

A King's Comrade eBook

A King's Comrade by Charles Whistler

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A Story of Old Hereford,

by Charles W. Whistler

Preface.

Introductory.



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PREFACE.

Hereford Cathedral bears the name of Ethelbert of East Anglia, king and martyr, round whose death, at the hands of the men of Offa of Mercia, this story of his comrade centres, and dates its foundation from Offa's remorse for the deed which at least he had not prevented. In the sanctuary itself stands an ancient battered statue—somewhat hard to find—of the saint, and in the pavement hard by a modern stone bears a representation of his murder. The date of the martyrdom is usually given as May 20, 792 A.D.

A brief mention of the occurrence is given under that date in the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," and full details are recorded by later historians, Matthew of Westminster and Roger of Wendover being the most precise and full. The ancient Hereford Breviary

preserves further details also, for which I am indebted to my friend the Rev. H. Housman, B.D., of Bradley.



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These authorities I have followed as closely as possible, only slightly varying the persons to whom the portents, so characteristic of the times, occurred, and referring some—as is quite possible, without detracting from their significance to men of that day—to natural causes. Those who searched for the body of the king are unnamed by the chroniclers, and I have, therefore, had no hesitation in putting the task into the hands of the hero of the tale. The whole sequence of events is unaltered.

Offa's own part in the removal of the hapless young king is given entirely from the accounts of the chroniclers, and the characters of Quendritha the queen and her accomplice Gymbert are by no means drawn here more darkly than in their pages. The story of her voyage and finding by Offa is from Brompton's Annals.

The first recorded landing of the Danes in Wessex, with which the story opens, is from the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle;" the name of the sheriff, and the account of the headstrong conduct which led to his end, being added from Ethelwerd. The exact place of the landing is not stated; but as it was undoubtedly near Dorchester, it may be located at Weymouth with sufficient probability. For the reasons which led to the exile of Ecgbert, and to his long stay at the court of Carl the Great, the authority is William of Malmesbury. The close correspondence between the Mercian and Frankish courts is, of course, historic—Offa seeming most anxious to ally himself with the great Continental monarch, if only in name. The position of the hero as an honoured and independent guest at the hall of Offa would certainly be that assigned to an emissary from Carl.

With regard to the proper names involved, I have preferred to use modern forms rather than the cumbrous if more correct spelling of the period. The name of the terrible queen, for example, appears on her coins as "Cynethryth," and varies in the pages of the chroniclers from "Quendred" to the form chosen as most simple for use today. And it has not seemed worth while to substitute the ancient names of places for those in present use which sufficiently retain their earlier form or meaning.

The whole story of King Ethelbert's wooing and its disastrous ending is a perfect romance in all truth, without much need for enhancement by fiction, and perhaps has its forgotten influence on many a modern romance, by the postponement of a wedding day until the month of May—so disastrous for him and his bride—has passed.

C. W. Whistler.

Stockland, 1904.

INTRODUCTORY.

A shore of dull green and yellow sand dunes, beyond whose low tops a few sea-worn pines and birch trees show their heads, and at whose feet the gray sea hardly breaks in



the heavy stillness that comes with the near thunder of high summer. The tide is full and nearing the turn, and the shore birds have gone elsewhere till their food is bared again at its falling. Only a few dotterels, whose eggs lie somewhere near, run and flit, piping, to and fro, for a boat and two men are resting at the very edge of the wave as if the ebb would see them afloat again.



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Armed men they are, too, and the boat is new and handsome, graceful with the beautiful lines of a northern shipwright's designing. She has mast and sail and one steering oar, but neither rowlocks nor other oars to fit in them. One of the men is pacing quietly up and down the sand, as if on the quarterdeck of a ship, and the other rests against the boat's gunwale.

"Nigh time," says one, glancing at the fringe of weed which the tide is beginning to leave.

"Ay, nigh, and I would it were past and over. It is a hard doom."

"No harder than is deserved. The doom ring and the great stone had been the end in days which I can remember. That was the old Danish way."

The other man nods.

"But the jarl is merciful, as ever."

"When one finds a coiled adder, one slays it. One does not say, 'Bide alive, because I saw you too soon to be harmed by you.' Mercy to the beast that might be, but not to the child who shall some day set his hand on it."

"Eh, well! The wind is off shore, and it is a far cry to succour, and Ran waits the drowning."

"I know not that Ran cares for women."

"Maybe a witch like herself. They are coming!"

Now through a winding gap in the line of dunes comes from inland a little company of men and women, swiftly and in silence. The two men range themselves on either bow of the boat, and stand at attention as the newcomers near them, and so wait. Maybe there are two-score people, led by a man and woman, who walk side by side without word or look passing between them. The man is tall and handsome, armed in the close-knit ring-mail shirt of the Dane, with gemmed sword hilt and golden mountings to scabbard and dirk, and his steel helm and iron-gray hair seem the same colour in the shadowless light of the dull sky overhead. One would set his age at about sixty years.

But the woman at his side is young and wonderfully lovely. She is dressed in white and gold, and her hair is golden as the coiled necklace and armlets she wears, and hangs in two long plaits far below her knees, though it is looped in the golden girdle round her waist. Fastened to the girdle hangs the sheath of a little dagger, but there is no blade in it. She is plainly of high rank, and unwedded. Now her fair face is set and hard, and it would almost seem that despair was written on it.



After those two the other folk seem hardly worth a glance, though they are richly dressed, and the men are as well armed as the jarl their leader. Nor do they seem to have eyes for any but those two at their head, and no word passes among them. Their faces also are set and hard, as if they had somewhat heavy to see to, and would fain carry it through to the end unflinching.

So they come to the edge of the sea, where the boat waits them, and there halt; and the tall jarl faces the girl at his side, and speaks to her in a dull voice, while the people slowly make a half circle round them, listening.



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“Now we have come to the end,” he says, “and from henceforth this land shall know you and the ways of you no more. There were other dooms which men had thought more fitting for you, but they were dooms of death. You shall not die at our hands. You are young, and you have time to bethink you whither the ways you have trodden shall lead you. If the sea spares you, begin life afresh. If it spares you not, maybe it is well. No others shall be beguiled by that fair face of yours. The Norns heed not the faces of men.”

He pauses; but the girl stands silent, hand locked in hand, and with no change of face. Nor does she look at her accuser, but gazes steadily out to the still sea, which seems endless, for there is no line between sea and sky in the hot haze. For all its exceeding beauty, hers is an evil face to look on at this time. And the women who gaze on her have no pity in their eyes, nor have the men.

Once again the great jarl speaks, and his words are cold and measured.

“Also, I and our wisest hold that what you have tried to compass was out of the longing for power that ever lies in the heart of youth. We had done no more than laugh thereat had you been content to try to win your will with the ancient wiles of woman that lie in beauty and weakness. But for the evil ways in which you have wrought the land is accursed, and will be so as long as we suffer you. Go hence, and meet elsewhere what fate befalls you. In the skill you have in the seaman’s craft is your one hope. We leave it you.”

Then, without a word of answer or so much as a look aside, the girl of her own accord steps into the boat; and at a sign from their lord the two men launch her from the shelving sand into the sea, following her, knee deep, among the little breakers that hardly hinder their steps. They see that in her look is deepest hate and wrath, but they pay no heed to it. And even as their hands leave the gunwale, the girl goes to the mast, and with the skill and ease of long custom hoists the sail, and so making fast the halliard deftly, comes aft again to ship the steering oar, and seat herself as the breeze wakes the ripples at the bow and the land slips away from her. She has gone, and never looks back.

Then a sort of sigh whispers among the women folk on shore; but it is not as a sigh of grief, but rather as if a danger had passed from the land. They know that the boat must needs drive but as the wind takes her, for oars wherewith to row against it are none, and the long summer spell of seaward breezes has set in. The jarl folds his arms and bides still in his place, and the two men still stand in the water, watching. And so the boat and its fair burden of untold ill fades into the mist and grows ghostly, and is lost to sight; and across the dunes the clouds gather, and the thunder mutters from inland with the promise of long-looked-for rain to a parched and starving folk.

* * * *



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Through the long summer morning Offa, the young King of Mercia, has hunted across the rich Lindsey marshes which lie south of the Humber; and now in the heat of the noon he will leave his party awhile and ride with one thane only to the great Roman bank which holds back the tides, and seek a cool breath from the salt sea, whose waves he can hear. So he sets spurs to his great white steed, and with the follower after him, rides to where the high sand dunes are piled against the bank, and reins up on their grassy summit, and looks eastward across the most desolate sands in all England, gull-haunted only.

“Here is a marvel,” he cries, turning to his thane. “Many a time have I hunted along this shore, but never before have I seen the like of this here.”

He laughs, and points below him toward the sand, and his thane rides nearer. The tide has crept almost to the foot of the ancient sea wall, and gently rocking on it lies a wondrously beautiful boat with red and white sail set, but with no man, or aught living beyond the white terns which hover and swoop about it, to be seen.

“’Tis a foreign boat,” says the thane. “Our folk cannot frame such an one as this. Doubtless she has broken her line from astern of some ship last night, and so has been wafted hither.”

“Men do not tow a boat with her sail set,” laughs the king. “Let us go and see her.”

So they ride shoreward across the dunes, and ever the breeze edges the boat nearer and nearer, till at last she is at rest on the edge of the tide, lifting now and then as some little wave runs beneath her sharp stern. For once the North Sea is still, and even the brown water of the Humber tides is blue across the yellow sands.

The horses come swiftly and noiselessly across the strand, but the white steed of the king is restless as he nears the boat, sniffing the air and tossing his head. The king speaks to him, thinking that it is the swinging sail which he pretends to fear. And then the horse starts and almost rears, for at the sound of the clear voice there rises somewhat from the hollow of the little craft, and the king himself stays in amaze.

For he sees before him the most wondrously beautiful maiden his eyes have rested on, golden-haired and blue-eyed, wan and weary with the long voyage from the far-off shore, and holding out to him piteous hands, blistered with the rough sheet and steering oar. She says naught, but naught is needed.

“Lady,” he says, doffing his gold-circled cap, “have no fear. All is well, and you are safe. Whence come you?”



But he has no answer, for the maiden sinks back into the boat swooning. Then in all haste the king sends his thane for help to the party they have left; and so he sits on the boat's gunwale and watches the worn face pityingly.

Now come his men, and at his word they tend the maiden with all care, so that very soon she revives again, and can tell her tale. Beyond the hunger and thirst there has indeed been little hardship to a daughter of the sea in the summer weather, for the breeze has been kindly and steady, and the boat stanch and swift. There has been rain too, gentle, and enough to stave off the utmost thirst.



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All this she tells the king truly; and then he must know how she came to lose her own shore. And at that she weeps, but is ready. In the long hours she has conned every tale that may be made, and it is on her lips.

She is the orphan daughter of a Danish jarl, she says, and her father has been slain. She has been set adrift by the chief who has taken her lands, for her folk had but power to ask that grace for her. He would have slain her, but that they watched him. Doubtless he had poisoned their minds against her, or they would not have suffered thus far of ill to her even. Otherwise she cannot believe so ill of them. It is all terrible to her.

And so, with many tears, she accounts for her want of oars, and provides against the day when some chapman from beyond seas shall know her and tell the tale of her shame. At the end she weeps, and begs for kindness to an outcast pitifully.

There is no reason why men should not believe the tale, and told with those wondrous tear-dimmed eyes on them, they doubt not a word of it. It is no new thing that a usurper should make away with the heiress, and doubtless they think her beauty saved her from a worse fate.

So in all honour the maiden is taken to Lincoln, and presently given into the care of one of the great ladies of the court.

But as they ride homeward with the weary maiden in the midst of the company, Offa the king is silent beyond his wont, so that the thane who rode yonder with him asks if aught is amiss.

“Naught,” answers Offa. “But if it is true that men say that none but a heaven-sent bride will content me, maybe this is the one of whom they spoke.”

Now, if it was longing for power and place which had tempted this maiden to ill in the old home, here she sees her way to more than her wildest dream plain before her; and she bends her mind to please, and therein prospers. For when wit and beauty go hand in hand that is no hard matter. So in no long time it comes to pass that she has gained all she would, and is queen of all the Mercian land, from the Wash to the Thames, and from Thames to Trent, and from Severn to the Lindsey shore; for Offa has wedded her, and all who see her rejoice in his choice, holding her as a heaven-sent queen indeed, so sweetly and lowly and kindly she bears herself. Nor for many a long year can she think of aught which would bring her more power, so that even she deems that the lust of it is dead within her. Only for many a year she somewhat fears the coming of every stranger from beyond the sea lest she may be known, until it is certain that none would believe a tale against their queen.



Yet when that time comes there are old counsellors of the Witan who will say among themselves that they deem Quendritha the queen the leader and planner of all that may go to the making great the kingdom of the Mercians; and there are one or two who think within themselves that, were she thwarted in aught she had set her mind on, she might have few scruples as to how she gained her ends. But no man dare put that thought into words.



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CHAPTER I. HOW THE FIRST DANES CAME TO ENGLAND.

Two fair daughters had Offa, the mighty King of Mercia, and Quendritha his queen. The elder of those two, Eadburga, was wedded to our Wessex king, Bertric, in the year when my story begins, and all men in our land south of the Thames thought that the wedding was a matter of full rejoicing. There had been but one enemy for Wessex to fear, besides, of course, the wild Cornish, who were of no account, and that enemy was Mercia. Now the two kingdoms were knit together by the marriage, and there would be lasting peace.

Wherefore we all rejoiced, and the fires flamed from the hilltops, and in the towns men feasted and drank to the alliance, and dreamed of days of unbroken ease to come, wherein the weapons, save always for the ways of the border Welsh, should rust on the wall, and the trodden grass of the old camps of the downs on our north should grow green in loneliness. And that was a good dream, for our land had been torn with war for overlong—Saxon against Angle, Kentishman against Sussexman, Northumbrian against Mercian, and so on in a terrible round of hate and jealousy and pride, till we tired thereof, and the rest was needed most sorely.

And in that same year the shadow of a new trouble fell on England, and none heeded it, though we know it over well now—the shadow of the coming of the Danes. My own story must needs begin with that, for I saw its falling, and presently understood its blackness.

I had been to Winchester with my father, Ethelward the thane of Frome Selwood, to see the bringing home of the bride by our king, and there met a far cousin of ours, with whom it was good to enjoy all the gay doings of the court for the week while we were there. He belonged to Dorchester, and taking as much fancy to my company as a man double his age can have pleasure in the ways of a lad of eighteen, he asked me to ride home with him, and so stay in his house for a time, seeing the new country, and hunting with him for a while before I went home. And my father being very willing that I should do so, I went accordingly, and merry days on down and in forest I had with Elfric the thane, this new-found cousin of ours.

So it came to pass that one day we found ourselves on the steep of a down whence we could overlook the sea and the deep bay of Weymouth, with the great rock of Portland across it; and the width and beauty of that outlook were wonderful to me, whose home was inland, in the fair sunshine of late August. We had come suddenly on it as we rode, and I reined up my horse to look with a sort of cry of pleasure, so fair the blue water and dappled sky and towering headland, grass and woodland and winding river, leaped on my eyes. And in the midst of the still bay three beautiful ships were heading for the land, the long oars rising and falling swiftly, while the red and white striped sails hung

idly in the calm. One could see the double of each ship in the water, broken wonderfully by the ripple of the oars, and after each stretched a white wake like a path seaward.



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My cousin stayed his horse also with a grip of the reins that brought him up short, and he also made an exclamation, but by no means for the same reason as myself.

“Ho!” he said, “what are these ships?”

Then he set his hand to his forehead and looked long at them from under it, while I watched them also, unknowing that there was anything unusual in the sight for one who lived so near the sea and the little haven of Weymouth below us.

“Well, what do you think of them?” I asked presently.

“On my word, I do not know,” he answered thoughtfully. “They are no Frisian traders, and I have never seen their like before. Moreover, it seems to me that they are full of armed men. See how the sun sparkles on their decks here and there!”

But we were too far off to make out more than that, and as we watched it was plain that the ships would make for the river mouth and haven.

“We will ride down and see more of them,” said my cousin. “I only hope—”

There he stayed his words; but I saw that his face had grown grave of a sudden, and knew that some heavy thought had crossed his mind.

“What?” I asked.

“It must be impossible,” he said slowly—“and this is between you and me—for it seems foolish. But have you heard of the northern strangers who have harried the Welsh beyond the Severn sea?”

I had heard of them, of course, for they traded with the Devon men at times, having settled in towns of their own in Wales beyond the Severn. It was said that they were heathen, worshipping the same gods whom our forefathers had worshipped, and were akin to ourselves, with a tongue not unlike our own at all, and easy to be understood by us. Also they had fought the Welsh, as we had to fight them; but one heard of them only as strangers who had naught to do with us Saxons.

“Well, then,” my cousin said, “suppose these are more of the northern folk.”

“If they are, they will have come to trade,” I said lightly. “But they will more likely be men from the land across this sea—men from the land of the Franks, such as we saw at Winchester the other day.”

“Maybe, maybe,” he said. “We shall see presently.”



So we rode on. I dare say we had four miles to go before we came to the outskirts of Weymouth village, and by that time the ships were in the haven. By that time also the Weymouth folk were leaving the place, and that hastily; and before we were within half a mile of the nearest houses we met two men on horseback, who rode fast on the road toward Dorchester.

“What is amiss?” cried my cousin as they neared us.

The men knew him well, and stayed.

“Three strange ships in the haven, and their crews ashore armed, and taking all they can lay their hands on. We are going to the sheriff; where is he?”

“Home at Dorchester. Whence are the ships? Have they hurt any one?”



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“We cannot tell whence they are. They speak a strange sort of English, as it were, like the Northumbrian priest we have. Red-headed, big men they are, and good-tempered so far, seeing that none dare gainsay them. But they are most outrageously thievish.”

“What have they taken, then?”

“Ask the bakers and butchers. Now they are gathering up all the horses, and they say they are going to drive the cattle.”

“Sheriff’s business that, in all truth. Get to him as soon as you may. I will go and see if I can reason with them meanwhile.”

“Have a care, thane!” they cried, and spurred their horses again.

Then my cousin turned to me, and his face was grave.

“Wilfrid,” he said, “you had better go with those messengers. I am going to see if aught can be done; but it sounds bad. I don’t like an armed landing of this sort.”

“No, cousin,” I answered. “Let me go with you. It would be hard if you must send me back, for I would fain see the ships. That talk of driving the cattle can be naught but a jest.”

“Likely enough,” he answered, laughing. “It is no new thing for a crew to come ashore and clear out the booths of the tradesmen without troubling to pay offhand. Presently their captains will come and pay what is asked, grumbling, and there will be no loss to our folk. As for this talk of taking the horses—well, a sailor always wants a ride when he first comes ashore, if it is only on an ass. Then if there is not enough meat ready to hand in the town, no doubt they would say they would find it for themselves. Well, come on, and we will see.”

So we rode on, but the laugh faded from the face of my kinsman as we did so.

“They have no business to come ashore armed,” he said, half to himself, “and Weymouth folk ought to be used to the ways of seamen by this time. I don’t like it, Wilfrid.”

Nevertheless, we did not stop, and presently came among the first houses of the village, where there was a little crowd of the folk, half terrified, and yet not altogether minded to fly. They said that the strangers were sacking the houses along the water’s edge, but not harming any one. However, they were taking all the ale and cider casks they could find on board their ships, and never a word of payment.



“Do not go near them,” said my cousin. “Doubtless some one will pay presently, and I will go and speak with their head men. Maybe they can’t find any one who can rightly understand their talk.”

“Oh ay,” said an old man, “it passes me to know how a thane like your worship can understand all sorts of talk they use in England. It is all the likes of us can compass to understand even a Mercian; but I warrant you would ken what a Northumbrian means easily.”

He shook his head with much wisdom, and we left him grumbling at the speech of the priest we had already heard of.

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We passed down the straggling shoreward street, and as we neared the waterside we heard the shouts and laughter of the strangers plainly enough. And over the houses were the mastheads of their three ships. One of them had a forked red flag, whereon was a raven worked in black, so well that it was easy to see what bird it was meant for. It was the raven of the Danish sea kings, but that meant naught to us yet. The terror which went before and the weeping that bided after that flag were yet to come.

The next thing was that from the haven rode swiftly half a dozen mounted men toward us, and the first glance told us that here were warriors whose very war gear was new to us. Three of them had close-fitting coats of ring mail, and wore burnished round helms of bronze or steel; while the others, who were also helmed, had jerkins of buff leather, gilded and cut in patterns on the edges of the short sleeves and skirts. Their arms were bare, save that one had heavy golden bracelets above the elbow; and they all wore white trousers, girt to the leg loosely with coloured cross-gartering, which reached higher than ours. I had never seen such mail as theirs, and straightway I began to wonder if I might not buy a suit from them.

But most different from any arming of ours was that each had a heavy axe either in his hand or slung to his saddle, and that their swords were longer, with very handsome hilts. Only two had spears, and these were somewhat shorter than ours and maybe heavier. They were better armed warriors than ever I had seen before, even at Winchester.

Some word passed among these men as they saw us; but they came on, making no sign of enmity of any sort. Perhaps that was because, being in hunting gear and with naught more than the short sword and seax one always wears, we had no weapons, and were plainly on peaceful business.

And as in spite of their arms they seemed peaceful enough also, my cousin and I waited for them, so that they pulled up to speak to us, that man who wore the bracelets being at their head.

“Friends,” said my cousin quietly, as they stared at him, “there is no war in the land, and we are wont to welcome strangers. No need for all this weapon wearing.”

“Faith, I am glad to hear it,” said the leader, with a grim smile. “We thought there might be need. There mostly is when we come ashore.”

One could understand him well enough, if his speech was rougher than ours. The words were the same, if put together somewhat differently and with a new way of speaking them. It was only a matter of thinking twice, as it were, and one knew what he meant. Also he seemed to understand us better than we him, doubtless by reason of years of travelling and practice in different tongues of the northern lands.

“The arms somewhat terrify our folk,” said my cousin, not heeding the meaning which might lie in the words of the chief. “But I suppose you have put in for food and water.”



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“For ale and beef—that is more like it,” said the Dane. “Having found which we are going away again. The sooner we find it the better, therefore, and maybe you will be glad to help us to what we seek.”

“Our folk tell me that you are helping yourselves somewhat freely already,” answered the thane. “One may suppose that, like honest seamen, you mean to face the reckoning presently.”

“Oh ay, we always pay, if we are asked,” answered the chief; and as he said it he hitched his sword hilt forward into reach in a way which there was no mistaking.

“It is a new thing to us that seamen should hint that they will pay for what they need with the cold steel. We are not such churls as to withhold what a man would seek in his need.”

“No man ever withholds aught from us, if so be we have set our minds on it,” said the chief, with a great laugh.

Then he turned to his men, who were all round us by this time, listening.

“Here, take these two down to the ships, and see that they escape not; they will be good hostages.”

In a moment, before we had time so much as to spur our horses, much less to draw sword, we were seized and pinioned by the men in spite of the rearing of the frightened steeds. Plainly it was not the first time they had handled men in that wise. Then, with a warrior on either side of us, we were hurried seaward; and I thought it best to hold my tongue, for there was not the least use in protesting. So also thought my cousin, for he never said a word.

Along the rough wharves there was bustle and noise enough, for the place swarmed with the mailed seamen, who had littered the roadway with goods of all sorts from the houses and merchants' stores, and were getting what they chose to take across the gang planks into their ships. Here and there I saw some of our people standing helpless in doorways, or looking from the loft windows and stairways; but it was plain that the most of them had fled. There were several boatloads of them crossing the bay with all speed for safety.

Next I saw that at the high stems and sterns of the ships stood posted men, who seemed to be on watch, leaning on their spears, and taking no part in the bustle. But every man worked with his arms ready, and more men who had found horses rode out along the roads as we came in. They were the pickets who would watch for the raising of the country, or who would drive in the cattle from the fields.



