

# FOR THE WHITE CHRIST

*Cover*

*"Bend lower, king's daughter--little vala with eyes like dewy  
violets!" (Page [250](#))*

## FOR THE WHITE CHRIST A Story of The Days of Charlemagne

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When Alcuin taught the sons of Charlemagne,  
In the free schools of Aix, how kings should rule.

LONGFELLOW.

To the Memory of My Mother

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

All the chapter headings of this story are taken from lays which were sung by harpers and skalds before the high-seats of heathen Norse chiefs and in the halls of the Anglo-Saxon kings, while England was yet a heptarchy and the name of Mohammed but little known to men even on the shores of the far-distant Bosphorus.

In most instances the selections are from Magnusson and Morris's beautiful translations of "The Volsunga Saga, and Certain Songs from the Elder Edda." The spirited lines from "Beowulf," "Maldon," "Finnesburh," and "Andreas" were found in Gummerle's "Germanic Origins." The translation of "Brunanburh" is by Tennyson.

Apology is due for occasional alterations and elisions, all of which will readily be detected by students of the wonderful poetic fragments which have come down to us from our Norse and

Teutonic forefathers.

R. A. B. Denver, January 1, 1905.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

"Bend lower, king's daughter--little vala with eyes like dewy violets!" . . . . . Frontispiece

"White to the lips, the young sea-king turned to his enemy"

"Love!" she cried, half hissing the word. 'You speak of love,--you, the heathen outlander!'"

"Go, Olvir!" muttered the king, thickly; 'go--before I forget that I once loved you'"

## FOR THE WHITE CHRIST

### BOOK ONE

Now death has seized--  
Bale and terror--my trusty people,  
Laid down life have my liegemen all.  
BEOWULF.

### CHAPTER I

Swans of the Dane-folk--

The ships of Sigmund--  
Heads all gilt over,  
And prows fair graven.  
LAY OF GUDRUN.

Early of an April morning of the year 778, a broad-beamed Frisian trade-ship was drifting with the ebb-tide down the Seine estuary. Wrapped about by the morning vapors, the deeply laden little craft floated on the stream like a dreamship. The mists shut out all view of sky and land and sea. From the quarter-deck, the two men beside the steer-oar could scarcely see across the open cargo-heaped waist to where, gathered silently about the mast, a dozen or so drowsy sailors stood waiting for the morning breeze.

The remainder of the crew lay sprawled upon the casks and bales of merchandise, side by side with a score of Frankish warriors. All alike were heavy with drunken slumber. The shipmaster, a squat red-haired man of great girth, regarded the overcome wassailers with an indifferent eye; but the tall warrior beside him appeared far from pleased by the sight.

"Is it so you rule your ship, Frisian?" he demanded. "You should have stopped the wassail by midnight. Here we swim on the treacherous sea, while our men lie in drunken stupor."

"We are yet in the stream, lord count," replied the shipmaster. "As to my Frisians, a dash of salt water will soon rouse them. If your landsmen are farther gone, what odds? Drunk or sober, they'll be alike useless when we strike rough seas."

The Frank's face lit with a smile as quick as its frown.

"There you are mistaken, Frisian," he said. "A man may bear the wild waters no love, yet owe them no fear. Twice I have crossed this narrow sea, as envoy of our Lord Karl to the kings of the Anglo-Saxons, and my henchmen sailed with me."

"Yours are king's men, lord count,--all busked like chiefs."

"Man for man, I would pit them against the followers of any leader. Better a few picked warriors, so armed, than twice their number of common freemen."

"Well said!" muttered the Frisian; "a choice following. I 'd wager on them, even against Dane steel--except the sea-wolves of Olvir Elfkin."

"Olvir Elfkin? You speak of a liegeman of Sigfrid, King of the Nordmannian Danes?"

