had seen nothing of them during the day, for all had been resting below, but now they had come ashore and he noticed Hrolf Dagson, the English Dane, speaking with one of them. At the same instant Hrolf observed the young Saxon.

"Ho, Flamehair!" called the Viking quickly. "Here is one who would speak to you!"

As Alfgar walked up he remembered Sigrid, and found that this was indeed Hrolf's

daughter. She was a slender, dark-haired girl whose firm handgrip and steady eyes bespoke her of true Viking stock.

"I owe you thanks, Alfgar of England," she said as they shook hands, "for I understand that it is to you we owe our freedom."

"Hardly," responded Alfgar with a smile, "seeing that with any leader save Harald we would hardly be here now! Nay, thank me not," he added hurriedly to stay her protests, "the service was right willing, and was indeed small. It was more luck than aught else."

"In any case I thank you," she answered merrily. "Think you we will stay on shore tonight?"

"I know nothing of Harald's plans," rejoined Alfgar, scanning the sky, "but I rather think we will."

Sigrid was a girl of about his own age, and although Alfgar usually felt anything but at his ease when in the presence of the other sex, this feeling seemed to be entirely absent now. In fact, that short stay at Byzantium and the great events which happened there had left Alfgar changed very much, and had both so-

bered him and given him added dignity. He was no longer a boy, he felt, and despite his age his looks well bore out the feeling.

Harald was only a short distance from them, issuing orders, and at this instant he called Eadgar to him.

"Take a few of the men, Eadgar, and go a bit up the stream. If you come across any village try to buy an ox or a few sheep; if not, there are deer and boars in the forest. If you do meet a village, take nothing without paying for it, but bring back some fresh meat if you can before dark. Keep the men close together, mind."

"Let me go too, Harald," exclaimed Alfgar, who had overheard. Harald nodded carelessly, and Alfgar excused himself to Hrolf and Sigrid to follow his uncle.

"Where is Svein Arnison?" asked Eadgar, as he picked out his men.

"I know not," replied Hrolf, who had asked to be of the party. "He took his bow and vanished among the trees a short space back."

"Bad for him if Harald hears of it," commented another grimly, and Alfgar wondered

if Svein had gone hunting independently. However, the dozen were soon chosen. Eadgar ordered them to take their weapons, but to carry bows instead of spears, and without more ado they left the camp.

Glad to be on shore once more, the men moved along gaily, shouting and jesting like children. Rambling through the trees, but not far apart, they played rough jokes on each other as they went, and more than one went rolling to the ground as he was cleverly tripped or thrown. Alfgar broke one of the thongs that served him for leggings in one of these encounters, and so it happened that he lingered a moment behind the others to replace it.

As he finished the task and rose to his feet, he heard a swift "hiss" and something tore through his long hair, close to his neck. With a shock Alfgar realized that it was an arrow, and leaped to the shelter of a tree. As he did so, a second shaft struck his side and fell broken from his steel byrnie. He was amazed to see that it was a Norse arrow!

Instantly he remembered Svein and choked back the shout already on his lips. Stringing

his bow, he peered out carefully, just in time to see a dark form flitting back through the trees. Reckless of the danger, Alfgar gained his feet and dashed straight for it, and a moment later recognized the figure of Svein. As he ran he placed a shaft on the string and let fly, but the arrow flew wide.

Alfgar was a good runner, but Svein was a better, and gained on him fast. Furious at the base attempt made on his life, the young Saxon strained every nerve, but he could not decrease the distance between them. Instead, it increased rapidly, until the form of the man ahead was lost to sight. Baffled, angry, and determined to settle the senseless quarrel without delay, Alfgar ran forward at a lope to rejoin his party.

He had not lost his way, for the woods were too open for that, and a moment later he heard a burst of shouts ahead. He recognized his uncle's voice, and instantly knew that something was wrong. Breaking into a run, he dashed ahead just as the note of a war horn rose through the forest, and then came another shout and the clash of steel.

Suddenly, as if from the very ground, a

dozen dark skin-clad forms sprang up around him and a weight bore him back. Fighting wildly against the man who had leaped upon him, Alfgar wriggled free and drew his sword, his back against a tree. There was no hesitation on the part of his opponents, and Alfgar could only strike blindly. So swiftly had all happened that almost before he realized that he was fighting for his life there came the gleam of an axe above him, something crashed down on his helm, and the last he remembered was staggering forward with hands outstretched, ere he fell headlong.

CHAPTER X

A CAPTIVE

WHEN Alfgar came to himself he found that his hands and feet were tightly bound and his head throbbed with pain. Although his steel cap had protected his head somewhat from the force of the blow, nevertheless he must have been unconscious for some time, as the day was nearly spent.

He closed his eyes again and listened to the talk of the men who carried him. They spoke rapidly but in a strange tongue, and were no doubt Tartars from the steppes beyond the Dniester. But after a little they began to chatter excitedly, and Alfgar opened his eyes to find that they were entering a village that blazed with fires.

Depositing him unceremoniously on the ground the men untied his bonds, while a crowd gathered around with many exclamations of wonder at the sight of him. They examined his byrnie and clothing closely, chattering away in their strange tongue, but the

effort to communicate with him was soon given up. One, an old woman clad in skins, brought him a vessel of goat's milk, which Alfgar drank greedily.

His captors were small men but very muscular. Their clothing consisted of a mingling of skins and woolen garments, while the neighing of horses told Alfgar that the village was probably settled by a nomadic tribe. However, the men treated him kindly enough, giving him food while they themselves ate, and helping him to chafe the blood back into his numbed wrists and ankles.

Then he was helped to his feet and led forward to a large fire around which was gathered a group of men. From their superior dress Alfgar inferred that these were the leaders of the tribe. They tried in vain to question him, not even his Latin being understood, and at length began to confer among themselves.

At one of the other fires Alfgar saw a crowd of the people gathered about a man who presently began to sing a rude song in a monotonous voice, accompanying himself on a rough form of harp, not unlike his own Saxon instrument. Instantly the thought flashed into Alf-

gar's brain that here might be a way to ingratiate himself with his captors, or at least to make his life valuable to them. They seemed highly pleased with their skald, for even the chiefs paused to listen, and when he finished his song there was subdued but hearty applause.

As the man laid down the harp Alfgar sprang up and walked over to the other fire where he was. No attempt was made to restrain his movements, although the Tartars watched him with surprise, and a little exclamation broke from them when he picked up the rude harp and tried it. It had fewer strings than his own instrument, but otherwise did not differ greatly, and after a moment Alfgar began the song of Beowulf in his own Saxon tongue, nerved by the thought of possible results.

There was dead silence as he sang. Of course the words were unintelligible to his hearers, but his clear, sweet voice rang high to the music of the strings, and he knew at once that he had captured his captors. His head was still aching badly, but Alfgar forgot this in the song as he told of the great

deeds of the hero and the fight under the sea with the monster.

When at length he laid the harp down and reseated himself, the Tartars gave a clicking kind of applause, and one of the chiefs sprang up and made a long and eloquent address. Evidently the art of their prisoner had greatly impressed the Tartars, for they broke out into a chattering applause at the end of the speech. An old man, taking Alfgar courteously by the hand, led him to a nearby hut. The boy sank wearily on a pile of soft rugs and skins, and in a moment was lost in slumber.

When he awoke the sun was shining brightly outside and the day was evidently far advanced, but this was not what drew a cry of surprise from Alfgar. At his feet, with an arm roughly bandaged and with blood on his forehead, lay the English Dane, Hrolf!

The man opened his eyes at Alfgar's involuntary cry, and smiled. Stretching out his hand to the Saxon, who pulled him erect, Hrolf cried,

"Greetings, Flamehair! Did they catch you, too?"

Alfgar briefly related all that had happened

to him, and Hrolf gave an angry exclamation as he heard of Svein's treachery. Then he told his own story in turn.

"We missed you, but thought little of it and went on. A few rods farther, Olaf Gormson stumbled and fell with an arrow through his gullet. Then a whole shower of them struck us and three more men rolled over. We drew together just as a horde of these savages sprang out on us, and for a moment it was touch and go. They can fight like wildcats, these Tartars! They drove us back little by little, and of a sudden half a dozen of them cut me off from the next man, an arrow went through my shield arm, and next minute there was a rope around my neck. Sword and shield I will take my chance with, but I have never learned rope-fighting, and down I went. Something clipped me on the head, and I knew no more until I woke up a few moments since."

Alfgar saw that Hrolf was not seriously hurt, and told him of the events of the night before. Making light of his wounds, the Viking strode to the door and they left the hut together. A Tartar who was passing beckoned, and they followed him to a fire. Here

a kettle hung filled with an appetizing stew, and they proceeded to assuage their hunger, for Hrolf had not eaten since the previous noon.

For the next week their life was uneventful save for its novelty to both of them. They dwelt unmolested in the village, but were not allowed to pass its bounds. Each night the harp was brought to Alfgar and he was glad indeed to sing, for the sight of one or two enslaved Greeks brought home to him the fact that but for his skaldship their plight would have been a sorry one indeed.

"I was not surprised to hear that news of Svein," said Hrolf one afternoon, as Alfgar was refitting the harp with strings. There was a strange note in his voice, and the Saxon looked up in surprise. "I have had my eye on the man for a long time, and I fear me, Flamehair, that evil will come of him, for evil words have lain under his tongue against me."

"Why, what mean you, Hrolf?" questioned Alfgar, puzzled. "Surely he has naught against you?"

"It is an unlikely word, yet true," replied

the Viking slowly. "When last I fared forth with Harald from Tsargrad, it was no hidden matter that Svein had come to me and asked for the hand of Sigrid in marriage."

"Why, she is but a girl!"

"She is as old as yourself," chuckled Hrolf, "and you are deemed to be no infant, Flame-hair! In any case, I said him nay, and hid no part of my mind from him, whereat he went away with no little anger."

"But how do you fear him now?" insisted Alfgar.

"Because Sigrid is alone," returned Hrolf moodily. "She may well be safe enough with Harald, but I misdoubt me that there is evil brewing. Svein is a great warrior, although somewhat headstrong, and clever in all his dealings. He has traveled through this country and I have heard that he speaks the tongue of this people. In sooth, I know not what I fear, but any Norseman who will so demean himself as to learn this barbarous tongue is of little good."

Alfgar laughed at the fears of the Viking, but nevertheless his mind dwelt often on the matter, and he began to think of escape. But

when he talked over the matter with Hrolf they decided that such a thing was of no use; they could flee nowhere, they spoke a foreign tongue, and while their arms had been left them, that very fact showed how little their captors feared their escape.

At length, after a week of this inaction, they were wakened early one morning by a chief, who led them outside. There they found most of the village people grouped about a string of heavily-laden horses, and two of the little wiry beasts were assigned the captives. Hrolf gazed at his steed in blank dismay.

"In good sooth," he exclaimed disgustedly, "when I bestride that creature my feet will touch the ground on either side!"

"Not unlike that other Hrolf whom Harald Haarfagr drove from Norway," laughed Alfgar, "and who afterwards won a realm in France. Men say that he could never find a horse to hold him, so he was called the Walker."

"Walk I will not," retorted Hrolf, leaping lightly into the saddle. He was so large, and the horse so small, that when he stretched down his legs they all but reached the ground,

and the Tartars made merry among themselves at his expense. They started off through the forest, and from various incidents Alfgar concluded that the journey was no short one.

"We're traveling north," said Hrolf, when the sun had risen above the trees. "I wonder where we are going?"

"Mayhap to some market or fair," decided Alfgar. "We have been so well treated that we must be valuable slaves."

Hrolf grunted indignantly. "Little they know us! What say you to escaping?"

"Plenty of time for that," rejoined Alfgar easily. "Just now we are helpless, but if we go far enough north we might win through to the country of Jarisleif, and so find Harald again."

"Best let matters rest for the present, then," concluded Hrolf, polishing his shield as he rode. All that day they pushed forward through a forested but desolate country, keeping away from the mountains to the west, and meeting no one. At night they camped beside a river, with the horses a hundred yards off under a guard.

For two days more this kept up, but on the

third afternoon the party turned sharply to the east and abandoned their north line of march. At this move Hrolf brought his horse beside that of Alfgar.

"What think you of this, Flamehair? We are no longer going toward Russland, and it lies ill in my mind."

Alfgar nodded agreement. "Possibly we will reach our destination tonight or tomorrow. They would probably figure on reaching a market town in the morning, anyway."

"Then shall we make a break tonight?" asked Hrolf.

"If you are willing I am," answered Alfgar quietly. "If we wait until we are sold we might be separated. At any rate, we can no more than fail."

Hrolf nodded and fell silent. At the end of the day when camp was made it became evident that their destination was not so far off. The horses were unsaddled and picketed as usual, but the loads were piled in readiness for rapid packing, and the men made the best of their rough apparel and weapons. Both Alfgar and Hrolf were by this time stiff and sore, for they were not accustomed to riding,

and were indeed thankful that the Tartars did not deem it necessary to bind them at night.

The two, having eaten, rolled up in furs, the nights being very cold, and simulated sleep; but it proved a hard matter to avoid falling asleep in earnest, so weary were they. Fortunately they held a place near the outskirts of the party.

One by one the fires died down and the men fell asleep, while the lonely guard who watched the horses sang weird monotonous songs as he walked his round. The night was moonless, and it was not long before the camp was wrapped in slumber. At last Hrolf touched Alfgar's arm as a signal.

Cautiously unrolling their furs, they rose to hands and knees and crept away from the dying fire, their weapons wrapped to avoid clashing against their byrnies. Only two groups of sleeping men lay between them and the horses, and these were passed without a mishap.

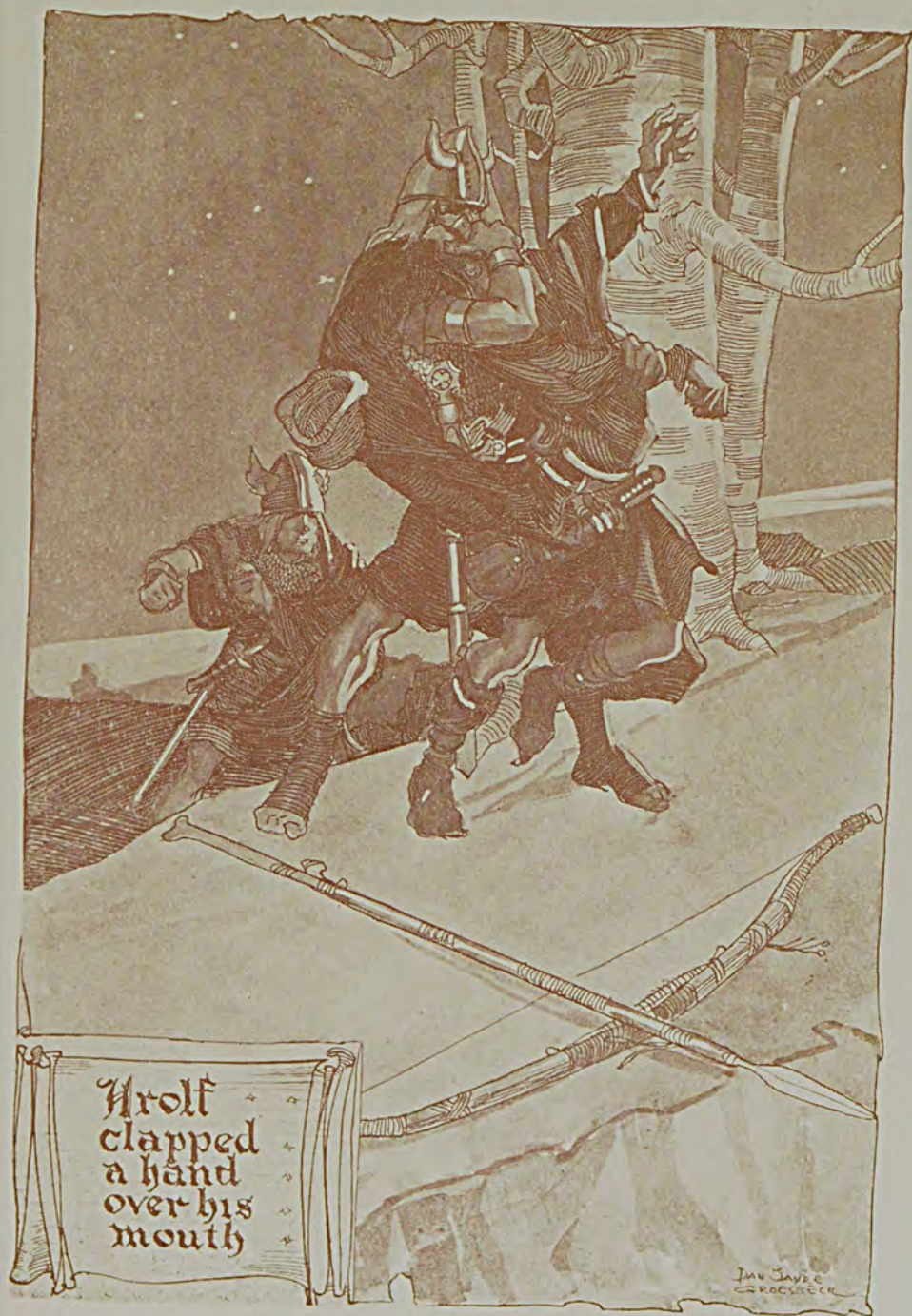
Rising to their feet they stepped lightly away into the night, and a moment later they were free. Hrolf seized Alfgar by the arm, with a low whisper.

"We must drive off all the horses, or else they will track and retake us. Best seize the guard and silence him."

Alfgar nodded his comprehension, and they stole forward through the grass, which was nearly to their shoulders. The lonely watchman was standing with his back toward them, leaning on a flint-tipped spear and gazing across the dark stream beside the camp, and Hrolf was on him before he heard a sound.

Then, just as he turned at the noise of swishing grass, Hrolf clapped a hand over his mouth and with his other hand gripped the Tartar's arm. Alfgar quickly bound the man with his own bowstring and thrust a gag into his mouth, then he was laid on the grass. Moving quickly and silently, they loosed the hobbles that restrained the horses, and each leaped to a bare back.

The next instant a series of wild yells roused the camp, with the sound of thudding hoofbeats. The startled Tartars, springing up, uttered a shout of dismay as they saw their steeds rush away and vanish in the forest below, while the two dim figures told the tale only too clearly.



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"To the west," shouted Alfgar as he rode at Hrolf's side, "away from the Tartars and their town!"

"Good enough," returned Hrolf, and between them they managed to turn the horses and gradually slackened speed. At a brisk trot they continued their flight until daybreak, holding the horses as much together as possible. Then, choosing five of the best, they turned the others off into the forest and pushed briskly onward.

"When we left Harald," said Hrolf, munching at some dried meat they had found on the surprised watcher, "he must have been still some two or three hundred miles from the Dnieper. By this time he will be well on his way to Kiev —"

"Unless he has met with more storms," broke in Alfgar. "Think you we can get to him before he reaches Norway?"

"Of a surety, if we reach him at all," laughed Hrolf. "It is in my mind that he will spend the winter with Jarisleif, as Magnus did before he took over the kingdom. In that case we can take our time."

They held on their way until noon, and by

continually changing mounts managed to keep the horses at a brisk pace without wearing them out. Hrolf, who had been with Harald all through the Palestine campaign, enlivened the way wonderfully with tales of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. They slept all the afternoon, and at nightfall took up their flight again, having met no man all that day. By early morning they decided that they would rest again until daybreak, for both were still in sad need of sleep, and it was well after sunrise when they took up the journey once more, after a breakfast consisting of a large bird Hrolf brought down with his bow. Once they saw the smoke of a village, but despite their hunger they avoided it carefully, traveling always to the north.

It was far along in the afternoon when Hrolf, with a sharp exclamation, pulled up the horses and motioned to Alfgar to keep silence.

"I heard a voice," he whispered, "and it seemed to come down wind. Hold quiet a moment."

Alfgar listened excitedly, stringing his bow and loosening his sword in its sheath. For a

moment he heard nothing, then the breeze brought the sound of a deep voice which seemed to be singing. The two sat without a movement, and then of a sudden Hrolf gazed at Alfgar in amazement.

"Did you hear those words?" he muttered.
"Am I drunk or crazed?"

"I heard it!" Alfgar returned eagerly.
"It was the Dane tongue, our own speech!
Ah — look there!"

And he pointed into a long open glade ahead. There, striding along and swinging a long stout staff, was a strange figure. Clad in a long brown robe, with iron-gray hair and long gray beard, there seemed little of the Northman about the man at whom they gazed; but the words that came from his mouth were of the Northern speech, and the song he sang was the Saga of King Olaf Tryggvison!

CHAPTER XI

BASIL OF THE ERRAND

WITH a simultaneous shout Hrolf and Alfgar urged their steeds in between the trees, but to their surprise the man never so much as looked in their direction, although they shouted loudly at him. Not until they reached his side did he look up. There was a momentary flash of wonder in his deeply-lined but strong face, then he waved his staff and spoke in the Dane tongue, yet with a strong foreign accent.

"Peace be with you! Halt me not, friends, for I have far to go."

"Are you mad!" cried Hrolf impatiently. "Do you meet Norsemen every day in these forests that you pass us thus? Stay, friend! Who are you?"

"Hold," broke in Alfgar, "we have spare horses, old man. Come, mount one of them. Where are your companions?"

The sturdy old man halted a moment, swept the faces of the two with a keen scrutiny, then

with surprising agility leaped to the back of one of the led horses and rode between them.

"My companions are in Syrland, which we of Greece call the Holy Land," he answered simply. "Thanks for your assistance, and a blessing on you."

Hrolf glanced at Alfgar and tapped his head, but a quick smile crossed the wrinkled face, and Hrolf reddened with confusion at the other's penetration.

"Nay, friends, deem me not mad," said the man, speaking slowly and with difficulty. "First, who are you?"

"Two men of Harald Hardrede's," answered Alfgar. "We were captured by Tartars and have escaped. Surely you are no Northman? How is it that you speak our tongue?"

"I speak it ill," returned the other. "I am known among the brethren as Basil of the Errand."

"A monk?" cried Hrolf, amazed, and Basil nodded smilingly. "What do you here, so far from the known world, in this land of savages?"

"I have an errand," replied Basil, tapping

a flat packet strapped about his waist. "I go to England."

At this astonishing statement Hrolf's jaw dropped and Alfgar stared at the monk, half-believing that he was crazed.

"Do you mean that you go to England through these lands," asked the Saxon, "instead of taking ship from Tsargrad? Surely that is a strange thing! And how learned you the Dane tongue? Who taught it you?"