Twice I had seen border warfare with the west Welsh on the Devon side of our country, and so I knew what these horsemen were about, or rather guessed it. But at the time all the affair was a confused medley to me, if I seem to see it plainly now as I look back. Maybe I saw more from the ships presently, for we were hurried on board, handed over to the ship guard and there left, while our captors rode away again.

I only hoped that when the first messengers reached Beaduheard the sheriff he would bring force enough with him. But I doubted it.



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The guard took our weapons from us, bound us afresh but not very tightly, and set us with our backs against the gunwale of the fore deck of the ship they had us on board, which was that with the raven flag. Over us towered a wonderful carved dragon's head, painted green and gilded, and at the stern of the ship rose what was meant for its carved tail. The other ships had somewhat the same adornment to their stems and stern posts, but they were not so high or so handsome. Plainly this was the chief's own ship.

Now I suppose that the presence of a captive or two was no new thing to the men, for when they had secured us each to a ring bolt with a short line, they paid little heed to us, but stood and talked to one another with hardly a glance in our direction. Seeing which my cousin spoke to me in a low voice.

"This is a bad business, Wilfrid," he said. "Poor lad, I am more than sorry I let you come with me. Forgive me. I ought to have known that there was danger."

"Trouble not at all," I said, as stoutly as I could, which is not saying much. "I wanted to come, and there was no reason to think that things would go thus. Even now I suppose we shall be let go presently."

Elfric shook his head. I could see that he was far more deeply troubled than he cared to show, and my heart sank.

"I cannot rightly make it all out," he said. "But these men are certainly the northern strangers who have harried Wales, even as we feared."

"Well," I said, "we shall have the sheriff here shortly."

"Beaduheard? I suppose so. Little help will be from him. It would take three days to raise force enough to drive off these men, and he is headstrong and hot tempered. His only chance is to scare them away with a show of force, or, at best, to prevent their going inland after plunder; for that is what they are here for."

"Maybe they will hold us to ransom."

"That is the best we can hope for. Of course I will pay yours."

The bustle went on, and I watched the stowing of the plunder after this, for I had no more to say. I thought of my father, and of the trouble he would be in if he knew my plight, and tried to think what a tale I should have to tell him when I reached home again.

And then came an old warrior, well armed and handsome, with iron-gray hair and beard, and he stepped on the deck and looked curiously at us.



“Captives, eh?” he said to the men. “Whence came they?”

“Thorleif sent them in,” answered one of the guard. “It was his word that they would be good hostages.”

As I knew that this man spoke of his chief, it seemed to me that he was hardly respectful; but I did not know the way of free Danes and vikings as yet. There was no disrespect at all, in truth, but full loyalty and discipline in every way. Only it sounded strangely to a Saxon to hear no term of rank or respect added to the bare name of a leader.



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Then the old warrior turned toward us, and looked us over again, and I thought he seemed kindly, and, from his way, another chief of some rank.

"I suppose this is your son?" he said to Elfric directly.

"My young cousin," answered the thane. "Let him go, I pray you; for he is far from his own folk, and he was in my charge. You may bid him ride home without a word to any man if you will, and he will keep the trust."

The warrior shook his head, but smiled.

"No, I cannot do that. However, I suppose Thorleif will let you go by and by. If our having you here saves trouble, you may be thankful. We are not here to fight if we can help it."

"Why, then," said Elfric, "unbind us, and we will bide here quietly. You may take the word of a thane."

"I have always heard that the word of a Saxon is to be relied on," said the old warrior, and gave an order to the guard.

Whereon they freed us, and glad I was to stretch my limbs again, while my spirits rose somewhat.

The old chief talked with us for a while after that, and made no secret of whence the ships had come. It seemed that they were indeed from Wales, had touched on the south coast of Ireland, and thence had rounded the Land's End, and, growing short of food, had put in here. Also, he told us that they had been "collecting property," and were on the way home to Denmark. He thought they were the first ships of the Danes to cruise in these waters, and was proud of it.

"It is a wondrously fair land of yours here," he said, looking inland on the rolling downs and forest-hidden valleys.

"Fairer than your own?" I asked.

"Surely; else why should we care to leave our homes?"

"Ho, Thrond!" shouted some man from the wharves, "here are cattle coming in."

The old warrior turned and left us, going ashore. Round the turning of the street inland, whence we came, some of the mounted men were driving our red cattle from the nearer meadows, and doing it well as any drover who ever waited for hire at a fair. I saw that they had great heavy-headed dogs, tall and smooth haired, which worked well enough, though not so well as our rough gray shepherd dogs. The ship we were in lay alongside



the wooden wharf; and one could watch all that went on, for the fore deck was high above the busy crowd ashore.

I wondered for a few minutes what the Danes would do with the cattle; but they had no doubt at all. Before old Thronð had reached them the work of slaughter had begun, and wonderfully fast the men were carrying the meat on board the ships, heaping it in piles forward, and throwing the hides over the heaps. I heard one of the guards say to another that this was a good "strand hewing," that being their name for this hasty victualling of the ships.

More cattle came in presently, and sheep also, to be served in the same way. There were a hundred and fifty men or so on each ship, and I think that this was the first landing they had made since they left Ireland, so that they were in need of plenty of stores.



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Then all in the midst of the bustle came the wild note of a war horn from somewhere inland beyond the town, and in a moment every man stood still where he happened to be, and listened. Twice again the note sounded, and a horseman came clattering down to the shore. He was Thorleif, the chief with whom we had spoken, and he reined up the horse and lifted his hand, with a short, sharp order of some kind.

At that every man dropped what he was carrying, and the men who were stowing the plunder on board the ships left their work and hurried ashore, gripping their weapons from where they had set them against the gunwales. There was a moment's wild hurrying on the wharves, and then the warriors were drawn up in three lines along the wharf, across the berths where they had laid the ships, and facing the landward road. Only the ship guard never stirred.

"If only we could get our men to form up like these!" said Elfric. "See, every man knows his place, and keeps it. They are silent also. Mind you the way of our levies?"

I did well enough. Never had I seen aught like this. For our folk, called up from plough and forest hastily—and now and then only—have never been taught the long lesson of order and readiness that these men had learned of necessity in the yearly battle with wind and wave in their ships. Nor had they ever to face a foe any better ordered than themselves.

"Is the sheriff at hand?" I said breathlessly.

"Maybe. I hope not closely."

Down the street galloped a few more Danes, looking behind them as they rode. They spoke to Thorleif, and he laughed, and then turned their horses loose and leaped to their places in the ranks. Thorleif dismounted also, and paced to and fro, as a waiting seaman will, with his arms behind him.

And then came a rush of horsemen, and my cousin gripped my arm, and cried out in a choked voice:

"Mercy!" he gasped, "is the man mad?"

The new horsemen were men of our own from Dorchester. I saw one or two of Elfric's housecarls among them, and the rest were the sheriff's own men, with a few franklins who had joined him on the road.

At the head of the group rode Beaduheard himself, red and hot with his ride, and plainly in a rage. His rough brown beard bristled fiercely, and his hand gripped the bridle so that the knuckles were white. He had armed himself, and his men were armed also, but their gear showed poorly beside the Danish harness. He had hardly more than twenty men after him, and I thought he had outridden his followers who were on foot.

“O fool!” groaned Elfric. “What is the use of this?”

But we could do nothing, and watched in anxiety to see what Beaduheard had in his mind. It was impossible that he could have ridden in here with no warning of the real danger, as we had ridden two hours ago, before things had gone so far. Every townsman had fled long since, and would be making for Dorchester. He must have met them.

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Now he halted in front of that terrible silent line, while his men seemed to shrink somewhat as they, too, pulled up. Then he faced Thorleif as boldly as if he had the army of Wessex behind him, and spoke his mind.

“What is the meaning of this?” he shouted in his great voice. “We can have no breaking of the king’s peace here, let me tell you. Set down those arms, and do your errand here as peaceful merchants, whereto will be no hindrance. But concerning the lifting of cattle which has gone on, I must have your leaders brought to Dorchester, there to answer for the same.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then the Danes broke into a great roar of laughter. Even Thorleif’s grim face had a smile on it, and he set his hand to his mouth, and stroked his long moustache as if hiding it, while he looked wonderingly at the angry man before him. But beside me Elfric stamped his foot with impatience, and muttered curses on the foolhardiness of the sheriff, which, indeed, I suppose no one understands to this day.

Some say that he took them for merchants, run wild indeed, but to be brought to soberness by authority. Others think that finding himself, as it were, in a wolf’s mouth, he was minded to carry it off with a high hand, seeing no other way out of the danger. But most think that he had such belief in his own power that he did indeed look to see these men bow to it, and lay down their arms then and there. But none will ever know, by reason of what was to come.

“Throw down your arms!” he commanded again, when the laughter ceased.

His voice shook with rage.

“Stay!” said Thorleif. “What is your authority?”

The question was put very courteously, if coldly, and it was common sense.

“I am the sheriff of Dorchester. Whence are you that you should defy the king’s officer?”

“Pardon,” said Thorleif. “It is only at this moment that we have learned that we have so great a man before us. As for your question, we are hungry Danes who are looking for victuals. It is our custom to go armed in a strange land, that we may protect our ships at the least.”

“Trouble not for your ships, for none will harm them,” Beaduheard said, seeming to be somewhat pacified by the quiet way of the chief. “Set down your arms, and render up yourself and the other ship captains, and the theft of the cattle and damage here shall be compounded for at Dorchester.”

Then Thorleif turned to his men and said:



“You hear what the sheriff says; what is the answer?”

That came in a crash and rattle of weapons on round shields that rang over the bay, and sent the staring cattle headlong from where they had been left at the wharf end, tail in air, down the beach. There was no doubting what that meant, and Beaduheard, brave man as he was, if foolish, recoiled. His men were already edging out of the wide space toward the homeward track, and he glanced at them and saw it.



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At that he seemed to form some sudden resolve; and calling to them, he rode straight at Thorleif and griped him by the collar of his mail shirt, crying that he arrested him in the name of Bertric the king. Thorleif never struggled, but twisted himself round strongly, and hauled the sheriff off his horse in a moment, and the two rolled over and over on the ground, wrestling fiercely. Three or four of Beaduheard's men rode up to their master's help in haste, caring naught that a dozen of the Danes had sprung forward. There was a wild shouting and stamping, and the horses went down as the axes of the Danes flashed. Two more of the sheriff's men joined in, and I saw the Danes hew off the points of their levelled spears. Then into the huddled party of our men who were watching the fight—still doubting whether they should join in or fly—rode a dozen Danes from out of the country, axe and sword in hand, driving them back on the main line of the vikings, and then the fight seemed to end as suddenly as it began. Two or three horses went riderless homeward, and that was how Dorchester learned that Beaduheard the sheriff had met his end.

The Danes fell back into their places, one or two with wounds on them; and Thorleif rose up from the ground, shaking his armour into place, and looking round him on those who lay there. They were all Saxons. Not one had escaped.

"Pick up the sheriff," he said to some of his men. "I never saw a braver fool. Maybe he is not hurt."

But, however he died, Beaduheard never moved again. Some of the Danes said that a horse must have kicked him; Thorleif had never drawn weapon.

"Pity," said Thorleif. "He was somewhat of a Berserk; but he brought it on himself."

Which was true enough, and we knew it. Neither Elfric nor I had a word to say to each other. The whole fight had sprung up and was over almost before we knew what was happening.

Then the Danes mounted the horses of the men who had fallen, caught the others they had turned loose on the alarm, and were off on their errands without delay. The ranks fell out, and went back to their work as if nothing had happened, and the wharf buzzed with peaceful-seeming noise again.

That is how the first Danes came to Wessex. Men say that these three ships were the first Danish vessels that came to all England; and so it may be, as far as coming on viking raids is concerned. Wales knew them, and Ireland, and now our turn had come.



CHAPTER II. HOW WILFRID KEPT A PROMISE, AND SWAM IN PORTLAND RACE.

All the rest of that afternoon we two had to bide on the narrow fore deck of the long ship, watching the pillage of the little town. Once I waxed impatient, and asked my cousin if we might not try to escape, seeing that little heed was paid to us, and that our staying here as hostages had been of no use. But he shook his head, telling me that until he had spoken with Thorleif or Thronð, to whom we had passed our word, we must bide; which I saw was right.



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Presently, as the evening began to close in, Thorleif came to us, and with him was the old chief. After them came a man with food in plenty in a ship's cauldron, and a leathern jack of ale, which he set before us as we sat on the coils of rope which were stowed forward.

"Welsh mutton and Welsh ale," said Thorleif, smiling. "That is plunder one may ask a Saxon to share without offence. Fall to, I pray you."

There was a rough courtesy in this, at the least intended, and we were hungry, so we did not delay. And as we ate, the chief spoke with us plainly.

"I had hoped," he said, "to manage this raid without fighting, but I never met so headstrong a man as your sheriff. Truly, I would have sent him home in peace, if in a hurry, had we been given a chance, but, as you saw, we had none. Now, if you will, I will send one of you home to say that if your folk will pay us fair ransom in coined silver or weighed gold, we will harry no more, and will not burn the town. One of you shall go at once, and bring me word by noon at latest tomorrow, while the other shall bide as hostage for his return. We will do no harm to aught until the time is up."

"Plain speaking, chief," said Elfric. "If we go, we must not have more than a reasonable sum named, else will the message be useless."

Then they talked of what sum should be named, and in the end agreed on what was possible, I think; at all events, it was far less than has been paid to the like force of Danes since. The riches of our peaceful Wessex were as yet unknown to the vikings, save by hearsay; indeed, it has been said that these three ships came to spy out the land. And then came the question as to which of us two was to go.

That was ended by Thorleif himself. I said that Elfric should go, and he was most anxious that I should be freed from the clutches of the Danes. And as we spoke thereof, neither of us being willing to give way—for, indeed, it did not seem to me that it mattered much whether I stayed, while Elfric had his own family, who would be sorely terrified for him—Thorleif decided it.

"Elfric the thane must go," he said, "for men will listen to him. That is the main thing, after all.

"We will not harm your cousin, thane, and you may be easy in your mind."

"Nay," said Thrond, "I think that Dorchester would pay ransom for the thane willingly. Best let the lad go."

"This is more a question of ransoming the town and countryside, foster father," answered Thorleif. "The thane shall go."



In a quarter of an hour he was gone, the Danes giving him back his weapons and mounting him on his own horse. He told me that he had no doubt that I should be freed by noon tomorrow, and so we parted in good spirits, as far as ourselves were concerned.

As to the trouble that had fallen on the land, that was another matter. I did not rightly take it in, but it was heavy on his mind. For myself, therefore, I was content enough; I had no reason to think that the Danes were likely to treat me evilly in any way.



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Nor did they. On the other hand, as if I were one of themselves, they set me by the chief when they made a feast presently, and did not ask me questions about the country; which was what I feared. Most likely their riders had learned all they would from others.

When it grew dark they lighted great fires along the wharves, and sat by them in their arms, drinking the Weymouth ale, and eating the Dorset fare they had taken. The ship guards went ashore, and their places were taken by others, and I saw strong pickets passing out of the town to guard the ways into it. Thorleif would not risk aught in the way of safeguard. After that was done, those whose watch off it was went on board the ships, and slept under the shelter of the gunwales, wrapped in their thick sea cloaks. They gave me one, and bade me rest on the after deck by the chiefs; and in spite of the strangeness of everything I slept dreamlessly, being tired in mind as well as in body.

Next morning things were to all seeming much the same. The Danes had kept their word, and all was peaceful. There being nothing more in the town left worth taking, they stowed everything carefully, and made all ready for sailing. And then, halfway between noon and sunrise, Elfric rode back.

I did not see him, for he was not suffered to come beyond the line of outposts, and all that he had to say, of course, I did not know at the time. One came and told Thorleif that the thane waited to speak with him, and he was gone from the ships for half an hour with Thronð. When he came back his face was grimmer than ever, and a red scar which crossed his forehead was burning crimson. He stayed to speak to the men on the wharves, and some order he gave was passed from one to another, and in ten minutes every man had left the wharves and had passed inland, with him at their head.

“Ho, that is it!” said one of the ship guard from the deck below me.

“What is it?” I asked, for I had been talking to the man in all friendly wise, of ship and sea and strange lands.

“Why, your folk will not pay, and so we must needs take payment for ourselves in the viking’s way.”

I said no more, nor did the man. I think he was sorry for me; but it was not long before he called to me and pointed to the hillside above the town. On it was a black throng of folk, slowly coming down toward us.

“Your people coming to drive us out,” he said, laughing a short laugh.

Then he and his comrades bustled about the ship, setting every loose thing in place, until the decks were clear. In the other ships the guard were at the same work, and at



last they cast off all the shore lines but one at stem and stern. The ships might sail at the moment their men were on board if they were beaten back.

About that time the farther houses in Weymouth began to burn, and I heard the Wessex war cry rise, hoarse and savage, as the foes met. There were more of our men coming over the hill, and it was good to me to see that the Danes, who watched as eagerly as I, waxed silent and anxious. One said that there seemed a many folk hereabout, as if the gathering against them was more than they cared for.



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Now I did not know what I had best wish for. Sometimes I thought that if our men were beaten back they might come to terms, and I should be freed. And it being a thing impossible that I could hope that Wessex was to be beaten, and next to impossible that I should so much as imagine she could, I mostly wondered what would happen to me when the Danes had to seek the ships. But as the noise of the fight drew nearer, and the black smoke from burning houses grew thicker, I forgot myself, and only wished I was with Elfric in that struggle; and at last I could stand it no longer.

“Let me go, men,” I said; “I cannot bide here.”

“We must, and you have to,” said the friendly man. “We want to help as much as you, but here we have to stay. Be quiet.”

“Ay, or we will bind you again,” said another man shortly.

But neither looked toward me; their eyes were on the road inland, down which we could not see, for it opened at the end of the wharf.

Now a wounded man or two crawled down that road, and some of the guard helped them to the ships. They growled fiercely when their comrades asked how things went, and thereby I knew that it was ill for the Danes. The houses nearer the wharves were burning one after another, as they were driven back.

At last there came a rush of Danes down that road, and into the seaward houses they went, and fired them. Then they came on board the ships, and bade the ship guard relieve them at the front. More than one of those who came thus had slight wounds on them, but they did not heed them.

“Keep still, lad,” said my friend as he hurried away. “The men are savage. We are getting the worst of it—not for the first time.”

Savage enough the men were, and I saw that the advice was good; so I sat down on the steering bench and went on watching. But I was not long left in peace. The noise of the fight came closer and closer, and the wounded crept in a piteous stream to us. And then a man would look to the after line from the ship to the bollard on the wharf, and leaped on the after deck close to me.

“Out of the way, you Saxon!” he said savagely, and with that sent me across the deck with a fierce push which was almost a blow; and that was the spark which was all I needed to set my smouldering impatience alight.

I recovered myself, and without a word hit him fairly in the face with all my weight behind a good blow from the shoulder, and sent him spinning in turn. He went headlong over the edge of the raised deck, and lit among a group of his comrades, thereby saving himself from what would have been a heavy fall on his head and shoulders.

“Well hit, Saxon!” shouted a man from the nearest ship, and there was a great roar of laughter thence.



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However, before his comrades, who had been watching the fires they had lighted, knew rightly how the man had thus been hurled on them, and were abusing him for clumsiness, he had his sword out, swearing to end me; and I suppose he might have done so without any of the others interfering had they understood the matter. But he was a heavy man, and mailed moreover; whereby three or four were smarting under his weight. So they fell on him and held his arm, thinking, no doubt, that he was resenting their words; which was the saving of me, for at that moment a roar came from the wharf, and slowly out of the lane end we had been watching came Thorleif's men. Their faces were toward the foe, and those who led the retreat were at work with their bows, shooting over the heads of those before them at the press which drove them back. And some leader from among them, with lifted sword, signed to the ship guards to heed the open end of the wharf, to my right.

They forgot the little matter on hand, and ran ashore. Then I noted that on that end of the wharf, where a narrow lane came down to the water, there was another fight going on, and they had to support the Danes there. The other end of the wharf was kept by a curve of the shore, and that was safe.

Presently all the Danes were back on the water front, and across the end of the two entrances to its wide space they drew some heavy wagons, which had been set there in readiness, blocking them. One could only see now and then what was being done, as the wind drifted the black smoke aside, for now every house was burning fiercely.

Then came a wild and yet orderly rush of the Danes to the ships, and it was wonderful to see each man get to his post at the oars as he came. Three men went to each oar port. One had the oar ready for thrusting outboard, one stood by with his shield ready to protect the rower, and the other, standing in the midship gangway, had his bow ready.

Thrand came on board with the first, and leaped to the steering deck, where he grasped the tiller, paying no heed to me. His eyes were on the lane end. I got out of his way, and stood by the stern post, with my arm round the dragon tail.

For I saw nothing else to do but to keep quiet. I did not know rightly whether honour compelled me to stay as a captive still, but I thought it did. But if not, in one way I could have escaped; for I had been forgotten, and every man was watching the shore. I could drop overboard and swim ashore somewhere beyond the reach of the Danes, being a good swimmer; but as I say, I doubted if I might. So I stayed, whether wrongly or not I will leave others to decide; but seeing that I doubted, I think I need not be blamed for doing as I did.

One of the houses fell in with a tremendous crash, and an eddying of smoke and flame across the wharf to leeward. Out of that smother came running the men who had left the ships just now, stooping and hiding their blackened faces from the sparks with their

shields, and they too found their posts at once. A dozen came on the after deck with bows, and lined the shoreward gunwale.



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Hardly had they come on board when the rest came in a rush, Thorleif being last of all. Behind them the wharf was empty, save for one man whom an arrow out of the smoke caught up and smote. Thorleif heard him fall, though in the turmoil of trampling feet I could not; and he turned back to him, and lifted him as if he had been a child, and bore him on board. Then the gang planks rattled in, and the lines were cast off, and the ship began to move.

Still the wharf was empty. I think the Saxons had been driven back for a while, and that they did not yet know, so thick was the smoke of the burning, that the barrier at the end of the lane was unguarded.

Now there were five yards between ship and shore—then ten—then twenty. The oars took the water, and she headed for sea. Out of the smoke came my people, and ran yelling across the open, and I seemed to wake up.

“Thronð,” I cried, “I take back my promise. Let me go.”

“Eh!” he said, looking round.

I was then with my hands on the gunwale, in the act of leaping overboard, when he reached round and held me fast.

“Steady, fool!” he said; “you will have a dozen arrows through you.

“Here, hold him,” he said sharply.

And the men fell on me, binding me deftly with a few turns of a line, and then troubling themselves no more about me.

Next moment there was a sharp hiss, and an arrow from the shore stuck in the deck close to me, and another chipped the tail of the dragon and glanced into the sea. I mind noting that many another such splinter had been taken from that stern post, and presently saw—for I lay on my back, helpless—that a flint arrowhead still showed itself through a new coat of paint. It was too deeply bedded to be cut out, or else it was token of some honourable fight. It at least had come from forward, whereas I thought that most of the chips had come from astern, as this new one did. It is strange what little things one will notice when at one’s wits’ end.

The shouts ashore grew more faint, and at last were past. The crew were very silent, but the oars swung steadily, and at last Thorleif came from the midship gangway and saw me. The weary men laid in the oars at that moment, and threw themselves down to rest.

“Ho, Saxon!” he said, “on my word I had forgotten you. Who had you tied up?”



“I did,” said Thronð. “He said somewhat about taking back a promise, and wanted to go overboard.”

Thorleif stooped and unbound me, and I thanked him.

“Well, you won’t go overboard now,” he said, nodding toward the shore.

The great rock of Portland was broad off on our right, and maybe we were five miles from the nearest shore. Astern—for we were still heading out to sea—the smoke of burning Weymouth hung black against the blue sky. It was just such a day as yesterday, fair and warm, and the land I loved had never seemed so lovely.



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“Let me go, chief,” I said; “it is of no use for you to keep me.”