"No, lord count; Earl Olvir is far too proud to let himself be called the man of any king. I sail far on my trade-farings. At the fair of Gardariki, across the great gulf from the Swedes, I saw the Norse hero. His father was one-time king of the Trondir, a folk who dwell beneath the very eaves of the ice-giants. His mother was an elf-maiden from the far Eastland. Another time I will tell you that tale, lord count. I had it from Floki the Crane, my Norse sword-brother. But now I speak of Earl Olvir's following. He is so famed in the North that the greatest heroes think it honor to fight beneath his banner; and he rules the mail-clad giants as our great King Karl rules his counts. Six seasons in all he has come swooping south from his ice-cliffs to harry the coasts of Jutland and Nordmannia; and though even now he is little more than a bairn in years, each time that he steered about for his home fiord he

left a war-trail of sunken longships to mark his outbound course."

"I heard much of such sea-fights from that mighty Dane hero Otkar,--he who went over to King Desiderius and fought against our Lord Karl in the Lombard war."

"Ay; who has not heard of Otkar Jotuntop,--Otkar the Dane? This very Earl Olvir of whom I spoke is of kin to the hero."

"Even I have heard of Lord Otkar," called out a childish voice, and the speaker sprang lightly up the deck ladder. She was a lissome little maiden, barely out of childhood, yet possessed of an unconscious dignity of look and bearing that well matched her rich costume.

The warrior bowed low to her half-shy, half-gay greeting, and smiling down into her violet eyes, he replied in a tone of tender deference, "The Princess Rothada is early awake. Shall I not call the tiring-woman?"

The girl put up her hand to touch the coronet which bound her chestnut hair, and her glance passed in naive admiration down the gold-embroidered border of her loose-sleeved overdress.

"Princess! princess!" she cried gayly. "To think that only four days have gone since with Gisela and the other maidens I waited upon the blessed sisters! And now I wear a ring and silken dresses, and the greatest war-count of the king my father--but are you not my kinsman, lord count?"

"Your cousin, little princess. My mother was a sister of our lord king."

"Then you shall no longer call me princess, but Rothada, and I shall call you Roland. Few maidens can own kinsmen so tall and

grand!" and Rothada stared up in half-awed admiration at the count's war-dented helmet and shining scale-hauberk.

The warrior's blue eyes glowed, but there was no vanity with his frank pleasure.

"Saint Michael give me skill to shield you from all harm!" he said.

"Surely he has already strengthened your arm. In all the land you stand second only to the king my father!--But you spoke of Otkar the Dane. Tell me more about him, cousin. Already I know that he was a heathen count from the far North, more learned than any monk or priest, and in battle mightier even than my father. Two winters ago there came to Chelles a maiden who knew many tales of the Saxon and Lombard wars,--Fastrada--"

Roland's cheeks flushed, and he stooped forward eagerly.

"Fastrada!" he exclaimed. "You knew her?"

"For a winter's time---"

"You will meet her again. She is now one of the queen's maidens,--the fairest of them all."

"Then you like her, cousin," replied Rothada, with innocent candor. "It was different with Gisela and me. Many of the maidens feared her, and she broke the holy rules and talked so much of warriors that the good abbess sent her away. Yet that is long since--she may have changed."

"None could but like her now, child," replied Roland, softly. Yet even as he spoke, some unwelcome thought blotted the smile from his face. He frowned and stared moodily out into the wavering mists.

The girl followed his look, and the sight of the water alongside recalled her to the present.

"See, kinsman," she said, with a sudden return of gayety, "the sailors spread the sail. How long shall we be upon the sea until we reach the Garonne?"

"Were we travelling by land, I could tell you, little princess. But I am no sea-count. Our shipmaster can best answer you."

The Frisian turned to the daughter of the great king with an uncouth attempt at a bow.

"Wind and wave are fickle, maiden, and no sea is rougher than the Vascon Bay," he grumbled. "But with fair wind I land you at Casseneuil while the lord count's horsemen yet ride in Aquitania."

"That I doubt, man," said Roland. "Yet here is promise of fair sailing. The sun melts the mists, and with it comes the breeze to sweep them away."

"Ay; the fog breaks. Between sun and wind we 'll see both shores before the ship gains full headway."

"I already see-- Look, man! Can we be so close inshore? What flashes so brightly?"