"It was taught me by Olaf Tryggvison," came the reply. At this Hrolf pulled his horse up short, his face flushing a deep red in his anger.

"Old man!" he said sternly, "make no more sport of us, lest we fail in the reverence we owe. Olaf has been dead these fifty years, for my own uncle fell beside him at Svold Sound!"

"You are wrong," and the deep eyes of Basil once more struck Hrolf as if with a blow. "See, it is in my mind that I can trust you, and as we go along I will tell you the story of my errand. Is it then true that men deem that Olaf fell at Svold?"

"Truth itself," answered Alfgar, wonder-

ing greatly at this strange comrade who had sprung into their fellowship. "Yet it is also true that some hold him to have escaped, but of this I know little."

"Then listen," said Basil quietly. "Ten years since I was a soldier in the Emperor's army. I was taken by the Saracens and suffered many things, even to torture, but I held to my faith. I was carried far to the east, even beyond Jordan.

"Then one day the city wherein I was dwelling, a slave, was taken by a raid of Christians. I was released and found that the leader of the Christians was an old man, far older than I, but who was very terrible in battle, for he fought with both hands alike and no man stood before his blows."

At this statement Hrolf started, and Alfgar saw him dart a quick look at Basil, who continued calmly.

"With him were others, all of whom wore the robe of monks. When we returned to this side Jordan they bore me to their castle, for I was still suffering from my tortures. There it came to pass that I joined the brotherhood. I grew to love this old man beyond other men,

as did we all, and we knew that his name was Olaf, and that in his own land he had been king."

"Why, man, it's impossible!" burst forth Hrolf. "I too have heard tales of such a man, but Olaf — !" and he fell to staring at Basil.

"Nothing is impossible with the help of God," resumed the latter quietly. "See, even I, who was a Greek, have learned from him the tongue of the Northland, and I bear his errand."

"Aye, what of that?" asked Alfgar excitedly. "Tell us of this errand of yours, Basil!"

"Of all our brotherhood Olaf trusted and loved me best," replied the old monk. "Two years since he gave me this packet which I bear here. He told me that his ending was not far off, and he gave me the behest that when he should die I should bear this book and ring contained herein to him who is King of England, even Edward, the son of Ethelred, who was true friend to Olaf of aforetime. This was that it might be known that Olaf was indeed dead, for tokens have been sent ere this to Edward the King."

Hrolf was silent with his amazement, for Basil's tale could not well be doubted. Alf-gar's curiosity, however, was not yet satisfied.

"Then how came you up here, near the Black Sea?" he asked. "To carry out your errand speedily you should have gone by sea!"

"And so I did," smiled Basil as he met Alf-gar's eager look. "I took ship from Joppa to Tsargrad. There I fell into the hands of godless men who bound me for a slave and sent me forth on a ship to the north. They left me only the packet, which they deemed worthless. We sailed north for many days, trading, and when we came to a port they named Constantia they were about to sell me, and wished to throw my packet into a fire.

"Then I think God aided me, for I asked Him to prevent this wicked thing, and even as they jested with me a ship sailed into the bay and men brought fire and sword into the place, so that I rescued the packet safely."

"A ship?" cried Hrolf excitedly. "What kind of a ship?"

"Nay, I sought not to know," smiled Basil. "But it was that of him you follow, even Harald Hardrede."

A cry of astonishment burst from his two hearers, and Alfgar caught a wondering look of helplessness from Hrolf that made him smile, even as his heart leaped in joy.

"Tell us all the tale, Basil," he urged. The monk nodded.

"So would I, if you gave me time, young Saxon. Harald heard my tale, and would have had me sail forth with him. But I have no business in Russland, so I took a horse and rode to the west on my errand. God is with your leader, friends, for did He not bring him to my aid?"

The simple earnestness of the monk touched Alfgar deeply. Before he could speak Hrolf asked eagerly after news of the Vikings, which Basil denied him.

"I know nothing of them," he answered helplessly. "Stay, though! On the second day thereafter, five days since, horses came up behind me. On one of them was a man clad in armor like to yours, and on another was a maiden. They rode in haste, and the steed of the maiden was all but foundered, so that the warrior bade me change horses with the maiden. At the same time she cried to

me for help, and as I was seeking to understand the matter the godless man struck me from my horse and they vanished."

A hoarse cry broke from Hrolf. Alfgar was amazed to see him come close to Basil, lay his hand on the monk's, and exclaim in a low, tense voice:

"And the maiden? What was she like? Think, monk, for the love of God!"

Something in the man's tones must have wakened long-dead stirrings in Basil's heart, for he gazed at Hrolf's excited face and replied at once.

"She was slender, and dark of hair, and wore a kirtle of blue trimmed with silver."

"Sigrid!"

The cry broke from Alfgar and Hrolf at the same instant.

"Which way went they?" cried Hrolf savagely, his face suddenly gone white and terrible. "It was my daughter, monk! Where are they? Speak quickly!"

"I know not," and Basil shook his head. "I had my errand to think of, and I paid no heed to them. In truth, the man hurt me sorely. Yet people have given me food and

drink, so that I lack for nothing, though I do not understand their tongue. Poor folk, I fear they are no Christian people who — ”

But his rambling speech was cut short by a cry of wild rage from Hrolf. Alfgar sat his horse quietly, knowing that for the present there was naught to do. He had understood only too well the purport of Basil's story. Harald had led his men upon the little port, one of many scattered about the shores of the Black Sea as trading posts for Byzantium, and Svein had seized his opportunity to carry off Sigrid. Knowing the tribes of the interior as he did, speaking their language well, he might even hope to carry Sigrid back to Byzantium or some other place in the Empire. Small wonder that Hrolf burst into a storm of wild curses and threats against the Viking! But a sudden thought came to Alfgar, and he drew Basil aside.

“ You say the two were alone, and passed you? ”

“ Aye, young friend, and in this direction. Was the maiden in trouble? ”

“ Of the worst, Basil,” and Alfgar quickly explained matters. “ Say, can you use a sword

still? Will you help us search for her and mayhap rescue her from the hands of — ”

“Nay,” interrupted the old monk, staring over Alfgar’s head at the distant mountains, “fain would I go with ye, but first comes my errand. Olaf the son of Tryggvi is dead, and I bear his token.”

“But you cannot!” cried Alfgar, exasperated by the simple confidence of the man. “You have the whole world to cross! Why, any of these Tartars would sell you as a slave in a minute! Come with us, and we will go together, and you will reach England safe enough.”

“Peace!” exclaimed Basil of the Errand, pushing aside the detaining hand of the Saxon. The latter cast a look at Hrolf, but the latter sat with his head sunk on his breast, seemingly oblivious.

“Peace! If your way goes with mine, so be it; if not, detain me no more, for my errand waits!”

“The horse is yours,” said Alfgar quietly. “It is the least we can do. At least wait here until we can talk matters over.”

“Not a moment!” returned Basil, a fanat-

ical glare in his eyes. "Let me go, and my blessing be upon you!"

He raised his staff, and Alfgar bent his head. Hrolf had pulled up his steed and was fingering his sword and staring into the forest; he paid no heed to them, and Alfgar was shocked at sight of the man's face, so drawn and convulsed was it. The next instant Basil of the Errand had turned his horse, and the two Vikings were alone.

"Come, Hrolf," said Alfgar simply, taking the man's hand. "Cheer up, old warrior! There is still hope, for you and I still have our weapons, and we are Northmen of good heart! Shame be on us if we sat down and wept while Svein hurried farther from us!"

Hrolf started as if stung by a whip, for Alfgar had tried to rouse him and succeeded.

"What chance have we!" he returned bitterly. "Svein is somewhere in this land, that is all we know. But with him is Sigrid — little Sigrid, whom I had thought to take home to Danelagh once more, to the home my fathers won from yours! Aye," he added, a sudden flash coming into his face, "there is still hope, and there is still vengeance! Come,

Flamehair, and swear to me that you will follow this man while I follow him, that you will take vengeance on him if I fall, and that not fire nor sword shall stay your blade from his heart's blood!"

Alfgar himself was choking at the thought of Sigrid, and he "handselled" the agreement in a hearty grip right willingly. The score against Svein was mounting high! But he soothed Hrolf with fair words, and just as the westing sun settled to the tree tops they took up the journey again.

"We cannot shun the villages now," said Alfgar decidedly. "First we must seek news of Svein. Is not that a smoke to the west?"

"Aye," rejoined Hrolf. "But what use, Flamehair? We cannot speak the tongue of these people, and so can do little questioning."

"We will find a way," Alfgar replied with confidence. "Mayhap my skaldship will prove of more avail than your sword, Hrolf. They will hardly attack us if we come to them in peace."

Hrolf grunted, but said nothing. Half an hour later the smoke was close by, and they soon came in sight of a large village, almost

a town. A shrill cry went up as they were seen and men poured out to meet them, but they rode boldly forward and made no move toward their weapons, so that the men were evidently puzzled. Like their late captors these people were Tartars, and a few moments later the two riders were surrounded by the crowd.

In vain they tried to make themselves understood, and finally Hrolf made signs of eating, which were perfectly comprehensible. Finding that their visitors were peaceably disposed, the Tartars flung aside their weapons and led them into the village. Here they were treated hospitably enough, the folk examining their weapons and clothes with great curiosity. After finishing a good meal, Alfgar made signs of harping, and it was not long before a harp was brought him.

As soon as his clear voice rose on the evening air, the whole village crowded about the fire. Alfgar sang one or two Norse songs, then began the song of Caedmon, in his own native Saxon. At the first words there came a cry from a nearby hut, and a man burst eagerly through the crowd.

"Who are you?" he cried wildly, and Alfgar saw about his neck the iron collar of a slave, "Who are you who speak in Saxon?"

Alfgar sprang up in delight and answered him. It appeared that the man was a slave from faraway Germany, who had traveled from hand to hand until finally he had been sold to the Tartars. Alfgar in turn told him who they were, and the man passed on the information to the Tartars. The village chiefs drew back a little, gazing on the visitors with awe and wonder when they heard that they were from the great Tsargrad. Here Hrolf, who had a smattering of Saxon, put in an eager question.

"Have you seen aught of a warrior and a maiden, traveling alone?"

"Not I," returned the man, "but I will ask these folk."

He turned to them with a question, and at once a babel of voices went up. To Alfgar's surprise the attitude of the assembly changed on the instant. All drew back from the three Northmen, the women vanished, and weapons flashed out. The German slave turned back to him, trembling.

"Lord," he said, "the chiefs say that such a man passed here two days since, at the head of a band from another tribe. With them was a woman, borne in a litter between horses. They drove off many horses belonging to the chiefs. Say them fair, lord, and quickly, else we be all slain!"

The slave's fear was so evident that Alfgar saw there was indeed danger were not their position explained.

"Tell them we are foes of that man," he exclaimed swiftly. "Say that we are in pursuit of him. How many were his men?"

"A score, lord," answered the German when a few words had passed. At once the hostility of the Tartars was dropped and their suspicion slowly evaporated. They proceeded to make their visitors comfortable with furs and wraps, and requested through the slave that Alfgar sing further. But this he refused.

"Give the dogs no more now," growled Hrolf. "We have other things to think of. These look like bold men enough, Flamehair, and if they can fight like those who took us they should be good followers. Ask if they will accompany us in pursuit of Svein."

"Good idea!" cried Alfgar delightedly. He saw at once that with the help of the Tartars they could easily trace the Norseman and his band, and he quickly put the question through the German. As the latter translated his request, he was overjoyed to see that it met with the ready approval of the Tartars, but a long conversation passed between the chiefs before the acceptance was made.

"They say yes, lord," returned the slave at length. "The tribe whose men accompanied him you seek dwells some two-score miles away, among the hills. They are brave men, and live in a castle built by the gods, and make raids thence."

"A castle built by the gods?" repeated Alfgar. "How is that?"

The German, who had not overmuch intelligence, questioned the chiefs again, and finally interpreted with a laugh.

"Of olden times, lord, there were folk in this land called Goths. It was my error. This tribe with whom we are can raise men among other tribes if you will lead them against the castle of the raiders, for it is old and ruined but strong — perchance built by the Greeks."

"What say you, Hrolf?" asked Alfgar, explaining matters to his comrade, who had missed much of the quick conversation. "Shall we accept the offer?"

"Yes, by the eye of Odin!" burst forth Hrolf, fingering his sword hilt eagerly. "I would lead them against Asgard itself, were Svein there! I like this matter of the castle ill enough, but mayhap we can whip the Tartar dogs into shape."

"Possibly the castle is poor enough," rejoined Alfgar thoughtfully. "I have heard of the Goths, who swept over the Empire centuries since and who guarded these lands for the Empire when they were shattered. It must be that Svein knew this tribe of outlaws, for such they seem to be considered, when he was in this country before. That would explain his leadership."

When the German signified to the chiefs that the two strangers would lead them, the village at once fell into a bustle of excitement. Men were dispatched in every direction on horseback, bearing messages, and before Alfgar and Hrolf were conducted to a hut they were informed that at the next sunset the men

would begin to come in small numbers from other villages.

"Well, bid them make haste," growled Hrolf moodily. "We have little time to waste, Flamehair!"

"Best not to spoil matters by over-impatience," answered Alfgar. "Luck is with us in finding such assistance when we needed it most, and tomorrow we can well afford to rest. In sooth, I had ridden so much of late that my whole body feels stiff and sore."

CHAPTER XII

THE CASTLE OF THE GOTHs

THE next day Alfgar, who had tacitly assumed command of the expedition, Hrolf being too moody and distraught to manage the details, inspected the men of the village who were to accompany him. These consisted of a score of men, half the fighting force of the place. The others remained behind in case the village required defense, and Alfgar gathered that these nomads lived in constant warfare among themselves, sometimes a number of the scattered villages banding together against a common enemy as in the present case.

Small as the number was, however, the Saxon was amazed at their skill with weapons. He himself was accounted of good worth with the bow, but these Tartars were far beyond him. Their flint-tipped spears, for with them iron was very valuable, surprised him by their weight and accuracy. So, taking all in all he could not but respect these warriors, and

came to the conclusion that with enough of them success could be assured.

With heavy weapons Alfgar was far superior to any with whom he tried his skill. With sword or axe and shield none of the Tartars could stand against him, and after a few fencing bouts with the chiefs the latter came to hold him in high respect.

This served him in good stead when the men from other places began to come in that evening. By threes and fours they arrived, establishing separate camps, and Alfgar was up until nearly midnight. Then the German slave informed him that all the levies were in, the whole number being two short of fifty. All heard the tale of Alfgar's prowess, and they treated him with the greatest of deference. Hrolf spent the greater part of the day by himself, sharpening his weapons and polishing his byrnie and shield, and Alfgar did not disturb him.

At dawn they started through the forest on their march, all being mounted on the wiry little horses. The Saxon slave was taken along to act as interpreter, for Alfgar had no other means of conveying his orders to the Tartar

chiefs. As to their plans he was at the first in some doubt.

"What is our best course?" he asked Hrolf as they rode along. "It seems that we can reach this castle by evening, if we push on fast. Had we best make an assault on the place or take it by craft?"

"By craft," replied Hrolf, eager and active now that the strain of waiting was over. "Svein will never dream of danger, and if we can surprise his stronghold, it will go hard but we will overcome him."

So Alfgar communicated the plan to the chiefs, who at once pushed on at a faster pace. He tried in vain to get from them some idea of the general form of the castle, but they could not tell him more than it was a great stone building. So he and Hrolf decided that they could only wait for darkness and the end of the journey, and then act as circumstances might direct.

Some of the men brought in a deer, and they made a brief midday meal, pushing on again at once. They were now getting into the hills, leaving the lower ground behind, and after an hour came upon a faint but well-defined

trail. This the Tartars examined carefully, and assured Alfgar that they were now only a few miles from the castle. The pace had been a severe one all day and to Alfgar it seemed cruel to press the horses as they did; but the little beasts responded nobly, and shortly after sunset the party halted. After a short consultation the German turned to the two leaders.

"The castle is only half a mile distant," he announced, "and they wish to know what to do next."

"Let all the men remain here," said Alfgar promptly. "Do you and the chiefs advance on foot with us."

The Tartars at once set about making small fires of very dry wood, which would send up little smoke, and Alfgar, Hrolf, the slave and three of the chiefs set out on foot, following the track. This led them between two hills, through a narrow valley, and here the Tartars motioned to be cautious. They turned an abrupt angle of a cliff, and a little cry of astonishment escaped Hrolf as the castle appeared above them.

This, a relic of the days when these lands formed a flourishing part of the Great Empire,

had been placed with no small military skill on a jutting-out crag of the hill. The position was a strong one, for on only one side could the place be attacked. The castle itself seemed to be in fair condition, a number of figures on the walls showed that it was well guarded, and Alfgar felt his heart sink.

"It is a strong place, eh, Hrolf?"

"Like enough," nodded the other carelessly, "but I have been at the taking of stronger. These Greek castles have no inner keep, such as the Franks build, and once the walls are scaled it is all over. It is my rede that we wait until midnight or after, prepare torches and ropes, and send up a few men to silence the guards the first thing. If we can remain unseen until our men are over the walls the thing is easy."

"There must be a goodly force of men in there," remarked Alfgar slowly.

"What of it?" responded Hrolf sharply. "With a dozen men I could take the whole castle, were we to surprise it. How are they to know our number, Flamehair? Come, let us back to camp, for we have much to do."

As they walked back to the camp Alfgar ex-

plained his plan to the chiefs. Upon arriving, these at once set the men to work making inflammable torches and flares which might be ready for instant use. Ropes were also made ready and men chosen for their lightness of foot and activity to first scale the walls and silence the guards. The chiefs, who had at first been downcast at sight of the castle, so impregnable in spite of its ruined condition, to their arms, were now full of confidence in the young leader.

As they waited for the dead of night, the men talking in low tones, Hrolf beckoned Alfgar out of hearing of the German, whose name was Morcar.

"Lad," he said earnestly, "did 'st note the bird that flew before us on the way back?"

"No," returned Alfgar, wondering. "What bird?"

"The raven," said Hrolf impatiently. "The raven of Odin! It was a message to me, Flamehair, a message from the gods."

The Saxon stared at him, wondering if his brain were touched by his great sorrow. But Hrolf was in deadly earnest.

"It is said that Odin so warns those of my

house," he continued, "before they are to be gathered to Valhalla. Lad, should I fall tonight you will care for Sigrid, and take her safely to Harald?"

"Nonsense," laughed Alfgar, although a little uneasily, for he had heard many tales of Odin's ravens. "We are Christian men, Hrolf, and take no thought for such things! Besides, this forest is full of birds of all kinds!"

"Nay, this was a warning," persisted the Viking. "It is in my mind that I strike my last blow tonight, Flamehair. Peace, lad! Let me speak out my thought. Like many others, I have clung in secret to the old gods, but Sigrid belongs only to the White Christ. If the sign be a true one, lad, and if the maid is recovered, then ask these Tartars for an escort to pass you from tribe to tribe and strike for Russland. It is a desperate chance, but it is your only one."

"Come, come," urged Alfgar, who was in truth dismayed at Hrolf's words. "Pull yourself together, man! You will soon forget such thoughts when we are over the walls and the sword dance is forward! Besides, if our al-

lies see you thus downcast they will speedily lose heart."

"Trust me for that, Flamehair," returned the Viking grimly. "If Odin calls me this night, as I think he will, I will fear only for Sigrid. You are freed of your oath, lad, until Harald has his throne, and it may well be that I shall meet Svein this night and be his bane. But if aught has happened to Sigrid, and the man escapes me, then follow him to the very bounds of Nifleim itself!"

Alfgar shivered slightly as he gazed into the somber, intent eyes of the Viking.

"I will do all that may be done in the matter," he said quietly. "Yet if Sigrid be saved, and you fall, Hrolf, my first duty is to take her out of this land. Now I see the chiefs are coming toward us; most like it is time to be stirring, so forget your gloomy thoughts, Hrolf, and to the work in hand!"

Their fingers gripped silently across the fire, and the next moment the group of chiefs approached and spoke to Morcar. He turned to Alfgar with a question, and the latter nodded as he rose.

"All ready. Let those who are to scale the

walls set out first. We will give them a slight start and be ready in case they fail."

As this was translated a dozen men, bearing light ropes and daggers, dashed off. The others assembled more slowly, and the two Northmen joined the chiefs at their head. All save the leaders had torches ready to light from covered brands.

As they moved away from the tiny fires Alfgar distinctly saw a dark shadow flap from a tree and cross their path. He glanced at Hrolf, and the Viking only gave a grim laugh and strode onward. But at Alfgar's heart it seemed as if an icy hand had clutched, for the shadow was a huge raven.

When they gained the mouth of the defile they did not pause but continued their way silently until they stood in the very shadow of the castle walls. These loomed black and gloomy in the starlight above them, and only with an angry effort did Alfgar dispel the hopelessness that seized upon him. From all around rose the night-noises of the forest, yet so still was the night that Alfgar heard from far down in the valleys the angry grunts of some old boar crashing through the thickets

toward his bed. Then Morcar gripped his arm suddenly, and soft but clear from the mass of the walls above came the weird call of an owlet. So natural was it that from the forest answered two others, and the Saxon was taken by surprise when the chiefs moved forward.

Then they were standing against the walls themselves, and a whisper rose as the men searched for the dangling ropes. A chief beside Alfgar located the first of these, and pressed it into the Saxon's hands. Alfgar was not eager for the honor of going up first, but did not hesitate. Slinging his shield over his shoulder he went up the rope silently and adroitly hand over hand until he got a grip with his feet. It seemed that he would never reach the top, until a hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him up.

He was on the top of the wall, two Tartars beside him. At his feet lay a quiet form, and with a little shudder Alfgar saw that the arms were flung out to either side. He had small time to think of this, however, for Hrolf was close behind him on the rope, and others were already swarming up the walls.

Below them were lights, from a long low

building that stood inside the square of masonry. The sound of loud voices reached them, and Alfgar followed one of the guides to the stairs that led down into the courtyard. A moment later the Tartars were crowding behind him, and he advanced to the long building, which was of wood.

Reaching the doorway, he saw inside a wild crowd of men drinking and feasting. Most of them were sprawled out asleep, but at the farther end sat a few whose talk rose high, and among them was Svein the Norseman. Instantly Alfgar turned and passed the word, and a flame of light seemed to fill the courtyard as the torches were kindled.

Something twanged beside Alfgar's ear, he saw a man behind Svein clutch at his throat and stagger down, then the quiet night leaped into madness. Roaring his warcry Hrolf rushed into the hall, sword in hand. The sleeping men were up instantly, Svein caught up a huge axe and sprang forward, and behind Alfgar shrilled up the Tartar yell and the keen twang of bowstrings.