“Why,” he answered, “I don’t know that it is. But your folk would pay no ransom, and it would seem foolish if I had let you go offhand. Not but what your folk have not proved their wisdom, for they have got rid of us pretty cheaply. Odin! how they swarmed on us!”

“Ay,” growled Thron. “I did not dream that so many men could be gathered in so few hours; but they fought anyhow, and it was only a matter of numbers. Well, the place is good enough, and it is but a question of more ships next time.”

“Why did not you try an escape when we were all busy in the fight?” asked Thorleif, turning to me. “I have lost more than one captive in that way.”

I told him, and he looked kindly enough at me, and smiled in his grim way.

“You were right in saying that a Saxon’s word was good, Thron,” he said.

“I am sorry we can in no way send you back now. Your cousin did his best to win his folk to peace—and fought well when he could not. Nay, he is not hurt, so far as I know.”

“Let me swim ashore, if there is no other way,” I said, with a dull despair on me.

Thorleif looked at the sea and frowned.

“I could not do it myself,” he said. “There is a swift current round yon headland. See, it is setting us eastward even now.”

But I did not wait to hear any more; I shook my shoes off, and over I went. The wake of the swift vessel closed over my head as the men shouted, and when I came to the surface I looked back once. It seemed that Thorleif was preventing the men from sending a shower of arrows after me, but in those few moments a long space of water had widened between us; and I doubt whether they would have hit me, for I could have dived.

Then I headed for shore and freedom, and it was good to be in the water alone with silence round me. As for the other two ships, they were half a mile away from Thorleif’s, and I did not heed them. So I never looked back, but gave myself to the warm waves, and saved my strength for the long swim before me. There was not much sea, and what there was set more or less shoreward, so that it did not hinder me. Presently I shook myself out of my tunic, and was more free.

I suppose that I swam steadily for an hour before I began to think in earnest what a long way the land yet was from me. In another half hour I had to try to make myself believe that it was growing nearer. Certainly Portland was farther from me, but that was the set



of the current; and presently I knew, with a terrible sinking of heart, that the land also was lessening in my sight. The current was sweeping me away from it.

When I understood that, I turned on my back and rested. Then I saw that the ships were not so far away as I had expected. I seemed to have made little way from them also; which puzzled me. They had not yet set sail, and it was almost as if the oars were idle. I think they were not more than a mile off. I could almost have wept with vexation, so utterly did all the toil seem to be thrown away. However, a matter of two hours in the water when as pleasant as this was nothing to me, for I had stayed as long therein, many a time, for sport. So I hoped to do better with the turn of the tide, and let myself go easily to wait for it.



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We had left Weymouth when the flood had three hours more to run, so I had not long to wait. It turned; and I knew when it turned, because the wind against it raised a sea which bid fair to wear me out. I had to go with it more or less.

Then, indeed, the land seemed very dear to me, and I began to think of home and of those who sat there deeming that all was well with me. They would never know how I had ended. I will not say much of all that went on in my mind, save only that I am ashamed of naught that passed through it. Nor did I swim less strongly for the thoughts, but struggled on steadily.

And at last the sun set, and the wind came chill over the water, and I knew that little hope was for me. Again I turned on my back and rested, and I grew drowsy, I think.

Now the daylight faded from the sky, and overhead the stars began to come out; but as the sky darkened the sea seemed to grow brighter. Presently all around me seemed to sparkle, and I wondered listlessly that the stars were so bright in the water to one who swam among their reflections. Then the little crests of foam on the waves seemed on fire, and my arms struck sparks, as it were from the water, as the sparks fly from the anvil. Only these were palest blue, not red, and I wondered at them, thinking at first that they were fancy, or from the shine of the bright stars above.

And all of a sudden, ahead of me, moved swiftly in the sea and across my way a sheet of dazzling blue brightness, and it frightened me. Often as I had seen the sea and swum in it, I had never seen the like of this, nor had heard of it. The sheet of silver fire turned and drew toward me, and I ceased swimming, and stood, treading water, watching it. Out of its midmost fires darted long streaks of light, everywhere, lightning swift, coming and going ceaselessly.

Into the midst of that brightness rushed five bolts of flame, and scattered it. The water boiled, alive with the darting fires around me and under my feet, and my heart stood still with terror. Yet I was not harmed. And then I saw one of those great white-hot silver bolts hurl itself from sea to air in a wide arch, and fall back again into the water with a mighty splash; and all the flying water seemed to burn as it fled.

Truly it was but a school of mackerel, and the porpoises which fed on the silver fish, all made wonderful by the eerie fires of a summer sea; but I could not tell that all at once. I think that I knew what it was when the great sea pig leaped, for his shape was plain to me. The shoal went its way, and after it the harmless porpoises. But the sea was fairly alight now; all round me it shone with its soft glow, and my body was wondrous with it, and I seemed to float in naught but light.

Then I think that I wandered in my mind, what with the fright and weariness; for I had been five or six hours in the water, and it was long since I had tasted food. It came to me that I was dead at last, and that I was far in the sky, floating on bright air, with stars

above me and stars below. And that seemed good to me. I rested, paddling just enough to keep myself upright and forget my troubles in wonderment.



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Surely that was a voice singing! There was a strange melody I had never heard the like of, and it came from the brightness not far from me. I came back to knowledge of where I was with a start, trying to make out from which direction it sounded.

“This is a nixie trying to lure me to the depth,” I thought. “Truly, he need not take the trouble; for thither I must go shortly, without any coaxing.”

I turned myself in the water, trying to see if I could make out the singer, but I could not. Seeing that no other was likely to be swimming in Portland race but myself, I had no thought that the song was human.

But I could find nothing. When my face was seaward, I saw far off the ships I had left, indeed; and one seemed to have set her sail, for it showed as a square patch of blackness against the sky, but no voice could come from them to me. Presently I thought that somewhat dark rose and fell on the little waves between me and her, but that was doubtless the tunic I had given to the water. I did not think of wondering why I still saw it after all this long swim, but I seemed to have made no headway from the ships, which were as near as when I last looked at them.

So I turned again and swam easily, as I thought, shoreward. The song went on, but it seemed to ring in my ears as the drone of our miller’s pipes comes up from the river on a still summer evening. Yet it grew more plain.

Then I saw the ships before me. I was swimming in a circle, my right arm mastering the left, I suppose. That told me how weary I was, if I had not known it to the full before. At that moment the song, which was close to me, stopped, and a fiery arm rose from a wave top against the sky, and seemed to hail me.

“Ho, Wilfrid! have you had enough yet? By Aegir himself, you are a fine swimmer!”

Through the brightness came a sparkling head, round which the foam curled in fleecy fire; and shining as I shone, Thorleif the viking floated up to me and trod the water.

“What, you also?” I said. “Both of us drowned together at last?”

And with that I went into the brightness below me, and troubled no more for anything.

CHAPTER III. HOW WILFRID MET EGBERT THE ATHELING.

It was indeed Thorleif whom I saw as the deadly faintness of utter weariness and want of food came over me, and I sank. The Danes had hardly lost sight of me from the ships, for they had drifted backward and forward on the tide as I drifted, and I was never



more than a mile from them. Until the tide turned to the eastward there had been no wind of any use to them, and that which came with sunset was barely enough to give them steerage way. So they had watched me for want of somewhat else to do, being worn out with the long fight; and when I was far off, some keen-sighted seaman would spy my head as it rose on a wave, and cry that the Saxon was yet swimming.



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Now, if there is one thing that the northern folk of our kin think much of in the way of sports, it is swimming, and it seems that I won high praise from all. Maybe they did not consider how a man who is trying to win his home again from captivity is likely to do more than his best. At all events, I had never so much as tried a swim like that before, nor do I think that I could compass it again. Presently, when the turn of the tide brought with it no eddy into the bay which set me homeward, Thorleif would let me go no longer, and followed me in the boat with two men; which was easy enough, for I swam between the ship and the place where the red glow of burning Weymouth still shone in the northern sky. He could not leave me to drown.

For a time, in the growing dusk, he could not find me. Then the sea fires showed me black against their glow, and the sea tempted him, and he leaped in after me, singing to cheer me, for it was plain that I was nearly spent. When he brought me up from the depth again I had little of the drowned man about me, for I had fainted. I remember coming round painfully after that swoon, and eating and drinking, and straightway falling into a dreamless sleep on the deck of the ship; and I also remember the untoldly evil and fishy smell of the seal oil they had rubbed me with.

When I came to myself, my first thought was that a solid wall of that smell stood round me; but such were the virtues of the oil and the rubbing that when I woke after eighteen hours' sleep I was not so much as stiff. It would ill beseem me to complain thereof, therefore, but it might have been fresher.

When I woke from my great sleep it was long past noon. I lay in the shelter of the gunwales under the curve of the high stern post, wrapped in a yellow Irish cloak, and in my ears roared and surged a deep-voiced song, which kept time with the steady roll of oars and the thrashing of the water under their blades. The ship was quivering in every timber with the pull of them, and I could feel her leap to every stroke. The great red and white sail was set also, and the westerly breeze was humming in it, and over the high bows the spray arched and fell without ceasing as oar and sail drove the sharp stem through the seas. Thorleif was in a hurry for some reason.

Only one man was on the after deck, steering, and he was fully armed. Save that his brown arm swayed a little, resting on the carven tiller, as the waves lifted the steering oar with a creak now and then, he was motionless, looking steadily ahead under the arch of the foot of the sail. The run of the deck set me higher than him, and I could not see more than the feet of some men who were clustered on the fore deck. But I could look all down the length of the ship, and there every man was armed, even the rowers. They had hung red and yellow wooden shields all along the gunwales, raising the bulwark against sea and arrow flight alike by a foot and more, and the rowers were fairly in shelter under them, if there was to be a broadside attack.



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I never doubted that a fight was intended, though I could not tell why. Every man was at his post—two to each oar bench beside the rower, one with ready shield, and the other with bent bow, and these were looking forward also as they sang that hoarse song which had roused me. I do not know that I have ever heard aught so terrible as that. The wildness and savageness of it bides with me, and of a night when the wind blows round the roof I wake and think I hear it again. But it set me longing for battle, even here on the strange deck, and I would that I might join in it.

And then I knew that my own weapons lay beside me, and I sprang up, and grasped the sword and seax in haste to buckle them on. They rattled, and the steersman turned his head and laughed at me. It was old Thronð.

“That is right, lad,” he said, turning his head back to watch his course again. “None the worse for the wetting, it seems.”

Truth to tell, I felt little of it, being altogether myself again after the rest. So I laughed also, setting aside for the moment the question of what my fate was to be. It was plain that the man who saved me from the sea and gave me back my arms did not mean to make a captive of me in any hard sort.

“Only mightily hungry,” I said. “It seems that I have slept heavily.”

Thronð jerked his free thumb toward a pitcher and wooden bowl that were set near me, without looking round.

“So I suppose,” he said. “Eat well, and then we will see what sort of a viking you make. You have half an hour or so.”

Ale and beef there were, ready for me, and I took them and sat down at the feet of the old chief, with my legs hanging over the edge of the fore deck. Thence I could see that Thorleif was forward, and that away to the northward of us a ship was heading across our course, under sail only. The two other Danish ships were far astern of us, but their oars were flashing in the sun as they made after us.

Then I looked northward for England, but there was only the sea’s rim, and over that a bank of white summer clouds. Under the sun, to the south, was a long blue line of hills whose shapes were strange to me, and that was the Frankish shore. We were far across the Channel, and still heading eastward.

“Thronð,” I said, “are you after that ship yonder?”

“Ay. She will be a Frankish trader going home, and worth overhauling. Maybe there will be no fight, however; but one never knows.”



Now it was in my mind to ask him what would be done with me, but I did not. That was perhaps a matter which must be settled hereafter, and not on the eve of a fight at sea. Moreover, I thought that a Frankish ship was fair game for any one, and that if I were needed there was no reason at all why I should not take a hand in the fight. Certainly I should fare no worse for taking my plight in the best way I could. So I held my tongue and went on eating.



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One or two of the men looked up from the oars and grinned at me, and of these one had a black eye, being the man I had knocked off the deck. It was plain that he bore no malice, so I smiled back at him, and lifted the jug of ale toward him as I drank. He was a pleasant-looking man enough, now that the savagery of battle had passed from him.

Now I would have it remembered that a Saxon lad reared on the west Welsh marches is not apt to think much of a cattle raid and the fighting that ends it, and that with these Danes, who were so like ourselves, we had as yet no enmity. It seemed to me that being in strange company I must even fit myself to it, and all was wonderful to me in the sight of the splendid ship and her well-armed, well-ordered crew. Maybe, had we not been speeding to a fight the like of which I had never so much as heard of, I should have thought of home and the fears of those who would hear that I was gone; but as things were, how could I think of aught but what was on hand?

We were nearing the vessel fast, and seeing that she did not turn her head and fly, old Thronð growled that there was some fight in her.

“Unless,” he added with a hard chuckle, “they have never so much as heard of a viking. Are there pirates in this sea, lad?”

“They say that the seamen from the southern lands are, betimes. I have heard of ships taken by swarthy men thence. The Cornish tin merchants tell the tales of them.”

“Tin?” said Thronð. “Now I would that we had heard thereof before. I reckon we passed some booty westward. Eh, well, we shall know better next time.”

After that he was silent, watching the ship ahead. She was a great heavy trader, with higher sides than this swift longship.

And presently, as I watched her, a thought came to me, and I was ashamed that I had not asked before if it was true that my cousin had not been hurt in the fighting.

“He was not harmed,” answered the old chief. “He hurt us; he is a good fighter. Get yon shield and hold it ready to cover me. It is not worth while to have the helmsman shot, and it will set a man free to fight forward.”

Now the ship was within arrow shot, and we could see that there were few men on her decks. Thorleif hailed her to heave to, sending an arrow on her deck by way of hint. Whereon she shot up into the wind, and her sail rattled down. Thronð whistled to himself.

“Empty as a dry walnut shell, or I am mistaken,” he said between his teeth.

Then he shouted to Thorleif, and some order came back. The sail was lowered, and the ship swung alongside the stranger under oars only, while a rush of men came aft.



Thorleif hailed the other ship to send him a line from the bows, and one flew on board us as we shot past. Then in a few moments we were under easy sail again, towing the great trader slowly after us; and the men were grumbling at the ease of the capture, thinking, with Thronð, that it boded a useless chase. Thorleif came aft to speak with the shipmaster from our stern.



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Then there climbed on the bows of the trader a tall, handsome young man, at the sight of whom I could not withhold a cry of wonder, for I knew him well. He was Ecgbert the atheling, nephew of our great king Ina, and the one man whom Bertric feared as a rival when he came to the throne. His father and mine had been close friends, and we two had played and hunted together many a time, until the jealousy of Bertric drove him to seek refuge with Offa of Mercia. I thought him there yet.

“Yield yourselves,” said Thorleif, “and we will speak in peace of ransom. I will come on board with a score of men, and harm none.”

“We have yielded, seeing that there was no other chance for us,” said Ecgbert quietly. “Come on board if you will, but on my word it is hardly worth your while. We left in too great a hurry to bring much with us.”

“Whence are you, then, and whither bound?”

“From Mercia, by way of Southampton, and bound anywhere out of the way of Quendriitha the queen. We had a mind to go to Carl the king, but any port in a storm!”

“Well,” said Thorleif, laughing, “I am coming on board. That must be a terrible dame of whom you speak, if she has set the fear of death on a warrior such as you seem to be.”

Then he bade the men haul on the cable, and the ships drew together slowly. I had to leave the deck, being in the way of the men, and Ecgbert did not see me, as far as I could tell.

Thorleif and his men boarded the prize over her bows and went aft, Ecgbert going with them. The two ships drifted apart again, and I found my place by Thronð once more, while the men sat on the gunwale, waiting for the time when their chief should return.

“Who is the queen yon Saxon speaks of?” asked Thronð.

I told him; and as we had heard much of her of late, I also told him how men said that she had been found on the shore by the king himself. Whereon Thronð’s grave face grew yet more grave, and he said:

“Lad, is that a true tale?”

“My father had it from the thane who was with the king when they found her alone in her boat.”

“So her name was not Quendriitha when she began that voyage?”

“I have heard that she was a heathen. Mayhap the king gave her the name when she was christened. It means ‘the might of the king.’”



So I suppose that he did, for the hope of what his wife should be. Nor was the name ill chosen, as it turned out, for all men knew by this time that the queen was the wisest adviser in all the council of Mercia in aught to do with the greatness of the kingdom.

“I have ever had it in my mind that she would get through that voyage in safety,” Thronð said. “Ran would not have her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lad, I saw her start thereon, or so I think. Tell me when she was found.”

That I could do, within a very short time. My father and Offa had been wedded in the same year, as I had heard him say but a few days ago, at Winchester, as men talked of the bride whom we had welcomed, Quendritha’s daughter. And as he heard, Thronð’s face grew very dark.



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“That is she. Now I will tell you the beginning of that voyage. I was a courtman then to the father of Thorleif, our jarl here, and I myself made the boat ready and launched her in it.”

And then he told me that which I have set down at the beginning of this tale—neither more nor less. What was the fullness of the evil the woman had wrought he did not tell me, and I am glad.

When he ended he sat silent and brooding for a long time. The ship forged slowly and uneasily over the waves with the heavy trader after her, and on our decks the men were silent, waiting for word from Thorleif of what was to be done. We could hear him, now and then, laughing with the crew of the other ship as if all went easily.

“Lad,” said old Thronð, suddenly turning to me, “you had best forget all this. It is dangerous to know aught of the secrets of great folk; and if it comes to the ears of Quendriþa that one is telling such a tale of her, the life of the man who has told it will not be worth much. Maybe I am wrong, and I speak of one who is drowned long since; for, indeed, it seems out of the way of chance that a girl could win across the sea from Denmark to a throne thus. And if it is true, she has done even as Thorleif’s father bade her, and has left her ways of ill.

“And, yet,” he said again, “if ever you have to do with her, remember what she may have been. It will be ill to offend her, or to cross her in aught.”

“That is the hardest saying that our folk have of her,” I said, “but I have heard it many a time.”

“There is much in that saying,” Thronð answered grimly.

“Well,” I answered shortly, “I suppose that if any man will set himself against a king or a queen, he has to take the chances.”

“Small chance for such an one if the queen be—well, such another as I helped to set adrift from our shore.”

Meaningly that was said, and I had no answer. I was glad that Thorleif showed himself on the bows of the prize and hailed Thronð.

“Send the Saxon lad on board here,” he said; “we have met with a friend of his.”

That could be none but the atheling, and I leaped up. The men were heaving on the tow line, and the ships were slowly nearing each other.

“Thronð,” I said breathlessly, “will Thorleif let me go?”



“Of course,” he answered, smiling. “We only picked you up again to save your life. He had a mind to land you on the English shore presently; for he said you had kept faith with us well, and he could not let you suffer therefor.”

The bows of the trader grated against our stern, and one of the men gave me a hoist over her gunwale with such good will that I landed sprawling among the coils of rope on the fore deck. When I gathered myself up I saw Ecgbert and Thorleif aft, while the Danes were rummaging the ship, and I made my way to them. And as I came the atheling stared at me, and then hastened forward with outstretched hand of welcome.



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“Why, Wilfrid, old comrade, how come you here? I heard only of a West Saxon, and whether this is luck for you or not I do not know.”

“Good luck enough, I think,” I answered, with a great hand grip. “I had not yet let myself wonder how long it would be before I saw home again.”

His face fell, and he looked doubtfully at me.

“I cannot take you home, Wilfrid; I am flying thence myself. The Danish chief will set you ashore somewhere at his first chance, he says.”

“Why, what is amiss again?”

“The old jealousy, I suppose,” he answered grimly. “As if a lad like myself was likely to try to overturn a throne! Here had I hardly settled down in Mercia as a fighter of the Welsh and hanger-on of Offa’s court, when there come Bertric’s messengers, asking that I should be given up, and backing the demand with a request for closer alliance by marriage. Offa, being an honest man, was for sending the message back unanswered. But the queen had a mind for the match, and as I was in the way, it was plain to me that I must be out of it. So I did not wait for Quendritha to remove me, but removed myself.”

“Alone?” I asked.

“Alone, and that hastily. You do not know the lady of Mercia, or you would not ask.”

Now I thought to myself that in the last half hour I had learned more of that lady than even Egbert knew, and I felt that he was wise in time, if Thronð’s tale was true; which, indeed, I began to believe. But it did not seem right to me that an atheling of Wessex should be alone, without so much as a housecarl to tend him and stand at his back at need. I minded what my father taught me since I could learn.

“Here is your duty, son Wilfrid. First to God; then to the king; then to the atheling, the king’s son, and then to father and mother; then to the shire reeve and the ealdorman, if so be that they are loyal; and then to helpless woman and friendless poor man. But to the weak first of all, against whomsoever will wrong them, whether it be the king or myself.”

“Where will you go, atheling?” I asked, speaking low, for I had many things warring in my mind.

“I cannot tell yet. I am an outcast.”

Then I knelt on the deck before him and made him take my hands between his own, and I said to him, while he tried to prevent me:



“Whither you go I follow, to be your man in good or ill. Little use I am, but some I may be; and at least the atheling of Wessex shall not say that none would follow him.”

“Wilfrid,” he cried, “I cannot suffer you to leave all for me.”

Then said Thorleif, who had been watching us in silence:

“Take him, prince, for you will need him. He has kept faith with us, though he might have escaped easily enough, because he thought his word withheld him. And he has proved himself a man in battle with the waters, as I know well. Let him go with you, and be glad of him.”



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"I am loath to take him from his folk to share my misfortunes."

"That is naught," said Thorleif. "Pay a trader who is going to England to tell other chapmen to pass the word to his folk where he is. They will hear in a month or less."

"Hearken to the chief, my prince," I said. "That is easy, and it will be all I care for. If my father hears that I am with you, he will be well content."

"More than content, Wilfrid," said Ecgbert, smiling. "We of the line of Ina know your folk of old. Well, be it as you will, for, on my word, I am lonely; and I think, comrade, that if I had choice of one to stand by me, the choice would have fallen on you."

"There was little need, chief, for you to tell me that Wilfrid of Frome was steadfast. We are old friends."

"Bide so, then. Friends are not easily made," answered Thorleif, laughing. "Now tell me what you are thinking of doing. Maybe I can advise you, being an adventurer by choice, as it seems you must be by need. But first I will offer you both a share in our cruise, if you will turn viking and go the way of Hengist and Horsa, your forbears. Atheling and thane's son you will be to us still, if you have to take an oar now and then."

"Kindly spoken," said Ecgbert; "but this I will tell you plainly. It had not come into my mind to think that Bertric needed to fear me until he showed that he did so. Had he left me to myself, I had been as good a subject of Wessex as Wilfrid here. But now it seems to me that maybe he has some good reason to think that the throne might be or should have been mine. Wherefore it is in my mind to seek the great King Carl, and learn what I can of his way of warfare, that presently, when the time comes, I may be the more ready to take that throne and hold it."

"Why, then," said Thorleif, watching the face of the atheling, "I will tell you this from out of my own knowledge of Wessex. If you learn what Carl can teach you, you will, if you can raise a thousand followers, walk through Wessex into Mercia, and thence home by East Anglia to London town, and there sit with three crowns on your head—the greatest king that has been in England yet. For your folk know no more of fighting, though they are brave enough, than a herd of cattle. But it will be many a long year before you know enough, and then you will need to be able to use your knowledge."

"Can you tell me where to find Carl the king? It may be that I have years enough before me to learn much."

"Those who want to learn do learn," quoth Thorleif. "It is in my mind that, unless a Flemish arrow ends you, Wessex will have to choose between you and Bertric presently."



Then he told us where he had last heard of the Frankish king, which was somewhere on the eastern Rhine border. And at last, being taken with the fearless way of the young atheling, said that if he would, he himself would see him as far on his way as the Rhine mouth. And in the end Ecgbert closed with the offer, and left the Frankish ship accordingly.