The Frisian wheeled about, an anxious frown lowering beneath his shaggy forelock. His alarm was only too well founded. A puff of the freshening breeze swept before it the last bank of vapor, and revealed with startling clearness two grim black hulls, along whose sweeping bulwarks hung rows of yellow shields. On the lofty prows shone the gilded dragon-heads whose glitter had first caught Roland's eye. The single masts were bare of yard and



sail; but along each side a dozen or more great sweeps thrust out beneath the scaly shield-row like the legs of a dragon.

"Danes!" gasped the Frisian, and from the grimly beautiful viking ships, every line of which spoke of grace and speed, he turned a despairing eye upon his clumsy trade-ship.

"Lost! lost!" he cried. "Already they come about to give chase--Garpike and the lame duck! Paul seize all vikings!"

"No, Frisian," rejoined Roland. "These, in truth, are war-ships; yet they come in peace. Dane or other, they dare not attack us on the coast of Neustria."

As though in retort to this proud boast, a red shield swung up to each Danish masthead, and across the water rolled a fierce war-cry. Roused by the wild shout, all the sleepers in the trade-ship's waist sprang to their feet. But while the Frisians huddled about the mast like frightened sheep, the Franks met the sudden danger with the steadiness of seasoned warriors. At a sign from their lord, they crept aft, sword and axe in hand, and crouched on the deck behind the bulwarks. As they made ready for battle, Roland caught up the hand of Rothada, who stood gazing at the viking ships in mingled terror and admiration.

"Princess," he said, "the heathen shoot far with bow and sling. It is time you sought shelter below. For a while you can there lie in safety."

"But you, cousin? The Dane ships swarm with warriors. You and your men will all be slain! Do not fight them, Roland! Let there be no bloodshed."

"A wise maiden!" cried the shipmaster. "Mark the odds,--one

stroke brings death to us all. Yield, lord Frank! What if they give two or three to Odin? The rest they 'll spare for thralls or set free for wergild."

"Ah, Roland, yield, then! Do not anger the terrible heathen. My father will soon ransom us."

"And what will he say to his daughter's faithless warder,--to the coward who, without a blow, yielded a king's child into heathen thralldom?--By my sword, the Danes take you only over the corpse of the last Frank in this ship!"

But proudly as he spoke, when he swung the girl down from the deck, the count's heart sickened at thought of her helplessness. How would the little cloister-maiden fare in the hands of the fierce sea-thieves? The anguish of the thought filled him with renewed rage. He gripped his sword-hilt.

"Now to die, with a score of Danes for death-bed," he muttered.

Then a sudden hope flashed from his blue eyes. He seized the steersman by the shoulder, and shouted joyfully: "Ho, Frisian; we may yet go free! Cast over the cargo! The breeze freshens; we 'll outsail the thieves!"

"Only another viking could do that--yet the cloth bales will float--the Danes may linger to pick them up. A good trick, if old-- But what-- Curse of the foul fiend! Look to seaward--three more longships--across our course!"

"The race is run! Strike sail, man, and go forward to your sailors. You and they may so save your skins. I and my men die here."

"I, too, can die," answered the shipmaster, stolidly, and he drew a curved sword-knife from his belt.

"Go; you wear no war-gear," commanded Roland.

"I will fight berserk, as they say in the North."

"Then take my shield, and with it the thanks of a Frankish count. No braver man ever fought beside me."

The Frisian took the shield, unmoved by the praise.

"Once I had a Northman for sword-fellow. They called him Floki the Crane. From him I learned the ways of vikings. They know how to die."

"No less do my henchmen," rejoined Roland, and he shook the great mane of tawny hair which fell about his shoulders. Here was no Romanized Neustrian, tainted and weakened by the vices of a corrupt civilization, but a German warrior,--an Austrasian of pure blood. He watched the approaching Danes, eager for battle.

The Frisian, as he slipped the shield upon his arm, stared at the Frank with a look of dull admiration. But when an arrow whistled close overhead, he wheeled hastily about and shouted command to strike sail. The order was obeyed with zeal, for the crew stood trembling in dread of the Danish missiles. Down rushed the great wool sheet, and an exultant shout rolled out from the pursuing longships. Count Roland smiled grimly.

"Hearken, men!" he said; "the heathen think we yield. They lay aside bow and sling. All will be axe and sword play. They shall learn the taste of Frankish steel!"