Surprised as they were, the band of Svein had little chance. Half of them were cut

down before they found their weapons, but the rest gathered about their leader at the far end of the hall and defended themselves desperately. Alfgar, pressing forward with the rest, saw Hrolf crash forward into the midst of them, his sword flaming red in the torch-light, and at the same instant he saw Svein disappear.

Instantly his thoughts flew to Sigrid. Crafty as Svein was, he would hardly have such a stronghold without secret ways of escape, and Alfgar darted forward in desperation. Two of the raiders leaped at him, but Alfgar felled one with his shield and sent the other staggering back with a thrust in the shoulder, and before him were the hangings behind which he had seen Svein slip. Tearing them aside, he saw a narrow passage before him and darted down this at full speed.

He was barely in time. The passage opened on a small room, in which Alfgar could dimly see two struggling figures. With a shout he sprang at them. There was a deep curse in Svein's voice, and Alfgar's blade shattered on the huge axe of the Viking, meeting it full in its descent. His hand was numbed by the

shock, but he flung himself at the other's throat, hoping to keep him until the men could come up. But the effort was vain. Just as the light of a torch flickered through the room from the passageway behind, Alfgar heard a cry from Sigrid, and went staggering back beneath a sword-like thrust of the great axe. Before he could recover the figure of Svein had vanished.

"Is it you, Alfgar?" cried Sigrid as the men behind burst into the room. The Saxon turned and caught the hand she had extended to him. "Were you wounded?" she inquired breathlessly, startled wonder in her eyes still.

"Nay, maiden," smiled Alfgar, although he knew he would bear the mark of that thrust for many a day. "Quick, are you unharmed? We must catch him ere he escapes."

"I am safe, quite safe," and suddenly the girl broke down and sank sobbing on the couch beside her. Alfgar turned to the Tartars and pointed out the window whence Svein had escaped. They were after him in an instant, and he looked about for Hrolf, fearing yet to leave Sigrid alone.

But Hrolf was not there. From the great

hall beyond came the sound of fierce yells and the ring of steel, and with a sudden fear Alfgar ran through the passage. Reaching the hall, he was just in time to see Hrolf cut down a gigantic opponent with one sweep of his sword, and at the same moment an arrow, shot at close range, tore through the byrnie of the Viking.

With a cry of grief Alfgar caught his friend as he fell. Paying no heed to the fighting men around him, he pillowed Hrolf's head on his knee. The Dane was quite conscious, and caught his hand.

"Sigrid?" he murmured feebly.

"Safe," cried Alfgar, tears on his cheeks. "Can you stand? She is here, close by!"

At the words Hrolf pulled himself up determinedly, passed his arm about Alfgar's neck, and staggered beside him through the passage. "I was right, lad," he whispered faintly. "It was the raven of Odin!"

"Sigrid!" called Alfgar. "Here is your father! Stay, he is sore hurt," he added as the form of the girl came toward them in the darkness. With a cry of bitterness and sorrow Sigrid flung her arms about her father, and

the Viking pulled himself away from Alfgar to return her embrace.

"Safe, girl, safe!" he cried exultantly. "Odin calls me, Sigrid! Hail, Valkyrie, hail! Ah — my Sigrid!"

As Hrolf sank to the floor, Alfgar paused. For in that moment it seemed to the boy, aghast, that there was a sound of wings in the air, that an answering cry met and mingled with that of the Viking, and that steel clashed on steel! He tried to move, but could not; and an instant later, when a number of the Tartars burst into the room with torches, he saw only the still form of Hrolf on the floor, with that of Sigrid over him. The Valkyries had indeed called their hero.

CHAPTER XIII

ACROSS THE STEPPES

THE first thing Alfgar was conscious of was that he was in dense blackness. He tried to move, but could not, and found that he was swathed in bandages. Slight as his movement was, it sent a pain through him, and he remembered that thrust of the axe given him by Svein. He tried to call out, and at the sound a rude hanging before him parted and he saw a dark form betwixt him and the fire-light outside.

"Where am I?" he murmured. "Who comes? Is it —"

"Hush!" came the voice of Sigrid, as the dark figure dropped to his side. "You must not talk, Saxon. We are in the Tartar camp, and have been here two days."

"Was I hurt badly?" Alfgar paid no attention to the injunction as to silence.

"You were badly bruised, Flamehair. But the hurt is not serious, and rest — oh! What are you doing?"

Alfgar kindly but firmly removed the hand she had placed on his shoulder, and struggled up to a sitting position, smiling. Despite the pain, he resolved to put his Viking training into practice, and even rose to his feet.

"There, there, Sigrid," he laughed, although faintly. "It ill becomes a man to lie abed when he is but bruised. Stay, I will sit down, if you will have it so. Now tell me all the story, maiden."

"Well," began Sigrid quietly, seeing that she could not restrain Alfgar, "it started in that Greek seaport where Harald landed for water and more plunder. We women were all left in the ship, while the Vikings went ashore. On the next evening Svein Arnison rowed out in a small boat, with the news that Harald was sore hurt and had sent for me, having word of you and — and father."

Sigrid's voice trembled, but after a slight hesitation she conquered her grief and went on calmly.

"I thought nothing wrong, of course, and went into the boat with him. But instead of rowing toward the torches on the wharf, he went to one side, saying that Harald lay in a

house near the walls. When we landed he bade me go ashore first, and as I did so he flung a cloak over my head and tied it firmly around me."

A cry of anger and indignation broke from Alfgar at this, but the girl paid no heed.

"He put me over some skins on the back of a horse and mounted one himself. We rode most of the night, then he made me promise not to try to escape if he freed me. This I promised, for I knew not where I was. I fell asleep as soon as he untied me, for we were both very weary. In the morning we went on, and that day the horses nearly gave out. But just as mine was stumbling, we met an old man who —"

"I know!" interrupted Alfgar quickly. "We met him, and it was he who put us on your trail! He was a Greek monk."

So then he told her the strange story of Basil of the Errand, at which Sigrid was much amazed, for she had heard often of the great Olaf Tryggvison and his supposed death at Svold.

"Yes," she nodded as Alfgar finished, "I was more angry than ever at Svein's treatment

of him, but I could do nothing. We went on at top speed after that, and indeed Svein treated me courteously enough in all things. The second day after, we came upon some Tartars. Svein spoke to them in their own tongue and seemed to find one among them who knew him. They brought us to the castle, where Svein seems to have been before, and he was at once taken as chief.

"He told me that we would be married in Christian fashion, and my words did not shake him in the least, for the next day he sent a Tartar away, as he said, for a priest from one of the settlements. Then you came, and — and father —"

Here Sigrid broke down and began to sob softly. Alfgar, feeling a sudden great pity for the fatherless girl, put out his hand and stroked her hair softly, soothing her. After a little space her sobs lessened, and he told her of Hrolf's bidding.

"So fear not, Sigrid," he concluded gently. "I shall bear out his bidding in all things, and together we will make our way through this barbarous country to Russia. After all, it should not be so hard. It is in my mind that

these Tartars will give us an escort willingly. Tell me, is your father — ”

“ Yes,” replied Sigrid as he paused. “ He was laid to rest yesterday. I — I put a little cross over his grave.”

Alfgar said nothing to her about his conversation with Hrolf on the subject of religion, but his mind flew to that last scene in the old castle.

“ Tell me, Sigrid,” he asked quickly, to change the subject, “ did you hear a sound like the rush of wings, and hoofs clicking in the air, and the clash of arms, just afterward? It seemed to me that the Valkyries came, in very sooth! ”

“ Nay,” she answered wonderingly, “ I heard nothing.”

“ Well, perchance it was but fancy,” returned Alfgar. “ Now, Sigrid, are you all ready to start tomorrow? ”

“ Tomorrow? ” she echoed blankly. “ Why, how is that possible? You will not be able to move for — ”

“ Nonsense! ” smiled Alfgar, getting to his feet and throwing aside the skin that hung across the door of the hut. “ I am as hungry

as a bear, maiden; it was not so much the wound as the weariness and the excitement which made me sleep so long, methinks. Fear not, I will be able to ride well enough. Besides, every day counts. If I mistake not, we would have a hard journey if we delayed until the time of snow, and the autumn is well onward."

Half leaning on the arm of Sigrid until they came to the nearest fire, a sharp click went up from the Tartars as they saw Flamehair come quietly up and sit down among them. It was the early part of the evening, and they were eating a kind of stew made from game mixed with roots. Alfgar, together with Sigrid, was given some of this, and he soon felt a great deal stronger. After the first few movements his wound, to his joy, scarcely bothered him.

A few moments later there came a joyful cry and Morcar, the German slave, ran up and greeted Alfgar warmly. The honest fellow was so glad to see him that Alfgar was struck with an idea.

"Where is the chief in command?" he asked the German. The latter indicated a

Tartar, who grinned amiably at Alfgar, and the Saxon began to put questions to him.

"Can you furnish us with horses and an escort to take us safely through your country?"

The Tartar nodded rapidly, and seizing the hand of Alfgar, pressed it against his forehead. It was evident that he was regarded with the deepest respect and gratitude.

"Can we start tomorrow?"

At this question the Tartar looked blank, and made a long speech. Morcar told the Saxon that it was desired that he should remain with them for a longer time, and that if he wished wives, he would be given as many as he desired from the tribe, together with wealth of horses and other things. At this Sigrid laughed and Alfgar flushed with embarrassment.

"Tell him I wish no wives," he replied to Morcar. "Tell him that I must start tomorrow, with this maiden. Tell him also that as recompense for the father of this maid, who lies sleeping yonder in the forest, he shall give me you, to take with me."

Morcar stared at Alfgar, then spoke rapidly.

Once more the chief nodded and pressed the Saxon's hand to his forehead in token of obedience, while Morcar, with tears streaming down his cheeks, seized the other hand.

"Do you mean it, lord?" he faltered. "It is no idle jest?"

"It is no jest, Morcar," replied Alfgar with a smile. "Since the chief has consented, go get that collar sawn from your neck. You have done me too much service to be aught else than a friend and comrade."

The German kissed Alfgar's hand vehemently, then that of Sigrid.

"Lord," he said after a moment, "you know not how I have prayed for this day, prayed to be free once more ere I died! Ah, to see my own land again, my own forests and rivers, and to hear my own tongue in the mouths of my people! See, lord, I had a wife and little ones, and my old father may still be there waiting for me — ah, just to be free! Lord, my life is yours for the asking, and with joy will I pay the debt I owe you!"

"I want not your life, man," smiled Alfgar, who was deeply touched by the earnestness and gratitude of the Saxon. "Come, get that hate-

ful collar off, and in the morning we will take the first step toward your own land once more. You must make all arrangements for the trip, now, and serve as interpreter along the way. Otherwise I fear it would indeed go full hard with us."

The German vanished, and he seemed like a new man. Watching him go away, Alfgar could not help wondering how long men would be made thralls, and if the time would ever come when there would be no more slavery. But that was an impossible dream, and with a faint sigh he turned back to the fire.

His bruises troubled him but little, and he sat for a long time listening to the chiefs and talking with Sigrid. The girl had been greatly saddened by the death of her father, but in her grief there was no trace of weakness, and through the long days thereafter she gave few signs of sorrow, though more than once there were traces of tears on her cheeks in the mornings.

At length Alfgar retired to his hut again and fell into a sound sleep that lasted until he was roused by Morcar at daybreak. He found his arms neatly arranged, polished anew and

free of rust, and in his scabbard hung Hrolf's sword, for Alfgar's had been shattered in the encounter with Svein.

"The maiden ordered it so," explained Morcar as Alfgar gave an exclamation of surprise at sight of the weapon. "She bade me give the blade to my lord, saying that no other was worthy to wear it." Here the German-Saxon smiled. "My lord will have a surprise when he goes out," he added.

"Very well," laughed Alfgar, "help me on with this byrnie, for I am too stiff to raise my arms. Is the surprise a pleasant one?"

"Perchance," and more than this Morcar would not say. He helped Alfgar into his arms, then took away the shield to hang at the saddle-bow of a horse, and Alfgar left the hut. As he emerged into the gray dawnlight he stopped with a little cry of astonishment. There, standing over a fire, was a Viking, clad in byrnie and helm, quiver slung at side and spear in hand! But at his exclamation the figure turned, and he looked into the laughing face of Sigrid.

"Hail, Viking! Skoal!" rang out her merry voice. "How like you the recruit?"

"The byrnie is overlong," said Alfgar, advancing, "but in sooth I know not what to say."

"They are my father's arms," replied Sigrid softly. "It seemed to me, Flamehair, that there would be little safety for a girl in crossing through these great forests and steppes, so I put up my hair under the helm and slipped the byrnie over my kirtle. It is large, indeed, but what a feeling of security it gives!"

"Aye," smiled Flamehair quickly, "at a little distance you might easily be taken for a warrior, Sigrid. It is a right good idea, and I should have thought of it. Pull down the helm more in front — there! Now your face is shadowed and you look the part indeed!"

"You had best take this spear," she returned, holding out the weapon. "I will use father's bow, for with that weapon I am at home, and might prove of good use in a pinch. Are you ready for breakfast?"

Alfgar was ravenous again, and after a good breakfast with the chiefs a dozen of the Tartars led up their horses. Morcar, whose collar was now gone, Sigrid, and Alfgar were each given a good steed, and the farewells were then said.

As the chiefs had taken great store of booty from the captured hold they were only too glad to give Alfgar all that he wished, but he refused their offers and after bidding them Godspeed he climbed stiffly into his saddle, waved his spear, and the little cavalcade moved off through the forest.

After a short consultation with Morcar it was decided to head for the northwest, in order to avoid the mountains and to cross the great plains or steppes into the land of Jarisleif.

With half a dozen Tartars preceding the group of three, and the rest following, they rode all that day. Once they came to a large village and were met by a hastily-summoned crowd of warriors, but the escort proved its value by passing them through safely and obtaining provisions and goat's milk. Once, too, toward evening they met a band of Tartars numbering a score, who stopped them. But after a few words with the escort, upon a close inspection of Alfgar and Sigrid the Tartars rode on a short distance and then left them. There was no little amusement as the half-disguise of the girl was noted, but the rough jests seemed kindly enough and the leader of

the party exchanged gifts with one of the escort before parting.

That night they camped in the forest. At morning the way was taken up again until they arrived at another village. Here there was a long consultation, and Morcar turned to the Saxon.

"Lord, the men will hand us over to these Tartars, who will then take us forward through their country, for our escort would now return home."

Alfgar signified his assent, and after the midday meal they parted with their first escort and went on with a number of men from the village. The next day they came to sparser forests and seemed to be on the uplands. As they were jogging along late in the forenoon the Tartars suddenly drew rein and motioned Alfgar to silence. The little horses stood like statues, and Alfgar could hear nothing. Two of the Tartars slipped from their steeds and went forward on foot.

"They heard something, lord," whispered Morcar. "What, I know not. Best wait."

After a few moments the two men returned and reported excitedly.

"They say that a score of strange Tartars are encamped ahead, and with them is a prisoner," said the German. "The captive is an old man, who sings aloud in a strange tongue, so they say."

After a hurried conference one of the Tartars beckoned to Alfgar, who jumped down and accompanied him through the trees. After a few hundred yards they came in sight of the encampment, which was nothing more than a halt for rest and eating. But Alfgar gave a start of amazement as the scene flashed before him, for the man sitting bound in the midst of the skin-clad men, who were tearing raw flesh in their savage hunger, was no other than Basil of the Errand!

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNFAITHFUL GUIDE

ALFGAR gripped the arm of the Tartar and drew him back. He said nothing until they reached the party. The escort numbered only a dozen, but Alfgar swiftly made up his mind that if possible the brave old monk should be rescued.

"Give your helm to Morcar," he said to Sigrid. "Morcar, tell the men that we will attack those fellows and rescue the prisoner, who is a friend of mine. Do you wait here in charge of the maid. Take her helm and what arms you will from the Tartars."

When Morcar translated the order the quick satisfaction of the fierce Tartars was evident at once. They loved nothing better than a chance to use their weapons, and Alfgar determined that there must be some old tribal enmity which would account for their delight at attacking the other party. So, leaving Morcar to take care of Sigrid, much against her

wishes, he placed himself at the head of the little band and all went forward on foot.

The encamped party suspected no danger and Alfgar's men took up their positions craftily. When all was ready the leader blew his horn, and with a yell the men sprang out. Leaving the others to fight, Alfgar sprang through the group of startled raiders and swiftly cut the cords that bound the old Basil. As he did so he managed to hold off one or two who attacked him, catching their blows on his shield, and cried to Basil to run back to where they had left the horses.

But the great pine-forest held a surprise that was both unexpected and terrible. As Alfgar's men attacked furiously, cutting down a number of the foe before they could snatch up their arms, and just as Basil had reached the trees, a shout arose from an unexpected quarter. Whirling about, Alfgar was dumfounded to see a score of fresh foes taking his men in flank!

The Saxon realized on the instant that there had been two parties of the enemy instead of one. He was already cut off from his men and a dozen foes were rushing at him. A sudden

deadly fear darted into his mind as he thought of Sigrid, unprotected save for Morcar. Still he hesitated, inclined to break through to the side of his men, but he saw that this was useless. Half of them were down already.

So, turning, Alfgar gave one shout and sprang at the men behind him. An arrow glanced from his byrnie, but his shield protected his face, and except for his stiffness from the bruises of Svein's axe Alfgar would have had no fear. The first to meet him went down before the impact, his sword disposed of another, and warding off a vicious spear-thrust, Alfgar dropped his shield and took to his heels.

Well he knew that his only chance lay in reaching the horses and making off with Sigrid and Morcar. Easily leaving his pursuers behind, Alfgar gave a groan as he reached the path. There before the horses was a little knot of struggling men, while at one side stood Sigrid, an arrow on the string, waiting for a shot.

As Alfgar came up with a shout of rage he saw Morcar holding three Tartars in check, while two bodies lay in the path. Wasting no

time, the Saxon brought down one man just as another fell beneath Morcar's axe. The third took to his heels and vanished. Morcar was streaming with blood, and laughed grimly as a stream of figures poured from the forest behind Alfgar.

"Mount, lord!" he cried.

Casting a glance over his shoulder, Alfgar ran to the horses and helped Sigrid into the saddle of one. When he had gained the back of another, he saw that Morcar still stood in the path, motionless.

"Hasten, Morcar!" he shouted, for the pursuers were only a hundred yards away and arrows were whistling about them. The German only waved his hand in answer, and struck the horse of Sigrid as it passed him.

"Go, lord!" he panted, lifting his axe. "I have my death-stroke."

"Nonsense," cried Alfgar angrily, holding out his hand. "Here, up behind me, man!"

An arrow splintered on his helm. Morcar only shook his head and pointed to Sigrid.

"Save her, lord! I pay the debt I owe. Farewell!"

And with that he brought down the flat of

his axe heavily on Alfgar's steed, which sent the animal into a wild gallop. As the Saxon, exerting every effort to stick on the maddened beast, threw one glance backward, he saw Morcar disperse the other horses and then become the center of a whirl of steel and flesh as the foemen closed in. A moment later he was among the trees, Sigrid was ahead of him, and with a little sob Alfgar sent up a quick prayer for the brave German. He made no effort to pull up his horse, but galloped along beside Sigrid.

The girl's face was white and set, and for a little space Alfgar said nothing, realizing that the sacrifice of Morcar had moved her deeply. Indeed, the happenings of the last few days had been as a terrible nightmare to the girl. She had not been unused to scenes of violence, but her own danger and the death of her father seemed so unreal to her that it required something of an effort to face it all without a sign of weakening.

"Morcar was a brave man," said Alfgar quietly, when at length the steeds had been halted for a brief rest. "He has given his life for us, Sigrid, and if I live I swear that some

day I will seek out that old father of his and see that he ends his days in peace. Come, we are doubtless being pursued, so we cannot rest very long. Are you unhurt?"

"Yes," nodded Sigrid. "A band of men swept by us at the first yell that went up, and four or five stayed to attack us. Were our escort all cut off?"

"Yes, to a man," replied Alfgar sadly. "The newcomers took us in flank, and I had just time to cut my way through to join you. By this time it is all over."

"Were we the only ones to — to escape?" returned Sigrid.

"Unless some of the Tartars slipped off into the woods," answered Alfgar. They started forward at a brisk trot. Suddenly the Saxon pulled up his steed with an exclamation.

"By the rood! I forgot the old man — Basil of the Errand!"

Then he explained to Sigrid how the monk had been freed at the first moment and had vanished in the forest. Sigrid had seen nothing of him, and Alfgar finally reached the conclusion that Basil must have been overtaken by the second party of Tartars in their attack.

They rode steadily forward through a deserted country, holding ever to the northward. Toward sunset they noticed that the trees were growing sparser and more thinly scattered, and at length Alfgar realized that they were almost on the great open plains or steppes of which he had heard so many stories from Harald's men. They had traveled hard and fast, and as Sigrid was weary and he was stiff and sore himself, he determined to camp there.

"We will have to make the best of it," he stated, pointing to a large tree ahead. "That will shelter us, at least. By this time I suppose we have thrown off the pursuit, even if there was any. At any rate we must take the risk and build a fire, for the nights are cold."

"I know not whose horse this was," said Sigrid, as she slipped off, "but the saddlebags are well supplied. Oh, here is flint and steel, too!"

"Good," smiled Alfgar. "I was wondering how we would manage for a fire. Now for supper. Here is some meat and a few stale grain cakes; but how about water? There seems to be none in sight."

Sigrid searched the saddlebags she had

taken from her steed, and triumphantly produced a bottle of sour Tartar wine, and another of goat's milk, with a packet of food. The horses were unsaddled and picketed for the night, and although Alfgar deeply regretted that the beasts had no water, he could do no more. Then a fire was started, and they sat down to their first repast in the wilds.

"Stop!" cried Sigrid suddenly, bending her ear down toward the earth. "Is that not the sound of horses?"

Alfgar followed her example, a quick fear in his heart. Faintly but distinctly he heard the sound of hoofs, and instantly sprang to his arms, which with Sigrid's had been piled at the foot of the tree. The byrnies and helmets were donned quickly, for Morcar had refused the offer of Sigrid's helm, and with bows ready they slipped behind the tree, ready to jump to their horses if need were.

"I believe that it is but a single horse," exclaimed Alfgar a moment later. The sound of hoofs was now plain in the darkness, and their anxiety gradually subsided as it became evident that they would have only one horseman to deal with. Closer and closer the hoof-

beats thudded, then stopped suddenly. A dim shape became visible at the outer edge of the firelight.

"Who are you?" cried Alfgar boldly.

"Thanks be to God, I have found you!"

