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KING ALFRED'S VIKING

A Story of the First English Fleet

by
Charles W. Whistler.

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Preface.

The general details and course of events given in this story are, so far as regards the private life and doings of King Alfred, from his life as written by his chaplain, Asser. One or two further incidents of the Athelney period are from the later chroniclers--notably the sign given by St. Cuthberht--as are also the names of the herdsman and the nobles in hiding in the fen.

That Alfred put his first fleet into the charge of "certain Vikings" is well known, though the name of their chief is not given. These Vikings would certainly be Norse, either detached from the following of Rolf Ganger, who wintered in England in 875 A.D. the year before his descent on Normandy; or else independent rovers who, like Rolf, had been driven from Norway by the high-handed methods of Harald Fairhair. Indeed, the time when a Norse contingent was not present with the English forces, from this period till at least that of the battle of Brunanburh in 947 A.D. would probably be an exception.

There are, therefore, good historic grounds for the position given to the hero of the story as leader of the newly-formed fleet. The details of the burning of his supposed father's hall, and of the Orkney period, are from the Sagas.

Much controversy has raged over the sites of Ethandune and the landing place of Hubba at Kynwith Castle, owing probably to the duplication of names in the district where the last campaign took place. The story, therefore, follows the identifications given by the late Bishop Clifford in "The Transactions of the Somerset Archaeological Society" for 1875 and other years, as, both from topographic and strategic points of view, no other coherent identification seems possible.

The earthworks of the Danish position still remain on Edington hill, that looks out from the Polden range over all the country of Alfred's last refuge, and the bones of Hubba's men lie everywhere under the turf where they made their last stand under the old walls and earthworks of Combwich fort; and a lingering tradition yet records the extermination of a Danish force in the neighbourhood. Athelney needs but the cessation of today's drainage to revert in a very few years to what it was in Alfred's time--an island, alder covered, barely rising from fen and mere, and it needs but little imagination to reproduce what Alfred saw when, from the same point where one must needs be standing, he planned the final stroke that his people believed was inspired directly from above.

It would seem evident from Alfred's method with Guthrum that he realized that this king was but one among many leaders, and not directly responsible for the breaking of the solemn peace sworn at Exeter and Wareham. His position as King of East Anglia has gained him an ill reputation in the pages of the later chronicles; but neither Asser nor the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*-

-our best authorities--blames him as they, for his contemporaries knew him to be but a "host king," with no authority over newcomers or those who did not choose to own allegiance to him.

Save in a few cases, where the original spelling preserves a lost pronunciation, as in the first syllable of "Eadmund," the modern and familiar forms of the names have been used in preference to the constantly-varying forms given by the chroniclers. Bridgwater has no Saxon equivalent, the town being known only as "The Bridge" since the time when the Romans first fortified this one crossing place of the Parret; and the name of the castle before which Hubba fell varies from Cynuit through Kynwith to Kynwich, whose equivalent the Combwich of today is. Guthrum's name is given in many forms, from Gytro to Godramnus. Nor has it been thought worth while to retain the original spelling AElfred, the ae diphthong having been appropriated by us to an entirely new sound; while our own pronunciation of the name slightly broadened as yet in Wessex, is correct enough.

The exact relationship of St. Neot to Alfred, beyond that he was a close kinsman, is very doubtful. He has been identified with a brother, Athelstan of East Anglia, who is known to have retired to Glastonbury; but there is no more than conjecture, and I have been content with "cousinship."

C. W. Whistler

Stockland, 1898.

Chapter I. The Seeking of Sword Helmbiter.

Men call me "King Alfred's Viking," and I think that I may be proud of that name; for surely to be trusted by such a king is honour enough for any man, whether freeman or thrall, noble or churl. Maybe I had rather be called by that name than by that which was mine when I came to England, though it was a good title enough that men gave me, if it meant less than it seemed. For being the son of Vemund, king of Southmereland in Norway, I was hailed as king when first I took command of a ship of my own. Sea king, therefore, was I, Ranald Vemundsson, but my kingdom was but over ship and men, the circle of wide sea round me was nought that I could rule over, if I might seem to conquer the waves by the kingship of good seaman's craft.

One may ask how I came to lose my father's kingdom, which should have been mine, and at last to be content with a simple English earldom; or how it was that a viking could be useful to Alfred, the wise king. So I will tell the first at once, and the rest may be learned from what comes after.

If one speaks to me of Norway, straightway into my mind comes the remembrance of the glare of a burning hall, of the shouts of savage warriors, and of the cries of the womenfolk, among whom I, a ten-year-old boy, was when Harald Fairhair sent the great Jarl Rognvald and his men to make an end of Vemund, my father. For Harald had sworn a great oath to subdue all the lesser kings in the land and rule there alone, like Gorm in Denmark and Eirik in Sweden. So my father's turn came, and as he feasted with his ninety stout courtmen, the jarl landed under cover of the dark and fell on him, surrounding the house and firing it. Then was fierce fighting as my father and his men sallied again and again from the doors and were driven back, until the high roof fell in and there was a sudden silence, and an end.

Then in the silence came my mother's voice from where she stood on the balcony of the living house across the garth [ii](#). I mind that she neither wept nor shrieked as did the women round her, and her voice was clear and strong over the roaring of the flames. I mind, too, the

flash of helms and armour as every man turned to look on her who spoke.