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Thorleif's men had sought every corner of her by that time, and had some store of silver money to show for their long chase, and were satisfied. As for the shipmen of their prize, I think they were well enough content to be let go in peace, and had little to say on the matter. Ecgbert was for giving them the gold ring which he had promised them as passage money, that being the only thing of value he had beyond his weapons; but Thorleif would not suffer him to do so, saying that his Danes would but take it from them straightway.

So the great trader lumbered off southward, and I and the atheling sat with Thron and Thorleif, and told and heard all the story of the raid on Weymouth until the stars came out. And I was well content; for no Saxon can ask aught better than to serve his lord, whether in wealth or distress.

Now I might make a long story of that voyage with Thorleif, for there were landings such as had been made at Weymouth, and once just such another fight. And ever the lands where we touched grew more strange to me, until we came to the low shores of the Rhine mouths, hardly showing above the gray waves of the sea which washed their sad-coloured sand dunes. And there Thorleif landed us at a fishing village, among whose huts rose the walls of a building which promised us shelter at least.

Terribly frightened were the poor folk at our coming, but they took us, with the guard Thorleif sent ashore with us, to the building, and it turned out to be a monastery, where we were most welcome. And there we bid farewell to the Danes, not without regret, for we had been good comrades on the voyage. There was a great difference between these crews of men from one village under their own chief, and the terrible swarms of men, gathered none knows whence, and with little heed to their leaders save in battle, which came in after years. We saw the Dane at his best.

Now after that the good abbot of the place passed us on from town to town until at last we came to Herulstad, where Carl the mighty lay with his army, still watching and fighting the heathen Saxons of the Rhinlands. And there Ecgbert was welcomed in all friendliness, and our wanderings were at an end. Even the arm of Quendritha could not reach the atheling here, though Carl and Offa were friendly, and messengers came and went between the two courts from time to time.

In that way I had messages sent home at last, and my mind was at rest. It was, however, nearly a year before my folk heard of me, as I learned afterward. But close on five years of warfare lay before me ere I should set foot on English ground again.

CHAPTER IV. HOW WILFRID MET AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE IN NORWICH MARKET.



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Looking back on them, it seems that those five years with Carl the Great were long, but in truth they went fast enough. With Ecgbert I went everywhere that war was to be waged, whether on the still half heathen, unwillingly christened Saxons, who were our own kin of the old land; or across on the opposite frontier, where the terrible Moors of Spain had not yet forgotten Roncesvalles. For us it was fighting, and always fighting, and little of that most splendid court of the king did we see; for Ecgbert had set himself to learn all that he might, and he was not one to do things by halves. Nor had I any wish to be anywhere but near him.

They were good years, therefore, if we had our share of danger and hardship to the full, and must needs bear the marks of it ever after. Once I was sorely wounded, and Ecgbert tended me through that as a brother rather than as my lord—even as I would have tended him, only that he was never hurt. Some of us grew to think that he had a charmed life; but I thought that he was kept for the sake of what was to be in days to come, when England was worn out with warfare between the kingdoms, and would welcome a strong hand over her from north to south.

I know not whether it was Carl himself who bade Ecgbert wait for that day, but it is likely. The atheling was in no haste to return to England, and it was his word that until he was needed he should bide here and learn.

But when the time went on he had thought for me, and one April day, as we rode together, he bade me go home and see that all was well with my folk. I had some fever on me at that time, for we were among the Frisian marshlands, and it had fallen on me when I was weak from the wound I spoke of, so that I could not shake it off. It came every third day, and held me in its grip for the afternoon, cold as ice, and then hot as fire, and so leaving me little the worse, but always thin and yellow to look on. Moreover, it always seemed to come on the wrong day for me, when I needed to be most busy, so that over and over again Ecgbert had to ride out without me. There were plenty more of us in the same case that year, when we were hunting Frisian heathen rebels to their strongholds in their fens.

“I must lose you in one way or the other, comrade,” Ecgbert said. “Either you will die here, which is the worst that could befall you, or else you must go home to England. Now there is a fair chance for you, for Carl is sending some messengers with presents to the young King of East Anglia, who has yet to be crowned. Go with them, and take him greetings from me.”

But before I could bring myself to agree to parting from him he had to put this before me in many ways, for I could not bear to leave him. And at last he laid his commands on me that I must go. He said it was time that he had a friend who knew his hopes in England, watching how matters went for him, and that I could best do it. So there was no way out of it, and I had to go.



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And when I knew that, there woke in me the longing for England which lies deep in the heart of every one of her sons, wheresoever he may be across the seas, and the days were weary before Carl's messengers should sail. I think that Ecgbert envied me, with the same longing on him; but one could only know it from his silences, or from the way in which he would talk to me of all that I should see again.

Two days before we sailed I was sent for by Carl himself; which was an honour indeed for me. Very kindly he thanked me for past services, as if I had not rather served Ecgbert than himself; and he gave me new arms of the best from head to foot, and a heavy bag of gold moreover, that I might not say that Carl the Great was sparing of his reward to those who had fought for him. I did not need that, for he had been more than generous to us for all these years, and any man knows that it is an honour to have served with the greatest of kings, and to have spoken freely with him.

I told Ecgbert that I must return to him when I was free from the fever, but he shook his head.

"Nay, but you have your work at home, and mine lies here," he said. "Your father has no other child, and, he needs you. I am well off here till that day we wot of comes. Wait for it in patience, and then we shall meet again. There will be no comrade like you for me till then, but I shall know I have one at least who will welcome me presently if you go now."

He made it light for me; but it was a hard parting, and I will say no more of it. The ship left the little Frisian port whence we sailed, and he stood on the shore and watched us until I could see him no more; then for a time a loneliness fell on me which made me a poor companion for the gay Frankish nobles with whom I was to go to East Anglia.

Not that it mattered much after an hour or so, when we met the waves of the open sea; for they were no sort of companion to any one, even to themselves, and the seamen had their laugh at them.

But for myself, not being troubled with the sickness, the sea worked wonders. For the first time for many a long month the ague fit had less hold on me when its time came next day. Then a Frisian sailor saw that I had the illness he knew so well and over well, and would have me take some bitter draught he made for me out of willow bark, saying that Carl's leeches knew somewhat less than nothing concerning ague. Whether it was the sea air, or the draught, or both, the fit did not come when next it was due; and the seaman said I was cured, for the power of the ill was broken. He had time to say that again, for we had head winds the whole way across, and were nigh a week before we made the mouth of the great river which goes up to Norwich, where we hoped to find the king, Ethelbert. And by that time the Franks were themselves again, and my colour was coming back, and the joy of home was on me, and we were gay enough.



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It was on the last day of April that we saw the English shores again, early in the morning, with the sun on the low green hills of Norfolk. By sunset we were far in the heart of the land, at Norwich, and across the wide river the cuckoo was calling. We had left a leafless land, and here all was decked in the sweet green of the first leaves, and all the banks were yellow with the primroses. I heard the Franks scoffing at the houses of the town, and at the wooden tower of the church which rose from among them; but I cared not at all, for nothing like the beauty of sky and land had they to show me beyond the sea.

And when the men thronged to the wharf, it seemed to me that never had I looked on their like for goodliness and health, as their great English laugh rang out over their work, and the sound of the English voices made the old music for me.

The king was not at Norwich, but inland at Thetford, and there we must seek him. But his steward rode down to us from the hall, which stands a mile from the river, on its hill. Thither we were led in all state as the messengers of the great king, and there we bided for a day or two while they made ready a train of horses which should take us to our journey's end. We had some wondrous gifts for Ethelbert from Carl.

There is only one of these Frankish companions of mine of whom I need speak, and that one was a young noble from our old land, named Werbode. I had seen somewhat of him in these last wars, for he had led the men of his father, and had been set under Ecgbert, who had won to high command. So we were both Saxons, and of about the same age; and it was pleasant to find ourselves together on the voyage, for he was a good comrade, and, like myself, not altogether thinking and feeling with the Franks.

So we saw much of each other on the voyage, and now it was pleasant to take him about the old town, and show him what the new home of the Saxon kin was like here in England. There was a great fair going on at this time, and we enjoyed it; for though there was not the richness of wares we had been wont to see at the like gatherings of merchants and chapmen beyond the seas, here were mirth and freedom, and rough plenty, which were as good, or better.

And presently he said that here we had horses which were as fine as any he had ever seen, and that put a thought into my mind. I would buy one for myself rather than ride one found me by the town reeve; for I had to get home to Somerset, and I would make no delay.

"Well, then," says Werbode, "let us go and see if you people have forgotten the ancient Saxon manner of horse dealing."

So we went to the horse fair, and there our foreign dress drew every dealer in the place round us as soon as I had looked in the mouth of one likely steed. After which, as may be supposed, it was not likely that I could make any choice at all; but we two sat on the

bench outside the town gate, and had, I think, every horse in the fair trotted past us, whether good or bad. And at last the noise, and to tell the truth the wrangling of the dealers, grew tiresome, and we went our way, some other buyer having taken their notice for a moment.



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And then it chanced that we came to a quiet place where a man, armed and with two armed helpers, had a string of slaves for sale. The poor folk were lying and sitting on the ground, with that dull look on them which I hate to see, and I was going to pass them, throwing them a penny as I did so. Werbode was laughing at the ways of the horse dealers, and did not notice them; for the sight was common enough after any war of ours with Carl, when the captives who could not ransom them were sold.

And then one of them leaped up with a great cry, and hailed me by name.

“Wilfrid! Wilfrid of Weymouth!”

I turned sharply enough at that call, for the last thing that one could have expected was that my name should be known here in the land of the East Angles. And who of all whom I knew in the years gone by would name me as of Weymouth? I had but been there as a stranger.

“Wilfrid the swimmer!” said the man, stretching his bound hands to me.

The slave trader cracked his whip and rated the man for daring to call to me thus, bidding him be silent. But I lifted my hand, and he held his peace, doffing his cap to me with all reverence for the fine dress and jewelled weapons—Carl’s gift—that I wore.

I did not heed his words of apology, but looked at the ragged, brown-faced man who called to me. He was thin and wiry, with a yellow beard, and his hands were hard with some heavy work. Yet his face was in some way not altogether strange to me, though I could not name him. He was no thrall of ours or of my cousin’s, so far as I could tell.

“Wilfrid—thane—whatever you are now,” he said, for I would not suffer the trader to prevent his words, “you gave me a black eye at Weymouth, and thereafter drank ‘skoal’ to me when we chased the trading ship.”

Thereat Werbode laughed.

“Faith,” he said, “if every thrall to whom I have given a black eye or so has a claim on me—”

But his words went on unheard as far as I was concerned. I seemed to have the very smell of the smoke of burning Weymouth in my nostrils, and the wild rowing song came back to me. I minded the man well, and it went to my heart to see the free Danish warrior tied here at the mercy of this evil-eyed slaver, for I knew that he was as free born as myself.

I turned sharply on the merchant, and asked him how it came about that he had this man for sale.



“He is a freeman, and I know him,” I said.

Nevertheless it came into my mind that he had been taken prisoner at the time of some such landing as that wherein I had first seen him.

“He is a shipwrecked foreigner, lord,” was the answer; “a masterless man whom I bought from the Lindsey thane on whose manor shore he was stranded.”

But it seemed to me that there was a look of fear in the eyes of this slave trader. It came when I, whom he had taken for a Frank noble from my dress, spoke to him in good Wessex. Whereby I had a shrewd guess that all was not so fair and lawful as he would make it seem.



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“He lies,” growled the Dane. “Some thrall picked me up, and this man took me from him. He was on the prowl for castaways on the morn of the storm. Nigh dead I was, or would have fought.”

He spoke low and quickly, and the trader seemed not to understand his Danish. But I saw that he spoke the truth.

Now I think that if this shipmate of mine had been fairly taken captive as he raided, I should have let him take the reward of his work. But this chance was a different matter.

“Show me the receipt for payment to that thane of whom you speak,” I said. “If you can, well and good; if not, then we will go to the sheriff and see this matter righted. I know the man as a freeman.”

“Ay, in his own land,” said the trader, beginning to bluster. “What is that to me? Here in England he is masterless—”

“No,” said the Dane; “this is my master. Heard you not how I owned to a black eye from him?”

And he looked at me in a half proud way which told me how the bonds had broken him, and yet how they had not yet made him shameless if he must beg me for help to freedom.

Then said Werbode quietly:

“Where is that receipt? I suppose that if you paid for his man, my friend has to repay you for ransoming him. It is a simple matter.”

“I do not carry it with me, stranger. You know not this land of ours. It is at my inn. I can show it, of course.”

“Well, then,” said I, “I will take my man and answer for him. Bring the writing to the house of the sheriff, where I lodge, and what is there set down I will pay you.”

Now there were a dozen idlers gathered by this time, and seeing that the trader hesitated, I called to one, who seemed to be a forester by his staff and green jerkin, and bade him fetch the sheriff, if he could find him. I would have the matter settled here. Whereon the slaver gave in.

“Well, then,” he grumbled, “I hold you answerable for him. Take him, and get your money ready.

“Let him free,” he said, turning to his men.



That they did with somewhat more readiness than one would have expected. The Dane shook himself and looked round him. And then, without a word of warning, he sprang straight at the slaver and wrested his whip from him. Then he swung him round by the collar of his leather jerkin, and lashed him in spite of the sword which the man drew. The idlers shouted, and Werbode laughed, while the two men had all they could do to prevent the other slaves from breaking away; or else they themselves had no reason to object to seeing their master tasting his own sauce.

The heavy plaits of the whiplash curled round the legs of the trader, and he writhed. They caught his short sword and twitched it from his hand, to send it flying among the gathering crowd, and then the man lay down and howled for mercy. But the thralls of the crowd were only too pleased with the sport, and as I and Werbode did not interfere, to do so was no one else's business.



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At last the Dane held his hand, and left his tyrant groaning. He broke the whip stock and twisted the thong from the end of the fragment. Then he tied it round the neck of the slaver, and rose up and saluted me in the way of the Danish courtman.

“Whither, lord?” he asked, quite coolly. “I am ready.”

“Better go back to the sheriffs,” I said. “Maybe we shall have to answer for this, and we will tell him first.”

“No,” he said, with the ghost of a smile; “you will not set eyes on this man again. What I told you is true. He has no more right to me than the thrall who found me; less, maybe, for I suppose the thrall would have taken me to his lord, who had some claim on me for a castaway.”

The crowd closed in round the slaver, and the other slaves raised a sort of wretched cheer as we went away. Soon we turned the corner of the street and came to the outskirts of the fair again, and none had followed us. There the decent folk stared at us and our ragged follower somewhat, and a thought came to me.

“Comrade,” I said, for I could not mind his name, “let me rig you out afresh before we part.”

“They call me Erling,” he said. “Have you so many men to serve you that we must needs part?”

“No,” I answered, “but I am no sort of a master to serve. I will help an old comrade home, however.”

“Home was burnt a year ago,” he said. “Let me bide with you, thane; I must be some man’s man. You will go back to the west presently, I suppose?”

“Yes, after a time. What of that? for it is not your way.”

“Your way is mine, unless you drive me from you. You have given me my freedom, and I know it. Let me serve you freely.”

“Well,” said I, “you will be my only servant when once I leave King Carl’s train, with which I have come.”

“So much the better,” he said. “I am likely to be as handy a servant as you can find, in most things.”

“Oh,” said Werbode, laughing, “take him, Wilfrid. Free service is not to be despised. Moreover, if you want any one well and soundly beaten, here is your man.”



“I can keep the thane’s back at a pinch, young sir,” said the Dane quietly. “That mayhap is more than most will do if they are hired.”

“Faith, I believe you could,” said Werbode, looking the man’s wiry frame up and down.

“Take him, Wilfrid.”

“Why, then,” said I, “so I will, and gladly, for just so long as I please you as a master. And when you will leave me, you shall go without blame. Now let us see to clothing you afresh.”

So we went to the quarter of the fair where such things as we needed were to be had, and there we took pleasure in fitting my new follower out in all decent housecarl attire, not by any means sparing for good leather jerkin and Norwich-cloth hose and hood, for I would not have him looked down on by our Frankish servants. And, indeed, with weapon on hip and round helm on head, over washed face and combed hair, he seemed a different man altogether. The old free walk of the seaman came back to him, and he looked the world in the face again as the free warrior he was.



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He had been Thorleif's own court man, he told me, and knew the ways of one who should follow his lord, whether in hall or field, and I will say at once that so he did. I had little to teach him beyond some Saxon ways which came strangely to him at first.

We went back to the king's hall, and there I told the sheriff somewhat of the business with the slaver, and he laughed.

"Not the first time I have heard the like," he said. "If the man complains, pay him. But if he is a man stealer, as is likely, you will hear naught of him, and he will get him from Norwich as fast as he may."

As I suppose he did, for neither I nor the sheriff heard more of him, and next day his place in the market was empty.

I asked Erling of his shipwreck, and if Thorleif had been lost, but he could not tell me. He had been washed off the fore deck as the ship met a great breaker, and with him had come an oar, which he clung to for long hours, making his way shoreward as best he might. The ship was in danger at the time, and he lost sight of her very soon. Presently some eddy of tide took him and cast him on the sands of Humber mouth, and there he lay till he was found. That was a month ago, and since then he had been hawked up and down the coast with the other slaves till we met.

"But I was such a scarecrow, and so savage withal, that no man would look at me," he said. "It was a good day for me when the knave brought me to Norwich. Mayhap it was a lucky day for him also, for sooner or later I should have got adrift, and then you would not have been looking on to hold me from paying him somewhat more than a beating."

Next day was the last of the fair, and again I went to seek a horse, with my new follower after me. There was less choice but more quiet, and soon I found that Erling knew more of the points of a steed than I did. A Dane is a born horse dealer. So I sent him one way while I went another, and when I was almost despairing of finding what I thought would suit me, he came in search of me, leading a great skew-bald horse, bright brown and white in broad splashes all over him, in no sort of pattern. After him came a man who might be a farmer, and looked as if he cared not whether he sold the beast or kept him.

"The best horse in the fair, thane," Erling said to me. "I will not praise his colour; but if you forget that and look at his build, you will like him."

So I did; but if a man wanted to be noticed everywhere in such wise that folk would reckon a week's time from the day when the man on the skew-bald rode through the village, he could not choose a better mount, and I said so, laughing.



“There is somewhat in that,” Erling allowed; “but if you ride through the foe at the head of your men on such an one, none can deny that you did it. Nor can your men say that they lost sight of you.”

In the end I mounted and tried the horse. Presently I rode him out of the town and away across the heaths, and had no fault to find with him. Indeed, by the time that I brought him back I did not care if he was of all the colours of the rainbow, for he was the best horse I ever backed.



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Then the franklin who owned him asked me a long price for him, and I left Erling to settle that. Afterwards I knew that the man was a known breeder of these horses, and that men thought me lucky to get the steed. I think the Dane managed to bate somewhat of the price, but very little, for it was a matter of taking or leaving with the owner.

After that I bought a horse for Erling, or rather he chose one and I paid for it; but that was a small matter, for the last day of the fair brought prices down.

Then I had to put up with the jests of my friend Werbode concerning my new horse, and the older Franks thought his colour was a bit of vanity on my part. Werbode said that he was an unsafe beast to go chicken stealing on, for he would be too well known on a dark night; and the others said that they supposed that men would know that I had come home now. But that sort of jest one gets used to in camp life, and I cared not. I had a better steed than any one of them, whether here or across the sea, and presently, as we travelled toward Thetford, they knew it, and forgot to laugh at his skin.

So we left Norwich, and rode across the moorlands to find the king; and the gladness of homecoming grew on me every day, so that I longed for the state affair to be over, that I might turn my horse's head south and west for my own home. And thus, in all gladness, and joying in every mile of the way, we came to Thetford, strong with its earthen ramparts above its still river, and were made most welcome at the hall of Ethelbert the king. There had gone messengers before us to tell of our coming, and the greeting was fitting for the men of Carl the Great.

Truly I saw the Franks smile at one another as we were led into the great hall, homely and pleasant, with its open timbered roof and central hearth, arms and antlers and heads of forest game on walls, and bright hangings round the high place at the upper end; for it was but a hut compared with the palaces of their own master. But when Ethelbert the king came from his chamber to greet us, they had no eyes for aught but him. Young and handsome and free of speech and look as he was, none could doubt that here was one who was worthy of his throne, for in every way he seemed a king indeed. He minded me of Ecgbert, and if he did that, it may be certain that I need add no more to my praise of him.

Now it happened that the day after we reached Thetford was a Sunday, and I need not tell what a pleasure it was to me to hear again the old English services that once I had thought so long, as a boy will. And on that day, for the first time, it came to me that my man, Erling the viking, was a stark heathen, Odin's man. Truly he came to the church with me, and there he stood and stared at all that went on, quietly and reverently enough, but in such wise that I thought that he had somewhere seen the like before. So presently when we came forth from the church I asked him if he had no knowledge of the faith.



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“Ay,” he said; “I have helped to burn a church or two in my time, and now I am sorry therefor. I have heard good words in this place, so that I think I know why you were ready to risk gold to free a captive. Let me go with you again.”

“I will find some good priest who shall tell you more and teach you,” said I.

But he shook his head.

“That is another matter,” he answered. “Let be for a time. I am content to go your way and see what it is; but no man, if he is worth aught, will leave the gods of his fathers offhand, not even for the faith which is good for you and for Carl the king, and this king here who has death written on his handsome face.”

“What mean you by that?” I asked, almost angrily. “On the face of Ethelbert?”

“Ay,” he answered. “Cannot you see it?”

“Seldom have I seen a stronger or more healthy man! This is sheer foolishness.”

“I do not speak of health,” he answered. “Eh, well, we of the old race have the second sight now and then. On my word, I wish I had it not. Pay no heed to me and you will; it is best not.”

Then he laughed, because I was almost angered with him, and said that maybe fasting with the slaver had made his mind full of forebodings.

“There was a boding in it at one time that the slaver was nigh his death, if so be that I got loose,” he said. “That ended in a whipping for him. But I would that this Ethelbert had not that thin red line round his neck. It sets strange thoughts in one’s head.”

I told him to hold his peace, and he did so. But somewhat that night made me look to see what he meant. The king had no line such as he spoke of on his sunburned throat, so far as I could see.

CHAPTER V. HOW WILFRID MET THE FLINT FOLK, AND OTHERS.

It must not be supposed that the gifts of Carl the Great were given, and his greetings spoken, offhand, as it were, by us. There must needs be a gathering of the Witan of the East Anglians, that all might be done with full honour both to Carl and his embassy. I must say that it somewhat irked me to be treated with much ceremony, as a Frank and paladin of the great king, instead of being hailed in all good fellowship as a thane of England, who was glad to get home again. However, there was no help for it till our



errand was done; for it was out of his goodness that Carl had given me a place among his messengers, saying that they must have some one of their number who could act as interpreter, and I would not be ungrateful even in seeming.

So I had no chance yet of private speech with Ethelbert, when I might give the message from Ecgbert; which was indeed the main reason of my coming here instead of going straight home. That chance would best be sought when the state business was done; for since no man in all England rightly knew where Ecgbert was at this time, and he had no mind that many should, my business would wait well enough. So I bent myself to enjoy the feasting and the hunting parties the court made for us all; and pleasant it was, in all truth. And every day fresh companies of the great folk of the land came in, till the town was full of thanes and ladies and their trains, gathered to see and hear what had come from beyond the seas.



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So one day I rode with Werbode, who was all eagerness to see the land (to which his forbears would not come when Hengist asked them, by the way, as he told me) across the great heaths that lie north and east of Thetford, with Erling after us, leading two greyhounds which had been lent us from the royal kennels. There were bustards in droves on these heaths, and roe deer to be found easily enough by those who had skill to seek them in the right places. The bustards were nesting; but that is the time when one can best course the great birds, and many a good gallop we had after them.