A cry of rejoicing broke from the Saxon as the figure came forward and the light fell on the face of Basil the monk. Dropping their weapons, Alfgar and Sigrid ran forward as he left the saddle and held out a hand to each. Soon they were once more settled by the fire, where Basil attacked the meager supply of food ravenously.

"I hid in the trees," he explained when his hunger was somewhat appeased, "until the godless men made an end of fighting and fell to quarreling over the plunder. Then I made for the horses, took the best I could see, and made haste to follow your tracks. It was not easy, but God led my steed forward until I saw the light of your fire."

"Were all our people killed?" asked Alfgar. "Did you see aught of Morcar, the German? How did you steal a horse so easily? Strange they were not guarded!"

Basil cast a glance at the stout oaken staff

which lay at his side. A quizzical look stole into his eyes as he met Alfgar's puzzled expression. "Aye, young Englishman, the steeds were guarded, but I have been a fighting man in my time and there is yet strength in my arm. As for your men, I could not tell them from the rest. The German was lying in the road as I passed, and I halted to bless him ere he died. He was a worthy man."

"But you have not told us how you fell into their hands!" exclaimed Sigrid, deeply interested in the old monk.

"They came upon me in the forest and bound me, that was all," he answered simply. "But I knew there was a Hand stronger than mine which would deliver me, and so indeed it proved."

Alfgar told all that had happened since he and Hrolf had parted with Basil — of the capture of the stronghold and of Svein's escape and Hrolf's death. Basil listened with close attention at first, but toward the end of the tale he gazed out into the night and seemed wrapped in thought. At the conclusion of the story Sigrid spoke up impulsively.

"You will go on with us now, will you not?"

Surely you see the impossibility of ever reaching England as you had intended, Basil! Come on with us to Jarisleif, and there you can be sent with a worthy escort to Edward. If Jarisleif will not, then Harald would furnish you with a ship and with men right gladly, for the sake of the memory of King Olaf."

Basil turned his eyes on the earnest face of the girl and gazed steadily at her while Alfgar seconded her speech with a few words of entreaty. Then he shook his head decidedly.

"Nay, maiden, my errand may not go so far afield. See, I have been long on the way already, and there is yet far to go. What need have I of escort? My Guardian is more than many men and ships, maiden, and I need naught save His hand to guard me. Come with me if you will, and if you will not then go your ways and leave me to go mine. I thank you for your good hearts, both of you, but my errand waits and will not be held back."

Sigrid would have pleaded with him, but Alfgar motioned her to silence, well knowing that old Basil would not be argued with.

"As you will, old man," he answered

quietly. "Our ways do not lie with yours, yet I am sorry that we must separate in the morning. We would not detain you, and if your mind is made up, so be it. Now, Sigrid, I think we had better rest. There is little use in keeping watch, and we need sleep if we are to travel tomorrow. The journey will be long, and dangers may await."

Alfgar managed to rig up a rude bed for Sigrid, against her protests, out of his cloak and the saddle-bags. He and Basil flung themselves down on the other side of the big tree, and the fire was allowed to burn itself out. The young Saxon slept but little that night, for it was bitterly cold. He dared not keep a large fire blazing, however, for fear of attracting enemies.

At dawn they finished the remnants of their food and started out to find water for the horses. After a mile they came across a little stream, and here Basil left them, with his hearty blessing.

"God be with you, friends," he said, as they splashed through the shallow waters and halted on the other bank. "You will bring the maiden through safely, young Englishman,

if so be you do not lose faith in His power. Farewell, and Godspeed!"

"Godspeed," replied Alfgar and Sigrid devoutly, and Basil turned his steed to the west. They stood watching him until the lonely figure was lost in the distance.

"A strange man," remarked Alfgar softly as he led the way to the north, where a vast rolling plain stretched before them. "Stay — what is that smoke yonder, amid those trees?"

"A village, possibly," said Sigrid, doubt in her voice. "Shall we go thither, or —"

"We must have food," decided Alfgar, "and it may be that we can find a guide. Let us make the effort."

So turning toward the smoke, in the east, they rode slowly along. Half an hour later they were approaching a collection of a dozen huts, from which poured men and women as they came in sight. Alfgar raised his hand, and the weapons were lowered. Reining up, he addressed the Tartars in the Dane tongue. One of the crowd pushed forward and replied in very bad Latin, and Alfgar managed to communicate his wishes.

Food and drink were given them, and after

many inquiries they found that Jarisleif's men might be located a few days' journey to the north, although the Dnieper and Russia itself was much farther on. By promise of the golden armring Harald had given Alfgar, the Saxon obtained a guide to lead them aright.

Not wishing to lose any time, they started without delay. The saddlebags were filled with food, and at length it seemed to the two wanderers that they were on the road to safety. The Tartar who was their guide proved to be a lean, dark-skinned man with crafty eyes, who could say nothing save in his own tongue.

Alfgar and Sigrid pushed their horses fast after him, riding all that day. In the afternoon they sighted the smoke of another village, but did not approach it. Alfgar managed to knock over a small deer with his bow, and that evening they dined sumptuously on the banks of a clear, cold river. There seemed to be no danger, so a big fire was built, and all three lay down beside it, with the rippling of the river below in their ears, and the sighing of the wind through the long grass of the steppes lulling them to sleep.

Alfgar awakened uneasily. The sun was

high — much too high, he thought. He sat up and looked around. Near the dead ashes of the fire lay the sleeping Sigrid — but where was the guide? Moved by a sudden thought, he sprang up. The horses were gone!

CHAPTER XV.

AFOOT

WITH a rapidly sinking heart, Alfgar gazed around. The vast steppe lay stretched out for miles ahead without a break in the tall, waving grass, swept into shimmering lengths by the morning breeze. Behind were scattered trees, gradually reaching to the green forest in the farther distance, but it was plain that the Tartar had stolen the horses and slipped away early in the night, for there was no sign of life to be seen. Bitterly reproaching himself for not keeping a sharp eye on the man, whose crafty face he had noted, Alfgar roused Sigrid and told her of the situation.

"Never mind," she exclaimed cheerily, "things are not half so bad as they might be, Flamehair! He has left us our food, at least, and our arms, and we know that the men of Jarisleif cannot be so very far away."

Alfgar smiled wryly at the effort to hearten him.

"You might add that it was lucky he did not put a knife into us as we slept," he made response. "However, my chest is all right now and in any case I am more used to walking than riding. I fear it will be a hard matter, though, to win our way through this stiff grass on foot. It must be as high as our heads, or higher."

"Then we shall walk in the shade," laughed Sigrid. "Do you wait here while I go and bathe in the river, Flamehair. There is little use in making haste now, I suppose."

"Not a bit," agreed Alfgar. Sigrid ran off down the hill, and he set to work preparing breakfast and making up two packs of food. Reluctantly he decided that the byrnie of Sigrid must be left behind, for the weight would be far too much for her to long endure. His own he would wear as long as might be, also Hrolf's sword, which was an unusually fine weapon. Their bows were of little weight and might prove of inestimable value later on.

The helmets he decided to abandon. The sun was not bad at this season, and both he and Sigrid were used to no head-covering. So when Sigrid, rosy-cheeked and wet of hair,

returned she found all ready for a prompt start, with venison steaks broiled over the fire and grain cakes of flour and water waiting. The repast was not exactly epicurean, but neither of the wanderers cared for that. Sea rovers and their families were used to the coarsest of fare, and Varangar rations had changed Sigrid's tastes but little.

The river below their camp was shallow enough to wade across, after which they set out to the north, Alfgar leading the way. Now came a terrible struggle. The coarse, rough grass of the steppe was higher than their heads, and the Saxon had to force his way through, the sawlike blades cutting into his hands and face and neck. The byrnie protected his body, but his banded leggings were soon reduced to shreds. Indeed, Alfgar would never have thought it possible for mere grass to be so strong and keen. For Sigrid it was not so bad. She followed in the swathe he made and the trampled grass struck her with less force; but when they halted for a breathing-space at the end of an hour there was more than one bloody streak across her face. As for Alfgar, when he turned around Sigrid gave a cry of dismay,

for his face was a crisscross of tiny cuts, and his byrnie was spotted and stained with crimson.

"It is nothing," he reassured her with a smile, although the scratches smarted like fire. "We must endure it, Sigrid, for there is no other way. I wish we might strike upon a river, though!"

But river there was none, and never a break occurred in the sea of grass before them. At least, so thought Alfgar as he flung himself down toward midday for a brief rest. Barely had they started on, however, when they found that there was wild life in plenty concealed beneath that waving canopy, as the grass before them parted suddenly and the head of a small deer appeared. Sigrid had been fighting back the grass with her bow strung, and before the startled animal could spring away, the quick-witted girl had sped an arrow and he fell. They refilled their packs with fresh meat, not daring to light a fire here for fear the vast plain would be swept by flames from a chance spark. Fortunately, toward evening they came upon a tiny stream and camped here, weary and spent.

The stream was nothing more than a brook, but it broke the mass of waving grass-blades and wended toward the north-west, so they decided to wade along its bed.

"At least it will save our hands and faces," said Alfgar ruefully, looking at Sigrid's puffed and swollen features and imagining how his own looked. "In good sooth, another day of such struggling and I would be about ready to give up."

"If we only had the horses," sighed Sigrid bravely, "it would matter little. However, we are making progress, Flamehair, and it cannot last forever!"

"I wonder how old Basil is making it," said the Saxon, as they splashed along. The water was little more than up to their ankles, and progress was no longer difficult. "I suppose he is far among the mountains by this time."

After an hour or two Alfgar paused. His keen eye had caught a blue spiral of smoke dead ahead. He consulted with Sigrid, and they agreed that it must come from the camp-fire of some party beside the stream. But at the thought of striking away once more into

the tall grass both Alfgar and Sigrid decided that anything would be preferable to another such experience, and they concluded to go ahead and take their chance with friend or foe. So with anxious hearts they went forward as quietly as possible, hoping that with luck they might steal past the camp, if such it proved to be, without detection.

Closer and closer they drew to the thin bluish spiral, which was little more than a heat-haze above the steppe. But as they came nearer, it seemed to Alfgar that unless the stream curved sharply farther on, the fire was not close to it, but off a little to the north-west, on the left. This gave them new hope, for unless the camp was at the stream's edge they would not have to make a detour through that terrible cutting grass.

Anxious as they both were, neither had dared hope for the sight that met their gaze as they rounded a little bend in the stream. Sure enough, the fire was not near the bank, but as Alfgar judged, some hundred yards to the side. The cause for this became evident at the sight of a dozen of the little Tartar horses grazing at the edge of the stream or standing

in it to their fetlocks. All were hobbled or tethered by long ropes, and there were no guards in sight. Instantly Alfgar drew back behind a hummock of grass.

"Do you stay here," he whispered to Sigrid, while I go forward and secure two — "

"Nay," she broke in quickly. "I will go, too. They will not fear two more than one, Flamehair, and it may well be that we shall have to ride in hot haste. But we cannot take the steeds without leaving some recompense behind. Here, I will put this silver armlet on the bank in full sight."

Alfgar nodded. He would have thought little of taking the horses, for he considered that they were in the enemy's country; nevertheless a little flush of shame stole over his cheek and he turned away quickly to hide it. So he led the way forward, stepping as quietly as possible in the water.

The horses paid them little heed, and were evidently too tame to break away. Almost doubting that this good fortune would last, Alfgar very silently loosened the picket-ropes of two, and using a strand of the rope as a bridle led one up the stream, followed by Sig-

rid with the second. The broad silver armlet lay shining on the bank behind them. A moment later they had mounted, but as the stream still led northward both decided to continue in its bed and so avoid the grass, which was tall enough to give them considerable trouble, even when mounted.

"Sigrid, I will wager that you become a goddess," remarked Alfgar when the encampment had been left far behind and they could talk freely.

"How mean you?" asked the girl in surprise.

"Why," chuckled the Saxon, "when the Tartars find that two horses are gone, leaving no tracks, and that a silver armlet is on the bank in their place, they will conclude that some god has visited them! That is," he added, "if they believe in gods, which I doubt."

"Of course they do!" asserted Sigrid indignantly, but laughing as she spoke. "Even the black-skinned men from Egypt believe in gods, for I have seen them in Tsargrad, praying. Some of them even became Christians."

"I wonder what became of Svein," mused Alfgar suddenly. "Perchance he is even now

somewhere on the steppes. Or he may have fled south toward Greek land once again. I fear that my vow will be long in its fulfillment." Wherewith he told Sigrid of the vow which he had sworn to her father on the eve of the fight for the castle.

"Flamehair," she cried, her eyes flashing, "that were no fitting vow for you to keep! Let be, and forget that you ever —"

They were riding side by side now, and as Alfgar turned and looked into her eyes, Sigrid sensed something strange in his look, something that made her words die away into nothing, for never before had she seen that Saxon really angry, in cold blood.

"Sigrid," he said, and for all the softness of his voice it reminded her of the tones of Harald Hardrede, "did you ever chance to hear a lay called the wise words of Brynhild? See, this is the second verse of it:

My second rede would teach thee
Trust not the hasty swearer;
Give thou an oath and keep it,
But give it slowly ever,
For he who swears unthinking,
The wolf of vows, is witless!

“Now, maiden, it may well be that in swearing that vow I was witless, but never will Alfgar the Saxon be named ‘Wolf of Vows’! What I swear, that I do, so say no more on this matter. Now tell me something I have long wanted to know. How did Haldor, Harald’s Iceland man, come to have so terrible a visage, broken in as it seems to be? Was it a wound?”

Sigrid, not a little ashamed of her hasty speech—for in that day it was accounted great shame, especially among Vikings, to break an oath of any sort—told him the story as they rode, and neither referred to the vow given Hrolf for many a long day thereafter.

“That tale of Haldor’s face, Flamehair, is well known, and I wonder that you have not heard it before. Yes, it was a wound gained in a land the Greeks call Sicily, where Harald was a-Viking with some of the Varangars, a year since. They were besieging a strong town, so strong that the townfolk would throw open the gates and mock Harald, bidding him enter. This they did in the hope that some of the Vikings would rush in, when the gates might be shut and those inside slaughtered.

"But Harald bade the men go unarmed just out of arrow-shot of the walls, and there carry on games and sports. This they did for many days, until one day the townfolk went to the walls to see the sports, and but few carried their weapons, deeming it useless. At this Harald bade his men wear swords beneath their cloaks, and after a little they made a sudden dash for the gates, giving the townfolk no chance to close them.

"The Varangars had no shielding armor, and the battle in the gates was sore indeed. The banner-bearer fell, and Harald ordered Haldor to take up the banner. Stones were raining down, and as Haldor picked up the staff he taunted Harald at fighting poorly. At that instant a stone struck his face, hurting it terribly. But Harald had rushed forward and Haldor followed him until the town was taken, and men say that it was the taunt which made Harald so wroth that none could stand before him that day. After that he made Haldor a captain under him."

"It was a brave deed," commented Alfgar dryly, "although I had as lief beard a bear unarmed as taunt Harald in the battle-heat.

Dost think he really has a chance to recover Norway, Sigrid?"

"Yes," nodded the girl earnestly. "I have heard that Magnus, his nephew and the son of Olaf the Holy, is ruling there now, having taken the land from the Danes and also having taken the Danish land from King Svein Wulfson. How true this is I know not; it is but rumor that came to Tsargrad a short while since."

For some time they had noted that the brook was growing larger and wider, and suddenly it made a sweep and emptied into a little river, almost hidden among the waving grasses. Alfgar had never before seen a river without trees, and he pulled up to look about him. As he did so, his companion seized his bridle quickly.

"Look, Flamehair! What is that glint of steel, there to the left?"

Alfgar followed her pointing finger, and without a word began to string his bow. The glint, rising and falling, was the flame of sun on steel, and almost as Sigrid spoke they could see a little band of warriors riding along in the distance, and coming toward them. Sigrid

would have drawn back into shelter, but Alfgar stopped her.

"I am tired of fleeing," he said wearily. "Why fly from unknown dangers, Sigrid? Let them come; it is little harm they can do us, methinks."

CHAPTER XVI

A JOYFUL MEETING

IT was late in the fall, and Harald Sigurdson sat in the hall of the great palace of Jarisleif, alone. He had pushed on with all speed in the *Crossbeak*, but had arrived at the great city of Kiev only to find that the Russland king was far in the north at his other capital, Holmgarth, which in later days became known as Novgorod.

He had made what search he dared for Alfgar, Hrolf, Svein, and Sigrid, not knowing that the girl had been carried off, and wondering much at the message brought out to the ship by Svein, wherein he declared that Harald was sorely wounded. At length it was concluded that all four had been killed or carried off, and the journey up the Dnieper had been pushed fast.

Upon reaching Kiev the governor of the city, who knew Harald's friendship with Jarisleif and obeyed him in all things, at once dispatched men and messengers to the south

who had orders to search even to the great steppes, and there to spread among the nomad tribes news of a great reward for the safe return of any of the four. It had grieved Harald sorely, no less than all his men, to lose Alfgar, while the daughter of Hrolf was loved by every man in the band as his own. Few cared for the loss of Svein.

But one by one reports had come in of no news, and the governor assured Harald that not until the spring could he hope to regain any captives, if indeed there were any. But Harald had a long and difficult journey north to Holmgarth, and if he delayed until the deep snows it would be increased in difficulty a hundred-fold. To add to his perplexity there had come strange news from Norway, confirming older rumors.

Magnus had been taken for king of all the country. Norway had been under Danish rule for years, and it had been Harald's hope that he might rouse the people to strike for liberty and the old line of Fairhair kings. This Magnus had done before him, but he had also done much more. In a series of great battles with Svein Wulfson, king of Denmark, he had

swept him away and brought Denmark under his rule also.

Harald's difficulty was based on a custom of the Northland. He had, together with Magnus, been bequeathed half the kingdom by Olaf the Holy, before that king's death. But in England and the north of those days, hereditary right counted for little. The king and his jarls, who ruled the land under him, both gained their power in much the same way. A king could only gain the title by being accepted as such by a Thing, or assembly, of the people of some one district; or by the All-thing, or general assembly of the whole country. A jarl could only get his title through being named as such by the king, and neither title was hereditary, as it was in the south. Even in England the same custom prevailed until William of Normandy introduced the rite of coronation, when that was followed.

So now that Magnus was king, with the whole land behind him, Harald would be little better than an outlaw in attacking his rule. The former Varangars, on hearing the news, had held a great meeting and unanimously resolved to follow Harald wherever he led, and

many Northmen who were in Kiev had joined the following.

Nevertheless, Harald was torn with indecision. Messages had come from Jarisleif, bidding him hasten on to Holmgarth, and more private ones had come to Harald from Elizabeth the princess. She still waited for him, and urged him to accept part of the realm from her father, who was too old for further conquest and was eager to have the lands of the south subject to him. This seemed to Harald the best thing he could do, but at the same time it seemed to him that to be king in barren Norway was better than to rule all the rich southland. As he was thinking thus, the door of the hall swung open and Eadgar entered, with Haldor.

"No news?" asked Harald. Both shook their heads.

"None, Harald," replied Eadgar wearily. "It is in my mind that I will remain here and join you later in the north. Save for me the boy is alone in the world, and had I known it sooner I had gone home to England. Now I do not choose to neglect my duty to him; but as for you, Harald, the men —"

"Well, what of the men?" exclaimed Hardrede impatiently, as Eadgar paused.

"The men love Harald better than Flamehair," returned Haldor with his usual bluntness, and Eadgar nodded.

"You are killing your chances by waiting here," went on the Saxon. "Let me remain, and if Flamehair or the others appear, I can bring them on."

Harald nodded gloomily. "So be it, friends. Haldor, what think you I had best do in the matter of my kingship? It were easy to hold rule under Jarisleif, but such were a poor end for one of Harald Fairhair's race. Yet it mislikes me to carry war into mine own land of Norway, against my own brother's son."

"Hardrede was never wont to carry war-shield on back," returned the grim Haldor. Harald flushed, and Eadgar hastened to soothe matters over.

"It may well be, Harald, that Magnus will give you half the kingdom, more especially as you have greater wealth than ever king of these lands has owned," he said. "Why not use patience, and send a message to Magnus in the spring, from Holmgarth, to this effect? It

were not good to carry a bane-spear against your nephew, king by law."

"That is a good rede," approved Harald with a nod. "When we arrive at Holmgarth, we will —"

He stopped abruptly, listening. From the guardrooms below and from the courtyard of the palace came the sound of shouts, and the corridors seemed filled with running feet. Instantly Harald leaped for his sword, tore the peace-bands from the hilt, and sprang forward with naked blade. The other two were close behind, but before they could get to the door a wild yell pealed up outside and it was burst open.

Into the room rushed, not foes, but a tumultuous, rioting crowd of Varangars whose shouts and war horns raised a terrific din within the palace hall. Harald threatened them angrily, but suddenly he sprang back and dropped his sword, amazement in his face. This changed quickly to wondering delight, as Alfgar and Sigrid leaped down from the shoulders of the Vikings who bore them and ran forward to him.

Tears of joy stood in Harald's eyes and he

clasped Alfgar to him with a fierce hug that told more than his words by far. Sigrid he greeted no less heartily.

"Welcome, my friends, welcome!" he cried. Alfgar had already greeted his uncle, and stood beside Sigrid, flushed and happy. He was bronzed, ragged, and streaked with dust and dirt, as was Sigrid also; but these things mattered little.

"Ulf," shouted Harald, "have the hall set for a feast, and at this Flamehair will tell us the story. Are you both unhurt?"

"Quite, Harald," smiled Sigrid. "We want clean clothes more than aught else, just now!"

"Take her to the women's quarter, Haldor," commanded Harald. "Do you, Flamehair, come with me. You, too, Eadgar. We will save the story until the feast is set, and a right noble one it shall be. Have you any news of Hrolf and Svein Arnison?"

"Hrolf is dead," replied Alfgar as he followed Harald through a dark corridor to the chief's quarters. "Of Svein I will tell later."

"Dead?" repeated Harald, pointing the Saxon to a bucket of water, which Eadgar

dashed over him, and bringing out fresh garments. "Then it is in my mind that he died not alone, for Hrolf was ever a heavy-handed man with weapons."

"In good sooth he did not," rejoined Alfgar, dressing rapidly. "But the tale is a long one. Have you seen aught of Svein?"

"We?" repeated Eadgar in surprise. "Why, no! How should we see him?"

"You'll soon hear," laughed Alfgar lightly. It seemed to him that all his troubles were over, but he did not want to tell his story twice, and held silence. Haldor appeared and in his usual gruff accents said that while the feast was preparing the men desired Alfgar to sing them just one song, in the guard-rooms below. To this Alfgar readily assented. Harald smilingly handed him his own harp, and he followed all three down the winding passage. Suddenly a hand plucked at his arm, and the voice of Haldor whispered in his ear.