"Coward and nidring art thou, Rognvald, who dared not meet Vemund, my husband, in open field, but must slay him thus. Ill may all things go with thee, till thou knowest what a burning hall is like for thyself. I rede thee to the open hillside ever, rather than come beneath a roof; for as thou hast wrought this night, so shall others do to thee."

Then rose a growl of wrath from Rognvald's men, but the great Jarl bade them cease, and harm none in all the place. So he went down to his ships with no more words and men said that he was ill at ease and little content, for he had lost as many men as he had slain, so stoutly fought my father and our courtmen, and had earned a curse, moreover, which would make his nights uneasy for long enough.

Then as he went my mother bade me look well at him, that in days to come I might know on whom to avenge my father's death. After that she went to her own lands in the south, for she was a jarl's daughter, and very rich.

Not long thereafter Harald Fairhair won all the land, and then began the trouble of ruling it; and men began to leave Norway because of the new laws, which seemed hard on them, though they were good enough.

Now two of Jarl Rognvald's sons had been good friends of my father before these troubles began, and one, Sigurd, had been lord over the Orkney Islands, and had died there. The other, Jarl Einar, fell out with Rognvald, his father, and we heard that he would take to the viking path, and go to the Orkneys, to win back the jarldom that Sigurd's death had left as a prey to masterless men and pirates of all sorts. So my mother took me to him, and asked him for the sake of old friendship to give me a place in his ship; for I was fourteen now, and well able to handle weapons, being strong and tall for my age, as were many of the sons of the old kingly stocks.

So Einar took me, having had no part in his father's doings towards us, and hating them moreover. He promised to do all that he might towards making a good warrior and seaman of me; and he was ever thereafter as a foster father to me, for my own had died in the hall with Vemund. It was his wish to make amends thus, if he could, for the loss his folk had caused me.

Of the next five years I need speak little, for in them I learned the viking's craft well. We won the Orkneys from those who held them, and my first fight was in Einar's ship, against two of the viking's vessels. After that we dwelt in Sigurd's great house in Kirkwall, and made many raids on the Sutherland and Caithness shores. I saw some hard fighting there, for the Scots are no babes at weapon play.

Then when I was nineteen, and a good leader, as they said, the words that my mother spoke to Jarl Rognvald came true, and he died even as he had slain my father.

For Halfdan and Gudrod, Harald Fairhair's sons, deeming that the Jarl stood in their way to power in Norway, burned him in his hall by night, and so my feud was at an end. But the king would in nowise forgive his sons for the slaying of his friend, and outlawed them. Whereon Halfdan came and fell on us in the Orkneys; and that was unlucky for him, for we beat him, and Jarl Einar avenged on him his father's death.

Now through this it came to pass that I saw Norway for the last time, for I went thither in Einar's best ship to learn if Harald meant to make the Orkneys pay for the death of his son-- which was likely, for a son is a son even though he be an outlaw.

So I came to my mother's place first of all, and full of joy and pleasant thoughts was I as we

sailed into the well-remembered fiord to seek the little town at its head. And when we came there, nought but bitterest sorrow and wrath was ours; for the town was a black heap of ruin, and the few men who were left showed me where the kindly hands of the hill folk had laid my mother, the queen, in a little mound, after the Danish vikings, who had fallen suddenly on the place with fire and sword, had gone. They had grown thus bold because the great jarl was dead, and the king's sons had left the land without defence.

There I swore vengeance for this on every viking of Danish race that I might fall in with; for I was wild with grief and rage, as one might suppose. I set up a stone over the grave of my mother, graving runes thereon that should tell who she was and also who raised it; for I was skilled in the runic lore, having learned much from one of Einar's older men who had known my father.

Thereafter we cruised among the islands northwards until we learned that Harald was indeed upon us, and then I saw my last of Norway as we headed south again, and the last hilltop sank beneath the sea's rim astern of us. I did not know that so it would be at that time--it is well that one sees not far into things to come--but even now all my home seemed to be with Einar; and that also was not to last long, as things went. How that came about I must tell, for the end was that I came to Alfred the king.

When we came back to Kirkwall, I told the jarl all that I had done and learned; and grieved for me he was when he heard of my mother's death. Many things he said to me at that time which made him dearer to me. Then after a while he spoke of Harald, who, as it seemed, might come at any time.

"We cannot fight Norway," he said, "so we must even flit hence to the mainland and wait until Harald is tired of seeking us. It is in my mind that he seeks not so much for revenge as for payment of scatt from our islands. Now he has a reason for taking it by force. He will seek to fine us, and then make plans by which I shall hold the jarldom from him for yearly dues."

So he straightway called the Thing [fii](#) of all the Orkney folk, who loved him well, and put the matter before them; and they set to work and did his bidding, driving the cattle inland and scattering them, and making the town look as poor as they might.

Then in three days' time we sailed away laughing; for none but poor-looking traders were left, and no man would think that never had the Orkneys been so rich as in Einar's time. And he bade them make peace with the king when he came, and told them that so all would be well, for Harald would lay no heavy weregild on so poor a place for his son's slaying.