Whereby we lost ourselves presently, and made light of it until we had wandered for some hours, and then remembered that we had never seen a man of whom to ask the way back to the town. Of course we tried to make our way back by the sun, but ever there would seem to grow up a thicket or wood before us, which we must skirt, or some marshy lake shone across our path in a hollow of the heath; and it was slow work, and the horses grew weary as ourselves. The hounds trailed after us with bent heads, hardly rousing themselves to tug at the long leash when a hare scudded from its form away from us, for they had had their fill of sport by that time. And it grew near sunset before we met with any trace of man. There was not even a track across the wild upland which we could follow.

"We shall have to make a night out of it," said I at last. "However, that will not matter. Here is game enough for us and to spare."

"And no ale to wash it down withal," said Werbode and Erling in a breath.

"Why, then, we will find the best water we can," I answered; and we rode on our way looking for a clear pool.

And then the first sound which told us that any one was near came to us.

There rose from off to our left, where a patch of woodland lay, a cry that made each one of us rein in his horse and stare at the others.

"That was some one in dire distress," said I.

"A woman crying for help," said Werbode.

Then we forgot our own plight, and set spurs to our horses and rode toward the place whence the cry came. We heard it once more, and that quickened us. My horse pricked up his ears, and broke into a long stride that left the other two behind in a few minutes, as if he knew that there was need for dire haste. I had to ride carefully, too, for there were holes and great stones among the heather.

So I was the first to see what was amiss; and it seemed bad enough. Round the spur of the cover I came, and there before me I saw a wild throng of men, savage as any I have ever seen in the mines of our Mendips—bareheaded save for great shocks of black hair,



barefooted and hoseless, dressed in untanned hides of deer and sheep, and armed with uncouth clubs and spears on rough ash poles. They did not hear my coming, and they had their faces from me at first. Twenty or more of them there were; and two horses rolled on the ground



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hard by them, and they had been hamstrung, as one glance told me. One man, too, in the dress of a housecarl, lay not far off, wounded sorely. He saw me, and beckoned wildly to me. And next I knew why, for out of the throng came three men dragging a lady roughly away from the rest; and as their comrades parted to let them pass, I saw another man on the ground, and with his back to a third a gray-haired noble, who held back the wild men with long sweeps of his sword. He was trying to follow those who held the lady.

I saw all that at once, in a flash, for it broke on my eyes the moment I cleared the thickets of the cover; and as I saw I shouted and bore down on the throng, calling to my comrades to hasten. Then the men knew that I was on them.

They yelled to one another, and, without waiting to see if more followed me, left the lady and the men who fought for her, and scattered, flying. It seemed to me that the best thing I could do was to keep them in a mind to fly, and I rode after them. One or two I rode down; and I heard a wild outcry as some met Werbode and Erling when they came up. But they did not make for the wood, as I expected, but for the open heath. They ran like deer up the swell of a rising ground and passed over it.

When I came to the top of that I saw a wide stretch of bare land before me, like miles of that which we had passed, hardly heather-covered, and stony, and over it fled the men. There was no place where they could hide. And yet before my very eyes they vanished. One after another they went till but one was left, still flying. I took my eyes from him for a moment, and he too was gone. There was not so much as a bustard on the heath, which a moment before had been full of fleeting figures.

"They are trolls, thane!" cried Erling from beside me.

He, too, had seen the moorland and the men who had gone. Then Werbode rode up to me, and he looked and gasped.

"They went over this hill! I would swear it!" he said. "Where are they?"

"I do not know," I answered blankly, and, to tell the truth, with a bit of a chill down my back. "I should be better pleased if I did."

"See," said Erling, pointing, "there are the mounds wherein they live. They are trolls;" and with that he began to mutter I know not what heathen spells against them.

There were little low mounds everywhere, as I saw now.

"Trolls!" said Werbode, with a laugh. "One can't slay trolls. I saw Wilfrid cut one down, and there he lies even yet."



“Nay, but one can, if so be the sword is rightly charmed,” answered Erling.

“Well, they have gone,” said I. “Do you two go and see after these folk they were attacking, and I will bide here to watch that they do not come back.”

“That is the work of the man, not the master,” quoth Erling. “Here I bide, for I have runes which are of power against any trolls. I am not afraid.”



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Nor did he seem so; and I told him to call if but one man showed himself, and so rode back to the little party we had saved. The man who I had seen was of rank was bending over the lady, who lay where the wild men had left her; and his unhurt servant was watching beside him. The wounded man was sitting up and trying to bind a hurt in his thigh with a scarf, which, from its gold fringes, was plainly that of his mistress.

The thane rose up when he heard us coming, and saluted us. He was a handsome man of sixty years or so, richly dressed, who had plainly had a bad fall when his horse went down. There were three or four of his assailants lying where they had been round him as I came.

“Many thanks, sirs,” he said. “It was going hard with us when you came up. Now is no time for ceremony, or I would say more. I do not know if my daughter lives yet.”

I dismounted, and Werbode held my horse while I went to the side of the thane and looked at his charge. Wonderfully beautiful that young maiden seemed in the red light of the sunset, even though her face was white and her fair hair all tangled over her shoulders, and her rich dress all in tatters from the hands of the wild men. And at first I thought that she was dead. Then I minded that unless she had died of fright, which was possible, I had seen no harm done her beyond rough handling, while those who held her had fled from me without delay or heed to how she fell from their hands; and I knelt and tried to find the pulse in her wrist, very gently.

Her white hand fell limp and cold, but the fluttering beat was there.

“Not dead, thane, but fainting,” I said. “Let your man get water; there is a pool yonder.”

The housecarl started toward it, but as he passed one of the helpless horses, he turned to that and brought me a horn from the saddlebags. It had wine in it, and that was better. The old thane tried to get some of it into the lips of the lady, and succeeded while I rubbed her hands.

And all the while Werbode had his eyes on Erling, whose gaunt form was clear against the sky as he sat still on his horse and watched the heath for the trolls to return on us. Behind him the two hounds sat, careless.

“She is coming round,” said the thane, with a sigh of relief.

Seeing that so she was, I rose up and stood aside, not caring to be right before her eyes as she opened them, lest she should be frightened again. Slowly she came to herself, trembling, and looking round fearful of what she might find about her. But when she saw only her father and the man, she tried to smile and sat up, with a little clutch at her disordered dress as if she wanted to straighten it.



“That is better,” said the thane heartily. “Those thieves have fled, and all will be well, thanks to our good friends here.”

The maiden looked round, and saw that I was a stranger, and at that the colour came back of a sudden to her cheeks, and she tried to set her hair hastily out of her eyes. Whereat her father laughed at her, and then she was herself again.



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"I think we had better be going on before it grows dark," I said. "Do you know the road to Thetford?"

"My man here does. But you will not leave us—at least yet?"

"We are seeking the same road," I answered. "Now our horses are at the service of the lady and yourself. I suppose we are not far from the town, if we cannot find it;" and I laughed.

"Matter of ten or twelve miles, lord," said the housecarl.

"Why, then, the sooner we go the better. Lucky that the May twilight is long."

"We have met you in the nick of time," said the old thane courteously. "From your dress I take it that you are one of the Frankish paladins we were on the way to see. But do they always talk good Wessex at the court of King Carl?"

"No," laughed Werbode. "Sometimes they talk old Saxon—as I do."

The thane bowed, and let that matter rest. Then he looked ruefully at the two crippled horses, and set his arm round the lady, who had risen and was leaning on him.

"I thank you for that offer of a horse," he said. "I had twelve good men with me when we started across this moor, and you see all who are left. One after another they have been shot by unseen men as we rode, until these swarmed out on us as you saw."

"Who are they?" I asked, rolling up my cloak to set it pillion-wise behind my saddle for the lady.

"The flintknappers, I suppose," he said. "But I am a stranger to these parts, and I have but heard of them as dwelling about these heaths."

Then I would have the thane mount my horse; and I lifted the maiden up behind him, and wrapped Werbode's cloak round her, having a smile and thanks for the service. And when they were ready I whistled for Erling, and he came back to us at a canter, looking behind him now and then. But there was no sign of any follower.

"Ten miles from the town," I said to him, "and more heath to cross. We must hurry. But we cannot leave those horses to suffer."

"Our horses; and I have tended them, lord," said the rough housecarl, with a bit of a shake in his voice. "Leave that to me."



He drew his seax, and we went on. The poor beasts could never rise again, and that was the only way. The thane knew, and rode round the wood end, and we went with him. Then Erling lifted the wounded man on his own horse, and walked beside him.

“You and I will ride in turn,” said Werbode. “As I am mounted, I will take first turn for a mile or two. It will be all the same in the end.”

Presently Erling came alongside me, leaving the housecarl to mind his comrade. He held out a broken arrow to me.

“I said they were trolls,” he remarked. “See, this is an elf shot.”

And truly the arrow which he had drawn from one of the horses had as well wrought a flint head as I have ever seen—lustrous black, and covered with tiny chippings.

“It is a better made head than usual,” I said; “but many a thrall has naught but flint-headed arrows in his quiver as he tends the swine in the forest. They are good enough against the forest beasts.”



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Erling laughed. "Maybe. But they have slain ten of this party. I have no mind to hear them whistling about my ears again."

"Again?" said I.

"Oh ay; they had a shot or two at me yonder. The arrows came from nowhere and missed me, so it did not seem worth while to call you. I could not see any one."

Now it seemed to me that I had found a cool and valiant man in this Dane.

"I think that I should have wanted to take cover," I said. "These are perilous folk to have to do with. I wonder what became of them?"

"Gone into the mounds we saw," said he. "Betimes in our land men have seen such mounds raised, as it were, on pillars at night, and under them halls full of dancing trolls. But if the seer will go near them, all is gone. And mostly thereafter he dies."

"Not many trolls could get under those mounds we saw," I said. "See, there are more here; they are too small for dwellings."

There was indeed one of the heaps of earth close at hand to us, and Werbode rode toward it to see that none of the wild men lurked in its shelter. He reached it, and then his horse started and leaped aside, almost falling; and through a rattle of falling stones my comrade called to the steed to "hold up."

Whereon we supposed, of course, that he had been served as the horses of the thane had been crippled, and Erling and I ran to him, sword in hand, bidding the others go on. But when we came to the side of Werbode, we found him staring into a pit which seemed to have opened under the weight of his horse; and there was no sign of other danger.

"Strange folk these," he said. "I suppose this is a trap. The ground over it was as solid as anywhere, to all seeming. I was nigh into it."

The pit was ten feet deep or so, and it was plain that out of it had come what made the mound, though one could not see how. When I looked in I saw that the ground had given way over the roof of a passage hewn in the soft chalk, and that the opening of it must have fallen in long ago. The twisted stems of the sparse heather on the mound and all around it told of years, if not of long ages, that had passed undisturbed.

"There is the trolls' house," said Erling, shrinking back somewhat.

The level sunlight showed me walls of dull gray chalk, with the marks of the pick on them still. There was a layer of black and white flints bedded in either wall, halfway up, and on the floor were piled stones chosen from it carefully. I wondered who had



handled them, and when. Erling moved a little aside, and a shaft of sunlight darted down the passage and reached its end, and showed me those who had wrought here.

Two white skeletons sat against the wall, with a pile of flints between them. There was a lamp hewn from chalk on the top of that, and the stain of its smoky flame was on the wall behind it. One man had a pick made of the brow tine of an antler, greater than any which the red deer carry nowadays, across his knees, and another like pick lay by the bones of the other skeleton. That one had a broken thigh, and he seemed to bend over it in pain.



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“Holy saints,” said Werbode, in a whisper, “they were buried alive!”

So they must have been; but who shall know when? They had delved in the chalk for the flints they needed for their weapons, and their mine had fallen in at the mouth, and they could not escape. The stones had, doubtless, broken the leg of that one in falling. But by the token of the deer-horn pick I take it that it was ages ago when this happened, maybe before the days of the Welshmen whom we found here. Yet even then, as the red sun lit up the place of their death, we could see that the marks of their chalky hands bided on the handles of their picks, fresh as if made yesterday.

“Come away,” said Erling. “I like it not. This is over troll-like for me.”

I do not think that either of us was sorry to leave that sight. We went one on either side of Werbode, with our arms across the crupper of his horse, and hastened after the thane and his charge, who were half a mile away by this time, waiting for us. But we never heard any elvish arrow whistling after us, or saw any more of the uncouth folk.

I told him as we went on of the pit we had seen, and how Werbode thought it was a trap. Whereon the housecarl laughed a little, and said that it was but an ancient flint working. The men who had fallen on the party were the descendants of those who had made it. The flints had been worked here from time untold even till now, and those who worked them today had all the craft of their forebears.

“Why, then, they went into their workings when they fled from us,” I said.

“No doubt, thane. Where else should they go?” he said. “They came out of them on us.”

“I wonder you brought your master and the lady across this heath at all,” I said “it is a perilous place.”

“It grew late, and it is the nearest way,” said the man humbly. “Nor did I ever hear that the flintknappers, as we call them, harmed any.”

“Nor did I,” said the old thane. “It is somewhat fresh to me. Maybe parties like ours have passed here so often during this last week that at last the sight of gold and jewels has roused them to try to take from a weak band.”

So we talked and went on as fast as we might, all the while keeping a lookout around us. The lady had, in some way which is beyond me altogether, set herself in such array again that I, for one, could hardly tell that aught had been awry on her; and I wondered that Werbode’s red cloak had never seemed so graceful a garment on his broad shoulders. But she said little or nothing, leaning her head on her father as she rode with her arm round him, save when we asked her if all was well. I think she was very tired.



And so at last, with no more adventure, we came to the well-worn track which we were making for, and by-and-by, in the May moonlight, saw the twinkling lights of Thetford town, seeming to welcome us into the shelter of its protecting ramparts. I was glad to see them; but I had enjoyed that long tramp back, for some reason which was not plain to me, unless it had been the talk of the old thane and my comrades, and the sense of escape from danger.



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Now we came to the great hall, and the grooms thronged round us to take the horses; and seeing that there was a lady, one told the steward, and he bustled out to help her. But there I was at hand, and lifted the maiden from the horse and set her on her feet, having to support her for a moment, for she was weary and stiff. So she stumbled a little and laughed at herself, and thanked me, and was glad of my arm to help her toward the great door of the hall.

Werbode and Erling went off with the horses to the stables, and some of the housecarls took charge of the wounded man. I heard him groan heavily as they took him from the horse.

Then the thane gave his name to the steward, and that was the first time I had learned it.

“Sighard, thane of Mundesley, and his daughter, the Lady Hilda.”

They were led into the hall; and I went my way, or was going, for I had only passed down the steps, when some one called me.

“Paladin, one moment!”

I turned, for the Frankish title could be meant for no one but myself, and there was the old thane at the door.

“I did but take my daughter into the house, and I have yet to thank you and your comrades for your help. Believe me, I know how great it has been; but one is confused at these times. I think we shall meet again?”

“Doubtless,” I said. “But it was chance which brought us to you, as we wandered.”

“For which chance I have need to be thankful. It is not every one, however, who can make use of a chance as you did. If you had stood and stared for a moment instead of spurring your horse, I should have had a flint spear among my ribs. They ache at the thought thereof even now. Tell me your names at least.”

“Wilfrid, son of the thane of Frome, in Somerset,” I said. “I have served with King Carl for some years, and am here with his messages on my way home. My comrade is Werbode of old Saxony, one of the messengers also. The third of us is my man, a Dane.”

Sighard laughed, as if highly amused. “That explains it all. I have been puzzling all the way hither at the divers ways in which you three spoke. Your Dane’s tongue is almost good Anglian, and yet not quite. Werbode’s Saxon is quaint, but good enough, as it should be; but broad Wessex from the mouth of a seeming Frank was too much. Not the best master in the world could compass it for you. Now I am right glad that you are



of England. When she has got over her fright and is rested, the girl shall thank you also.”

He shook hands with me heartily and left me, following his daughter. Presently I saw him as we sat at table, and he lifted his cup to me; but though he was on the high place, where of course we were set, I was too far off to speak to him.

Now I cannot say that I had much right to that title of paladin he had given me, unless it was as a messenger from the palace of King Carl. Thane I was in Wessex, now that I had come of age, by right of lands that came to me from my mother’s side; but our folk got hold of the Frankish title, and used it for any one of us, so that I had to accept it. I did tell the old noble who led us that it was not by my wish that so they called me; but he stroked his beard and laughed at me.



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“What does it matter?” he said; “it is naught but the old name for a palace officer. It is near enough. Trouble not about it; for if we have taken it to mean a warrior noble—well, I will not say that you have not deserved it, else Carl had never sent you with us.”

One may guess that at supper that night I tried to see the Lady Hilda. But among all the bright array of ladies at that feast I could not spy her. And perhaps that is not to be wondered at, for long ere we came up all the baggage had been lost. By this time her court dress was being worn by swart women of the flint folk, far on the wild heaths. I dare say they fought over it.

CHAPTER VI. HOW WILFRID SPOKE WITH ETHELBERT THE KING.

Early on the next morning Ethelbert the king sent for me, to ask me concerning this affair with the flintknappers. Very pleasant he was, too, and the first thing he did was to laugh at himself for taking me for a Frank.

“I ought to have seen that you were a Saxon,” he said; “and if I had had the courtesy to speak with you, I should have learned it at once. I had a good friend once in that atheling of yours, who is lost to us.”

His face clouded as he said that, and but that there were a dozen courtiers present, I should have told him that Ecgbert was found again for him, then and there; however, that would wait, and I passed it over. Then he asked me of myself, and what I would do when the state affair was ended; and I told him that I had no greater wish than to find my way home at once.

“That is a long ride,” he said. “I think we can assist you. It is in my mind to ride westward myself in a week or so to see Offa, on a matter of business. That will take us far on your way, if you care to ride with me.”

Now I wondered what this business might be, for the honest face of the young king flushed somewhat as he spoke thereof; and one or two of the courtiers behind his chair smiled at one another meaningly. That was not for me to ask, but whatever it might be, I was glad of the kindly offer. I thanked him, and then we spoke of the flint folk, and I told him all I knew.

Then, of course, we must talk of the court of King Carl, and of all that I had seen and done beyond the sea, and the time went fast. I had my breakfast with the king there in his private chamber, for he wanted to hear of laws and the like, of which, to tell the truth, I could let him know little.



“Best ask the old paladin who is the head of the embassy, King Ethelbert,” I said presently. “I can tell you how Carl manages the sword; but of the way he wields the sceptre, I cannot. Mayhap I shall mislead you.”

“No,” he answered; “I would hear how his way seems to a plain Englishman as myself. My chancellor shall talk with the paladin.”

Then at last he started up, and cried:

“Why, I have forgotten somewhat. I promised to take you to my mother’s bower to be thanked by the Lady Hilda. Come with me at once.”



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“There is Werbode,” I said.

“Let him wait,” said Ethelbert. “It is the thane on the great pied horse whom she will thank.”

I wondered whether it was the steed or myself she remembered best, which was not courteous of me. Ethelbert laughed and told me so, adding that he thought after all that the horse would be noticed first. He was the first thing which had caught his own eye when we rode into the palace yard on our coming, certainly, so I had to stand another jest or two about him.

We came to the bower, across a fair garden where the May flowers were gay and sweet, and the king knocked at the door. It was a handsome, low-built little hall which stood at right angles to the great one, so that it had a door opening on the high place where we sat at table. Its windows on this garden side were wide and high, and this morning the heavy shutters were flung back from each, and the curtains were drawn aside, for it faced south to the warm sun. There were bright faces of the queen-mother’s ladies at one or two as they sat in the deep window seats working or spinning, and anywise laughing with one another; whereon I grew bashful, for of ladies’ talk and presence I have a sort of fear, being more used to camp than court, as I have said.

However, we went in, and there we stood on a floor strewn with sweet sedge in a fair hall, tapestry hung, full of sunlight, and of ladies also. There was a high place here at one end, and on it sat the mother of the king, not in any state, but working at a little loom, whose beams were all carven and made beautiful for her royal hands. There were two ladies helping her, and they rose as the king entered, as did all the others, and there was a sudden silence.

I should have been happier if only they had paid no heed to us, and with all my heart I wished myself elsewhere. Nor did I dare look round for the Lady Hilda, and so kept my eyes fixed more or less on the ground, or else trying to seem unconcerned, looking foolish, no doubt, in that effort. It came to me that one of my shoes was muddy, and that I could not remember having combed my hair this morning.

Then the queen rose and came to meet her son with a smile and morning greeting, setting her hands on his shoulder and kissing him, and so turned to me as if to ask Ethelbert to say who I was. And when she heard, I knelt and kissed the hand she held to me; and my shyness went, for I was no longer at a loss for somewhat to think of besides myself. I suppose the king or queen made some sign at this time, for the ladies rustled back to their seats, and their pleasant talk began again as if we were not present, only so low that it was like the murmur of the bees outside as we came past the hives.



Now the queen asked me just a question or two of my journey—if the crossing had been rough, and so on, and then said smiling:

“But you have had another journey since then, and that handsome horse of yours bore a double burden, they tell me. Here is the Lady Hilda, who would thank you for somewhat you did for her.”



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She beckoned, and a lady rose up from the window seat near by and came forward. Truly I had to look twice before I was quite sure that this was she, for here was a wonderfully stately young lady, clad in white and gold and blue, all unlike the maiden who had clung to her father as we rode yestereven. And if I had thought her fair then, I saw now that she was the fairest of all those who attended this homely and kindly-faced queen. She held out her hand to me, and I bent and kissed it; and on the white wrist I saw the blue marks of the clutch of the wild men, which made a great wrath rise in my heart straightway. Yet I must say somewhat or seem mannerless.

“You have fared none the worse for your ride, lady?” I said. “I fear you were weary.”

“I am black and blue with the claws of those folk,” she said, laughing ruefully; “they were grimy also. But I meant to try to thank you for much kindness.”

She blushed somewhat, and I made haste to say that I was happy to have served her in aught. But I would not have her forget my comrades.

“Ay, they helped you,” she said; “I had not forgotten. And I had the cloak of one of them. Will you thank him for it?”

I said that I would, and added words about Werbode’s pleasure in the loan, and so on. One could not say much with all those eyes on us, as it were, if I had had much to say. I was glad when the king took up the talk and asked after the welfare of the lady.

“I have sent men across that heath,” he said; “at least they will see to those who fell of your party. I hope they may bring back some not much hurt after all. A fall from a horse will not be of much account after half an hour.”

But she shook her head and paled, for, as her father had told me, his men who had fallen were not mounted. The king saw that the matter was hard for her to think of, and so turned the talk by asking how she liked that steed of mine.

“Sire,” she said gravely, “when horse and rider first came suddenly before my eyes, I thought that one of the saints had come to our help. It was the most welcome sight I have ever seen, and I shall ever love to look on a horse of that—of those—”

“Patchwork colours,” laughed the king.

“Wilfrid, so long as you live you will no more be taken for a saint than shall I again. Make the most thereof. Of a truth I will even buy me a skew-bald mount and ride round corners in search of the like reputation. Nay, sell me yours straightway!”

“No, King Ethelbert,” I answered—“not even to yourself after he has won me that word, and since he has borne so fair a burden.”



“Let us go straightway,” said Ethelbert. “You will not better that speech if you bide here for an hour.

“Farewell, mother; and farewell, ladies.”

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He bowed, and I did my best to leave gracefully, all those who were present rising again as he went, and returning his bow. The queen was laughing at him, and I dared to see if the Lady Hilda had a smile on her face. She had, and it did not pass when she met my look; but behind the smile was something of the terror of last evening, which had been brought back to her. It was in my mind as we passed the door again that if the sight of me and my horse so wrought on her, it were better that I kept away if I could; and I would have the beast stabled in the town.

Then said Ethelbert when we were halfway across the garden:

“We shall have the company of that very fair lady to Offa’s court. She is going to the queen as one of her ladies for a time, by our permission. Her mother was of Lincoln, and gave hospitality to Quendritha when she was first found on the shore. Then she married our thane of Mundesley here; whereby we have gained this fair subject.”