"Something stirring, lad! Something that will stir Harald to life, for we are in a bad fix, methinks."

Wondering much at these words, whose meaning he knew not, Alfgar entered the

guardroom. The men hailed him with a yell, and Harald caught the Saxon in his mighty hands and with a laugh whirled him aloft to a platform of shields, held on the Varangars' shoulders. Alfgar had small time for thought, but he obeyed the behest of Haldor, to his after-regret, by changing an old battle-song to fit the occasion. It was the "Ancient Biarklay" or song of Biark, the "Awakening of the Warriors," and it was met with a yell of delight:

Day is come up again,
Dun the cock's feathers!
'T is time, sons of Vikings,
The toil to be winning.
Wake aye, and wake aye,
Chiefs of the dragons!
All ye of the foremost
Brethren of battle!

Wake ye, hard-gripping,
Hard-loosing Hardrede!
Waken, ye warriors
Who will not of fleeing!
To wine naught I wake you
Nor whispers of women;
To battle I wake you,
To flame of the sword-edge!

To his surprise, Alfgar found the end of the song met with dead silence. As he gazed around in amazement he caught a reproachful glance from Eadgar, then saw that Harald, his eager eyes lit with a fierce light, was holding aloft a hand for silence.

"Comrades! We sail at dawn, in the small boats already prepared. It is settled, and ere the next winter be past we shall be lords of Norway or lords of the dead!"

"Skoal!"

The sudden, fierce shout told Alfgar vaguely that there was something forward which he knew not of, and that look of Eadgar's puzzled and worried him. But there was no time for talk now, and all poured into the large hall, which had been hurriedly decked for a feast such as Northmen loved. Now Alfgar had his first taste of really civilized life as it was in his own day.

The bare hall had been transformed, with tables down its length and tapestries and hangings on its walls. Not only were Sigrid and the other Varangar women present, but a number of Russians, the governor, and his captains. All had heard of the termination of

the search, and Harald had hastily invited them to a farewell banquet.

Owing to the presence of the women, the usual unlimited supply of ale was cut down. Sigrid sat at Harald's right, Alfgar at his left, below the governor of Kiev, who in reality was far more of a king than Harald, being governor of the whole south. The meal was attacked with more than the ordinary haste, and when ale time was reached Alfgar, at Harald's bidding, rose and related the tale.

"So," he concluded, "it was as well that we did not flee, for the men we had seen coming were Russians, who brought us safely to the river. Here we came up in boats with all speed, and it seems we arrived in the nick of time."

A deep sigh ran around the tables. Not a word had been said during the recital, save for deep mutterings at Svein's conduct, but now Harald sprang to his feet and ordered the leader of the Russians to be brought in. It seemed that the man was already in the hall, and when the promised reward had been paid him, Harald took from his own back a cloak lined with rich furs, and presented it to the

captain. Then he turned to Sigrid with a smile.

"Was there aught to criticise in Flamehair's tale, maiden? Methought that for a Viking he had small part in the events."

Sigrid nodded, amid a laugh, and Alfgar flushed.

"In sooth, Harald," she said, "he was far more modest in the telling of the tale than he was in the doing thereof!"

At these words a roar of laughter rose from all, whereat Alfgar blushed the harder. Harald, slipping from his arm a wrought-gold ring, put it on that of Sigrid.

"That is for the silver ring you lost, maid!" he smiled. "It is in my mind that as you have no kinfolk, I will myself care for you in the place of a father, if that likes you."

"Thanks, Harald," stammered Sigrid, taken somewhat aback by this offer, "the honor is no light one, and much I fear I do not deserve —"

"Say no more," and Harald waved his hand. "From this day you will be as my own daughter. And you Flamehair — what shall I do for you?"

"Give me a new helm, Harald," laughed the Saxon, "and let me be at your side. I want nothing else, and, indeed, I have done naught to deserve a reward."

Harald smiled, but said no more, merely bidding Alfgar to sleep in his own quarters that night. The feast lasted long, interspersed with song and story and not a few quarrels, until Harald and Alfgar withdrew.

"Know you what was in my mind tonight?" asked Hardrede, his hand on the Saxon's shoulder.

"Nay, Harald. What was it?"

"To give you promise that when I am king you shall be jarl."

"Please, Harald!" protested Alfgar quickly. "That were not a fitting honor for me, who am but a lad in years. Nay, let me but be your friend and I ask no more. Give the jarlships to other men who are wiser and know more of ruling than I."

Here Eadgar entered, bidding Alfgar come with him for a talk, and when Harald had showed him his bed the Saxon left the chambers. Outside, his uncle gripped him suddenly by the shoulder.

"What meant you by that song?" cried Eadgar, anger in his voice. Alfgar explained, his mind in no little consternation at such words. When he finished, Eadgar dropped his hand.

"Your pardon, lad. I was angry for a moment, because you spoiled my peace plan and decided Harald on making trouble for Magnus." He explained the situation to Alfgar hurriedly. "Now Harald, having once made up his mind that the throne shall be his willy-nilly, will take it. If Magnus stands in his way, so much the worse for Magnus. Do you see, lad?"

"Yes," agreed Alfgar soberly enough, "and I am sorry for the song, if it so decided him, as in sooth it seems to have done. However, there is much that may happen before spring, uncle, and Holmgarth, to say nothing of Norway, is a long distance away. In the meantime, we may effect a change yet. And now, good-night."

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE COURT OF JARISLEIF

ALFWIN was sorry indeed not to have seen more of Kiev, for it was a very great and a very famous city, and far more the capital of Jarisleif's empire than was Holmgarth. The great king, however, knew that matters were unsettled on his frontiers, for Magnus of Norway had been stirring up a hornets' nest of Danes and Swedes by his aid. Jarisleif was friendly to the whole race of Harald Fairhair, and had not expected any trouble between the claimants to the throne when he helped Magnus with ships and men, for at that time he knew nothing of Harald Hardrede's intention; nor, for that matter, did any one else save only Harald himself.

Early in the morning the little army, now swelled by a goodly number of Northmen and former followers of Olaf the Holy dwelling for the time in Kiev, departed. Harald had already prepared a great number of river boats which could easily ascend the shallow

waters above, and it was not long before the spires and towers of the city faded away behind them.

Alfgar, his uncle, and Sigrid were in Harald's boat, and as the Vikings formed their own crews, the Saxon found that rowing and poling the flatboat was no light labor. Day after day they traveled with all speed against the swift current. Two weeks after leaving Kiev they found a herd of horses, with litters for the women, waiting for them by Harald's orders, sent long in advance. Here they left the river behind and began the last stretch of the long journey, now on horseback. This suited the Vikings but ill, and many were the grumblings of the horse-weary men. However, it was a desperate fight against winter, and the indomitable Norsemen won. Three days after the first fall of snow, the city of Holmgarth appeared in the distance.

King Jarisleif himself, at the head of a large body of troops, came out to meet them. Alfgar gazed with eager interest on the man who so well deserved his title of "The Great" bestowed by after ages. He was a tall, noble-looking man, gray of hair and beard, clad in

armor poorer than that of his own men, who greeted Harald as a brother. The two chiefs met on foot and embraced, then entered the city together. Holmgarth was a poor enough city after Tsargrad and Kiev, but its people were friendly, many of Harald's party seemed well known there, and Alfgar anticipated a good rest and no little enjoyment during that coming winter.

He, with Eadgar and the other personal friends of Harald, was assigned quarters in the wooden-and-turf buildings which constituted the palace of Jarisleif. Of old Atli Far-seer he had seen little during the trip from Kiev, Atli having been busied with the pilots in the leading boat.

That same night Alfgar saw Elizabeth, or Ellisif, as the Northmen called her, for the first time. The daughter of Jarisleif was not so young as he had thought of her, and he forgot that she had not seen Harald for nearly ten years; nevertheless, she was of Harald's own age, she was by no means ill-looking, the people loved her, and it was an open secret that she and Harald had long been in love.

After the first few days of getting settled,

Alfgar and his uncle spent most of their time in the city. Holmgarth was the great merchant town of the northland, being the center of commerce between Byzantium and the northern countries. They even found numbers of Englishmen, both Saxons and Danes, for the races were by this time well mingled, and with these Eadgar held long conversations while Alfgar listened with intense interest.

"Things are not so well with England," said the latest-arrived of these, a Saxon from Wessex, outlawed for a killing he had done. "Edward is a good enough king, it may be, but he seems to have lost the vim and dash which won the throne for him. He has no children, and seems to grow more and more into monkish ways. Then there are numbers of Norman-French at his court — which may be only natural, considering his life in Normandy — but which is disliked at home."

"But is the land itself at peace?" asked Eadgar. "I have good store of booty won in the south under Harald, and if there are no disturbances, and if the realm is strongly ruled I would like to end my days among my own people, on my family's land."

"Then best stay away," returned the Saxon bluntly. "Jarl Godwin is of high race and is a great man, his daughter having married King Edward; but his sons are an evil race, young though they be, and promise to stir up great mischief in the days to come. It may well be that when Edward dies the throne will be vacant, and they will contest for it; or Svein the Dane may claim it, or your own Harald, or anyone who has the power to lay hold upon it. Best keep your goods out of England, Eadgar, for the evil day is sure to come sooner or later."

The two Saxons heard him with a sigh, and when they had left the inn at which their gatherings took place, Alfgar asked his uncle if the man was not rendered over-bitter by his exile.

"No, I think not," said Eadgar thoughtfully. "Edward has been but three years king in England, having lived long in exile; and although men call him 'The Good,' it is not as they called King Knut 'The Good.' Of course I know nothing of these sons of Jarl Godwin, but Godwin himself is a proud man and mighty as I remember him. And if

Edward dies without children, the throne may well go to the strongest of the many who can show some faint claim. However, time will prove that, and for the present we have enough to busy us with Harald's attempt on Norway."

Winter came on fast and hard, and to Alfgar, who had never witnessed a real northern winter, it was very wonderful and quite as disagreeable. He soon learned to bundle himself up in furs, however, as did Eadgar, and there were plenty of others in the town to whom this Russian winter was quite as strange. During these winter months Alfgar saw little of Sigrid. In common with the other women, she took part in the sports, such as bear and wolf hunting, and joined heartily in the festivities, but save on one or two occasions he did not see her in private.

Alfgar, however, had little time to bother with festivities. Owing to his knowledge of reading and writing, which few indeed possessed outside of the priests at the court, he was kept busy both by Harald and Jarisleif himself.

The wedding of Harald and Elizabeth was to take place just as soon as Harald's accounts

with the king were settled up. Now these were no light matters, as Alfgar found. For years past Harald had been sending all manner of booty back to Jarisleif to be kept for him. A ship load at a time, well guarded from pirates of the Black Sea and the rivers, had left Byzantium for the north; out of them all only one had been lost by wreck, and that was not an over-rich one.

Alfgar represented Harald as the vast stores of spoil were checked off and appraised by merchants of the town, who were eager to buy the rich silks and costly stuffs of the East. There was a goodly store of the richest of armor and weapons, and with this Harald equipped the Varangars, who were to be the nucleus of his army and who would form his own crew when the sailing-time came. The Varangar chief had three times been present at what was called "polute-svarf," a custom by which the Varangars, on the death of a Greek Emperor, had the liberty of entering his palaces and taking all that they could carry away. In this manner Eadgar as well as the other men had gained the most of his wealth.

Harald, however, had no use for anything

but hard cash, and gave Alfgar orders to sell everything possible to the merchants. Jarisleif appointed a "court" of three respectable merchant-citizens, who adjudged the value of the different articles. It was many weeks before this work came to an end, and every day Alfgar grew more amazed at the great stream of gold pouring into Harald's coffers. It was in truth the ransom of a kingdom, and when to it was added the dowry of Elizabeth, the landless Harald was richer in gold than Jarisleif himself.

The wedding was celebrated with great festivities, Russian nobles arriving for weeks beforehand from all the country roundabout. These were for the most part rough, turbulent fellows, much like the Vikings themselves, and although Jarisleif's code of laws suited them but ill, the king enforced order with an iron hand. Both the Russian and Norse skalds were in high fettle, each composing "flocks" or "drapas" for the occasion, and Alfgar received a golden armring from Jarisleif for a song telling of Harald's life and great deeds, which he sung in Jarisleif's hall on the night of the wedding.

One morning, some two weeks after the marriage, Harald sent for his skald, and Alfgar found him in the great hall, alone. The palace assigned to Harald as a residence was almost as large as that of the king himself, and Alfgar was surprised at not finding any of the Vikings with Harald, who was little given to lonely musing. But he soon found that there was more than idle thinking in store for him.

"Flamehair," began Hardrede, pacing up and down restlessly, "have you noted any strange faces in the town of late?"

Alfgar stared at him, astonished. "Why," he replied with a laugh, "there have been so many strange faces here that —"

"Tush!" broke in Harald impatiently. "Let me come to the point. Have you noted any men who seemed to you to appear other than they were in reality? Nay, I am not jesting, lad! This is serious."

"I have seen none such," replied Alfgar at once. "But I heard my uncle say yesterday that there was a man selling arms in the bazars who had newly arrived, and who looked more like a Viking than a merchant."

"Good!" cried Harald, and held out a bit of wood, scratched with the runic characters of the Norsemen. "Can you read runes, Flamehair?"

The Saxon looked at it and shook his head. Runic writing was an art in itself, and none but the initiated might read it.

"Then I will read it," replied Harald. "It says this: 'If Harald Sigurdson would grip Norway fast, let him seek out new weapons.' From the characters, I would say it came from Danish hands. It was left on the threshold of my chamber last night, Flamehair, and it seemed to me there was more in the words than might easily appear. Then it occurred to me that there might be someone in the town who wished to communicate with me in secret. Your news points clearly to this armor dealer. Take this bit of wood, go to his shop, and let him see it as if by accident. Then act as may seem best to you. If he wishes to see me, bring him here after dark tonight."

Placing the message securely in his girdle, Alfgar left the palace. He knew where the shop of the new dealer in arms was located,

and presently found himself in the presence of the man himself, a stalwart, eager-eyed fellow whose face had little of the merchant in it.

The shop, like all the rest, was closed in against the weather. Waiting until one or two Vikings had departed, Alfgar began to inspect the weapons offered for sale. It seemed to him that the dealer cared little whether he bought or not, and this confirmed his suspicion. As if by accident, Alfgar loosened his girdle and the bit of inscribed wood fell out. The Saxon picked it up again carelessly, and as he did so the dealer, with a keen look, addressed him.

"Friend, come you from the palace?"

"And if I did?" returned Alfgar cautiously, abandoning all pretense of buying. The dealer laughed.

"Well I wot that there is guile in women and lads," he chuckled, and Alfgar flushed. "There is a man there I would fain see. Could you get me past the guard, think you?"

"That depends," returned Alfgar. "Who is the man?"

"He who gave you that bit of wood," and now the dealer's eyes were keen and cold.

"I will come for you at nightfall," answered Alfgar shortly, and receiving a quiet nod he wrapped his cloak about him and left the shop. Full of excitement at what this might portend, he reported the result of his mission without delay. Harald nodded thoughtfully.

"I will be waiting, Flamehair. Best to have a dagger in readiness, for your sword will be in its peace-bands, and should the man prove to be an assassin quick action were necessary."

"An assassin!" echoed Alfgar in dismay. "Surely that is impossible, Harald! Why, who would send him?"

"Magnus, for one," smiled Hardrede. "Although to say sooth I do not believe it of him. Still, it is many years since he knew me and I him. However, be in readiness, and we will see."

Full of disquietude at these words, Alfgar spent the rest of the day in wandering about the town and thinking. In the evening he went again to the shop, and at his first knock the dealer appeared, wrapped to the eyes in a mantle. He recognized Alfgar and without

a word fell into step at the side of the Saxon. A word from Alfgar gained them ready admittance to the palace, and a moment later they were in the hall, where Harald sat alone on his high seat. The man dropped his mantle and strode forward; below the high seat he dropped to one knee, Alfgar watching him warily.

“My lord Harald,” said the dealer in arms, “my name is Ivar Grimson, of Thiodir in Denmark, and I come to you with a message from King Svein Wulfson.”

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW FLAMEHAIR WENT TO KING SVEIN

FOR a long moment there was silence, while Harald searched the face of Ivar through and through. Finally he held out his hand.

"Rise, Ivar," he answered curtly. "This is my skald who guided you hither. You may speak freely before him, or else go your ways in peace."

"Now I see that you are truly named 'hard-rede'," Ivar made answer smilingly, and as he flung aside his cloak Alfgar saw that he was clad in fit guise to speak with kings.

"This is my message, Harald Sigurdson. At the death of King Knut the great and his son Harald, your nephew Magnus made pact with the other son, Hordaknut, whom he had turned out of Norway, that at the death of either the other should rule his lands. Thereupon Hordaknut died and Magnus ruled Denmark, renouncing England to Edward the Good.

"Magnus appointed Svein Wulfson Jarl of Denmark to rule the land. But Svein being of the blood of Svein Forkbeard and King Knut, rebelled and was made king of his own land. Then came Magnus against him, and after many battles King Svein was driven to seek refuge in Sweden with King Olaf.

"Now it stands, Harald, that your nephew Magnus rules in Norway, which is of right your realm, and likewise rules in Denmark, of right belonging to Svein Wulfson. I with others had fled to Sweden with King Svein, and there word came to us that you were making ready to go against King Magnus. Therefore King Svein bids you join him, if such be your will, and that you go together with a great host, you to rule Norway and he to rule Denmark."

Ivar ceased, and Harald made no answer, gazing ever at the darkness over the Dane's head. Alfgar, watching intently, was surprised when Harald turned to him suddenly, asking:

"Flamehair, what think you of this?"

"I know little of it, Harald," replied the Saxon. "But it seems to me that if King

Svein rebelled against the man whose Jarl he was, he might deal unfairly with another."

A flush crossed Ivar's dark face at this thinly veiled insult, but Harald appeared well pleased, and checked the retort of the Dane.

"Hold, Ivar! Flamehair speaks naught but truth, for methinks it was not a good deed when Svein rebelled, having placed his hands between those of a king. That is of little moment, however. How came you here?"

"Svein is at Sigtun with King Olaf," returned Ivar. "From there I came to Aldeigiaburg, Jarisleif's Baltic port, by ship, with much peril and hardship. Thence I came by sled."

"Then it is in my mind that you can return the same way," said Harald dryly. Ivar started in surprise, but the Varangar chief continued. "With you I will send Flamehair here, to bear a message from me."

"But can I not take the message, Lord?" inquired Ivar, wondering. Alfgar was listening eagerly, curious as to what was passing in his leader's brain.

"Nay, I will send my own messenger to do King Svein honor," smiled Harald smoothly,

"and perchance he will make a song to sing before the King. But enough. Do you return to your booth and make ready to depart two days hence."

Ivar bowed, flashed a half-humorous glance at Alfgar, and wrapped his cloak around him once more as he passed through the door. Once they were alone Alfgar turned to Harald.

"Were you in earnest?" he asked, eagerly enough. "Are you really going to send me to Svein as a messenger?"

"I think so, Flamehair," laughed Harald, throwing his arm about the shoulders of the Saxon affectionately—a rare emotion for Harald to display. "But before I do what is in my mind, I must see Jarisleif. Go you to him now and ask that he receive me, at once."

Wondering more than ever, Alfgar hastened to the king's palace and delivered his message to Jarisleif, who was busied with his scribes. The king bade him bring Harald without delay, and in a few moments he returned with the Norse leader.

Harald advanced to Jarisleif and sat by his

side, tugging at his yellow mustache. At length he spoke.

"Jarisleif, you know that I am but a landless man, not yet king. I wish to ask a favor from you."

"It is granted before you ask," smiled the stately old ruler, his hand resting a moment on Harald's shoulder.

"Will you send one of these men for my captains and one or two of your leaders?" requested Harald. The man was dispatched, and Harald went on. "The request is no light one, Jarisleif. A messenger reached me this even, from King Svein."

Jarisleif said nothing, only his quick frown betraying his surprise.

"I am minded to send Flamehair, here, with a return message," went on the Viking steadily. "I trust him more than any other, but I would that he were more than a skald. Jarisleif, I ask that you give him the rank of Jarl — not with lands, but the rank only."

"What!" Alfgar leaped to his feet in amazement, staring. Jarisleif turned his keen black eyes on him and the Saxon, confused and helpless, paused. At this moment the captains

trooped in and ranged themselves about the room in no little perplexity as to the reason for this summons.

King Jarisleif, who thus far had said nothing, rose to his feet and held out both hands to Alfgar.

As in a dream, the Saxon went to his knees and placed his two hands between those of the great king. Then the latter broke silence, his voice ringing deep and sonorous in the chamber.

"Alfgar of England, surnamed Flamehair, do you swear that even as your hands are between my hands, so your faith will be given me; that you will be true to me and to my son Harald Sigurdson in all things; and that never will you take up arms against me or against him?"

"I swear," returned Alfgar, amid a deep murmur of amazement from the captains around.

"Then you are my man, and Harald's man, and hereto I give you Jarl's name, Alfgar of England!"

And with this Jarisleif pulled Alfgar to his feet, caught up a cloak of rich furs that lay

beside him, and flung it over the shoulders of the new Jarl.

"Take this as my Jarl-gift," he continued, "and you, friends, witness the oath sworn but now."

"And take this as my Jarl-gift, Flamehair!" cried Harald, throwing his own sword belt and weapon about Alfgar's waist. Scarce daring to deem it true, Alfgar caught at the firm hands and held them.

"Harald!" he exclaimed, feeling a swift exhilaration in his heart, although his voice trembled at first, "I thank you, and you too, King Jarisleif. I only wish that I were older or more worthy of this honor, which comes to few men —"

"Peace!" laughed Harald exuberantly, catching up a deer's-horn of ale from a table nearby. "Years will come soon enough, lad, and as for worth — none of those who left Tsargrad with me will dare dispute that! Skoal to Jarl Alfgar! Skoal to Jarl Flamehair!"

"Skoal! Skoal! Was-hael! Was-hael!" Not a voice among those that rang forth the shout held a dissenting note, Jarisleif himself

speeding the cry, and Alfgar felt a sudden thrill, a heart-thrilling of gladness that these, men among men, deemed him worthy such honor. A moment later Harald had drawn him away, and they were on the way to the other palace.

"You should not have done this thing," began Alfgar, when they were in the open air. "I have no lands, no great kin —"

"Silence, Jarl!" and despite himself Alfgar thrilled to the word. "It is done, and by morning all men will know it. Now give close heed to me, for it may be that you will have to earn the honor dearly enough and that before long."