Southward we went to Caithness, and so westward along the Sutherland coast; for we had taken no scatt there for this year, and Einar would use this cruise to do so, seeing that we must put to sea. We were not the first who had laid these shores under rule from the Orkneys, for Jarl Sigurd had conquered them, meeting his death at last in a Sutherland firth, after victory, in a strange way.

He fought with a Scottish chief named Melbrigda of the Tusks, and slew him, and bore back his head to the ships at his saddle bow. Then the great teeth of the chief swung against the jarl's leg and wounded it, and of that he died, and so was laid in a great mound at the head of the firth where his ships lay. After that, the Orkneys were a nest of evil vikings till we came.

So it had happened that, from the time when it was made over him, Jarl Sigurd's mound had been untended, for we ourselves had never been so far south as this firth before. Indeed, it had been so laid waste by Sigurd's men after his death that there was nought to go there for. But at this time we had reason for getting into some quiet, unsought place where we should not be

likely to be heard of, for the king had over-many ships and men for us to meet. So after a week's cruising we put into that firth, and anchored in the shelter of its hills.

There is no man of all our following who will forget that day, because of what happened almost as soon as the anchor held. It was very hot that morning, and what breeze had been out in the open sea was kept from us now by the hills, so that for some miles we had rowed the ships up the winding reaches of the firth; and then, as we laid in the oars and the anchorage was reached, there crept from inland a dim haze over the sun, dimming the light, and making all things look strange among the mountains. Then the sounds of the ships seemed to echo loudly over the still water and when all the bustle of anchoring was over, the stillness seemed yet greater, for the men went to their meals, and for a while spoke little.

Einar and I sat on his after deck under the awning, and spoke in low voices, as if afraid to raise our tones.

"There is a thunderstorm about," I said.

"Ay--listen," the jarl answered.

Then I heard among the hills, far up the firth beyond us, a strange sound that seemed to draw nearer, like and yet unlike thunder, roaring and jarring ever closer to us, till it was all around us and beneath us everywhere, and our very hearts seemed to stop beating in wonder.

Then of a sudden the ship was smitten from under the keel with a heavy, soundless blow, and the waters of the firth ebbed and flowed fiercely about us; and then the sound passed on and down the firth swiftly and strangely as it had come, and left us rocking on the troubled waters that plashed and broke along the rocks of the shore, while the still, thick air seemed full of the screams of the terrified eagles and sea birds that had left them.

"Odin defend us!" the jarl said; "what is this?"

I shook my head, looking at him, and wondering if my face was white and scared as his and that of every man whom I could see.

Now we waited breathless for more to come, but all was quiet again. The birds went back to their eyries, and the troubled water was still. Then presently our fears passed enough to let us speak with one another; and then there were voices enough, for every man wished to hear his own again, that courage might return.

Then a man from the Orkneys who had been with Jarl Sigurd came aft to us, and stood at the break of the deck to speak with Einar.

"Jarl," he said, almost under his breath, "it is in my mind that Sigurd, your brother, is wroth because his mound has been untended since we made it."

Then Einar said:

"Was it so ill made that it needs tending?"

"It was well made, jarl; but rain and frost and sun on a new-made mound may have wrought harm to it. Or maybe he thinks that enough honour has not been paid him. He was a great warrior, jarl, and perhaps would have more sacrifice, and a remembrance cup drunk by his own brother at his grave."

Now this man's name was Thord, the same who taught me runes--a good seaman and leader of men, and one who was held to be wise in more matters than most folk. So his word was to

be listened to.

"You know more of these matters than I, Thord," Einar answered. "Is it possible that Sigurd could work this?"

"Who knows what a dead chief of might cannot work?" Thord said. "I think it certain that Sigurd is angry for some reason; and little luck shall we have if we do not appease his spirit."

Then the jarl looked troubled, as well he might, for to go near the mound that held an angry ghost was no light matter. It lay far up the firth, Thord said, and the ships could not go so far. But Einar was very brave, and when he had thought for a little while he said:

"Well, then, I will take boat and go to Sigurd's mound and see if he ails aught. Will any man come with me, however?"

I liked not the errand, as may be supposed, but I could not leave my foster father to go alone.

"I will be with you," I said. "Will not Thord come also?"

"Ay," the grim Orkney man answered.

Now all our crew were listening to us, and I looked down the long gangways by chance, and when I did so no man would meet my eye. They feared lest they should be made to go to this haunted place, as it seemed--all but one man, who sat on the mast step swinging his feet. This was Kolgrim the Tall, the captain of the fore deck, a young man and of few words, but a terrible swordsman, and knowing much of sea craft. And when this man saw that I looked at him, he nodded a little and smiled, for he had been a friend of mine since I had first come to Einar.

"Two men to row the boat will be enough, jarl," I said. "Kolgrim yonder will come with us."

"Well," the jarl answered, "maybe four of us are enough. We shall not fright Sigurd with more, and maybe would find it hard to get them to come."

So he called Kolgrim, and he said that he would go with us, and went to get the boat alongside without more words.

Then the jarl and I and Thord armed ourselves--for a warrior should be met by warriors. The men were very silent, whispering among themselves, until the jarl was ready and spoke to them.

"Have no fear for us," he said. "Doubtless my brother needs somewhat, and calls me. I am going to find out what it is and return."

So we pushed off, Thord and Kolgrim rowing. It was strange to look back, as we went, on the ships, for not a soul stirred on board them, as it seemed, so intently were we watched; and the water was like a sheet of steel under them, so that they were doubled.