The Frisian shook his head: "No, no, lord count. They 'll board on either quarter, and overwhelm us. Your men are too

scattered. The Danes--"

"No, by my sword! The leading craft sheers off."

"She steers to meet the seaward ships! The Norns smile upon us, Frank. We are doomed; but many a Dane goes before us to Hel's Land!"

"Brave words, man, though strange on the lips of a Christian," replied Roland, and he drew his short-hafted battle-axe. "Now, men, make ready. The Dane ship closes like a hound on the deer's flank. It will find the stag at bay! When I cast my axe, leap up and strike for Christ and king."

A low murmur came back from the crouching Franks, and they gripped their weapons with added firmness. They were picked men, who had fought in all the wars of Karl and of Pepin his father. One, a hoary giant of sixty, could even boast that as a boy he had swung a sword in the fateful battle of Tours, when Karl the Hammer had shattered the conquering hosts of Mohammed. Death had no terrors for such iron-hearted warriors. All they asked was the chance to sell their lives dearly. Like hunted wolves, they lay in wait, while the shouting Danes rowed up to seize their prize.

## CHAPTER II

Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,  
Mood shall be the more, as our might lessens.  
Grief and sorrow forever  
On the man that leaves this sword-play!

## SONG OF MALDON.

Already the longship lay close astern. A harsh command sent the oars rattling in through their ports; and as the dragon prow overlapped the flank of the quarry, a dozen grappling-hooks fell clanking across the bulwark. Half the longship's crew swarmed in the bows,--a wild-eyed, skin-clad band, staring with fierce greed at the casks and bales with which the trade-ship was laden. None of them looked twice at the two men standing so quietly in the middle of the deck. In their eagerness for loot, all pressed forward to board the trade-ship, and so little did they dream of resistance that many bore their weapons sheathed.

They were soon to learn their mistake. As the first Dane leaped upon the bulwark, Roland swept his axe overhead and hurled it at the luckless viking. Across the front the Dane's wolfskin serk was thickly sewn with iron rings; but the axe-blade shore through iron and hide like cloth, and buried itself in the viking's breast.

The surprise could not have been more complete. As the axe flashed over their heads, the hidden warriors sprang up and fell upon the Danes with all the fury of despair. Their lord and the Frisian sprang forward beside them, and the Frankish blades threshed across the bulwarks in swift strokes that cut down a dozen vikings before they could guard themselves. More in astonishment than dismay, the foremost Danes recoiled upon their fellows, causing a jam and confusion that prolonged the vantage of the Franks. Like flails the weapons of the grey warriors beat upon the

round shields of the heathen.

"Strike! strike!" they shouted in the fierce joy of battle. "Christ and king! Down with the pagans! death to the sea-thieves!"

On the right the shipmaster thrust his pointed sword-knife into the faces of the enemy; on the left the axe of the hoary giant of Tours fell like Thor's hammer; while between the two, Roland, wielding his sword in both hands, cut down a Dane with every blow. His eyes flashed with the fire of battle, and as he struck he shouted tauntingly: "Ho, Danes! ho, sea-thieves! here is sword-play! Run, cast your spears from shelter! Frank steel bites deep!"

The answer was a roar of fury. The death of their fellows only roused the Danes to wild rage. Their huge bodies quivered, and eyes yet more fiery than Roland's flamed with the battle-light. The air rang with the clash of weapons, and the terrible war-cry swelled into a deafening roar,--"Thor aid! Thor aid! Death to the Frank dogs!"

In a mass the vikings surged forward and leaped at the bulwark. Vainly the Franks sought to withstand the shock. The crashing strokes of Roland's sword kept clear all the space within its sweep; but on either side the vikings burst across the bulwark in overwhelming numbers. Shield clashed against shield, and blades beat upon helmet and hauberk with the clang of a hundred smithies. No warriors could long withstand such odds. Down went the Frisian under the blade of a berserk axe, and after him fell the old giant of Tours, a throttled Dane in his grip. Then four more Franks fell, all together, and the whole line reeled back across the deck. The defence was broken. The Danes yelled in fierce triumph

and surged forward to thrust their handful of foes over into the sea. Many warriors so hard pressed would have flung down their weapons and begged for quarter. Not so the henchmen of the king's kin.