Soon they had regained Harald's hall, and here Alfgar learned for the first time what was in the mind of his chief.

"You will go with Ivar Grimson to King Svein. Find out what manner of man he is, and if folk deem him a faith-breaker or no. Openly, tell him that I will make a forth-faring this summer, as soon as may be, and will join him at Sigtun should nothing prevent. Bid him gather a host and keep matters as quiet as may be.

“But in private inquire as to what manner of man King Magnus is grown to be. Jarisleif and our friends here, who know Magnus well, praise him over-much, to my mind; here we have heard only good of him, and I would fain know what the Swede-folk think. Now, I would fain come to terms with Magnus, if that may be, but Svein must know nothing of it. With you on this journey take Sigurd Thick, my tooth-thrall. To him will I give a letter bidding Magnus give me my half of the realm, or what he will of it. At Sigtun send Sigurd secretly to make his way over the Dales to King Magnus with this letter. Wait for an answer as long as may be, and if none come then we will make war. You can trust Sigurd to the death, for thrall though he be, he is devoted to me.”

Now Alfgar discerned the plan of Harald in its entirety. Hardrede was playing for time, trying to find which of the two kings was the more worthy to be trusted. Svein was said to have all the power of the Swedish King, Olaf, behind him; if Harald joined with him the overthrow of Magnus was almost certain. But no word of cousinly greet-

ing had come from King Magnus, and unless it came through this message borne by Sigurd Thick, there was little likelihood of any coming at all.

Harald had not acted carelessly in picking Alfgar, in spite of the Saxon's youth. In appearance Alfgar was now a man in all things save the flowing Viking beard. He had broadened out amazingly, and the hardships of that stern journey from Byzantium had given him a resolute and determined air which fitted him well. Moreover, most of the men about Harald were blunt, hard-hitting warriors little suited for work requiring any delicacy such as this, while Alfgar had a singularly graceful and winning air which was quick to make him friends.

Eadgar greeted him when he returned late that night with a shout of amazement, holding him at arm's length and gazing at him.

"A Jarl!" cried the old Saxon warrior. "One of my race a very Jarl — the equal in rank of Godwin himself! Why, it is well-nigh unbelievable!"

"Nonsense," laughed Alfgar, tearing himself free and seizing his uncle in turn, "Con-

gratulate me, instead of staring as if I were moonstruck, or some strange beast! In sooth, uncle, it is hard for me to believe myself, yet it is true. Now listen."

Therewith he told Eadgar something of his mission, and they sat talking until a late hour. Eadgar was wise in the ways of men and courts, and had Alfgar carried out half his instructions he would have done well indeed.

When he went abroad in the town next morning he received the first evidence that his new rank was in truth no dream. The cloak and sword, princely gifts both, were greatly admired, but Alfgar found that the old good-fellowship of the men was somewhat gone now. No longer was he a skald, one of themselves, but he had become a powerful man overnight, even though he was landless. But there were lands for the winning, as old Atli Farseer gruffly told him, and under Harald Hardrede it would go ill but a landless Jarl would make his fortune soon enough, and one which men would long tell of.

That afternoon Alfgar said goodby to Sigrid. She made much fun of his rank, pretending to be greatly in awe of him; but when the

time for parting came all this vanished, and she held out her hands to him in farewell.

"You will prove worthy, Flamehair," she said softly. "Whatever betides, remember me as your friend. See, here is my Jarl-gift for you,— " and she held out new peace-bands for his sword, wrought with embroidery. "I had been making them for some time, and finished them but a day since." Then she bound them on his new weapon, and they said farewell; but as Alfgar walked home he was very sober and grave, for he had suddenly realized that Sigrid meant a great deal indeed to him.

That evening was a busy one indeed for the new Jarl. He met Sigurd Thick, a thrall given Harald when, as a babe, he had cut his first tooth, this being the custom of the North. Sigurd was very old and very thick, or fat as we would say, but he was faithful and honest, and as Alfgar knew him well he had no fears for that part of the errand. Ostensibly, Sigurd was his attendant, though Ivar Grimson the Dane remarked with a shrug that the new Jarl was a poor judge of men, it seemed.

But Ivar's opinion did not worry Alfgar over-much. On the morning following they

set forth by sled, and after a quick and uneventful journey reached the seaport. There Ivar's ship was waiting for them, and although the wintry season did not favor voyages, their passage to Sweden was by no means a bad one, and at length Jarl Alfgar arrived at Sigtun, where dwelt the Swedish king, Sigtun the Ancient, not far away from the present Stockholm — and his work was begun.

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT BEFELL AT SIGTUN

THE last part of the journey, from the sea to Sigtun — for the lakes were frozen, as was the sea edge — was made on skis. Fortunately for Alfgar, he had learned how to use these while at Holmgarth, for they were in general use among Russians and Northmen.

Word had not been carried ahead of them, so when they arrived at the quarters of King Svein the men on guard gave a shout of surprise, and it seemed to Alfgar that Ivar must be some great person, for they treated him with no little favor. They were bidden to wait in a room for the King, and Alfgar was surprised at its bareness. Accustomed as he was to the fine surroundings of Jarisleif's town, the bare rooms and rickety buildings of Sigtun were his first introduction to the conditions of the barren Scandinavian countries.

They had not long to wait, and presently a tall, broad-shouldered man with flowing yellow hair and beard appeared in the doorway

and gave Ivar a warm greeting. Ivar presented Jarl Alfgar, and the Saxon was able to form his first opinion of King Svein.

And it was undeniably a favorable one. Svein was one of "the most goodly of men," as the chroniclers tell us, and his frank, open face and genial greeting put Alfgar at his ease without delay. The young Saxon had yet to learn that guile is often hidden behind frank faces, but he was delighted with Svein's appearance and manner.

"Are you not somewhat young to be a Jarl?" he smiled, inspecting Alfgar curiously. "I knew not that Harald had received king's title."

"Yes, I am indeed young," replied Alfgar. "But I had Jarl's-name from King Jarisleif, although I am Harald's man. Now, Svein, Harald has given me letters —"

"Let them rest," broke in Svein quickly, taking Alfgar's arm, and darting a quick glance at Ivar which the Saxon did not see. "Come with me to my uncle and we will beg from him a fitting residence for you. How go matters with Harald?"

"Well enough," returned Alfgar, accom-

panying Svein from the room into a corridor. "Men are gathering to him, but he refuses to take those of Russia. He wishes to regain his throne by Norsemen —"

He paused suddenly as they entered a long hall, filled with men. At the farther end were two high seats, and here they found King Olaf of Sweden, who spent a good share of his time with Svein. A mutter of wonder and curiosity went up from the warriors when Alfgar appeared, his golden-red hair streaming over his rich armor and fur cloak, and Olaf stared at him as they approached.

"Who is this, Svein," he spoke, in a high-pitched voice that contrasted strangely with his heavy build and ox-like face, "who is this that comes in the likeness of the God Baldur? Has Nifleim yielded up its dead, or is he in truth some dweller from Asgard, come among men?"

Alfgar said nothing, for he knew that many of the Swedes still clung to the old gods, and Svein replied.

"This is Jarl Flamehair, Olaf, a man of Harald Sigurdson's, sent hither with messages to me. It seems most like that Harald and I

will go against Magnus this year. Olaf, I ask fitting quarters and attendance for Jarl Flamehair!"

"And right gladly will I furnish them," was the warm greeting given Alfgar, as the eyes of the Swedish king swept over him again. "Welcome, Jarl, to Sigtun! Did you bring men with you?"

"I came alone, Olaf," returned Alfgar easily, "save for a freed thrall, who waits with the men of Ivar."

"By Thor," exclaimed Olaf, "if all the men of Hardrede are like this man, Svein, it is in my mind that he will have little need of help to win back the throne of his fathers!"

Alfgar flushed at the frank admiration, and as he glanced at Svein caught a swift flare in the eyes of the Dane — an expression that was no quicker come than gone, but the look puzzled Alfgar. King Olaf called one of his men, issued rapid instructions, and turned to his guests.

"Svein, if you and Flamehair will follow Svart here, you will find quarters speedily."

Still arm in arm, the landless king and the landless jarl thanked Olaf and followed Svart.

Outside, Ivar and the rest rejoined them, and in no long time Alfgar was settled in a comfortable enough out-hall of the Swedish king's palace. Here Svein left Alfgar, after telling him to come to the palace that night and deliver his letters.

"Well, what think you of the Dane king, Sigurd?" asked Alfgar when he and Harald's thrall were once more alone together. Sigurd Thick was a man of slow speech and few words, and he hesitated long before replying.

"He is fair-seeming, Jarl. But my rede is that we trust him not over-much. I think I will get my bane from his hand."

"Nonsense!" laughed Alfgar, surprised. "Why should he seek your life, Sigurd Thick? In sooth, methought his face and words alike were true."

The thrall shrugged his shoulders. "Have it your way, then. I have said my say."

That same night Alfgar visited Svein once more and found him alone. The message was delivered, and Svein pondered it long in silence. Studying the man as he sat there, Alfgar could not but dismiss Sigurd's fears as

not worthy consideration. Finally the king replied.

"Jarl, this message pleases me well. It is now nearly spring, and as soon as may be I will begin to gather men, and see what force can be raised. How would it suit you to remain here for a time as my guest, and then carry word to Harald of what befalls, so that we may agree upon a meeting?"

This exactly suited Alfgar's instructions. "It is a good rede, King Svein," he replied joyfully. "The trip hither was too long and arduous for my liking, and if I can serve you I will do so." Thereupon he asked leave for Sigurd Thick to travel overland with the next party that left the city, explaining that the man wished to visit his family in Norway. This story had been agreed upon, and Sigurd's thrall collar had been removed to lend it color. As Alfgar spoke, he saw that Svein was playing with a little knife that hung at his belt.

"Surely, Jarl," answered Svein carelessly. "I will arrange it, so give it no more thought."

It was now wearing well on into the spring, and a week later Sigurd Thick departed. Oddly enough, Alfgar noticed one day that

the little knife no longer swung at the king's belt, and he idly asked Svein what had become of it.

"That?" answered Svein, with a laugh. "Oh, I gave it to your fellow Sigurd, the day he left. He rendered me a small service, and in payment thereof, I gave him the knife."

Alfgar started. Had the thrall been unfaithful? Was the "small service" a betrayal of Harald's letter to Magnus? But no, that could not be; Harald trusted the thrall absolutely, and Sigurd had naught to gain save from Harald, so Alfgar thought no more of it. The thrall had left with a company of cheaping-men, who were taking goods to sell in Norway over the mountains, and by now was well on his way.

So the days lengthened, and happily enough for the Saxon. King Svein kept him busy meeting great men of the court and getting in shape an account of what ships and men Olaf allowed him. The Swedish king made a frank offer of all his strength, but this Svein refused to accept. There were many Danes, fugitives from the rule of King Magnus, who had fled to Sigtun with Svein, and for the

rest Svein wished a select force of picked men and ships, that would compare favorably with those of Harald.

But through all the weeks that followed, Alfgar did not forget his real errand. Harald was by no means inclined to an alliance against his nephew could he get good terms from Magnus, and Alfgar kept busily at work among the Norsemen and others at the Swedish capital trying to find out just what kind of man Magnus was.

His reports were conflicting. All agreed that Magnus was a great warrior. Svein had lost battle after battle to him, and Svein was no coward. But as to trusting him, which was the chief thing, he gained very conflicting opinions. The Norsemen seemed to like Magnus, but on more than one occasion Svein flung out statements that placed Magnus in a very different light, telling Alfgar of his former dealings with the Norse king and of treacherous dealings he had met with at the hands of Magnus. His jarls, too, said much the same thing, and Alfgar soon came to believe that dealings with Magnus were not like to be profitable.

As to Svein himself, Alfgar never doubted him for an instant. Often he was tempted to tell him of his real errand and assure him that he was fully satisfied that Harald should join forces with him, but his better judgment held him back from this step, for which he was thankful later. The general opinion about Svein was that he was a skillful warrior and a strong ruler, but somewhat unlucky in his battles with Magnus. Alfgar found that few men in Sigtun, however, cared to express themselves openly on Svein. They gave him fair words enough, but always seemed to keep something back, to speak with a certain restraint, that puzzled the Saxon.

What could it be? To him, Svein seemed almost as ideal a king as Harald Hardrede himself; not as tall, for Harald was near seven feet in height, but open-handed and open-hearted above most men. Only at times there would come a certain baffling expression across the king's face, an expression that seemed to Alfgar to be like a curtain hiding the thoughts behind. But this was a little thing, and on the whole Alfgar liked and admired King Svein with all his heart.

So the weeks wore away into spring, and one day came word that Harald lay sick in Russia and that the mustering would be delayed perforce. Spring had come and well-nigh gone, and Alfgar began to worry about Sigurd Thick. That the thrall had played traitor he did not believe; Svein could never have concealed the matter, he concluded, and besides, was not Svein his friend and helper in all things? It was time that Sigurd had returned, and more than time, and he began to think of returning himself to Harald. But the way of this returning did not come as he had looked for it.

One day King Svein, flushed and in disorder, came to Alfgar's quarters in great haste and summoned him.

"Come quickly, Jarl! There be men here with news of your fellow Sigurd, and ill news of Magnus."

Alfgar sprang to the door after Svein, crying out questions eagerly.

"They be two of the cheaping-men who departed with him," explained the Danish king as they hastened along. "Here is their dwelling — let us have them out." He raised his

voice and called out, whereat the two men in question left the house and stood before them.

"Tell Jarl Alfgar the tale you told me," commanded Svein. Alfgar was watching the men expectantly, and although he liked their looks ill, he was impatient for the tidings. Finally one of them spoke up.

"It was after we had reached the Thrandheim dales, lord," he said, his eyes shifting from face to face. "There we came upon King Magnus at a large farmstead, and paused to sell his men goods. The same evening the man called Sigurd Thick, who came west with us, had business with Magnus for long. Magnus seemed somewhat angry, and next morning the body of Sigurd Thick lay in the courtyard with an axe wound in its head. That is all we know, lord."

"More of Magnus' work," sneered Svein as the man finished. "Thanks, friends, for the tale. Come, Jarl." He drew the horror-struck Saxon gently away, and they walked home in silence. Alfgar was overcome by this tragic ending to the mission of Sigurd. No doubt Magnus had slain him in anger, or perhaps the thrall had provoked him. In any

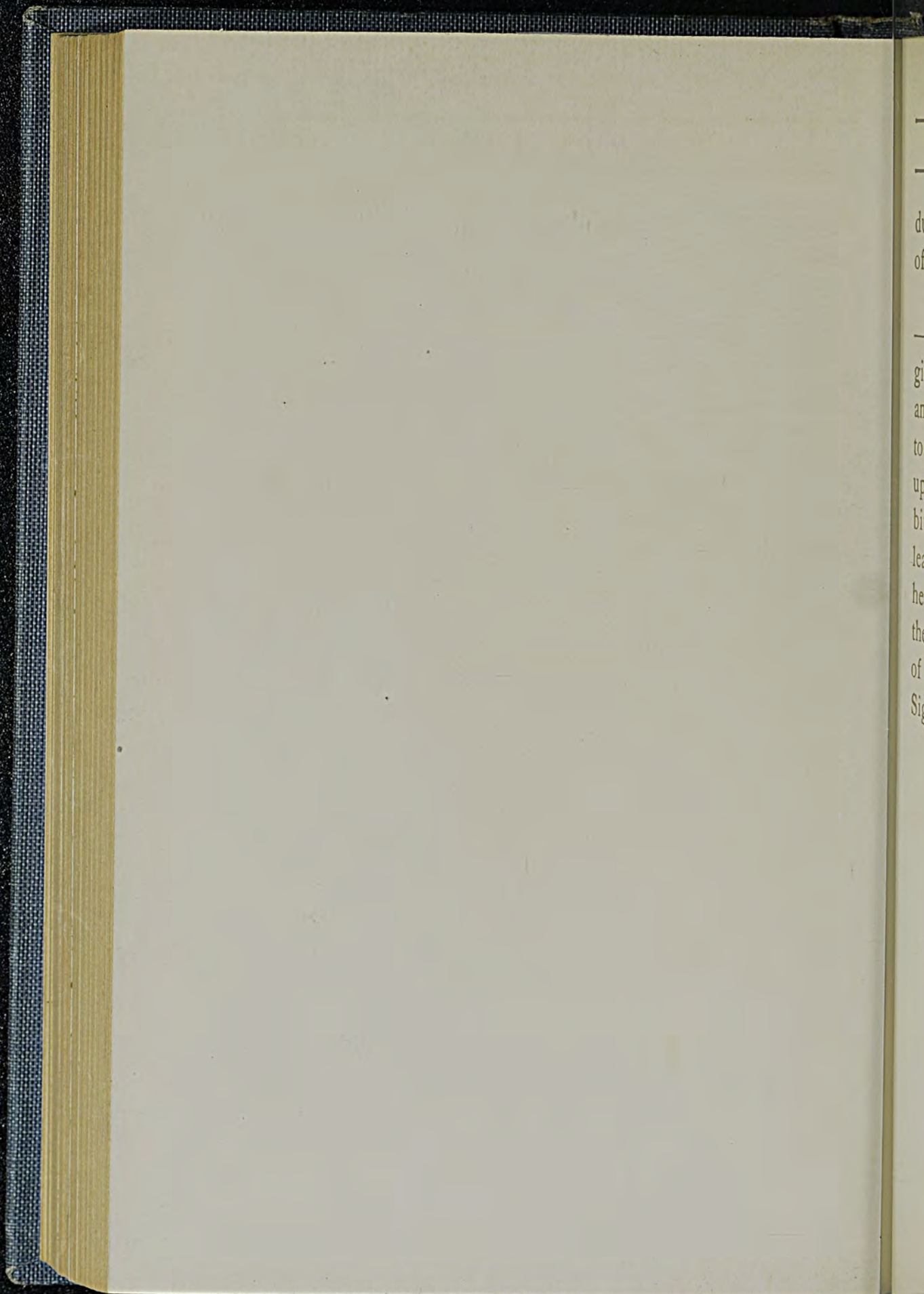
case, there was nothing more to keep him at Sigtun, and with a heavy heart Alfgar made ready to bear King Svein's message of fellowship to Harald, who lay with his men at the Russian port of Aldeigiaburg.

Two days later, a vessel not being then ready in the harbor, Alfgar borrowed a horse and went forth into the country for a ride by himself. He wanted to think things over, and without directing his steed let the animal follow the western road, commonly used by cheaping-men and farmers.

So aimlessly riding, and striking through the rich fields near the town, he came to a more rugged country, and after a time turned aside from the road and drew up beneath a lofty pine, a landmark for miles around. Dismounting here, he threw himself on the fresh young grass to rest.

As he did so, something caught his eye — a gleam from the grass at the roots of the great tree, where a little snow still lingered in the shadow. The young Jarl idly arose and strolled over. To his surprise, he saw that it was the gleam of gold, and as the object resisted his fingers, he took out his knife and





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dug around it—to spring back with a cry of amazement.

There in the grass lay a gold-hilted knife—the knife that had swung at King Svein's girdle weeks before! And, loose in the grass and snow, lay white objects that struck horror to Alfgar's heart. Leaning over, he snatched up the little knife, together with a scratched bit of wood beside it, and with a shudder leaped to the saddle. Digging the spurs deep, he rode madly away from the spot where lay the bones of Sigurd Thick—slain by no men of Magnus, but barely an hour's ride from Sigtun town itself!

CHAPTER XX

ALFGAR GOES AVOYAGING

WHERE Alfgar went on that wild ride he never knew. His only thought was a mad frenzy of escape, escape from the horror behind him, the smiling horror that bore the name of king. For, suddenly, it all rushed over him. Svein's smooth words came back to him —

“I gave it to your fellow Sigurd, the day he left!”

But how the knife had been given, Svein had not said. Now Alfgar knew the “small service” rendered by Sigurd, the faithful thrall! He could almost see the scene — Sigurd, doubtless led off the road by some ruse, floundering through the deep snow to the pine, perchance stabbed in the back — and then flung into the snowdrifts. And Harald's letter?

Alfgar came to himself with a groan of rage and dismay. All the time Svein had known that Harald wished peace with his

cousin! And all the time Svein had been giving him false words, trying to make him report ill of Magnus, trying to cause an open breach between the Norsemen!

Suddenly he drew rein and looked down at the things in his hand. He had been spurring wildly along the road, and just beyond were a little group of cheaping-men, staring at him as if they thought him daft. But what was that bit of wood he had picked up with the knife? There were scratches on it, runic scratches! Although he could read them not, Alfgar almost sensed their import. Slipping from the saddle, he ran to the four merchants standing in front of their cart of goods.

"Can any of you read runes?" he cried. One of them nodded surlily, and Alfgar thrust the bit of wood into his hand. "Read that for me."

The man looked at it. Then a flash of fear came into his face, he stared closer, and quickly handed back the chip.

"Nay, I can read it not, friend."

In sudden fury Alfgar tore the peace-bands from his sword and bared the weapon, seizing the man by the shoulder.

"Read, you dog!" he shouted, his eyes flaming with rage. Trembling in his fear, the man reached out for the chip and spoke stammeringly.

"Lord, there are but two words — 'Svein slew'."

That was all Alfgar needed. Replacing his sword in its sheath, he rewound the peacebands, his rage vanishing as quickly as it had risen.

"Thanks, merchant," he returned quietly. "Now it were best for you to say naught of this matter, especially at Sigtun."

The man shivered, and his comrades nodded. "Trust us, lord. We can guess much that lies unsaid, and we are traveling to the west."

Without a word Alfgar turned and leaped into the saddle. Now, as he rode slowly back toward the town, he wondered what he would do. He burned to charge Svein with the murder, but knew well that he dared not do this. Evidently Sigurd had not been quite dead, and had just time enough to scratch the few runes with the very weapon that had killed him.

"And that little action may have saved Norway from war," concluded the Saxon as Sigtun came into sight. "No, I must say nothing, but lay it all in the hands of Harald as soon as may be. Svein must continue to think that I know nothing of his plotting."

Entering the town, Alfgar rode quietly to his quarters, returned his weary horse, and took his way to the harbor. Here he talked for a long time with an old fisherman, who looked doubtfully at the bay, but as Alfgar poised a gold ring in his hand, nodded.

"I will be ready, lord, provided the wind is fair."

Then Alfgar went to his quarters again and clad himself in his best. Going to the palace of Olaf, the Swedish king, he sent for the priest Sigvald and asked for a quill and parchment. The priest willingly procured them, and Alfgar wrote a short note to King Svein.