Presently they were hidden as we rounded a turn in the firth, and we were alone among the hills, and the lonesomeness was very great. There was no dwelling anywhere along the shores, nor in the deep glens that came down to them, each with its noisy burn falling along it. Once I saw deer feeding far up at the head of a valley that opened out, but they and the eagles were the only living things we could see beside the loons that swam and dived silently as we neared them.

The silence and the heat weighed on us, and we went for a mile or more without a word. Then we turned into the last reach of the water, and saw Sigurd's mound beside its edge at the

very head of the firth, where the hills came round in a circle that was broken only by the narrow waters and the valley that went beyond them among the mountains. It was a fitting resting place for one who would sleep in loneliness; but I thought that I had rather lie where I could look out on the sea I loved, and see the long ships pass and the white waves break beneath me.

Now all seemed very peaceful here in the hot haze that brooded over the still mountains, and there seemed to be nought to fear. We drew swiftly up to the mound, with the plash of oars only to break the silence, and there was nought amiss that we could see. They had made it on a little flat tongue of land that jutted from the mountain's foot into the deep water, so that on two sides the mound was close to its edge. So we pulled on softly round the tongue of land, being maybe about fifty paces from the mound across the water. And when we saw the other side of Sigurd's resting place, the oars stayed suddenly, and the jarl, who held the tiller, swung the boat away from the shore, and I think I knew then what fear was.

The mound was open. There was a wide, brown scar, as of freshly-moved earth, across its base, reaching from the level to six or eight feet of its height, as though half the grass-grown side had been shorn away by a sword cut; and in the midst of that scar was a doorway, open to the grave's heart, low and stone built. Some of the earth that had fallen lay before it on the water's edge, but the rest was doubtless in the water, for there was but a narrow path between bank and mound.

At that sight we stared, thinking we should surely see the grim form of Sigurd loom gigantic and troll-like [\[iii\]](#) across the doorway; and the jarl half rose from his seat beside me, and cried out with a great voice:

"Sigurd--my brother!"

I think he knew not what or why he cried thus, for he sank back into his place and swayed against me, while his cry rang loud among the hills, and the eagles answered it.

And I grasped my sword hilt, as one does in some sudden terror, staring at the open mound; while old Thord muttered spells against I know not what, and Kolgrim looked at me, pale and motionless.

Then came the sharp, mocking cry of a diver, that rang strangely; and at once, without order. Thord dug his oar blade into the water and swung the boat round, and when once Kolgrim's back was towards that he feared, he held water strongly and then the boat was about, and we were flying from the place towards the ships, before we knew what was being done, panic stricken.

But Einar said never a word, and the two rowers slackened their pace only when the bend of the firth hid the mound from our sight.

Then said I, finding that Einar spoke not:

"What are we flying from? there was nought to harm us."

For I began to be ashamed. Thereat Kolgrim stopped rowing, and Thord must needs do likewise, though he said:

"It is ill for us to stay here. The dead jarl is very wroth."

"I saw nought to fray us; the cry we heard was but that of a loon."

But Thord shook his head. The silence of the place had made all things seem strange, with

the dull light that was over us, and the great heat among the towering hills.

"The mound was freshly opened," he said. "I saw earth crumbling even yet from the broken side. The blow we felt was that which Sigurd struck when he broke free."

Then at last Einar spoke, and his voice was strange:

"I have left my brother unhonoured, and he is angry. What must be done?"

Now I cannot tell what hardiness took hold of me, but it seemed that I must needs go back and see more of this. I was drawn to do so, as a thing they fear will make some men long to face it and know its worst, not as if they dared so much as when they must.

"I think we should have waited to ask Sigurd that," I said; and Einar looked strangely at me.

"Would you have us return?" he asked.

"Why not?" said I. "If the great jarl has called us as it seems, needs must that we know what he wills."

Then said Thord:

"I helped to lay him in that place, and I mind how he looked at that time. Somewhat we left undone, doubtless. I dare not go back."

Einar looked at the hills, leaning his chin on his hand, and said slowly, when Thord had done:

"That is the first time Thord has said 'I dare not.' Now I would that I had stayed to fight Harald and fall under his sword before. I too must say the same. I have left my brother unhonoured, and I dare not go back."

Pale and drawn the jarl's face was, and I knew he meant what he said. Nevertheless it seemed to me that some one must know what Sigurd willed.

"Jarl Einar," I said, "this is a strange business, and one cannot tell what it means. Now Sigurd was my father's close friend, and I have had nought to do with him. I will go back, therefore, and learn what I can of him. I think he will not harm me, for he has no reason to do so. Moreover if he does, none will learn what he needs."

"I have heard," said Thord, "that a good warrior may ask what he will of a dead hero, so that he shows no fear and is a friend. If his courage fails, however, then he will be surely destroyed."

Then I said:

"I have no cause to fear Sigurd, save that he is a ghost. I do not know if I fear him as such; that is to be seen."

Now Einar laid his hand on mine and spoke gravely:

"I think it is a hero's part to do what you say. If you go back and return in safety, the scalds will sing of you for many a long day. Go, therefore, boldly; this is not a matter from which you should be held back, as it has come into your mind."