"Back to back!" called their count, and for a moment he checked the Danish rush by the sweep of his single sword. Brief as was the respite, it gave his followers time to rally. They sprang together and ringed about their leader in a shieldburg that all the wild fury of the vikings could not break. Like their lord, these grey warriors were Rhinemmen of pure German blood. Between them and their foes was slight difference other than the veneer of a nominal Christianity. Drunk with the wine of battle, they whirled their reddened blades and rejoiced to slay and be slain in Odin's game. One by one, they staggered and fell, striking even in the death-agony. Those who were left only narrowed their ring to close the gaps, and fought on.

Of all the virtues, Northman and Teuton alike gave first place to courage. Wonder seized the Danes at the very height of their blood-fury. Never before had even they, the fierce sea-wolves, witnessed such sword-play. Overcome by admiration, many drew back as the last few Franks fell dying. When Roland stood alone within their circle, by common impulse they lowered their weapons and shouted to spare the hero. Only one voice dissented--but it was the voice of the Danish chief.

The sea-king had been steering his ship, and so unexpected and furious was the fight that its end came before he could force a way through the press of his own men. Enraged that he had failed

to come to blows, he now pushed to the front, a grand and imposing figure in his scale hauberk and gold-winged helmet. But beneath the helmet's bright rim lowered a face more brutal and ferocious than a Saxon outlaw's.

"Way!" he shouted; and as the vikings parted, he stepped over the slain to where Roland leaned heavily upon his sword.

"So-ho!" he jeered, and he eyed the gasping Frank with cruel satisfaction. "They breed bears in the South worth the baiting."

Roland's eyes flashed as he answered: "Heathen boar! you may well talk of baiting. Count your men who have fallen. Had I half my strength, I'd send you with them to burn in Tartarus!"

"Had you all your strength, Frank, I should strike off your hands with Ironbiter my sword, and cast you overboard to the sea-god. As it is, I'll take you thrall and break your back on Thor's Stone at the Winter Sacrifice. Next Yule the followers of Hroar the Cruel shall drink to Thor and Frey from the skull of Earl Roland, the kin of the Frank king."

The count started in astonishment.

"Tell me, Dane!" he cried; "how do you know my name? Not by chance did you lie in the Seine Mouth!"

"True, thrall; I can swear to that," answered Hroar, and he laughed. "Be certain I would not risk King Sigfrid's longships thus far south without sure gain. It is no harm to speak truth to a man who is doomed,--dead men tell no tales. May you have joy of your answer!"

"I laugh at death. Now tell me, Dane!"

"Know then, my merry thrall, that tidings of your sailing flew



to Nordmannia straight from the hall of your king. Sigfrid had word from Wittikind the Saxon, and he from well-wishers across the Rhine. Not all your king's foes dwell without his borders. Some speak Frankish for mother-tongue--"

"You lie! No Frank is traitor."

Hroar only laughed and answered jeeringly: "Maybe a little bird told how Earl Roland should sail south from the Seine with the Frank king's daughter,--a little bird in Frankish plumage. He sang a golden song for me. Your ship rides deep with her cargo, and Frisian thralls fetch a good price at the Gardariki fair.--But I would see your princess. If she is young and comely, I may have other use for her than to grind meal."

At the brutal words, fury seized upon Roland. His eyes blazed, and rage lent sudden strength to his tottering frame.

"Heathen dog!" he gasped; "never shall your eyes look on Rothada!"

Before Hroar could guard or leap aside, the Frank's sword swung overhead and whirled down upon his helmet like a sledge. Had the casque been of common make, Hroar would have met his fate on the spot. As it was, the blow beat a great dint in the gilded steel and sent the sea-king reeling backward, stunned and blinded. A dozen vikings sprang between to shield him, but Roland's sword dropped at their feet. Faint from loss of blood, and utterly spent by that last great blow, the count swayed forward. Darkness shut out from him the ring of shouting heathen. He fell swooning upon the heap of corpses.

"A champion! a champion! The Frank has won his freedom!"

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