Into my mind there came the thought of what old Thronð had told me, and I would that this maiden could be warned. And that was just a wild thought, for even Thronð could not say for certain that his guess was true, and he had bidden me hold my peace; and thereon I tried to consider that it was no concern of mine where the Lady Hilda went, though it troubled me more than enough to think that she was to go to Quendritha. So I said naught, and the king did not expect any answer.

“I suppose you have heard why we go thither,” he went on quickly. “If not, you will, and you may as well have it from myself.”

He glanced sidewise at me, and I bowed. I supposed I should hear some words of policy or other.

“They—that is, our wise folk and my good mother—have been saying that I ought to marry. They have dinned that into my ears for the last two months since I have been on the throne. It is a matter which I had not thought of, and therefore I have been in no haste to answer them; and they have grown impatient, saying that it is for the good of the realm. Have you ever been at the court of King Offa of Mercia?”

I had not, and I think I had told him so before, when he asked me if I would ride with him thither.

He took my arm and turned to pace the garden back again, thinking. I wondered that he took the trouble to tell me all this, as I was so complete a stranger to him.

“I am sorry for that,” he said; “I would have asked you somewhat. You would have answered it frankly, and without the thought of what might please me, as our courtiers would of course stay to consider. But tell me, what have you heard of Offa and his family?”



Now I could say nothing of what I had heard from Thronð; that was impossible. Nor did it seem to me to matter that of it I spoke not. The life of Quendritha the queen had lain open to all England, as one may say, for the last twenty years, and that was of more account than the half-told tale of a wandering Dane. So I said simply the truth.

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“I have ever heard of that royal house as the noblest and greatest in all England—at least since Ina of Wessex died; but I have been abroad for these five years, and I know not what they have brought.”

“Why, then,” he answered, laughing, “it is I who must tell you of them. There was once a fair little playmate of mine in Offa’s house, his youngest daughter Etheldrida. Since you left England she has grown up, and now—Well, you will not need telling the rest, maybe?”

He reddened and laughed, as if well content, and plain to me it was that if Ethelbert meant to wed that playmate of whom he spoke he was happy; for in this case certainly policy and inclination went hand in hand.

“Then both yourself and East Anglia will be happy, King Ethelbert,” said I, smiling in turn. “That is what you would tell me.”

“That is it. This princess has the fairness of her wondrous mother, and promise of the wisdom of her father; and I have known her for long years. Three weeks ago I sent with all solemnity to ask her hand, and I need not tell you how I waited for the answer. It came on the day before you landed, and now when your people have gone we shall ride to Fernlea, and—well, I suppose there will be a wedding.”

If Ethelbert when that day came looked as he looked at this moment, there would in all truth be a handsome bridegroom. I thought that the princess was to be envied, for more worth than that were the words of every man of his land in his favour, whether as the atheling of East Anglia or her king. And it was much for me that here this open-hearted king was telling me his hopes as if I were an old friend. Maybe that was because to his subjects he did not care to speak thus, or could not, by reason of old habit. He was wise beyond his years, being, as I think, about two years younger than myself. And as to this match, of course it was plain that Offa in furthering it was in nowise unwilling to link the land to the east of Mercia to himself in so peaceful a bond as he had linked Wessex in the year when I left home. It did come into my mind that thus in time the descendants of that mighty king would be likely to rule from the Humber to the Channel, but that was a dim thought of years to come. There was Egbert to be counted on.

And at that I wondered whether this were, as it almost seemed a good chance, a fitting time for me to remind the king of him. He himself had told me carefully that in aught I said of his doings I must be cautious; and now I could not tell what Ethelbert might not think right to make known to Offa, and so to Quendritha.

Ethelbert went on telling me of the coming journey, having found a listener who was no courtier, and did not heed that I was silent. And so we paced the garden, while he chatted hopefully, and I turned over somewhat heavier matters in my mind.



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Once I did well-nigh tell him of Ecgbert, and then forbore; for at that moment he said somewhat of Quendritha which almost made me think that he feared her. Whereon I was troubled to think that this bright and happy young king should be drawn into the net of her pride and policy, and again thought myself foolish for giving two thoughts to a matter which did not concern me. If the king was happy and yon fair maiden was content, they knew more of the queen than I. So I ended my questionings by a hearty wish that old Thronð had never told me that wild tale of his, and said naught of my prince, but listened patiently to the king until some one came and prayed him to meet the council, which he had forgotten.

I followed him to the great hall, and thence went to the stables, and so met with Werbode and Erling, and rode hawking with them all that afternoon. And when we came back we heard that tomorrow was the day for the meeting of the Witan, to hear and see what King Carl had to say and had sent.

Now, of all that wonderful gathering in the hall at Thetford I need say little. I know that our Franks had somewhat despised our buildings, for indeed they seemed somewhat poor to me after the mighty piles which Carl had reared. But such a wealth of colour and jewels decking so gallant an assemblage of brave men and fair ladies even Carl's court could not match, and so they told me. As we stood before the high place our Frankish dress seemed almost plain beside the English, richly as we were clad.

Then I found that I, by reason of having to interpret, was thrust somewhat more forward than I liked; but there was no help for it, and I went through it all as well as I knew how. Maybe it was lucky that I had that talk in all confidence with the king in the garden, for I was now in nowise afraid of him, though he sat there crowned and with his sceptre. I was afraid, however, of the Lady Hilda, knowing just where she stood behind the queen, and one would have thought that with her I might have claimed more close acquaintance than with the king; which is curious, for if I had not known her at all, I should have cared naught for all the ladies present, having business that needed other thoughts on hand.

However, after it was all over, the old paladin, who was our chief, thanked me, and spoke some honest words of praise for the way in which his message had been set before the Witan and the king; and gave me, moreover, a ring, set with a ruby from some far Eastern land, as a kindly remembrance of himself; so I verily believe that I did not manage so badly.



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After that was a day or two more of feasting and hunting, and then the embassy would return. I was sorry to part with Werbode, but I bade him carry back messages to Ecgbert, and in them I told him that I waited for the time when his message should best be spoken. Werbode knew not what that meant, but did not trouble to ask. He would give my message, and would also tell the atheling of the coming marriage. I had no doubt that it would be understood well by him to whom it was sent. At that time there were none of the Franks who knew or cared who Ecgbert was, save Carl; and if by chance my friend had spoken to any of these East Anglians of the Saxon leader under whom he had warred for Carl, the name of Ecgbert would mean naught to them. A Wessex atheling has no honour in East Anglia, and I doubt whether it had ever been heard here.

On the day after the great ceremony I noticed that Erling went about somewhat silently, and I thought that he very likely had a wish to cross the sea with the Franks, and so make his way home by land from the Rhine mouth. I asked him, therefore, if it was so, saying that I would give him money enough for all needs.

“It is not that, master,” he said; and when he called me master (which I had forbidden him, for he was more of a comrade, and I would not have him remember whence I took him), I knew that he was in earnest—“not that, for I would not leave you; unless, indeed this means that you would have me go?”

“No, comrade, that I would not. But you are downcast, and I thought that you might have the longing for home on you. Well, what is it?”

“It is naught,” he said.

But so plain it was that somewhat was amiss that I pressed him, and at last he said that he would tell me if I would not be angry with him. We were alone at the time, sitting on a great log in the corner of the courtyard, waiting for supper.

“Saw you aught strange about the robe which this young king had on yesterday, when you stood before him?” he asked first. “You were close to him.”

“I did not notice anything beyond that it was wonderfully wrought with gold and colours. The queen made it, they tell me.”

He sighed, and his face fell.

“I have heard that the Christian folk hold most precious such robes as are marked with the blood of one who has died for his faith. Are you sure that this robe is not such an one?”

“I know it is not. The queen made it new for the coronation.”



He was silent for a while, looking on the ground and shifting his foot in the dust, and some fear rose in my mind as to what he would tell me.

“Eh, well,” he said, sighing again, “mayhap the sun was in my eyes before I looked on him.”

“Is it the second sight again, Erling?” I asked in a low voice, for that was what I feared.

“Ay. Methought I saw that royal robe all spotted with blood as he sat in it.”



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“What does that portend?” I said.

He lifted his eyes slowly to mine, and answered, “Why need you ask?”

I did not answer him, for, in truth, I only asked with a half hope that he might have some other interpretation of this portent than that of violent death, which seemed the plain meaning of it—that is, if he saw aught, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. I tried to think that his glance had met the sun for a moment before he looked on the king; but I could not think it, for in the hall was no chance thereof. And then he spoke again slowly, with his eyes still on the ground.

“Thronð, who is my uncle, saw the same on the mail of my father not long before he fell. He said at that time that so it had often been in our family; but this has not come to me until I came here. I had no second sight up to this time.”

“It is sent for some reason, therefore,” said I. “Now, is it possible to avert the doom which seems written?”

He shook his head. “I have never heard so,” he answered.

“Yet the king does not seem fey,” said I, “and there is no man in all this land who would harm him. Ah, maybe you saw the robe as of a saint, because all men hold him most saintly!”

“May it be so,” he answered. “You are Christian folk, and it may mean that; I will hope it does. How should a heathen man know what is for you? Over you the Norns may have no power. Pay no heed to me.”

“No,” said I. “We ride to Offa with the king in a few days, and if you and I have fears for him, there are two who will watch him carefully. That is why the sight has come to you, I think. There is danger, and we may meet it.”

Thereat he cheered up, for the thought of facing a peril heartened him. His heathen fear of fate was enough to make any man downcast when it seemed to promise naught but ill, and I verily believe that he thought the way of the Christian might be altogether different from his. But I liked his second sight not at all, for of course we Saxons know that when it is given it is not to be despised. My father had many times told me of the like before I heard this.

After that I asked now and then if there was any danger to be guarded against on the way to Fernlea, and I was told by all that there was none. Hardly would a strong guard be needed, for the hand of Offa was heavy on ill doers, and his land had peace from end to end.



So then I began to think the portent altogether heathenish, and half forgot it. And with that I hoped that Erling would not often be taken in this way.

I rode with the Franks for an hour or two on their road back to Norwich, homeward, and then took leave of them, riding back to Thetford with Erling alone, for the king had but set the embassy as far as the gates of the town. And as I watched them pass across the heaths and at last disappear behind a hill, it seemed to me that I had my life to begin afresh, for the days when I was one of the paladins of King Carl of the Franks were past and done with. Many were the lessons I had learned therein, and I have never regretted those five years; and, best of all, in them I had been the friend and close comrade of Ecgbert, who I know had then all the promise of his greatness of the days to come.



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CHAPTER VII. HOW ETHELBERT'S JOURNEY BEGAN WITH PORTENTS.

Seeing that Carl the Great was at this time, and I suppose always will be, the model of what a king should be, Ethelbert had many things to ask me of him, and out of the hours which he spent in questioning me it came to pass that he took pleasure in my company at other times as well, treating me as a close comrade. That sort of thing is apt to be perilous in time, for it makes jealousies about a court if there is favour for one more than for another of the courtiers; but as I was no more than a passing stranger, who had not the least intention of biding here, I escaped that. Nor do I think that any one was jealous of me, for the honour which Carl had set on me for the sake of Ecgbert hung about me, as it were, and I suppose that half the court thought that I had to take some message on to Offa from my late lord.

Moreover, for good and wise reasons of his own, Ethelbert had no close companions of his own age, and maybe longed for such, finding in myself one to whom he could speak his mind of his own affairs without any thought of favour or policy rising up to cloud my answers to him, as his guest.

So in a few days I told him of Ecgbert, and gave him those messages of which I have spoken, being sure that with him they were safe. And I was glad that I did so, for his joy on hearing of his friend was good to see. As for the rest of the hopes of our atheling, he may have had his own thoughts, but he said plainly that the day when Wessex would need him might come, and that if it did none would more willingly welcome him home again.

“But,” he said, “I think that best of all Ecgbert would wish to come home in peace at once, and set all ambition aside. Presently, if we are careful, I may be able to speak to Offa of him again. Nay, but have no fear; I understand how matters are with Bertric, and will risk naught. I think we may find that Offa, who is friendly with King Carl, knows more of Ecgbert than you might guess.”

So that matter dropped, and I had done my errand. But for the sake of Ecgbert I was all the more welcome to the king, for I had to tell him of the wars and the deeds of his friend. I do not think that any will wonder that thus I saw more of the king than otherwise might have been my lot.

Now there was another of whom I saw much at this time before we started to ride westward, and that, of course, was the Lady Hilda. She, I found, was going to Fernlea, rather that she might be one of the ladies who should attend the bride whom it was hoped that the king would bring home, than as going to remain with Quendritha, and I must say that I was glad thereof. With her and her father I rode many a mile hawking, and both of them seemed to hold me as an old friend by reason of that lucky chance

which brought about our first meeting; and the only fault I had to find with the journey we looked for was that in Offa's court would end my friendship with them.



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So it happened one day as we rode thus that while the thane had crossed a stream, beating up the far bank for a heron, we fell into talk of the journey and its ending.

“What is amiss with it all?” she asked. “The good queen seems terribly downcast about it. Is not the princess her choice?”

“Altogether so, as the king tells me. Perhaps the queen has mother-like fears for the safety of this only son of hers, and lets them get on her mind overmuch.”

“That would be hardly like our queen,” she answered, laughing; “she is above that foolishness. No, but there is somewhat more.”

“Then,” said I, thinking that this was fancy, “it will be some trouble of state which is at the bottom of her anxiety. That none of us can mend.”

“It may be that,” she said; “but it is some heavy trouble. I have never seen her so downcast until yesterday. It is a sudden thing.”

There we left the subject, and I thought little more of it until the next morning, which was that of the day before we started. It had become a custom that I should wait on the king at his first rising, when he had most leisure to talk with me, and this time I found the queen with him in his chamber. She looked sad and anxious, as I thought.

“Wilfrid,” she said to me when the fitting greetings were over, “you are a stranger here, and no thought of policy will come into your mind. Tell me truly what you think of this; it may be that your word will have some weight with my son.”

Ethelbert smiled, but it was not quite his usual untroubled smile at all.

“It is not fair to ask Wilfrid,” he said; “maybe he puts much faith in these omens.”

“No, but he is of Wessex,” she said. “He cares naught for alliance or court, or for any of those things which blind our eyes. I want him to answer me as if I were just a franklin’s wife who is in doubt.

“Listen, then, if you will.”

She turned to me with a sort of appeal, and spoke quietly, though I saw that she was almost weeping.

“Last night I dreamed a dream, and in it I waited in the church here for the bells to ring for the wedding of my son and Etheldrida, whom he loves. It was in my mind that all the good folk would come in their best array, and that so we should sing a great ‘Te Deum’ for the happiness of all. And indeed there was a voice from the belfry—but it was of the great bell alone, as of a knell for the dead. And indeed it seemed that the people came



—but they came softly and weeping, and they were clad all in black. And then they sang—but it was the psalm ‘De Profundis.’”

I think that I paled, for I minded those other things which Erling had told me. The lady, who looked in my face, saw it, and she grew white also—whiter than she had been before.

“Lady,” I stammered, “I have no wit to read these things. It were well to ask the good bishop, for he is wise.”



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“Ay, too wise,” she said. “I would hear simplicity.”

Then Ethelbert rose up and set his arm round his mother very gently, and said gravely:

“Mother, know you not of what you have dreamed? Even as you told it first to me, and now again, I seemed to be back on that day, not so long past, when we buried my father. So it was in the church at that time, and it was the most terrible thing which you have known.

“Is it wonderful, Wilfrid, that it should come back thus in the night watches?”

“It is not wonderful,” I said.

“Lady, I think that the king is right.

“But, King Ethelbert, if I am to say my mind, I would put off the journey for the sake of the peace of the queen your mother.”

“And thereby offend Offa, and maybe hurt that little playmate of mine? No, it cannot be. And what should the dream be but that we say?”

Then the queen said plainly:

“I fear for you, my son—I fear Quendritha. In the days gone by your wise father was wont to say that if ever danger came from Mercia to East Anglia, it would be by reason of her ambition and longing for power and width of realm.”

“Why, mother, then surely in gaining the East Anglian throne for her daughter she gains all she would. And she is Offa’s queen, and in his court can be no danger to me or any man. Presently you shall surely dream again, and that dream shall show you the old sorrow turned to joy, for you will have a fair daughter to drive away your loneliness. She will be all you need, for I know that I can be of little help to you. The dream was of the sorrow which is passing to make way for joy to come.”

Then the queen made shift to smile, and told him that she deemed that her fears might be foolish. But to me it seemed that even as she had said, the thought of policy and state came first of necessity, setting aside such a vision as any simple thane would surely have thought held him from a journey he would take. Indeed, many a one would have given it up for far less, for I have known men turn back when already started, because a harmless hare crossed their path or a lone magpie sat on a wayside tree. Maybe I minded such like myself once, but service with Carl mended that. If he bade a man do a thing, that man had to do it, omen or none. Whereby I found that mostly these journey tokens, as one may call them, came to naught, and certainly I should not have done that if I had been able to mind them. And yet I do not know if aught would turn a true lover from the way which leads him toward the lady of his choice.



“One thing only I do fear from this dream of yours, my mother,” the king said after a little while. “Can it mean harm to Etheldrida? Was it for her that the knell passed, and shall I find her gone from me? It is many days since I heard from her or of her.”

Now when it came to that, I knew that nothing would stay the king, and so also did his mother. Whereon she was eager as himself to say that the dream was but wrought of her sorrow.



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“Why, then,” said Ethelbert, “you and Wilfrid may laugh at me if you will; for I have dreamed a dream to set against yours, because I think it has a good meaning. I thought that I was in a city, and that from its marketplace rose heavenward a great beam of light, like a pathway. And so I would climb it, but I could not. Then I had wings, and up it at last I sailed as a ship sails on the path of sunlight on an evening sea. Surely that promises a happy journey for me. Fear no more, therefore, my mother.”

Then we went from him, for state business called him, and I would take the queen across the garden to the bower door. There was little ceremony in this quiet court, and no waiting ladies were bidding her return outside. And when we were alone there she turned to me, and her eyes were dim and pitiful.

“Friend,” she said, “yon beam of light led to heaven. I do not know what it all means, but I fear—I fear terribly.”

“Lady,” I said, “many a time I have known men who thought they had ill dreams on the night before a battle, and naught came of them. I have forgotten to trouble myself much therewith.”

“Nay, but they are sent at times for our warning.”

“It may be so. I should be foolish if I did not believe what wiser men than I tell me of their messages. But if there is ill before the king, can it be anywise turned aside? What if he were persuaded not to go?”

“Oh,” she said, with a little sob, “then his troth would be broken, and that in itself would bring ill. It seems dark all round me.”

Then I said, for she was in sore distress:

“Lady, I am a stranger and hardly known to you, but I am to ride with your son. Will it be aught if I tell you that I will watch him as if he were my own atheling, and if need be die for him, with his own thanes?”

“It is much,” she said eagerly, “much; for in that court where I fear for him you will be a stranger, and may hear and note more than our folk, for if ill is plotted they may be careless of you. I shall have less fear now that I may feel that one at least shares in my dread. I do not know how to thank you for the promise.”

She set forth her hand to mine, and I bent and kissed it; but she pressed my great fingers as my own mother used to press them. Then she said in a low voice:

“I do not fear Offa, for he is noble in all he does. I fear Quendritha.”

“I have heard that she is to be feared. Can you tell me more of her?”



“You will see her as the fairest woman in all the land, and will but know her as the softest spoken. Once or twice I have seen what looks may lie under that fair outward show, and I know that in her heart is the rage for power and ever more power, let it be what it may. It goes ill with the lady of her train who shares a secret with her, if the secret is the lady’s. I cannot think how harm may come to Ethelbert from her; but none know how it may not. I pray you remember that.”

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I promised, and then she led me to her doorway; and there I left her, but not before she had thanked me again. I suppose that to share a burden even with me helped somewhat to lighten it. And in all truth I meant to do my part in watching, and if possible guarding, the king. Perhaps it would be as the queen said, that being in and yet not of his train I might be able to look on at all that went on more easily.

To that end I kept my Frankish dress, though I had meant to take to plain Saxon wear once more, with the knowledge that none would wonder that Carl's man was kept near the king, and that in Offa's court I should not be taken for an Anglian of his train.

Now the day came when we should set out on the long ride across England to the Welsh border, where Offa had set his throne for the time. As may be supposed, we went first of all on that morning to the church in the dim daybreak, and there heard mass and sought for blessing on our going and returning, and then I went and saw all ready for the ride. I had bought two more horses, good enough for change of mount now and then, one brown and the other black; and Erling was to lead them, with our belongings on a pack. The king would travel steadily, but no more slowly than might be managed, and we were to have no wagons or the like to hinder us, though there were three ladies besides the Lady Hilda who were to go with us.

It was past sunrise when I went to find Erling, but the morning was dull and dark. It was hot, too, for no breath of wind stirred the trees, and I seemed to notice a silence around me. That was because the thrushes and blackbirds were not singing after their wont in the dewy daybreak of May time, and I thought they waited for the sun to break out.

When I came to the stables there was bustle everywhere, of course; but the grooms seemed troubled in some way out of the common, and Erling himself came to meet me with a puzzled face which told me that all was not well.

"There is thunder in the air, thane," he said. "If I mistake not, we shall have somewhat out of the way, too. The horses are feeling it—unless some thrall has poisoned the whole stable."

Truly the horses were looking strangely. Their coats stared, and their ears were cold and damp, while they seemed glad of the company of the men, whinnying low and rubbing themselves against them as they came into the stalls. I heard one thrall say to another that the whole stable had surely been witch ridden in the night.

"Get the horses into the open," I said. "It is stifling in this stable. Maybe that is what is wrong."

My own horse was standing ready, and he greeted me, after his wont, with a little neigh; but he was wet, and his coat had lost the gloss of which Erling was so proud. I did not like it at all, but as every horse in the place seemed to be in the same way or worse, I

put it down to the thundery feel in the air. I led him out myself, and there were two thanes of our party, who had come for their horses.



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“Why, paladin,” said one, “what is amiss with the skew-bald? You can’t ride him today if he is as bad as he looks.”

I told him that his own horse was much in the same case, and added that I thought with Erling that it was the thundery weather which upset the stable, though I had never known the like before.

“I suppose that the king will not start until it clears,” I said.

“Ay, but he will,” said the other thane, looking at the gray sky. “Seldom does he put off a start, and today of all days there is a strong cable pulling him westward.”

Now Erling came out with the other horses, and the thane and his comrade glanced at them, and hurried to see to their own steeds. There was no sound of pawing hoofs and coaxing voices to be heard as one by one the horses were led out. It might have been the clearing of a sheep fold for all the spirit there was in the beasts.

I mounted, and rode with Erling after me out of the courtyard into the open. On the green were gathering the twenty thanes or so who made up the party, and across it was drawn up the mounted escort. There was the usual gathering of onlookers, and by the gate stood the king’s own huntsmen, with hawks and hounds.

The first thing I noticed was that the birds were dull and uneasy, and that the dogs were still more so. The hooded hawks sat with ruffled feathers, and one or two of the hounds lay on their backs, with paws drawn to them as if they feared a beating, while the rest whined, and had no eagerness in them. It seemed closer here than in the courtyard even, and every one was watching the sky and speaking in a low voice. Each sound seemed over loud, and overhead the hot haze brooded without sign of breaking.

The king’s chaplain came out, and a lay brother brought him his mule. He looked at it as I had looked at my horse just now, and his brow knitted. He was rather a friend of mine.

“Father,” I said, “there is somewhat strange in the air. Look at all the beasts; they feel more than we can.”

He nodded to me gravely. Then he said, with his hand smoothing the wet coat of his mule, which at any other time would have resented the touch with a squeal, but now did not heed him:

“It minds me of one day in Rome when I was a lad there, at college, learning. There is a great burning mountain at Naples, and it was smoking at the time. Then there came—”

“Way for the king!” cried the marshal who waited at the gate, and the good father had to stand aside with his tale unfinished.