Then said Thord:

"It will be well to ask Sigurd for a token whereby we may know that he sends messages by you."

And Einar said on that:

"In Sigurd's hand is his sword Helmbiter. I think he will give that to the man who dares speak to him, for he will know that it goes into brave hands. Ask him for it bravely."

"Put me ashore, therefore, before my courage goes," I said; and they pulled the boat to the bank where I could step on a rock and so to shore. And when I was there, Kolgrim rose up and followed me without a word.

"Bide here for two hours, jarl, and maybe I will return in that time," I said. "Farewell."

So I turned away as they answered me, thinking that Kolgrim held the boat's painter. But he came after me, and I spoke to him:

"Why, Kolgrim, will you come also?"

"You shall not go alone, Ranald the king's son; I will come with you as far as I dare."

"That is well," I answered, and with that wasted no more words, but climbed the hillside a little, and then went steadily towards where the mound was, with Kolgrim close at my shoulder, and the jarl and Thord looking fixedly after us till we were out of sight.

Chapter II. The Gifts of Two Heroes.

I will not say that my steps did not falter when we came to whence we could see the mound. But it was lonely and still and silent; no shape of warrior waited our coming.

"Almost do I fear to go nearer," said Kolgrim.

"Put fear away, comrade," said I; "we shall fare ill if we turn our backs now."

"Where you go I go," he answered, "though I am afraid."

"The next best thing to not being afraid is to be afraid and not to show it," I said then, comforting myself also with a show of wisdom at least. "Maybe fear is the worst thing we have to face."

So we went on more swiftly, and at last were on the tongue of land on the tip of which the mound stood. Still, since we could not see the open doorway, which was towards the water, the place seemed not so terrible. Yet I thought that by this time we should have seen Sigurd, or maybe heard his voice from the tomb. So now I dared to call softly:

"Jarl Sigurd, here is one, a friend's son, who will learn what you will."

My voice seemed to fill all the ring of mountains with echoes, but there was no answer. All was still again when the last voice came back from the hillsides.

Then I went nearer yet, and passed to the waterside, where I could look slantwise across the doorway. And again I called, and waited for an answer that did not come.

"It seems that I must go even to the door, and maybe into the mound," I said, whispering.

"Not inside," said Kolgrim, taking hold of my arm.

But I had grown bolder with the thought that the hero seemed not angry, and now I had set my heart on winning the sword of which the jarl had told me, and I thought that I dared go even inside the tomb to speak with Sigurd.

"Bide here, and I will go at least to the door," said I.

So I stepped boldly before it, standing on the heap of newly-fallen earth that had slipped from across it. The posts and lintel of the door were of stone slabs such as lay everywhere on the hillsides, and I stood so close that I could touch them. The doorway was not so high that I could see into it without stooping, for it was partly choked with the fallen earth, and I bent to look in. But I could only see for a few feet into the passage, as I looked from light to darkness.

"Ho, Jarl Sigurd! what would you? Why have you opened your door thus?"

Very hollow my voice sounded, and that was all.

"Sigurd of Orkney--Sigurd, son of Rognvald--I am the son of Vemund your friend. Speak to me!"

There was no answer. A bit of earth crumbled from the broken side of the mound and made me start, but I saw nothing. So I stepped away from the door and back to my comrade, who had edged nearer the place, though his face showed that he feared greatly.

"I think that the mound has been rifled," I said. "Sigurd would have us know it and take revenge."

"No man has dared to go near that doorway till you came, Ranald Vemundsson," Kolgrim answered. "Now I fear that he plans to lure you into the mound, and slay you there without light to help you. Go no further, maybe you will be closed up with the ghost."

That was not pleasant to think of, but I had seen nought to make me fear to go in. There was no such unearthly light shining within the mound as I had heard of in many tales of those who sought to speak with dead chiefs.

"Well, I am going in," I said stoutly; "but do you hide here, and make some noise that I may know you are near me. It is the silence that frays me.

"What can I do?" he said. "I know no runes that are of avail. It would be ill to disturb this place with idle sounds."

That seemed right, but I thought I could not bear the silence--silence of the grave. I must know that he was close at hand. Then a thought came to me, and I unfastened the silver-mounted whetstone that hung from my belt and gave it him.

"Whet your sword edge sharply," I said. "That is a sound a hero loves, for it speaks of deeds to be done."

"Ay, that is no idle sound," he said, and drew his sword gladly. The haft of the well-known blade brought the light into his eyes again. I drew my own sword also.

"If you need me, call, and I think I shall not fail you," he whispered. "It shall not be said that I failed you in peril."

"I know it," I answered, putting my hand on his shoulder.

Then I went boldly, and stepped into the passage. The whetstone sang shrill on the sword edge as it kissed the steel behind me, and the sound was good to hear as I went into darkness with my weapon ready.

I half feared that my first step would be my last, but it was made in safety. Very black seemed the low stone-walled passage before me, and I had to stoop as I went on, feeling with my left hand along the wall. The way was so narrow that little light could pass my body, and therefore it seemed to grow darker as I went deeper into the mound's heart.

Five steps I took, and then my outstretched hand was on the post that ended the passage, and beyond that I felt nothing. I had come to the inner doorway, and before me was the place where Sigurd lay. Yet no fiery eyes glared on me, and nothing stirred. The air was heavy with a scent as of peat, and the sound of the whetstone seemed loud as I stood peering into the darkness.