"I am going by a small boat," it ran, "to join Harald. I will deliver your tidings, to meet you as appointed. Send out the war arrow when you will, and get your ships ready, for Harald will soon come."

"But not as you think, friend Svein,"

thought Alfgar grimly as he sealed the letter and handed it to Sigvald. The priest promised that in the morning it should be delivered and so Alfgar left him.

"Aye," said Alfgar to himself as he returned home. "If Harald comes, it will be to exact a heavy vengeance for the death of his tooth-thrall. So rest in peace, King Svein, and it may be that in time you shall feel the taste of Varangar swords in memory of Sigurd Thick!"

At dawn the next morning Alfgar, his small possessions bundled up, strode down to the shore. The old fisherman and his two sons were waiting, their big boat lying ready, and Alfgar stepped aboard with a word of greeting and a smile.

"It is no light work, Jarl," remarked the old man, taking the tiller as his sons ran up the sail. "We have the Baltic to cross, but the weather promises well and the wage is good."

And thus it happened that Alfgar crossed the Baltic in a fishing boat, and came into Aldeigiaburg late one afternoon. But as the harbor lay clear before them, Alfgar rubbed his eyes. Where were the ships of Harald,

and all his host? Save for a few small boats, the port was empty!

In a fever of impatience he urged the others on, and as the craft drew in to a wharf leaped ashore. A number of men were standing about, and Alfgar addressed one of these.

"Where is Harald of Norway?"

"Harald!" The men stared at him in surprise. "Why, he departed a day ago for Sweden! Whence come you, not to know this?"

Alfgar staggered back as if struck by a blow. Too late! Svein's plots had succeeded after all! But his informant had not wholly finished.

"Stay! Now I think of it, one of his men — his helmsman, I heard say — was cracked on the head as the boats were loading. Harald ordered him left behind. You will find him in the red house yonder, where he is being tended, and he can tell you the news."

Bidding the old fisherman wait, Alfgar set off at a run toward the house the men pointed out. As he approached he heard a cry of joy, and Atli Farseer, his head bandaged, staggered out with open arms.

"Flamehair! Where in the name of Odin have you sprung from?"

"I came from Sweden in a small boat," returned Alfgar. "Oh, Farseer! Harald is ruined! Svein—" and in a torrent of words he poured forth the story, standing there before the little house that flared dull red in the sunset light. As he listened, old Atli seemed to throw off his years, until at the conclusion of the tale he gripped at his sword with a deep oath.

"The Danish dog! So he plots to make strife between Magnus and Harald to further his own schemes!" burst forth the old Viking. "Lad, there is good work in old Atli yet. This crack on the head well-nigh finished me, but in a few days we can travel. This boat of yours—is she stanch and fast?"

"Yes!" cried Alfgar, seizing his arm. "Why?"

"Sit down, lad. Take it easy. Here is my plan, that we take this boat, you and I, and sail south to meet Harald and Svein before they can get far, or before they get to Norway."

"But how?" exclaimed Alfgar in despair.

"Svein can collect his men in a few days, and the ships are ready. By this time he may have sailed!"

"No matter," rejoined Atli quietly. "Have you ever heard of the Halogaland wizards, Flamehair?"

"I have heard the men talking," answered the Saxon, puzzled. "They say these wizards from the north can command the wind from any quarter they wish."

Atli chuckled. "Not that, but almost. I am from that land, lad, from the isle of Thiotta in the north. Now among a few of us is known a secret that few wot of. I cannot command the wind, but from whatever quarter it may blow I can make it serve me."

Alfgar stared at Farseer in bewilderment. In those days the Vikings knew nothing of tacking or beating up against the wind; if the wind was fair they ran before it; if not, then they did the best they might. Only, as Atli had said, the men of the far north of Norway, the Halogalanders, knew and held secret the real art of sailing.

All this old Atli explained to Alfgar that night. The next morning Alfgar saw his fish-

erman and the latter readily agreed to sell his boat, trusting to get passage home on another sailing from the port. Then under Atli's direction the sail was changed and the boat itself built over to suit him. In all, Alfgar was at the port only four days, and on the fifth he and Atli Farseer set sail in the little fishing boat.

That was a long, stern journey, and long before the end was reached did Jarl Alfgar repent his rashness in starting. But all things have an ending, and after many days of hard work and weary watches the blue line of the fiords and mountains drew into the horizon ahead.

On the trip Atli had told the young Jarl of how Harald had waited for news, and how finally, taken sick, he had decided to push out for Sigtun himself with his ships. These carried all Harald's wealth, together with the families of his men, and Alfgar learned that Sigrid was in attendance upon the Princess Elizabeth, Harald's wife. In short, everything was to be staked on one desperate cast, and if Harald should lose, Magnus would be able to make a clean sweep of his foes.

"Do you know where we are?" asked

Alfgar, gazing anxiously at the cliffs ahead. Atli smiled.

"I am no wizard, lad, for all that I can sail a boat against the wind. Nay, we will have to land and seek news, but it seems to me that we are near the south end of Sweden. If Harald has not passed, well and good; if the fleet has gone by, we will catch them up at the straits between Sweden and Denmark, methinks."

An hour later they landed at a small fishing village, and there gained the news that a great fleet had passed, far out at sea, the day before. Getting a fresh supply of food and water, the two hastened back to their little craft and hurriedly pushed out again. Atli had guessed their position aright.

"Two days' lead on us, nearly," said Atli. "Fear not, Flamehair; the men will land at the straits to burn and plunder, and we will catch them up easily. It were best to come up with them by night, methinks, and lay the matter before Harald in secret."

To this Alfgar agreed readily. Their boat was a fast one and no winds hindered them, for Atli was a cunning steersman and under

his directions Alfgar, having passed his word to hold it secret, learned the art of sailing forward in all winds. This was in truth a great thing in those days, and although discovered long before by the Halogalanders, it was not for centuries later that ships of the Northland made general use of the knowledge.

For two days they followed the coast, gaining news of the immense fleet of the Danish king. Finally they came to the straits, with the land of Denmark stretching to the south, or rather the Danish islands, and learned that the fleet lay in a large bay a few miles ahead. Svein was gathering his scattered partisans and the Vikings were spreading fire and death among those who held to King Magnus.

Waiting until nightfall, having secured a fisherman to guide them to the bay, they made all speed through the darkness. Shortly before midnight they caught a flare of torches ahead, and by the dim starlight saw a black mass of ships lying at rest, while a great camp was spread on the shore beyond. As it was impossible to find their way, Atli hailed a ship and found that Harald was aboard a vessel

just ahead of them. A moment later they drew alongside this, and Alfgar went over the rail.

The guards greeted him with a surprised cry, but he quickly silenced them and inquired after Harald.

"He is in the cabin, talking with Eadgar and Haldor, Jarl," replied the men. Without hesitation Alfgar sprang forward, and saw a gleam of light from the partly open cabin door. With a thrill of emotion that sent a sob into his throat, Alfgar recognized his uncle, the Iclander, and Harald seated about a rushlight, talking earnestly.

"I like it not," the gruff Haldor was saying. "Svein speaks us fair, Harald, but I would fain hear some news of Flamehair and Sigurd Thick —"

He paused abruptly and all three sprang to their feet as Alfgar pushed open the door. Encrusted with salt brine, haggard, and weary, there was a glint of triumph in the eyes of the young Jarl as he flung something which glittered and rang on the table before Harald.

"There is your news, Harald! Ask of that

knife and that chip of wood where Sigurd Thick lies!"

And as he spoke the words Alfgar staggered, overcome by his great weariness, and fell into his uncle's arms.

CHAPTER XXI

KING MAGNUS

ALFGAR woke to find himself lying in a bunk, while Atli and the others were crowded about the table. Farseer was just concluding the tale of their long trip, and as Alfgar swung his legs over the side of the bunk and stepped up to the table, Harald turned to him with flashing eyes.

“Is this true, Flamehair?”

Swiftly Alfgar told his story, and when he finished the recital there was dead silence, broken a moment later as Harald’s fist crashed down upon the table.

“By the Cross!” thundered the infuriated chieftain. “Go rouse the men, Haldor! We will set upon Svein in his camp this night, and —”

“Peace,” interrupted Haldor quickly. “You have given an oath to Svein, Harald, and it will not do to break it thus hastily. His treachery is not known as yet, remember, to all men. Besides,” he added dryly, “there

are many more men in Svein's camp than we have here, for most of ours are abroad plundering."

Harald sank back, realizing the force of this argument.

"You are right," he said bitterly, plucking at his sword. "What is your rede, friends? We must even play the game with Svein's own weapons."

"Aye," agreed Eadgar thoughtfully, "that is sooth. Magnus is no doubt on his way south to meet us. If he comes upon us it would be sore dishonor to desert Svein, no matter what the cause. If only your letter had reached him!"

"Where a letter has failed a messenger might succeed," put in Haldor curtly. Harald gazed at him keenly.

"A messenger? How? We are still far from Norway."

"Aye," returned Haldor stoutly. "Here we are at Sealand, but in a day or two we go on to Roskild where Svein will set up his standard. You are absolved from your oath, for Jarl Flamehair has it out of the king's own mouth that he killed Sigurd Thick. Since

Flamehair has begun the task, let him finish it. Keep him hid aboard here till we reach Roskild, then send him north in a ship, privily, to see Magnus."

"A good rede!" exclaimed Harald, turning to Alfgar. "Stay, Jarl — are you hurt? We were so wrapped up in the news you bore that we gave small heed to you or your fainting!"

"No," smiled Alfgar quickly. "I was but a trifle exhausted and my knees were weak with much sitting in the small boat; besides, I was joyful at rejoining you, and when the strain was over — well, I'm all right now. Yes, give me the errand, Harald!"

The others smiled at his eagerness.

"But we do n't know where Magnus is," said Eadgar doubtfully. "In any case, the thing would have to be done speedily, and a head wind might drive the ship far off her course."

"No fear of that," broke in Atli. "Give us a short rest, and we can take that small boat against any wind. I am from Thiotta in the north, and —"

"Nay," and Harald bent a frown on him.

"I knew not that there was wizardry in this affair, Atli Farseer! Men who follow the White Christ must needs have little dealing with wizards."

"There is none, Harald," laughed Alfgar at these words. "I may not tell you what it is, but I give you my word that there is no magic in it. Set up the Cross on the small boat, if you will."

Harald's brow cleared. "Very well, Jarl — so be it. You want that particular boat, eh? Easy enough. Haldor, caution the guard on watch that they must say nothing of Alfgar and Atli under peril of death. You must both remain here in the cabin, lest the men fall to talking, and Svein hear of your arrival.

"Now for your errand. Listen, Atli, for if anything happens to Jarl Alfgar you must fulfill it. I will give you no letters, but this armring of mine which you bore once before, Flamehair. The runes will be enough proof of your authority to speak, for the ring belonged to King Olaf, the father of Magnus, and he will know it. Tell him the story and urge upon him my rightful claim to half the throne, but say that I would not bear bane-

spear against him willingly. Say, moreover, that we shall divide our loose wealth equally."

Harald smiled at the protests that went up at this statement.

"Why not?" he asked. "The gold does me no good, and there is more to be had. By the way, Eadgar, see that the fishing-boat is cared for; we can trail her after our ship well enough."

Atli went out with Eadgar, leaving Alfgar and Harald alone. Hardrede rose and placed his hands on the shoulders of the Saxon, looking him in the eye.

"Think not, Jarl, that you shall not be rewarded most fittingly for these your services. When I am king then you shall be my own Jarl instead of Jarisleif's —"

Sudden tears leaped to Alfgar's eyes, and he flung the hands of Harald from him roughly.

"I want not your Jarlship!" he cried bitterly. "If you think that I have served you and loved you for rewards, then it is time I found some other master who would think better of me, Harald Hardrede! I have no —"

But before he could say more Harald, with

a great laugh of joy, caught him in an iron grip and held him close.

"Oh, would that you were my own son!" he cried, a great heart-longing in his voice, and Alfgar's responding heart went out to him at the cry.

"My skald, you might have been as great a warrior as I, had not your mind ever been held to peace and gentleness. For the boldness in your heart I love you, Flamehair; no man in all the host would have dared say those words to Harald, and much loneliness has made me hard of redes indeed. Doubt me not, my son — doubt me not! You of all men are my truest friend."

"I was hasty, Harald," returned Alfgar humbly, "and I ask your pardon. I do not doubt you; but I pray you make me not your Jarl — let me have no other title than your friend, and I am content."

"Here is my handsel on it," smiled Harald, a deep light in his eagle eyes, and for a moment they stood hand in hand, and in Alfgar's heart lay joy so great that he could not speak.

Then swiftly Harald turned away and drew off his armring. Silently the young Jarl

put it on, and a moment later the others returned, their errands done.

The next day the host left Sealand, and a day later King Svein set up his standard at Roskild. Here the host was to tarry until more men and ships came in, and until they had more sure news of the whereabouts of Magnus, who was known to be on his way south to meet them. Harald had left last of all, and when he came to Roskild anchored his ships on the outer edge of the fleet where they might up sail and away at a minute's notice if need were.

That night the fishing boat was brought alongside and provided with a good store of food and water, and Alfgar and Atli, thoroughly rested and refreshed, left their hiding after dark and lowered themselves into her. Harald leaned over the rail above them, with a few parting words of instruction.

"Make all speed!" he concluded. "Harald and perchance Norway are in your hands, my friends; fail them not!"

"We will not, Harald," answered Alfgar as he ran up the sail and Atli jumped to the tiller. "Farewell!"

The little boat darted away, for there was a good wind. But dark as it was, she received a hail in passing a Swedish ship, and to his dismay Alfgar recognized the voice of King Svein himself!

"Do you reply, Atli," he said hurriedly. "He knows my voice."

"We are fishermen," shouted Atli, "returning to the other side of the island."

"Come aboard here," came Svein's angry voice, but Atli only laughed grimly and held on. Then the wind bore to them a few scattered words as the ships behind were lost in the night.

"After them — see who — kill —"

"Did you hear that?" asked Alfgar. Atli nodded, peering ahead.

"Let the dogs bark!" he cried exultantly. "We have the open sea before us, Flamehair, and speedy will be the ship that catches us now!"

Out from the shelter of the bay they swept, and as Atli had predicted earlier in the evening, there was a stiff gale blowing. To reach Norway, Wulf and Atli had to head to the northwest, and it was a hard voyage for so

small a boat, even in good weather. The night was a wild one, and frequent squalls caught them, so that all the skill of the old helmsman was needed. All at once Alfgar looked back, and gave a cry; for by a flash of lightning he had seen a large sail behind.

Atli had seen it also. "Svein is taking no chances," he said. "That was what the words meant that we heard faintly. He has sent a dragon in pursuit of us, and it will go hard if we are taken. However, she cannot overtake us easily."

Svein's dragon was faster than Atli thought, however. Slowly and steadily she drew up on the fishing boat, and there was no doubt that they were followed. Their sail could easily be made out, for the lightning flashed continuously, and despite the frequent squalls of rain, the pursuers continued to gain on them.

More than once Atli shifted his helm, but the dragon was close upon them when there came a sudden, furious burst of wind and rain that lasted for nearly five minutes. So terrific was it that Atli was hard put to it to keep the boat erect, and when it cleared off the ship had vanished. They had no time to

wonder, Alfgar keeping busy baling with his helm, but they concluded that she had either run back for shelter or had gone down in that sudden squall.

After three hours the gale blew over and settled into a steady wind. Rejoicing over their narrow escape, they held northward until the dawn, then turned toward the northwest. All day they sailed, and by the evening, red and purple in the setting sun, the cliffs of Norway appeared far ahead. Not knowing where King Magnus was, they drew in to the land, and for that night lay in a narrow bay, taking up their course again in the morning.

All that day they saw no sign of ships. At evening they drew in to the shore again, fearing they might pass the fleet by night. On the third morning they came to a long headland. As they swept around the point, Alfgar uttered a gasp of surprise. There, spread out before them, lay a multitude of ships, gay with bright-hued sails, gilded prows and glittering shields, while on the shore was a great camp that glittered with steel!

"No doubt of where we are now," remarked Atli grimly, heading in. "I have

done my work, Flamehair; may the gods help you in yours likewise!"

Alfgar smiled, but made no reply. As they reached the ships the Norsemen paid them no heed, for many such fishing-craft were in the harbor. Not until Alfgar hailed the nearest ship and asked for the king, did they arouse any comment. Then a large, well-made man with bright hair sprang on the bulwarks of a ship and hailed them.

"Who are you that ask for King Magnus?"

"Messengers from Harald Sigurdson," replied Alfgar. Atli smiled grimly at the uproar created by the words. Men sprang to the sides of every ship, while those on shore lined the beach. Only the bright-haired man seemed unmoved.

"If you jest it will go hard with you. Come aboard; this ship is the king's."

So, lowering the heavy sail, Atli and Alfgar rowed to the side of the ship and sprang on deck. Before them stood their questioner, and by the richness of his armor and weapons they knew that he was some great man of the king's.

"And now, what message do you bear from

Harald?" he asked, looking them over keenly and speaking eagerly.

"That is not for you to know," rejoined Alfgar quietly. "I speak to none save King Magnus himself. Tell him that Jarl Alfgar is here, from his uncle Harald."

At the words, an angry growl rose from the warriors clustering about the deck, but the leader quelled it with a glance.

"Like master, like man," he quoted, not unkindly, a humorous twinkle in his eyes. Alfgar liked him at first sight and wondered who he might be. "Have you proof of your message, or that Harald sent you on such important errand?"

"That I have," answered Alfgar. "That also is for the king's eye and for none other's. Now lead me to him and quickly, else we will return as we came."

"Truly, you speak as Harald himself might," laughed the other. A smothered laugh ran around the men. Atli touched Alfgar with his foot, and the Saxon wondered the more; a flush rose to his cheeks as he imagined he was being made sport of, and he took a quick step forward. But before he could

speaking, the Norseman held out his hand quietly and with dignity.

‘Give me the message, Jarl Alfgar. I am Magnus Haraldson.’

CHAPTER XXII

THE SUNDERING OF THE HOST

THEN it all came upon Alfgar suddenly, and he flushed again from shame, as he handed over the armring. Magnus looked at it eagerly, read the runes, and glanced up.

"Come with me to my cabin, Jarl."

Alfgar followed as he led the way through the warriors, and once inside the cabin, Magnus spoke excitedly.

"Now haste and give me your message! Where is Harald?"

So Alfgar poured out all his tale, telling of the great force that was being gathered by King Svein, and of Harald's desire that a civil war should not disrupt Norway. He told of Svein's plotting and of the killing of Sigurd Thick, at which Magnus gave an angry exclamation.

"Just like Svein! Had I received that letter — but go on."

"Your father, King Olaf," concluded Alfgar, "promised Harald a share of the king-

dom before he fell at Stiklestad. This was an open promise, and this promise Harald calls upon you to fulfil. If you will do so, Harald will leave Svein and join you here at once. Further, he offers to share with you all his wealth, which is great."

Magnus remained plunged in thought, then looked up.

"Leave me and refresh yourselves. I will take counsel, and before noon will give you an answer."

Alfgar and Atli went on deck, where they were immediately surrounded by a curious throng who brought them food and drink. All were anxious to hear of the famous Hardrede, and Alfgar and Atli satisfied their curiosity as well as might be, while waiting. Great satisfaction was evident among the men on hearing that Harald wished peace. When Magnus summoned them to the cabin, they found it full of chiefs, called from the other ships and the camp.

"One of my ships will take you back to Denmark," began the king, "and you can then rejoin Harald in a small boat. Tell him I have decided that his claim is a just one, and

that if he will hasten to me here we can then agree upon a settlement as he wishes. If we come to no agreement, he shall go his ways in peace.

"It is my word that we shall rule Norway together in peace, and that when one of us dies the other shall take his kingship. As to Denmark, that I have won for myself, and that land is naught of his."

Overjoyed, Alfgar dropped to one knee and kissed the king's hand — a custom little seen in the rough north.

"Here is a gift for you," continued Magnus, handing Alfgar a rich sword and Atli a ring byrnie of the best. "Let these be a token to Harald that you have spoken with me. Now make all haste to him, and God speed your journey!"

Much impressed with the dignity, straightforwardness and kingly manner of Magnus, Alfgar and Atli went aboard the ship furnished them. Their return trip was not so long, for they sailed under both oars and sail and made all haste. Two nights later they were outside the bay at Roskild.

Dropping into a small skiff, they entered

the fleet without discovery, and soon gained Harald's ship. With a muttered word to the guard, Alfgar went over the rail; as he did so his uncle gripped him.

"Careful! Svein is in the cabin with Harald, and their talk is rising high. Hist!"

Standing still, in dense shadow, Alfgar could make out the voices of the two chiefs, and suddenly that of Svein sounded angrily.

"Folk say, Harald, that you only hold to your covenants while they seem to drag your own case forward!"

"You will know of fewer broken oaths of mine," answered the voice of Harald, "than King Magnus will know broken oaths of yours!"

A moment later Svein left the cabin angrily, and without a look around him went over the side to his boat. Alfgar instantly entered the cabin and was greeted with a cry of joy.

"Well, Jarl! And have you accomplished your errand so quickly? We had not looked for you before another three or four days!"

Harald's face lit up when he heard Alfgar's brief summary of the words of Magnus.

"Then all is well, Flamehair! And of the

journey itself — did you have any misadventures? ”

“ At the start, yes,” answered Alfgar with a smile. He told of the ship that had pursued them, and as he did so the other chiefs entered the cabin and stood around listening.

“ I had hard words with Svein but now,” said Harald thoughtfully. “ My mind mis-gives me that he is plotting somewhat of evil against me. He seemed much wroth at my plain speech — ”

“ It would be an easy matter,” broke in Hal-dor gruffly, “ for a man to slip overside and into your cabin here, Harald.”

Hardrede started. “ By the Rood! Flame-hair, do you sleep at the foot of my bed to-night. In my place I will put a block of wood and see what befalls. In the morning we will set sail.”

So it was arranged, and when Alfgar had once more told his story, this time with more detail, the others left the cabin and he flung himself down. He was in sore need of rest, and fell asleep without delay.

A slight noise aroused him, and as he opened his eyes he saw the door standing open and

moonlight streaming into the cabin. With a sudden start he remembered the words of Haldor, and lay quietly, his hand on his sword. Then came a swish, followed by a dull thud. Instantly Alfgar was on his feet, his sword bared, and he flung himself against a dark figure that darted into the moonlight.

As he did so, the face of the intruder came into the light. Alfgar gave a startled cry, for the face was the face of Svein Arnison, whom he had last seen far away, in the room in the old Gothic castle where Hrolf had breathed his last! Instinctively he sprang back, blocking the way to the deck.