Ethelbert came forth with a smiling return to our salute, and with him came his mother and the four ladies who were to bear us company on the way. One of these was, of course, the Lady Hilda, and I dismounted and left my horse to a groom for the time, having promised myself the pleasure of helping her to mount.

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At that moment the marshal, who was a thane set over all the ordering of the journey, went to the king and asked him if it might not be his pleasure to wait for an hour to see if the weather broke. I think that the king was so taken up with parting words to the queen that he had hardly noticed the gloom and heat, and certainly he had not noted the uneasiness of the horses, which was growing more and more. So he only turned for a moment to the thane, signing to the man to bring his horse.

“Nay, but a dull start often forebodes a bright ending to a journey. We will go,” he said, laughing.

“Now farewell, mother, for the last time.”

He bent his knee for her blessing, doffing his cap as he did so. And even as he bent I was aware of a dull rumble, not loud or like thunder, but as if all the wains of the host of King Carl were passing toward us from far off. Hilda stood by me at that moment, and she heard it.

For the life of me, though I knew that no wagons were near us, I could not help glancing round for them, and as I did so I saw the end of a thrall’s mud hut across a field fall out. The king leaped up and set his foot in the stirrup, and at that moment the earth heaved and shook under us, and the whole oaken hall and buildings round us creaked and groaned like a ship in a ground swell, while Hilda clung to my arm in terror. Her horse, which the thane, her father, held, trembled and broke out into white foam all over, stumbling forward.

I do not think that the king felt it; indeed, as he was swinging himself into the saddle at the moment, he could not have done so. But his horse reared almost on end with terror, and any less perfect rider must have had a heavy fall. All around us were plunging horses and shouting men, but he did not seem to heed them. He had all he could do to get his horse in hand again, and I think his eyes were misty with that parting.

He gave the horse the rein, crying to us to follow, and so passed down the dim street and out under the green arches of the lane beyond at a gallop, as gay and hopeful a lover as heart could wish. Doubtless to him the shouts seemed but the cries of good speed, and the plunging of the maddened horses but the sounds of mounting; for the way had been left clear for him westward, and he did not look back.

Out of the houses of the town I saw the folk running and crying, not in farewell to him, but in wild terror of rattling roofs and crumbling walls. They did not heed him; but I saw him wave his hand to them, for he thought they cheered him, as he passed too swiftly to note either pale faces or woeful cries.

Then after him rode their hardest the men of the escort and others who were already mounted, and the tumult stilled suddenly. They say that the queen swooned there on



the pavement at the gate; and I do not doubt it, though her ladies took her so quickly away that I did not see her. Hilda was almost fainting on my arm, and I had to drag her away from the wild frenzy of her horse, which the thane could hardly hold.



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I saw two or three men stand staring at Erling, who was in trouble with his charges, and then they went to his help. And next I was aware that somewhat soft rubbed my sleeve, and I started and turned. It was my own horse, who sought me in danger, and would tell me in his own way that he was there. In that glance I noted that his eye was bright again, and in a minute or two he shook himself heartily. Thereby I knew that there was no more of this terror to come, or he would have felt it yet.

“Thane,” I said, “see. The skew-bald has not lost his senses like that beast. Let us set Hilda on him. The marshal will help to shift the saddle.”

But Hilda came to herself again, and tried to laugh, saying that there was never yet a horse of which she was afraid. Nor would she hear of a change, for when her horse grew more quiet it was plain that its terror had passed away. She took herself gently from my arm, and spoke bravely now.

“What was it?” she asked me while Sighard soothed the beast.

“Why,” answered Father Selred for me, “just what I was going to tell the paladin—such an earthquake as I felt on a like day in Rome years ago. But why it comes here in quiet England, where is no fiery mountain to disquiet the earth, I cannot say.”

“Father, it is the end of the world!” said a thrall, forgetting our presence in his terror.

“Not so, my son. The thousand years of prophecy are not at an end yet; and there are more foretellings of Holy Writ yet to be fulfilled. It is just the old earth shaking herself after a sleep.”

The man's face cleared, and he shrank back with a low bow, frightened at his own boldness. All seemed to have found their tongues again, and were telling how the matter had seemed to them without waiting to know whether they were listened to.

“No hurry,” said Sighard; “the king cannot keep up that pace, and anyway will have to wait the pack-horse train somewhere. Let us see all well first.”

Maybe we waited for half an hour after that, for the ladies were sorely frightened. We had the horses walked to and fro for a while, and presently they were themselves again. And there came no more trembling of the ground, while the clouds grew blacker, and a short, sharp thunderstorm swept over us. It was good to feel the cleared air again, and to smell the scent that rises after rain, and to hear the song of the birds break out around us.

Yet on every face was a fear that would not be put aside. Men thought that the earthquake boded ill for the journey of the king and what might come thereof.



So when the rain had passed we rode away after the king, followed by the pack horses, and before noon caught him up. He had heard then what had happened to set his steed beyond control, and his face was grave also. Even he could not help fearing that the earthquake, coming at that moment as it did, might be sent as a token which he must hear though the dreams of his mother went for naught.



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“And yet,” he said to Father Selred and myself as we rode beside him, “I am doing what I deem best for throne and realm, and I have no thought of guile or harm to any man. Nor can I see that I have to fear any from Offa, or that at his court can be danger to me.”

“Journey and reason therefor are alike good so far as man can see or plan,” said Selred the priest. “I would that every journey was undertaken as fully innocently. I cannot think that any tokens have been sent to warn you from it. Yet if there had been aught amiss in your plans, it is true that there have been tokens enough to scare any man from evil.”

“Maybe it all means naught but danger on the journey. Well, we knew there was always that in any ride. For the rest, we are in the hands of Him who orders all and can see beyond our ken. We will go on till the tokens, if tokens they be, are plain in their meaning.”

Father Selred approved, gravely. Then he muttered somewhat to himself, and laughed. It was Latin, but the king told me afterward what it meant. Some old Roman poet had made a song in which he said that a man who was just and straightforward in his purposes need not fear if the world fell, shattered in ruins, around him.

It was a good saying, and surely that was the way of Ethelbert of East Anglia. Maybe the one thing which did trouble him was his thought of the terror of his mother, and of her anxiety for him.

But it was a long while before the rest of us shook off the fear of what all this might betoken. Perhaps of all I had the most reason to think that ill was before the king, for Erling, though he said no more to me, was plainly full of bodings. And I have heard that other men dreamed dreams of terror and told them to one another. Only Ethelbert was always cheerful, singing as he rode and laughing with us, so that we ought to have been ashamed to be dull.

Save for what was in my mind, I cannot say that the miles went slowly. The days were bright and warm, and ever did I take more pleasure in the old home land. And always when Ethelbert had his counsellors round him I rode with Hilda and her father, and I think that I wished that journey might never end, after a while.

For I was going homeward to where mother and father waited me, in the first place. Then I had pleasant companions, and most of all this one of whom I have just spoken. I had a good horse under me, and a comrade in Erling who served me silently with that best of service that is given for love. I was high in honour with this wonderful young king, for the sake of Ecgbert first, I think, then of King Carl, and lastly because he did indeed seem to like my own company. I do not think that one could need more to add to pleasure.



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I have seen the progresses of kings before this and since, and often it has been that after their passing there has been grumbling, and the hearty hope that the long and greedy train which ate men out of house and home, borrowed their best horses, and otherwise made a little famine in their wake, might never come that way again. But this Ethelbert left, as it were, a track of happiness across England, in hall and in village, in cot and in forest. He had ridden with so small a train that he might overburden none of those who had to entertain him on his way, and he stayed nowhere overlong. Everywhere he seemed to leave smiles and wishes that he would honour that house or that town again on his return, and not a man to whom he had spoken, if it were but a word of thanks, would ever forget how Ethelbert the Anglian looked on him with that kindly glance of his.

CHAPTER VIII. HOW ETHELBERT CAME TO THE PALACE OF SUTTON.

By Ely and Huntingdon and Northampton, and so through the very heart of England, across the sweet Avon at Stratford, our way took us, under trees that had their first leaves fresh and sweet on them, and past orchards pink and white, with the bees busy among the bloom. I had seen many a fair country beyond the sea in the wide realms of Carl, but none so sweet as this to my mind. The warm rain that came and stayed us now and then but made it all the sweeter; and I mind, with a joy that bides with me, the hours of waiting in old halls and quiet monasteries.

That black cloud of fears cleared away presently, for it was in all truth a very bridal procession in which we rode. Everywhere the news went before us that hither came the well-loved king to bear away the sweet daughter of Mercia, and from town and hamlet the bells greeted us, and the folk donned their holiday gear to come to meet us. I had not known that the name of Ethelbert, young as he was, could have been so held in love across the land. But Father Selred told me that never had been such a king as he, as there surely had never been such promise of the days when he was the heir to the throne.

First in all he was in the minds of every man who knew him, whether in war or peace, council or chamber, and maybe he was the only one who did not know it. I learned much of him in that ride, and always with a growing love of him and a deeper wonder. He thought for every one but himself.

Nor was there a church, however small, which he passed on that happy journey toward his bride which was not the richer and brighter for some gift of his, left on the altar after the morning mass, which always began our day, or given quietly after the evensong which ended it. One might know his road now by the words of the people, who will say with more than pride that once Ethelbert crossed the threshold of their church and gave this or that gift. I have seen richer gifts given, and heard more words said; but what he



gave seemed always that which was wanted, and the word he spoke was always the best that could have been. And I have wondered at the mighty churches which Carl the Great had reared and was still rearing, but in some wise it seemed to me that the way of Ethelbert was of more worth.



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Now, seeing that we had started with our minds full of portents, it is not by any means wonderful that we found more on the road. For a time, if a horse did but cast a shoe, the thane it belonged to shook his head and wished that naught ill might come of the little delay. And once, when we stumbled into a fog among the river country of the midlands, where one would expect to meet with it, there was nigh a panic in the company, so that the thanes crowded round Ethelbert and begged him to return. Whereon he laughed at them gaily.

"Thanes, thanes!" he cried, "one can no more see to return than to go forward! I might take it as a warning not to go back, just as well. Did none of you ever see a fog before? Had it fallen on you while hunting, you would have done naught but grumble and wait its lifting."

But they were terrified, as it seemed, beyond reason; and, indeed, it was as thick as any Friesland fog I have ever seen, and it grew blacker for an hour or so, while we had perforce to wait under dripping trees till we could see to go on. Even a horse will lose his way home in such a fog as that.

And at last they begged the king to pray that it might clear from off us, and so he knelt and did so. It was strange to hear his clear voice rising from the midst of half-seen men and steaming horses, praying for the light. And then the fog lifted as suddenly as it had come, and the sun shone out.

"See," he said, "our fears are like this mist, and cloud our senses. Surely the fears shall pass likewise from the heart of him who prays. So read I the token, if token it be."

All that day thereafter we rode in brightest sunshine, and men were fairly ashamed to say more of ill-luck and the like. And so also in lovely weather we went for the fourteen days of our journey, until we came to the place where we should cross the Severn at Worcester, and but a day's long ride was before us.

After that time of the mist Ethelbert noticed Erling, and would call him and speak long with him of the ways of his home, as I thought.

At Worcester we waited while a message went from the town to Offa, and next day there came to meet us some score of the best thanes of the Welsh borderland, who should be our guides to the end of the journey. Hard warriors and scarred with tokens of the long wars they were, but pleasant and straightforward in their ways, as warriors should be. Only I did not altogether like the smooth way of the man who was their leader. His name was Gymbert, and he was of mixed Welsh and English blood, as I was told, and he was also high in honour with Offa, and with Quendritha herself; which in itself spoke well for him, but nevertheless in some way I cared not for him.



They feasted us that night in Worcester, and early next morning we rode out westward again on the last stage of our journey, the king leading us with this thane at his side, followed by the rest of the Mercians and his own thanes. So I, not altogether unwillingly, rode with Hilda in the rear of the party, feeling somewhat downcast to think that this was the last time I was at all likely to be her companion.



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I suppose that there is not a more wonderful outlook in all England than from the Malvern heights, save only that from our own Quantocks, in the west. I hold that the more wonderful, for there one has the sea, and across it the mountains of Wales, which one misses here, while it were hard to say whence the eye can range the furthest.

I told Hilda so as we reined up the horses for a moment at the top of the steep to breathe them, and she sighed, with all the wonder before her. We of the hill countries do not know all the pleasure that comes into the heart of one from the level east counties, as he looks for the first time from a height over the lands spread out below. I had been long enough in Friesland now to learn some of that wonder for myself anew.

“Well,” she said, “you will be back again at home in your hills shortly, and all this ride will be forgotten. Where does your home lie? Can it be seen?”

I pointed south or thereabout. I could almost fancy that I should be able to see the far blue line of the Mendips under the sun, so bright it all was and clear.

Then she asked if my folk knew that I was on my way home.

“No; else I had ridden straightway from Thetford to them. They think that I am yet with the Franks across the sea, and a few days can make no difference to them. Nor could I be so churlish as to refuse the king’s offer of help on my way.”

“I wonder how you will find all when you get back?”

“And so do I. There were merchants from Bristol who brought me a message that all was well with them six months ago, and by the same hands I sent back word that so it was with me. Possibly that message has reached them about this time.”

That was the third time I had heard from home during these years, and I was lucky to have heard at all. It seems that my father had bidden friends of ours at the ports to let him hear of men from across the seas who were to go to the court of Carl.

“Ah,” she said, “I hope so. That would be more than joy to your mother. And then for you to follow so quickly on the message! that will be wonderful. I would that I could see that meeting.”

She turned and laughed in the pleasure of the thought, and I suppose there was that in my eyes which told her that I had the same wish. Maybe I should have said so, but she flushed a little, and gave me no time.

“But I shall be on the way back to East Anglia with the princess, and I will picture it all. Some day, when you come back to see the king, as you say he has asked you, I shall hear of it.”



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Now it was in my mind that it was possible that I might be back in Thetford, or wherever Ethelbert's court might be at the time, sooner than I had any wish. For if aught had happened amiss at home, so that our lands, for want of the heir, had fallen into the hands of Bertric, I should be left with naught but my sword for heritage. Then—for the king had spoken of these chances to me—I was to come straightway back to him and take service with him. My knowledge of the ways in which Carl handled his men would be of use to him, and a place and honour would wait me. But I would not think much of such sorrow for me, though that it was possible, of course, may have been the great reason which made me silent when there were words I had more than once had it on the tip of my tongue to say to Hilda. Could I have known for certain that home and wealth yet waited for me, I know that I must needs have asked her to share them, now that at the end of this daily companionship I learned what my thoughts of her had grown to be.

“Ay, I shall be back with Ethelbert at some time,” I said. “I do not forget promises.”

After that we rode down the long hill silently enough, and the way did not seem so bright to me. And so through the long day we rode, stopping for an hour or two at the strong oaken hall, moated and stockaded, of some great border thane for the midday meal. There were the marks of fire on roof and walls; for once the wild Welsh had tried to burn it, and failed, in a sudden raid before Offa had curbed them with the mighty earthwork that runs from Dee to Severn to keep the border of his realm. “Offa's Dyke” men call it, and so it will be called to the end of time.

And now we were on the way of the war host from west to east, the way of the Welshmen, and making toward the ford of the Wye, which they were wont to cross, so that we call it the “ford of the host,” the “Hereford.”

It was late when we came into the little town of Fernlea, which stands on the gentle rise above the ford, for the five-and-twenty miles or so of this day's work had been heavy across the hills. The great stronghold palace whither we were bound lay some miles northward, and it seemed right that we waited here till the next day, that into it we might pass with all travel stains done away with and in full state.

Already there had been a royal camp pitched for us by Offa's folk, and I was glad that we had not to bide in the town. One could not wish for better weather for the open, and the lines of gay tents, with the pavilion for the king in their midst, seemed homely and pleasant to me with memory of the days which seemed so long ago when the camp of Carl was my only home.

As soon as we reached this camp under the hill, where the town stockading rose strong and high against the Welsh, the thane I have already mentioned, Gymbert, arranged our lodging, he being the king's marshal in charge of us, and also warden of the palace. He was a huge man, burly and strong, somewhat too smooth spoken, as I thought, but

pleasant withal. He gave me a tent to myself, somewhat apart from the king's pavilion, as a Frankish stranger, I suppose.



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“Your thralls will bide with the rest,” he said; “they can find shelter in the tents there are yonder. If some of them have to bide outside, it will not hurt them.”

“Well enough you ken that, Gymbert,” said Erling curtly, in good Welsh.

I understood him, of course, for we had Welsh thralls enough at home, but I wondered that he knew the tongue. Gymbert understood him also, for his face flushed red and he bit his lip. But he pretended not to do so.

“Your Frankish tongue is a strange one,” he said. “What does the man want?”

“I think that he means that outside the tent is as pleasant as in, as you hint,” I said. “But he will bide here across my door, as is his wont.”

“Outside, I suppose?” said Gymbert, with a laugh. “Well, as you like.”

He rode away, and I looked at Erling wonderingly. The Dane was watching him with a black scowl on his face.

“Where on earth did you learn the British tongue?” I said; “and what know you of Gymbert?”

“I learned the Welsh yonder,” Erling answered, nodding westward. “I lived in the little town men call Tenby for three years. There also I heard of this man. He was a thrall himself once, and freed by this queen for some service or another. He is a well-hated man, both by Saxon and Welsh, being of both races, and therefore of neither, as one may say.”

“He seems to be trusted by the king, though!”

Erling shrugged his shoulders. “He has fought well for him, and is rewarded. Were there aught to be had by betraying Offa, he would betray him. Take a bad Saxon and a false Welshman, and that is saying much, and weld them into one, and you have Gymbert.”

“This is hearsay from the Welsh he has fought,” said I; “one need not heed it.”

“I suppose not,” quoth Erling; “but I never heard aught else of him. And he has the face of a traitor.”

With that he turned to his horses and began loosening the pack from that one which bore it. There was no more to be got out of him, as I knew, and so, leaving him to set the tent in order, I went my way toward the river, being minded for a good swim therein after the long, dusty way. And turning over what Erling had said of himself, I



remembered that Thorleif had told me how he had come from Wales round the Land's End to Weymouth. I thought rightly that he had picked up Erling there.

I had a good hour's swim in a deep pool of the river, and enjoyed it to the full. The current was swift, and it was good to battle with it, and then to turn and swing downward past the fern-covered banks and under the shade of the trees with its flow. And while I was splashing in the pool, a franklin came running from his field with his hoe, waving wildly to me.

"Come out, master, I pray you!" he gasped; "the water is full forty feet deep there!"

"Is that so?" I said gravely. "I will go and see."

With that I dived, and stayed under as long as I could, not being able to find the bottom after all.



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And when I came up again the honest face of the franklin was white and his eyes stared in terror. So I laughed at him.

“I believe the pool is as deep as you say; but would seven feet of water be any safer?”

“Nay, master, but it would drown me. Yet come out, I do pray you. It gives me the cold terror to see you so overbold.”

Then came Father Selred along the bank, and the man begged him to bid me leave the water; and so we both laughed at him, until the franklin waxed cross and went his way, saying that I was a fool for not biding in the shoal water up yonder by the great tree. I could walk across there waist deep, he said, grumbling.

Then I came out, and the father told me that the king would be here anon. We walked to and fro waiting for him, and presently he came with Hilda’s father, Sighard, in attendance. The four of us sat down on the river bank, under the great tree of which the franklin had spoken, and watched the trout in the shallows till Ethelbert lay back with his arms under his head, and said that he was tired with the ride and would sleep.

He closed his eyes, and we went on talking in low voices for an hour or so while he slept. And then the horns rang from the distant camp to tell us that the evening meal was spread in the great pavilion. But the king did not hear them, and I looked doubtfully at him, wondering if he should be waked.

“Wilfrid,” said Father Selred in a whisper, “surely the king dreams wondrous things. His face is as the face of a saint!”

And so indeed it was as he lay there in the evening light, and I wondered at him. There was no smile around his mouth, but stillness and, as it seemed, an awe of what he saw, most peaceful, so that I almost feared to look on him. The horns went again, soft and mellow in the distance from across the evening meadows. The kine heard them, and thought them the homing call, and so lifted their lazy heads and waded homeward through the grass.

“Ethelbert, my king,” said Sighard gently.

The eyes of the king opened, and he roused.

“Was that your voice, mythane,” he asked, “or was it the voice of my dream?”

“I called you, lord, for the horns are sounding.”

“Thanks; but I would I had dreamed more! I do not know if I should have learned what it all meant had I slept on.”



“What was it, my son?” said Selred.

The king was silent for a little, musing.

“It was a good dream, I think,” he said. “I will tell you, and you shall judge. You mind the little wooden church which stands here in Fernlea town? Well, in my dream I stood outside that, and it seemed small and mean for the house of God, so that I would that it were built afresh. Then it seemed to me that an angel came to me, bearing a wondrous vessel full of blood, and on the little church he sprinkled it; and straightway it began to grow and widen wondrously, and its walls became of stone instead of timber and wattle, and presently it stood before me as a mighty church, great as any of those of which Carl’s paladin here tells me.



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“Then I heard from within the sound of wonderful music and the singing of many people; and I went near to listen, for the like of that was never yet heard in our land. And when I was even at the door, from out the church came in many voices my own name, as if it were being mingled with praises—and so you woke me.”

“It is a good dream,” said Sighard bluntly. “It came from the wondering why Offa let so mean a church stand, and from the horns, and from my speaking your name. Strange how things like that will weave themselves into the mind of a sleeping man to make a wonder.”

“It is a good dream,” said Selred the priest, after a moment’s thought. I doubt not that it was in your mind to give some gift to the church. Mayhap you shall ask Offa to restore it presently, for memory of your wedding; and thereafter men will pray there for you as the founder of its greatness.”

“Yet the angel, and that he bore and sprinkled?”

“It seems to me,” I said, “that it was a vision of the Holy Grail; and happy would King Arthur or our Wessex Ina have held you that you saw it, King Ethelbert.”

“Ay,” he said, “if I might think that it was so!”

Again the horns rang, and he leaped up.

“We must not keep them waiting,” he cried. “Come!”

“More dreams,” grumbled Sighard the old thane to me as the king went on before us with the chaplain. “On my word, we have been dream-ridden like a parcel of old women on this journey, till we shall fear our own shadows next. There is Hilda as silent as a mouse today, and I suppose she has been seeing more portents. I mind that a black cat did look at us out of a doorway this morning.”

So he growled, scoffing, and I must say that I was more than half minded to agree with him. Only the earthquake did seem more than an everyday token.

“I suppose that the earthquake which we felt was sent for somewhat?” I said.

“Why, of course; such like always are. But seeing that it was felt everywhere we have ridden, even so far as Northampton, and likely enough further on yet, I don’t see why we should take it as meant for the king.”

Then he began to laugh to himself.

“When one comes to think thereof,” he chuckled, “there must have been scores of men who felt it just as they were starting somewhere; and I warrant every one of them took it



to himself, and put off his business! Well, well, I can tell what it did portend, however, for Ethelbert, and that is a mighty change in his household so soon as he gets his new wife home. Earthquake, forsooth! Mayhap he will wish he had hearkened to its message when she turns his house upside down.”

“Nay,” I said, smiling; “one has not heard that of the princess.”

“She is Quendritha’s daughter,” he said grimly, and growing grave of a sudden. “That is the one thing against this wedding, to my mind. If she is like her mother, or indeed like her sister Eadburga, who wedded your king, there is an end for peace to Ethelbert, and maybe to East Anglia.”