I moved forward, and somewhat rattled under my foot, and I started. Then my fear left me altogether, for I had trodden on dry bones, and shuddered at the first touch of them in that place. I had faced fear, and had overcome it; maybe it was desperation that made me cool then, for it was certain now that I must be slain or else victor over I knew not what.

So I took one pace forward into the chamber, and stood aside from the doorway; and the grey light from the passage came in and filled all the place, so that it fell first on him whom I had come to seek--Jarl Sigurd of Orkney.

And when I saw, a great awe fell upon me, and a sadness, but no terror; and in my heart I would that hereafter I might rest as slept the hero where the hands that had loved him had placed him.

Into the silent place came once more with me the clank of mail and weapons that he had loved, and from without the song of the keen sword edge whispered to him; but these could not wake him. Peacefully he seemed to sleep as I stood by his side, and I thought that I should take back no word of his to the jarl, his brother, whom both he and I loved.

They had brought the great carven chair on which he was wont to sit on his ship's quarterdeck, and thereon had set the jarl, as though he yet lived, and did but sleep as he sat from weariness after fight, with helm and mail upon him. Shield and axe rested on either side of him, ready to hand, against the chair; and behind him, along the wall, were his spears, ashen shafted and rune graven.

His blue, fur-trimmed cloak was round him, and before him was a little table, heavy and carved, whereon were vessels for food, empty now save for dust that showed that they had been full. And across his knees was his sword, golden hilted, with a great yellow cairngorm in the pommel, and with gold-wrought patterns from end to end of the scabbard--such a sword as I had never seen before. His right hand held the hilt, and his left rested on the shield's rim beside him; and so Sigurd slept with his head bowed on his breast, waiting for Ragnarok and the last great fight of all.

The light seemed to grow stronger as I looked, or my eyes grew used to it, and then I saw that the narrow chamber was full of things, though I minded them afterwards, for now I was as in a dream, noting only the jarl himself. Costly stuffs were on the floor, and mail and helms and more weapons. Gold work there was also, and in one corner lay the dried-up body of a great wolf hound, coiled as in sleep where it had been chained. Another had been tied by the passage doorway, where I had stepped on it; and below a spar that stood across a corner lay a tumbled heap of feathers that had been a falcon.

Many more things there were maybe, but this I saw at last--that the jarl's right foot rested on the skull of a man whose teeth had been long and tusk-like. It was the head of the Scot whose teeth had been his death.

Now the sword drew my eyes, for Einar bade me ask for it, else I think I had gone softly hence without a word, so peaceful seemed the dead. And as I looked again, I saw that the hand holding the hilt was dry and brown and shrunken, so that one might see all the bones through the skin, and at first I was afraid to ask.

At last I said, and my mouth was dry:

"Jarl Einar, your brother, bids me ask for sword Helmbiter, great Sigurd. Let me take it, that he may know how you rest in peace."

But Sigurd stirred not nor spoke; and slowly I put out my hand on the sword to take it very gently, but his grasp was yet firm on it. Then, as I bent to see if it had tightened when I would draw the sword away, I could see beneath the helm the face of the dead, shrunken indeed and brown, but as of one at rest and beyond anger.

Once more then I took the jarl's sword in my right hand, and raised his hand with my left, putting my own weapon by against the wall. And then the hilt slipped from the half-open fingers, and the sword was mine, and my hand held the jarl's. And it seemed to me that he gave it me, and that I must thank him for such a gift. The sword though it was sheathed, was not girt to him, and its golden-studded belt was twisted about it, and it was no imperfect giving.

So I spoke in a low voice:

"Jarl Sigurd, I thank you. If my might is aught, the sword will be used as you would have used it. Surely I will say to Einar that you rest in peace, and we will come here and close your mound again in all honour."

I set back his hand then, and it seemed empty and helpless, not as a warrior's should be. So I ungirt my own weapon--a good plain sword that I had won from a viking in Caithness--and laid it in the place of that he had given me. And as I put the thin fingers on its hilt, almost thinking that they would chafe around it, a ring slipped from them into my hand, as if he would give that also, and I kept it therefore.

Then for a minute I stood before Jarl Sigurd, waiting to see if he had any word; but when he spoke not, I lifted the sword and saluted him.

"Skoal to Jarl Sigurd; rest in peace, and farewell."

Then I went forth softly, and came out into sunshine; for the wind was singing round the hilltops, and the dun mist had gone. Then I was ware that the sound of the stone on the sword edge had long ceased, and I looked for Kolgrim.

He was lying on the grass in the place where I had left him, but he was on his face, and the sword and whetstone were flung aside from him. At first I feared that he had been in some way slain because of his terror; but when I came near, I saw that his shoulders heaved as if he wept. Then I stood over him, treading softly.

"Kolgrim," I said.

At that he looked up, and a great light came into his face, and he sprang to his feet and threw his arms round me, weeping, yet with a strong man's weeping that does but come from

bitter grief.

"Master," he cried, "O master I thought you lost--and I dared not follow you."

"I have met with no peril," I said, "nor have I been long gone."

"More than two hours, master, have you been in that place--two long hours. See how the sun has sunk since you left me!"