As he did so there came a shout from above, and a snarl of rage from Svein. A sword flashed out, and the next moment Alfgar was attacked desperately as Svein strove to cut his way to freedom. There came a rush of feet from the decks, but now his surprise was over.

"Traitor!" he cried. "This time you will not escape!"

The words drew a scornful laugh from Svein, who pressed Alfgar hard. But the Saxon was no longer the mere stripling who had opposed him in that fight in the dark;

they were in full moonlight now, and even without his shield Alfgar had no fear of the great sword that Svein poised and swung so lightly.

Back and forth they struggled, steel clashing on steel, while above them formed a ring of faces and the flare of torches cast a ruddy light on the conflict. Once a savage swing caught Alfgar's shoulder, but the byrnie held and Svein barely escaped the return thrust. Alfgar was fighting freely and easily now, and from the men about the hatchway came shouts of encouragement.

The end came swiftly. Back and farther back Alfgar drove the traitor and would-be assassin, until at length Svein had his back against the wall. He swung savagely and downright, but ever Alfgar parried his thrusts and caught the great sword on his own blade, turning it aside. Of a sudden Svein overreached himself; abandoning the downright edge swing, Alfgar gave one straight thrust of his weapon, and Svein dropped to the deck.

"Well fought!" came a cry from Harald, as the chief leaped down. The men poured after him with lights and entered the cabin.

There, deep buried in the log of wood, stood a war axe!

Harald turned to the chiefs with a deep oath. "Out oars and away! Hew a passage!" But this was not necessary. The ships of Harald left the harbor quietly, without opposition by Svein, and by morning they were well on their way. Under oars and sail they made rapid progress, and at length arrived without incident at the fleet of Magnus. On the way Alfgar saw Sigrid for the first time in months, and they had many long talks about old times and old friends, sitting on the sunny forecastle.

King Magnus welcomed Harald by messenger, bidding him come ashore with the Varangars to a feast in a great tent set up in the camp. Harald's ships were run up on the beach, and Harald set foot on Norse soil for the first time in many long years.

Alfgar, as they followed the messenger to the camp, could scarcely believe that so many and so great events had happened in such a short time, and that he had had such a large part in them himself. Around them the men of Magnus were cheering the magnificent

appearance of Harald and his chosen men, as they marched through the camp; then they entered the banquet-tent, and the two leaders met face to face.

As Harald and Magnus smilingly clasped hands, a tremendous shout of joy rolled up from the assembled men, spread to the camp and on to the fleet until the shout was drowned in the blare of horns. For a long time Magnus and Harald talked, avoiding the matter of kingship, until all the men had feasted. Then a file of men entered, bearing burdens.

"These be gifts to your men from me," said King Magnus. To each of Harald's men were given gold, weapons, clothing — whatever they wished, and Alfgar wondered at the generosity of the Norse ruler. Suddenly Magnus arose, a reed in each hand, and stood before Harald.

"Which of these two wands will you choose as my gift?" he smiled.

"The one nearest me," answered Harald. Alfgar wondered what this meant, until Magnus spoke again.

"With this reed I give you half Norway realm, with all dues and dominion therein.

You shall be king rightfully as I, but I shall have precedence while I live. This is but my due, for I have made you such a man as I thought none should ever be in Norway while I lived."

Harald thanked him well for this honor, and soon returned to his ships, for it was evening. There was great celebration both on shore and in the fleets that night, and next day King Magnus summoned all his host to a Thing. When the Thing was set, he made known to all, that Harald was now king of half the realm. One of his great men, Thorir of Steig, then gave Harald the king's name, and it was approved with right good will. Harald Sigurdson was now king in sooth — and the ambition that began in far off Byzantium was at last fulfilled!

Then Harald beckoned to Haldor, whispered in his ear, and the man left the assembly. The two kings were talking earnestly when he returned, at the head of men who carried chests and boxes.

"What means this?" asked Magnus, surprised.

Harald smiled. "Seeing you have been so

generous with your kingship, Magnus, it behooves me to be equally so with my wealth. Men, place all in two piles."

So it was done, and the great heaps of gold and silver were placed in two portions, one beside Magnus and the other beside Harald. When all was done, there remained a great lump of solid gold, melted down when some palace was burned, and carried off later. Taking this in both hands, Harald addressed Magnus.

"How shall we divide this lump?"

"I know not," smiled the other, shaking his head. "I have not gold enough to buy the half of it!" But Harald turned and cried eagerly:

"Alfgar! Jarl Alfgar! Take this as a free gift from us both!"

Alfgar, confused, came forward, but refused to take the ingot. At last Magnus added his urging to that of Harald, and so in the end Alfgar gave way, thanking the kings with a full heart, for the gift was a princely one. Then King Magnus took Alfgar's hand.

"Jarl Flamehair," he smiled at the nickname, "ask of me what you will, and I swear

that I will give it you. It is your doing that we met in peace, and for this I would give you a reward, that men may not deem Magnus less generous than Harald!"

A shout pealed up from the host, and Alfgar had a sudden idea. With a smile at Harald, he met the eye of the King.

"There is but one thing I desire, Magnus. This is, that you use your good offices in my behalf with King Harald yonder."

"Why, what mean you?" exclaimed Harald.

Still addressing Magnus, Alfgar went on.

"There is one thing in Harald's hands that I crave, and it is in his giving alone, King Magnus. If he will grant it me, I want no more."

"What is this thing, Harald?" asked Magnus. Hardrede stared at his Jarl, perplexed.

"Nay, I know not," he answered. "But whatever it is, I grant it you freely. Now name it, Flamehair!"

"It is the hand of the lady Sigrid," and Alfgar flushed deeply at the roar of laughter and cheers that went up from the host as Harald gripped his hand heartily.

CHAPTER XXIII

STAMFORD BRIDGE

IT was very late in summer when these things befell. Before winter set in the two kings went north to Nidaros, the capital built by King Olaf Tryggvison, and there Harald received recognition from all the land as king. Meanwhile, King Svein led his expedition on to Denmark and that winter brought the land under him, Magnus being too busy to gather a host.

That same autumn word came to them that amazed Jarl Alfgar and Sigrid. It was said that a messenger had reached England, bringing letters from Olaf Tryggvison, and bearing news of his death. Whether this messenger was Basil of the Errand or no, Alfgar never learned; but he and Sigrid concluded that as Basil was the only messenger, he must have finally arrived at the end of his journey.

At Yuletide Alfgar and Sigrid were married in Clement's Church at Nidaros. The marriage was no surprise to Harald's men,

Hardreide A. E. d. e.

and indeed the request made by Alfgar at the meeting of the kings had been long expected. All men knew the story of the two and their adventures together, and it was deemed only fitting and right that they should be wedded in the end. It was on that voyage north from Denmark that Alfgar secured Sigrid's permission to put his request before King Harald.

Hardreide bestowed lands in the south of Norway on Alfgar as a wedding gift, and thither the young Jarl took his bride. With them went Eadgar, who in the following spring took ship and visited England, thinking to settle down there. But he found things not to his liking, and returned sadly to his nephew's stead. Alfgar had long since given up all idea of returning home. His friends were all here in Norway, he knew no one in England, and the tidings of King Edward's weak rule brought by Eadgar made him well content to remain in the north.

He accompanied King Harald, after the death of Magnus, in the wars against Svein of Denmark, but seldom staid long at the court. Each winter, however, Harald came south and remained at Alfgar's stead for a month,

and as the years drew on the two grew ever closer together.

Then came the eventful tidings of the death of Edward of England. Soon after this Alfgar was with Harald, in the Wick of Norway, when a stranger accompanied by a few men came to the king. Alfgar knew the man for a Saxon at once, and so indeed it proved, for he was no other than Jarl Tosti, the brother of the new Saxon king Harald Godwinson.

Tosti urged on Harald his claim to the English throne, for by the compact made by King Magnus with King Hordaknut years before, by which Hordaknut's realms were to go to Magnus, the Norse kings still held title to England. Alfgar saw the way things were blowing, and fought hard against it, but to no avail. In the end the smooth flatteries of Tosti availed, and King Harald sent out a war-muster calling half of Norway's fighting men together. That winter Ulf the Red, the old Icelfander, who had been made marshal by Harald, died.

Sorrowfully enough, Alfgar went with his men and ships to join the host of the king at the Solund Isles. There were near two hun-

dred ships in the fleet, and men said that never had so great a host been gathered in Norway before.

"I will bear no arms against my own people," said Alfgar to the king, as they stood together on the royal ship. "Yet will I go with you and if you conquer the land, Harald, it will be my work to make things go as well as may be between you and the Saxons."

"I would not have you bear bane-spear against your own folk," said Harald kindly. "Bide you with me, Flamehair, and still give me your rede, for since I have promised Jarl Tosti to help him against his own brother, that promise I will keep, though methinks it will go hard with us or ever the realm of England falls to my hand."

So the fleet came to the Orkneys and the Orkney Jarls, Paul and Erland, joined Harald with a mighty host and all sailed south past Scotland. At Scarborough they landed and won the city, then continued down to York.

Here the Saxon king's brothers, Jarls Morcar and Walthiof, met Harald with a great army, but Harald's battlecraft had not deserted him, and the upshot of that battle was

that Jarl Morcar fell and the English host was routed. Shortly after, as the army began the siege of York, Jarl Tosti joined them from Flanders with many men. He bore the news that William of Normandy had set out to conquer England also, and Alfgar wondered drearily how it would all come out.

York was a strong city, however, and Harald could do but little against it. The fleet was brought up to Stamford Bridge, and here the townfolk made a truce with the king. It was arranged that on the Monday following a Thing would be held outside the town, to which Harald and his men should come in peace, and there the dominion would be given him, with the king's-name of England.

That Saturday Alfgar, without weapons, rode across the country with some of his men, for he longed to see his birthplace again. He visited the monastery, which had been rebuilt, but none there knew him, and sadly enough he returned toward York. It had been a goodly journey, and he did not reach the city until late Sunday evening. Stating that he was a Saxon, which his looks and tongue bore out, he entered the city.

Then, to his amazement, Jarl Alfgar found that an hour before King Harald Godwinson, with all his host, had entered the city secretly and was making ready to assault Harald Hardrede, unsuspecting. Soon after Alfgar's entrance the gates were closed and guarded; the Norse host was below Stamford with all the ships, and in no way could Alfgar leave the city to warn his master. In vain he tried, and at length gave up in despair.

In the morning he joined some of the Saxon troops, who were laying their ambush for King Harald, and left. Parting with the men, he whirled his horse and at a mad gallop dashed for the fleet; but he was too late. Within a mile of the city he met Harald and all his men. They had left their byrnies and most of their weapons behind, and had no thought of battle.

"Hold, Harald!" shouted Alfgar, leaping from the saddle as the king drew rein. "Treachery! Harald Godwinson waits to lay his host on us!" And therewith he told the news. But despite his agonized appeals Harald refused to believe that it could be true.

"King Harald may be there," he said, "but

he is no traitor! Yet will I send to the ships, bidding the men there bring up our weapons and armor. Never will King Harald of Norway flee!"

The messengers were sent off in haste, but as Alfgar rode along at Harald's side, he knew that they would be of no use. A few moments later the English host came in sight, and for the first time Harald's confidence gave way. He arrayed the men with him in a wide circle, shield to shield, their spears planted in the ground. Before the English army rode out a score of men in full armor, and came near the Norse line while one of them shouted out a message:

"Jarl Tosti, Harald thy brother giveth thee peace and one-third of his realm if thou wilt make peace with him."

Tosti, beside Alfgar and Harald, made quick answer.

"That is somewhat late in coming! I will accept the proffer; but what shall be given King Harald Sigurdson for his toil?"

"Seven foot's room, to wit," returned the Saxon, "or so much more as he is higher than other men!"

Tosti laughed scornfully. "Return now and make ready for battle, if ye think to kill us here treacherously. Never will Jarl Tosti desert his friends; rather shall we all take one rede, to die with honor or win all England by victory."

The English wheeled their horses and returned. King Harald asked Tosti who the man was that had borne the message, and dryly enough the Jarl replied that it was King Harald Godwinson himself!

"Had I known that," returned Harald, "he would never have returned to his own men alive!"

"So I thought," laughed Tosti, and for the first time Alfgar felt a gleam of admiration for the man. "But I would rather that he should give me my bane here than that I should bear death to him, for he is my own brother after all."

"Oh, it is just as well," laughed Harald. "He was a little man, but stood right stiff in the stirrup. He will be hard to conquer."

Alfgar stood in the center of the shield-ring, beside Harald's banner, for still he would not bear weapons against Englishmen, and the

king would not press him to do so. The Norsemen were surrounded, and for a time managed to hold their own, despite the lack of weapons and armor. So stoutly did they fight that the Saxons began to give ground, and forgetting their orders, the Norsemen raised a shout and broke their array.

This was their undoing. In vain Harald and Alfgar shouted to them to hold firm until the army arrived from the ships; in vain Harald leaped out into the thick of the fight and drove the Saxons before him. Suddenly, Alfgar saw the armorless king throw up his arms and fall. With a sob of rage and anguish, Alfgar picked up an axe and ran to his side. It was of no use; an arrow had pierced Harald's throat, and the Norse king breathed out his life in Alfgar's arms.

Then, for the first time, Alfgar was filled with mad fury. Whirling his axe aloft, he led the shattered Norsemen around Harald's banner, and here Jarl Tosti joined them. Barely fifty men remained of all who had started to the Thing with Harald, but so stoutly and so fiercely did the fifty armorless men fight that the English perforce were driven back.

Then the Saxon king again offered them life, and peace to Tosti; but with one accord they chose to die rather than to yield, pointing to the body of Harald and cursing the Saxons as traitors to their oaths. At this the battle joined again, but just in time Eystein Heathcock arrived with the host, coming at a dead run. Finding they were too late, and that Harald had fallen, they fell on the English like madmen.

But Alfgar did not join them. With a few of his men he drew the body of King Harald out of the fray. As he did so the mad onrush of the half-frenzied Norsemen was checked and broken, for the Vikings sought only vengeance for their king and were careless of their lives. The Saxons burst through them, and Alfgar hastily drew aside with his men.

"Come, men," he said sadly, "we are utterly defeated and cut off from the ships. Let us go to a monastery I wot of, and there will the king's body be kept until we can get ships home."

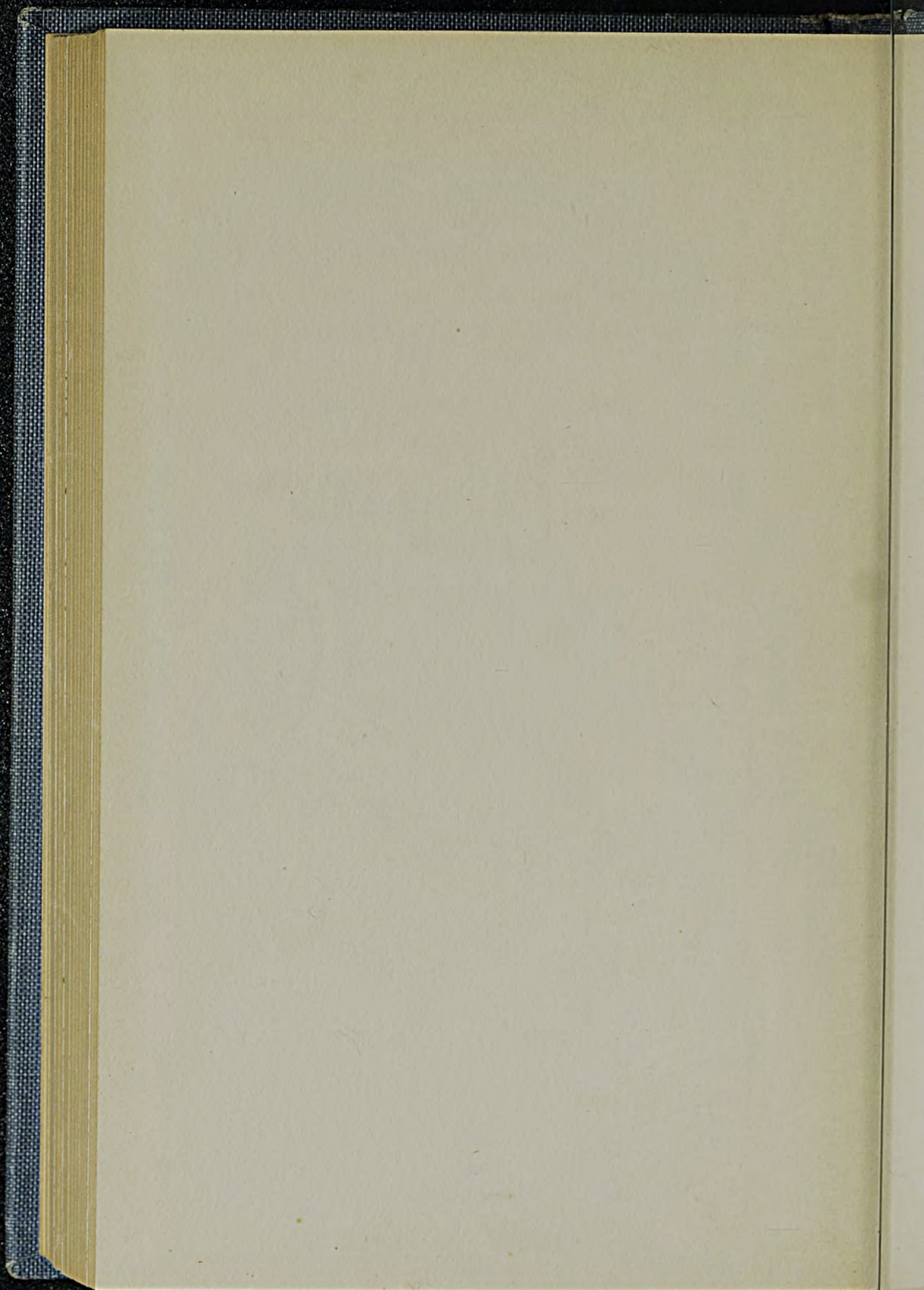
So this was the ending of that great array and of Norway's greatest king. All the noblemen of Norway fell in that desperate battle,

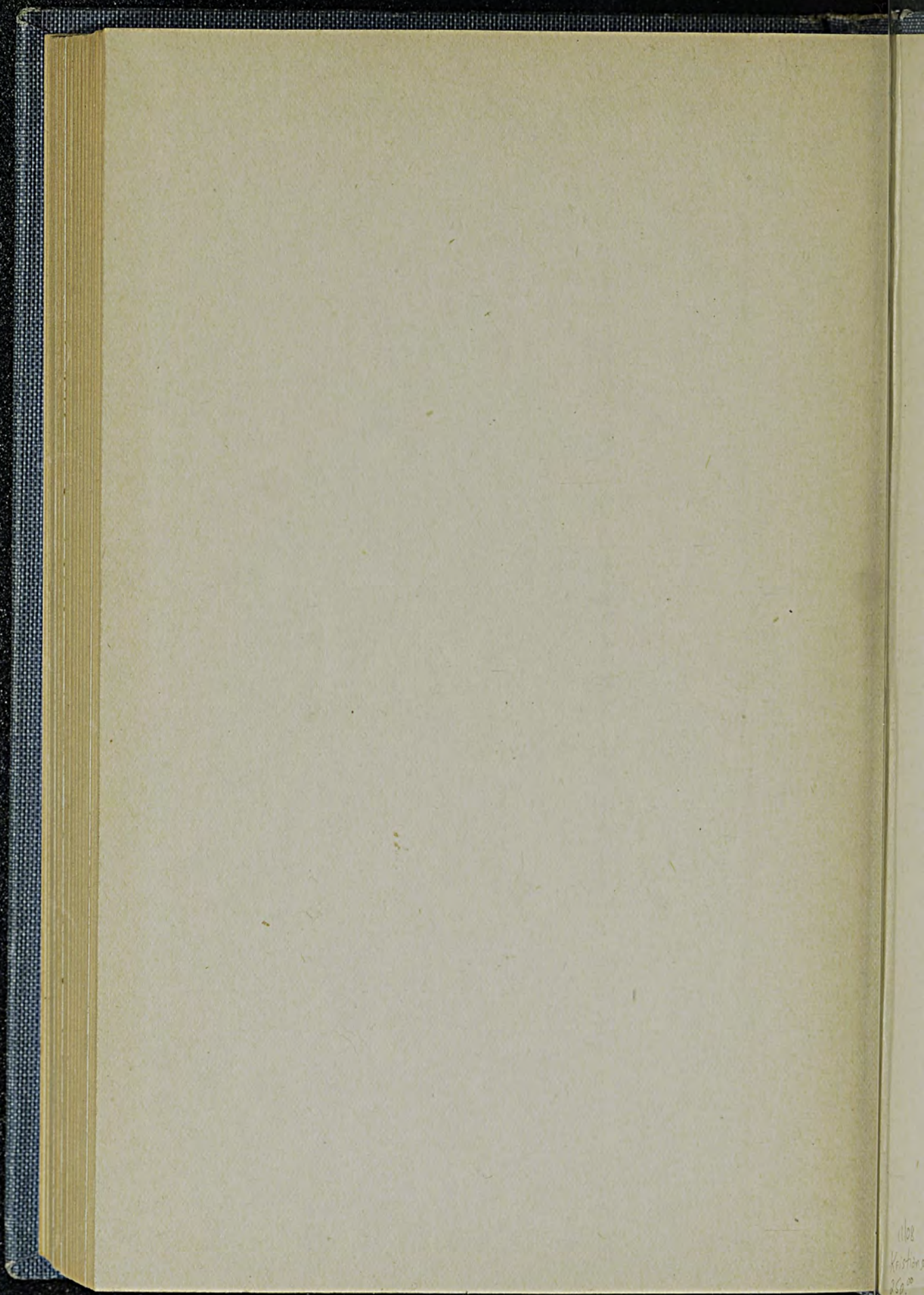
save Jarl Alfgar, and one or two who had remained at the ships. It was the most terrible defeat the Norsemen ever received, and stung all the more bitterly because it came through treachery.

Alfgar was kindly received at the monastery and stayed there until news came of the battle of Senlac and the death of Harald Godwinson. Soon after came men of William the Conqueror, spreading over the land, and these gave ready safe conduct to Alfgar to fare to Norway with the body of his loved king.

So Alfgar came home again, and King Harald was buried in his own new Marychurch at Nidaros. And ever after that Alfgar dwelt quietly on his stead, going no more to war, while he made songs for all who came, and listened to Sigrid telling the children wondrous tales of Flamehair the Skald.

THE END





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