So indeed it seemed, though I knew not that I had been so long. I had stayed still and gazed on that strange sight without stirring for what seemed but a little while. Yet I had thought long thoughts in that time, and I mind every single thing in that dim chamber, even to the markings on the stones that made its walls and roof and floor.

"See," I said, "Jarl Sigurd has given me the sword!"

Kolgrim gazed in wonder. There was no speck of dust on the broad blade as I drew it, and the waving lines of the dwarf-wrought steel and gold-inlaid runes were clear and bright along its middle for half its length. For the mound was very dry, and they had covered all the chamber with peat before piling the earth over it.

"Let us go back to Jarl Einar; he will fear for us," I said, sheathing the sword and girding it to me.

So we went across the meadow, and even as we went a blast of cold wind came from, over the mountains, and with it whirled the black thunderclouds of the storm that had been gathering all day. We ran to an overhanging rock on the hillside and crept beneath it, while the thunder crashed and the lightning struck from side to side of the firth, and smote the wind-swept water that was white with foam.

"Master," said Kolgrim, "the Jarl Sigurd is wroth; he repents the sword gift."

But I did not think that he had aught to do with this. For, as any hill-bred man could tell, the storm had been brewing in the heat, and was bound to come, and would pass to and fro among the hills till it was worn out.

Nevertheless, when it passed away in pouring rain that swept like a hanging sheet of moving mist down the glens from the half-hidden mountains, and the sun shone out brightly again over the clear-cut purple hillsides and rippling water, I looked at the mound in wonder. For it was closed. We had sought shelter in a place near that whence we saw the mound in coming, and could see the fallen side, though not the doorway, looking across its front. And now the slope of the bank seemed to have been made afresh, as on the day when Sigurd had been closed in, years ago. None could say, save those who had seen it, where the opening into the grave-chamber might be.

Now both the opening and closing of Sigurd's grave mound seem very strange to me. Thord and the scalds will have it that he himself wrought both. As for me, I know not. In after days I told this to Alfred the king when he wondered at my sword, and he said that he thought an earthquake opened and washing rain closed the mound, but that it happened strangely for me. I cannot gainsay his wise words, and I will leave the matter so.

Thereafter Kolgrim and I went back to Einar, who yet waited for us. Glad was he to see us return in safety; but both he and Thord were speechless when they saw the jarl's sword girt to me and the jarl's golden ring on my hand. Neither they nor any one else will believe that I met with no peril; and the tale that the scalds made hereafter of the matter is over wonderful, in spite

of all I may say. For they think it but right that I should not be over boastful of my deeds.

But Jarl Einar looked on sword and ring, and said:

"Well have you won these gifts. My brother is in peace in his resting place now. I hold that he called for you."

So we went back to the ships, and there for many days the men stared at Kolgrim and me strangely. They say I was very silent for long, and it is likely enough. Moreover, Einar was wont to say that I seemed five years older from that day forward.

We went no more to the place of the mound, for it seemed to need no care of earthly hands. Nor were any wishing to go to so awesome a place, and we left the firth next day, for the men waxed uneasy there.

But on that day Einar gave me the great ship that we had taken from Halfdan, the king's son, saying that he would add to Sigurd's giving. Also he bade me choose what men I would for her crew, bidding me thank him not at all, for I was his foster son, and a king by birth moreover.

So when I knew that this would please him, I chose Thord for my shipmaster, and Kolgrim for marshal, as we call the one who has charge of the ordering of the crew. And I chose a hundred good men whom I knew well, so that indeed I had the best ship and following in Norway, as I thought. At least there were none better, unless Harald Fairhair might match me.

Now there was one thing that pleased me not at this time, and that was that Kolgrim, my comrade, never called me aught but "master" since I came from Sigurd's presence--which is not the wont of our free Norsemen with any man. Nor would he change it, though I was angry, until I grew used to it in time.

"Call me not 'master,' Kolgrim, my comrade," I said; "it is unfitting for you."

At last he answered me in such wise that I knew it was of no more use to speak of it.

"Master of mine you are, Ranald the king, since the day when you dared more than I thought man might, while I lay like a beaten hound outside, and dared not go within that place to see what had become of you. Little comradeship was mine to you on that day, and I am minded to make amends if I can. I think I may dare aught against living men for you, though I failed at that mound. I will give life for you, if I may."

I told him that what he had done was well done, and indeed he had had courage to go where none else had dared; for I had ties of friendship that made me bold to meet Jarl Sigurd, and might go therefore where he might not. It was well that he did not come into the presence of the dead.

"Therefore we are comrades, not master and man," I said.

"Nay, but master and man--lord and thrall," he answered.

So I must let him have his way, but he could not make me think of him as aught but a good and brave comrade whom I loved well.

They hailed me as king when I went on board my ship for the first time with my own men, as I have said. Then our best weapon smith asked for gold from the men, and they gave what they had--it was in plenty with us of Einar's following--and made a golden circlet round my helm, that they might see it and follow it in battle.

It was good to wear the crown thus given willingly, but in the end it sent me from north to south, as will be seen. That, however, is a matter with which I will not quarrel, for it sent me to Alfred the king.

We had left the firth two days, cruising slowly northward, when one ship came from the north and met us, not flying from our fleet, but bearing up to join us. And when she was close, there came a hail to tell Einar that she bore a messenger from Harald the king in peace, and presently we hove to while this messenger went on board the Jarl's ship.

Then it seemed that Einar had been right, and that Harald would lay a fine on the islands for Halfdan's slaying, and so give them back to Einar to hold for him. The messenger was Thiodolf, Harald's own scald, and he put the matter very plainly before the jarl, so that he thought well of the offer, but would nevertheless not trust himself in the king's power before all was certain, and confirmed by oath. Whereon Thiodolf said that one must see the king on the Jarl's part, and so I seemed the right man to go, as the jarl's foster son and next in command to him.

"Nevertheless," said Thiodolf, "I would not advise you to sail in Halfdan's ship, for that might wake angry thoughts, and trouble would come especially as Halfdan took her without leave when he was outlawed."

So I took the Jarl's cutter, manning her with enough men of my own crew; and Kolgrim came with me, and we sailed to Kirkwall in company with Thiodolf the scald.

Then when Thiodolf took me into his presence, I saw Harald Fairhair for the first time, as he sat to receive Einar's messenger in the great hall that Sigurd had built and which we had dwelt in. Then I thought that never before could have been one more like a king. Hereafter, when sagamen will sing of a king in some fancied story, they will surely make him like King Harald of Norway. I myself have little skill to say what he was like beyond this--that never had I seen a more handsome man, nor bigger, nor stronger. King-like he was in all ways, and his face was bright and pleasant, though it was plain that it would be terrible if he was angry, or with the light of battle upon it.

The hair, whence he had his name, was golden bright and shining, and beard and eyebrows were of the same colour. But his eyes were neither grey nor blue altogether, most piercing, seeming to look straight into a man's heart, so that none dared lie to him.

I think that it is saying much for King Harald that, though his arms and dress were wonderfully rich and splendid, one cared only to look on his face; and that though many men of worth were on the high place with him, there seemed to be none but he present.

When the scald told the king who I was, and what was my errand, with all ceremony, he looked fixedly at me, so that I was ashamed, and grew red under his gaze. Then he smiled pleasantly, and spoke to me. His voice was as I thought to hear it--clear and steady, and yet deep.

"So, Ranauld Vemundsson, you are worthy of your father. It may be that you bear me ill will on his account, but I would have you forget the deeds done that Norway might be one, and the happier therefor."

"Had my father been slain in fair fight, lord king," I said, "no ill will had been thought of. It has not been in my mind that you bade Rognvald slay him as he did. And that Jarl is dead, and the feud is done with therefore. Jarl Einar is my foster father, moreover."

"That is well said," answered Harald. "But I thought Sigurd must have fostered you; he was ever a close friend of Vemund's."

I did not know why the king thought this, though the reason was at my side; so I only said that my mother had given me to Einar's keeping, and the king said no more at that time about it.

After that I gave the Jarl's messages, and the king heard them well enough, though it seemed to Einar that the wergild to be paid was over heavy, and he had bidden me tell Harald that it was so. Therefore the king said that he would give me an answer on the morrow, and I went away into the town well pleased with his kindly way with me.

There was a feast made for me that night, and after it I must sit still and hear the scalds sing of the deeds of Harald the king, which was well enough. But then Thiodolf rose up and sang a great saga about the winning of Sigurd's sword, wherein it seemed that I had fought the dead jarl, and bale fires, and I know not what. He had heard strange tales from Einar's men, if they told him all that he sang.

Some men may be pleased to hear their own deeds sung of, with more added thus; but I was not used to it, and the turning of all eyes to me made me uncomfortable. But Harald had paid no sort of heed to what they sang of him, and so I tried to look at my ease, and gave the scald a bracelet when he ended.

"Overmuch make you of that matter, scald," said I quietly.

He laughed a little, and answered:

"One has to fill in what a warrior will not tell of himself."

Now the men shouted when I gave Thiodolf the bracelet, and Harald looked quickly at me. Then I thought that maybe I had overdone the gift, though Einar had ever told me that a good scald deserved good reward, and Thiodolf was well known as the best in Norway. It was a heavy ring, silver gilt, and of good design, that I took from the same viking whose sword I gave to Sigurd.

"Overpaid am I," the scald said, putting it on his arm.

"You are the first who has ever sung of me," I answered; "and the voice and tune were wonderful, if the saga was too strong for me."

Then Harald smiled again, and praised Thiodolf also, and I thought no more of the matter. The feast was pleasant enough in the hall, full of Harald's best men and chiefs, though it seemed strange to sit as a guest in Einar's house.

Now on the next morning I was to speak with the king about Einar's business, and I went to him unarmed, as was right, save for helm and Sigurd's sword. He was in the jarl's own chamber, and with him were Thiodolf and a young scald named Harek, who sat with things for writing before him, which was what I had never seen before.

We talked for some time, and all went well for peace; but one more message was to go and come between the king and Einar, and so I said I would sail at once.

"Not so much need for haste but that you can bide here for a day or two," Harald said. "I will not have you complain of my hospitality hereafter. And Thiodolf and Harek here want to learn more about Sigurd's sword and its winning."

"If I tell them the truth, I shall spoil their saga, lord king!" I said, laughing.

"Trust the scalds to mind you do not," he answered. "There are times when I have to ask them which of my own doings they are singing about now. But is there no wonder in the tale?"

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