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Now I had heard little or nothing of how that last match turned out; I only knew that when I was taken from home we were full of rejoicing over it. So I heard now for the first time that over all the land of Wessex were whispers of ill done by our new queen—of men who crossed her in aught dying suddenly, or going home to linger awhile and come to a painful end. I heard that she bore rule rather than the king, and that her sway was heavy, and so on in many counts against her. The tales were the same as those I had heard often of late about her mother, Quendritha, and with all my heart I hoped that the Princess Etheldrida was not as those two. I had heard naught but good of her, at all events, and I will say now that all I had heard was true. There could be no sweeter maiden in all the land than she. I heard the same good words of her only brother, Ecgrith, and I suppose that those two bore more likeness to their mighty father than to the queen.

All this half-stifled talk of untold ill from Quendritha lay heavy on my mind; and it came to me that Sighard was a true man, and that to him I might tell the tale Thrond told me. I must share that secret with some one who might, if he deemed it wise, warn King Ethelbert in such sort that he should beware of her, now and hereafter. So after a little while I said:

“Thane, I have heard that Quendritha came ashore—”

“Ay,” he said sharply, looking round him. “But that is a tale which is best let alone. It is true enough. My wife’s folk took her in at Lincoln.”

“Is it known whence she came?” I went on, paying no heed to a warning sign he made; for we were far from the camp yet, and the king was a hundred yards ahead of us.

“Let be, Wilfrid; hold your peace on that. There are men who have asked that question in all simplicity, and they have gone.”

“Why, is there aught amiss in coming ashore as she did?”

“Hold your peace, I tell you. On my word, it is as well, though, that you have had it out with me here in the meadows. Listen: there is no harm in the drifting hither. What sent her adrift?”

“I have sailed for a month with Danes,” I said. “I have met with a man who once set a girl adrift.”

As I said that I looked him meaningly in the face, and he grew pale.

“So,” he said slowly, “you have heard that tale also. There was a Danish chapman who came to our haven at Mundesley, where I live, and told it there to me. That was a year after the boat was found. I bade him be silent, but there was no need. When he heard



that the girl had become what she is, he fled the land. And, mind you, he could not be certain, nor can I.”

“Nor could the man who told me. But my Dane is the nephew of that man.”

Sighard grasped my arm.

“Speak to him, and bid him hold his tongue if he has heard the tale, else he and you are dead men. Get to him at once.”



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I thought, indeed, that there was need to do so, though Erling was in nowise talkative. For if, as was pretty certain, the tale of the coming of Quendritha went round the groups of men at the camp fires, he might say that he had heard of one set adrift from his own land.

So instead of going in at once with the king to the pavilion, I ran down to the lines where the horses were picketed, and found Erling on his way to the supper, which was spread under some trees for our servants. I took him aside and walked out into the open with him.

“Erling,” I said, “do you mind that tale which Thrond tells concerning a damsel set afloat?”

“Ay, more than mind it—I saw it done! She went from our village. I was a well-grown lad of fourteen then. Now I know what you would say. It is the word of Thrond that this Quendritha, whom men fear so, is she. He says so, since you spoke to him.”

“Have you breathed a word thereof to any one?” I asked, with a sort of cold fear coming on me.

I had no mind to die of poison.

“Not likely; here of all places. I mind what that maiden was in the old days. From all accounts she has but held herself back somewhat here. But had you had aught to do with her, I should have warned you, master.”

I set my hand on his shoulder.

“I know you would. Now you will see the queen tomorrow. Tell me, then, if this is indeed she.”

“Ay, I shall know her well enough. What I fear is that she may know me!”

Grim as his voice was, that made me laugh.

“Seeing that you were but a lad when she last set eyes on you—and now you are ten years older than myself, bearded and scarred moreover—I do not fear that for you in the least.”

“Nor will she have need to scan me,” he said. “Of course I need not fear it.”

Then I asked him if he had more of the second sight.

“Naught fresh, master. Only that look on the face of the young king deepens, and ever there is the red line round his neck. I fear for him.”



So did I, but of that we spoke no more. I tried all I knew to fathom that fear of mine, and the most I could do was to make it seem more and more needless and foolish. And presently, when we sat at the table, and I saw the king speaking with the Mercians, and noted their admiring looks at him, and their eagerness to listen to him, I thought that Sighard was right, and that I was frayed with shadows of my own making. I knew enough of men by this time to see that here was no thought of ill toward Ethelbert.

CHAPTER IX. HOW QUENDRITHA THE QUEEN WOVE HER PLOTS.

Great was the welcome which Ethelbert of East Anglia had from Offa of Mercia when we reached the great stronghold of Sutton Walls on the next morning, riding there in all state and due array in our best holiday gear, with those Mercian thanes who had met us as escort before and after us. The morning was bright and clear, and I thought I had never seen so fair a procession as this with which the king went to meet his bride.



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I had heard much of this palace of Offa's from the Mercians and from Ethelbert himself, but it was a far stronger place than I had expected. Seeing that here, on the newly-conquered Welsh border lands, no man could tell when the wild Britons might swarm across the ford, and bring fire and sword in revenge on the lands they had lost, if the king would have a palace here, it must be a very strong hold, and Offa had indeed made one.

The Romans had chosen the place long ago, having the same foe to watch and the same ford to keep, and on the low hill, which they saw was best for strength and position alike, they had set a great square camp with high earthen walls and deep moat below them. Once they had had their stone houses within it, but they had gone. The last of them were cleared when Offa drove out the Welsh and set his own place there after our fashion. Then he had repaired the earthworks, and crowned them afresh with a heavy timber stockade, making new gates and bridges across the moat.

Across the bridge which faces toward Wales we rode, between lines of country folk, who thronged outside the stockading to see our coming; and so with their cheers to greet us we came into a great open courtyard, with long buildings for thralls and kitchens and the like on either side of it, and right opposite the gate, facing toward it, the timber hall of the king itself. A little chapel, cross crowned, stood on its left, and the guest house and guard rooms for the housecarls to the right, stretching across the centre of the camp where once the Roman huts had been.

The hall was high and long, and had a wide porch and doorway in the end which faced the gate. Behind it one could see the roofs of other buildings which joined it, and beyond it again were stables, and byres, and kennels, and barns, and the countless other offices which a great house needs, filling up the rest of the space the stockade enclosed. Nor were they set at random, as one mostly sees them; but all having been built at once, they stood in little streets, as it were, most orderly to look on, with a wider street running from the back of the hall to the gate which led toward Mercia through the midst.

Presently I learned that the queen's bower was a lesser hall, which joined the back of the great palace hall itself, and that there were other buildings, which were not to be seen at first. It was the greatest palace in all England, and I wished that the Franks, who had little praise for our dwellings, had seen this before they went back home. It is true that all was built of timber, while the Franks used stone; but that last no Angle or Saxon cares for while good oak and ash and chestnut are to be had.

I did not pay much heed to the place at the time when we rode in, beyond a swift glance round me. There was that which held my eyes from the first on the wide steps that led to the hall door. There stood Offa and his queen to meet their guest, with the nobles of Mercia round them in a wondrous gathering, blazing with colour, and gold, and jewels, and the white horse banner of Mercia over them.



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To right and left along the front of chapel and guest house were lines of the scarred housecarls who had followed Offa and won the land for him, bright with flashing helmets and weapons; and close behind the group on the steps were some black-robed priests, who had a vested bishop in their midst.

So they waited while we dismounted, and then Ethelbert went forward alone toward the king and queen, carrying his helm in his hand, and with only a little golden circlet round his fair hair. I mind that the bright sun flashed from it as he went till there seemed a halo round his head, like to the ring of light they paint round the heads of the saints in the churches. And I thought that even Offa seemed less kingly than did he, though the great king was fully robed and wearing his crown. I think he had on a white tunic with a broad golden hem, and a crimson cloak fastened on his shoulder with cross-shaped brooch, golden and gemmed, while his hose were of dark blue, cross-gartered with gold.

And then I must look at the queen, and I saw the most wonderfully beautiful lady who ever lived outside of a gleeman's tale, so that hardly could Guinevere herself, King Arthur's queen, have been more beautiful. She was tall and yet not thin, and her golden hair fell in two long plaits almost to the ground over her pale green dress. From her shoulders hung a cloak of deeper green, wondrously wrought with crimson and gold and silver, and fastened with golden brooches. She also wore her crown; but even if she had not had it, none could mistake her for any but the queen among all the ladies who stood behind her, and they were of the noblest of that land.

I thought that the Princess Etheldrida would be there also, for beside the king was Ecgrith the atheling; but she was not. They say that she had some maidenly fear of meeting this husband of hers, who was to be, in the open court thus.

Now Offa smiled and came down the steps to meet Ethelbert, and set his hand on his shoulder and kissed him in a royal greeting, and so led him to the queen, who waited him with a still face, which at least had naught but friendliness in it. One would say that it was such a look as a fond mother might well turn on the man who would take her loved daughter from her, not unwilling, but half doubting for her. There seemed no look of ill, and none of guile, in her blue eyes as Ethelbert bent and kissed her hand; and she too bent and kissed his forehead.

And at that moment from my shoulder growled Erling, and his face was white and troubled:

"Yonder is she!"

Then he shrank away behind me, and so took himself beyond her sight. I did not see him again until the queen had left.



The words struck a sort of chill into me, and I looked more closely at the queen. Maybe I was twenty paces from her, and one of many, so that she paid no heed to me. And as I looked again I seemed to see pride, and mayhap cruelty, in the straight, thin lips and square, firm chin. It was a face which would harden with little change, and the blue eyes would be naught but cold at any time.



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And it came to me that it was a face to be feared; yet I did not know why one should fear aught for Ethelbert from her.

Now those greetings were over, and Offa led Ethelbert into the hall. Then Gymbert the marshal came and took us to our quarters, that we might prepare for the feast, giving some of us in charge of his men, while he led away the leaders of the party himself toward the guest hall by the palace.

One took charge of me, and led me round the little church to the back of the hall, telling me that the king had given special orders that the Frankish noble was to have some lodging of his own. It did not seem to be worth while for me to explain the case to this man, who would, doubtless, be sorely put out if I wanted to remain with the other thanes; so I said nothing, but followed him to the rear of the great hall, where a long building with a lean-to roof had been set against it, behind the chapel, and as it were continuing it. Inside it was like a great room, rush-strewn, and with a hearth in its midst, round which the servants of those who were lodged there might sleep, and along one side of it were chambers, small and warm, with sliding doors opening into the room. I found Father Selred there before me, and it seemed that he also was to have one of these chambers, the priest's house being full, and I was glad of it. Soon after that they brought Sighard, Hilda's father, there also, and I thought I was in good company, and had no wish to go further.

I told the man to bid Erling the Dane come hither when his work in the stables was done, and so he left me. Sighard's men, of whom there were two, had followed him with his packs.

Now they take Ethelbert to his chamber, and Offa and Quendritha seek their own in the queen's bower.

"A gallant son-in-law this of ours, in all truth," says the king gaily.

"Ay. And now you hold East Anglia in your hand, King Offa."

"Faith, I suppose so," he answers, laughing—"that is, if Etheldrida can manage him as you rule me, my queen! She is ever a dutiful daughter."

"If this young king were to die, the crown he wears with so good a grace would then fall to you," says the queen, coldly enough.

"Heaven forbid that so fair a life were cut short! Do not speak so of what may not be for many a long year, as one may hope."

"Then if he outlives you, he will make a bid for Mercia."



“Nay, but he is loyal, and Ecgfrith will be his brother. It will be good for our son that he has two queens for sisters—Wessex and Anglia are his supporters. But there is no need to speak thus; it is ill omened.”

“Nay, but one must look forward. There would be no realm like yours if East Anglia were added thereto,” says the queen slowly.

“We are adding it, wife, by this marriage, surely, as nearly as one may.”

“It were better if it were in your own hands,” she persists.



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“Truly, you think that none can rule but yourself. Let it be, my queen. You will have a new pupil in statecraft in your son-in-law.”

So says Offa, half laughing, and yet with a doubt in his mind as to what the queen means. Then he adds, for her face is cloudy:

“Trouble not yourself over these matters which are of the years to come; today all is well.”

“Ay, today. But when the time comes that Ethelbert knows his strength? I will mind you that East Anglia has had a king ere this nigh as powerful as yourself. He will have other teachers in king-craft besides ourselves.”

“Why, you speak as if you thought there would be danger to our realm from Ethelbert in the days to come?”

“So long as there is a young king there, who can tell?”

Then says Offa, “I am strong enough to take care of that. Moreover, he will be our son-in-law. I wit well that not so much as a mouse will stir in his court but you will know it;” and he laughs.

At that she says plainly in a low voice:

“You have East Anglia in your hands. If Ethelbert did not return thither, it is yours.”

Whereon Offa rises, and his face grows red with wrath.

“Hold your peace!” he says. “What is this which you are hinting? Far from me be the thought of the death of Ethelbert, in whatever way it may come.”

And so, maybe knowing only too well what lies behind the words of the queen, he goes his way, wrathful for the moment. And presently he forgets it all, for the spell of his love for Quendritha is strong, and by this time he knows that her longing for power is apt to lead her too far, in word at least, sometimes.

But we knew naught of this. It was learned long afterward from one to whom Offa told it, and I have set it here because it seems needful.

Nor can I tell, even if I would, how Ethelbert met Etheldrida, his promised bride. We saw them both at the great feast to which we were set down in an hour or so, and the great roar of cheering which went up was enough to scare the watching Welshmen from the hills beyond the river, where all day long they wondered at the thronging folk around the palace, and set their arms in order, lest Offa should come against them across the



ford of the host again. Their camp fires were plain to be seen at night, for they were gathering in fear of him.

All the rest of that day we feasted; and such a feast as that I had never seen, nor do I suppose that any one of those present will ever see the like of it. Three kings sat on the high place, for Ecgrith reigned with his father; and there was the queen, and she who should be a queen before many days had gone by. It was the word of all that those two, Ethelbert and the princess, were the most royal of all who were present, whether in word or in look, and in all the wide hall there was not one who did not hail the marriage with pleasure. It was plain to be known that there was no plot laid by these honest Mercian nobles against their guest. One feels aught of that sort in the air, as it were, and it holds back the tongues of men and makes their eyes restless.



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There were some fifty or more who sat with the kings on the high place at the end of the hall opposite the great door, thanes and their ladies, of rank from earl to sheriff. They set me at one end of the high table also, as a stranger of the court of Carl, asking me nothing of my own rank, but most willing to honour the great king through his man. And that was all the more pleasant because next above me was the Lady Hilda, so that I was more than content. She had found that she was indeed to ride home with the new-made bride, and had spoken with her already.

“See,” she said, “the omens have come to naught. We were most foolish to be troubled by them. Saw you ever a fairer face than Etheldrida’s?”

And that was the thought of all of us who so much as remembered that such a thing as a portent of ill had ever crossed the path of the king on his way hither.

So the business of eating was ended at last, and then the servants cleared the long boards which ran lengthwise down the hall for the folk of lesser rank, and there was a great shifting of places as all turned toward the high seats to hear what Offa had to say to his guests. And when that little bustle was ended he welcomed Ethelbert kindly and frankly, and so would drink to him in all ceremony.

Then Quendritha rose from her seat and took a beaker from the steward, and filled the king’s golden horn from it. As she did so I saw Offa look at her with a little questioning smile, as if asking her somewhat; but she did not answer in words. She passed him, and filled the cup of the young king who was her guest, and so sat down again. Then Offa and Ethelbert pledged each other, and the cheers of all the great company rose to hail them.

Not long after that the queen and the ladies went their way, and we were left to end the evening with song and tale, after the old fashion. Those gleemen of Offa’s court were skilful, and he had both Welsh and English harpers, who harped in rivalry. Soon Ethelbert left the hall, and men smiled to one another, for they deemed that he was seeking some quiet with the princess. But he was only following his own custom, and I knew that he would most likely be in the little chapel for the last service of the day.

Offa sat on, and it seemed to me that his face grew flushed, and his voice somewhat loud, as the time passed. His courtiers noted it also.

“Our king is merry,” one said to me. “It is not often that he will drink the red wine which your Frankish lord sent him.”

“Ay,” said another Mercian. “I saw him lift his brows when the queen filled his horn with it awhile ago. But he has kept to it ever since.”



I did not heed this much, but there was more in it than one would think. What the drinking of that potent wine might lead to was to be seen. I hold that Offa was not himself thereafter, though none might say that he was aught but as a king should be—not, like the housecarls at the end of the hail, careless of how the unwonted plenty of that feast blinded them and stole their wits.



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Presently, indeed, the noise and heat of the hall irked me, and I found my way out. It was a broad moonlight night, and the shadows were long across the courtyard. There was a strong guard at the gate, which was closed, and far off to the westward there twinkled a red fire or two on hill peaks. They were the watch fires of the Welshmen, and I suppose they looked at the bright glare from the palace windows as I looked at their posts.

In the little chapel the lamp burned as ever, but no one stirred near it. I thought I would find Father Selred in our lodging, and turned that way; and as I passed the corner of the chapel I met a man who was coming from the opposite direction.

“Ho!” he said, starting a little; “why, it is the Frank. What has led you to leave the hall so early?”

Then I knew that it was Gymbert the marshal.

“I might ask you the same,” I said, laughing. “I have not learned to keep up a feast overlong in the camps of Carl, however, and I was for my bed.”

“Nay, but a walk will bring sleep,” he said. “I have my rounds to make, and I shall be glad of a companion. Come with me awhile.”

So we visited the guard, and with them spoke of the fires I had seen, and laughed at the fears of those who had lighted them.

“All very well to laugh,” said the captain at the gate; “but if the Welsh are out, it will be ill for any one who will ride westward tonight. Chapman, or priest, or beggar man, he is likely to find a broad arrow among his ribs first, and questioned as to what his business may be afterward.”

Then we went along the ramparts to the rearward gate; and it seemed as if Gymbert had somewhat on his mind, for he fell silent now and then, for no reason which I could fathom. However, he asked me a few questions about the life in Carl’s court, and so on, until he learned that I was a Wessex man, and that I was not going back to him.

“Then you are at a loose end for the time?” he said. “Why not take service here with Offa?”

“I am for home so soon as this is over,” I said. “If all is well there, I have no need to serve any man.”

“So you have not been home yet,” he said slowly, as if turning over some thought in his mind. “What if I asked you to help me in some small service here and now? You are free, and no man’s man, as one may say.”



“Nor do I wish to be,” I answered dryly.

I did not like this Gymbert.

“No offence,” he said quickly. “You are a Frank as one may say, and a stranger, and such an one may well be useful in affairs of state which need to be kept quiet. I could, an you will, put you in the way of some little profit, on the business of the queen, as I think.”

“Well, if the queen asks me to do her a service, that may be. These matters do not come from second hand, as a rule.”

He glanced sidewise at me quickly, and I minded the face of another queen, whose hand had been on my arm while she had spoken to me with the tears in her eyes.



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“Right,” he said, laughing uneasily. “But if one is told to seek for, say, a messenger?”

“I am a thane,” I said. “To a thane even a queen may speak directly.”

“You Wessex folk are quick-tempered; or is that a Frankish trick you have picked up?” he sneered. “Nay, but I will not offend you.”

Then he was silent for a time while we walked on. I thought that the queen had hardly sent a message to me in that way, and that he had made some mistake. I would leave him as soon as we turned back toward the hall. We were alone on the rampart, with the stables below us on one side and the high stockading on the other; and then he dropped that subject, and talked of my home going in all friendly wise.

“There are always chances,” he said. “Come and take service with Offa if aught goes amiss at home.”

“I have promised to go to Ethelbert, if so I must,” I answered, thinking to end his seemingly idle talk.

I had put up with it because I was his guest in a way, seeing that he was the marshal, and it does not do to offend needlessly those who hold one’s comfort in their hands.

End his talk this did, suddenly, and why I could not tell.

“Why,” he said, “then you are his man after all! I deemed that you had but ridden westward with him for your own convenience.”

“So it was, more or less,” I said, somewhat surprised at his tone.

And when I looked at him his face seemed white in the moonlight.

“Of his kindness he bade me bear him company.”

But he made no answer, and half he halted and made as if to speak. Again he went on, but said naught until we came to the steps which led down from the rampart to the rear gate. On the top of them he turned and said in a low voice, staying me with his hand on my arm:

“Say naught to any man of what I said concerning a state need of the queen’s, for mayhap I took too much on myself when I spoke thereof; there may be no need after all.”

I laughed a little, for I did but think that he had been trying to make out that he held high honour in the counsels of Quendritha, out of vanity, not knowing what my rank was.



“If she does send for me, I shall remember it, not else,” I answered.

And then, as he had the guard to visit, I left him, and went across the broad street, from the gate to the hall through the huts, back to my lodging. There I found Father Selred, and together we waited for Sighard. Erling sat on the settle by the door, with his weapons laid handy to him, on guard.

“All seems well, father,” I said; “there is naught but friendliness here.”

“Well indeed,” he answered. “It is good to hear the talk of priests and nobles alike; they know the worth of our young king.”

“Well, and what is the talk of the housecarls, Erling?” I asked.

“Good also,” he growled. “But I would that I kened the talk of her of whom I have seen overmuch in the days gone by.”



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Then he remembered that of this matter Father Selred knew nothing, and he swore under his breath at his own foolishness; but the good father had not heard him, or his rough Danish prevented his understanding.

“What says he of the men?” he asked.

And when I told him he was well content, saying that from high to low all had a warm welcome for our king.

But even now Offa rises from the table and leaves the hall, all men rising with him. So he passes out of the door on the high place and seeks his own chamber, and there to him comes Quendritha.

“I have dreamed a dream, my king,” she says, standing before him, for he has thrown himself into a great chair, wearily. “I have dreamed that your realm stretched from here on the Wye and the mountains of the Welsh even to the sea that bounds the lands from the Wash to the Thames. What shall that portend?”

“A wedding, and a son-in-law whom you may bend to your will,” answers the king; but his eyes are bright, and there comes a flash into them.

That would be a mighty realm indeed, greater than any which had yet been in our land. If the East Anglian levies were his, he would march across Wales at their head, with the Mercian hosts to right and left of him. He might even wrest Northumbria from the hold of her kings.

Quendritha sees that flash, and knows that the cup has done its work. The mind of the king is full of imaginings. So she sits by him, and her voice seems to blend with his thoughts, and he does not hinder her as she sets before him the might and glory of the kingdom that would be his if that dream were true. And so she wakes the longing for it in the mind of Offa, and plays on it until he is half bent to her will; and her will is that the dream should come true, and that shortly.

Then at last she says, “And all this is but marred because of a nidding lad who will leave the hall at a feast for the whining of the priests yonder! In truth, a meet leader of men, and one who will be a source of strength to our realm! It makes me rage to think that but he is in the way. It is ill for his own land, as it seems to me.”

“Ay, wife,” says Offa. “But he is in the way, and there is an end thereof.”

“He is in your hand, and there are those who would say that Heaven itself has set him there. Listen. He hunts with you tomorrow. Have you never heard of an arrow which went wide of its mark—by mischance?”

Again the eyes of the king flash, but he does not look on the queen.



“Who would deem it mischance?” he says. “No man. And I were dishonoured evermore.”

“Not your arrow, not yours, but another’s—mayhap yonder Frank’s. He is a stranger, and would care naught if reward was great; then afterward he should be made to hold his peace.”

And at that she smiles evilly. A stray Frank’s life was naught to her if he was in her way.

“Say no more. The thing is not possible for me; it is folly.”



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“Folly, in truth, if you let Ethelbert keep you from the realm which waits you. Were he gone, there is not so much as an atheling who would make trouble there for you.”

“Peace, I say. Ethelbert is my guest, and more than that. He shall go as he came—in honour. What may lie in the days to come, who shall know?”

“He who acts now shall see. Until the Norns set the day of doom for a man, he makes his own future. Surely they set his end on Ethelbert when he came here.”

So she says in the old heathen way, but Offa does not note it. It is in his mazed mind that Ethelbert wrongs him by living to hold back the frontier of Mercia from the eastern sea.

“He is my guest, and I may not touch him,” he says dully. “All the world would cry out on me if harm came to him here. And yet—”

“You shall not harm him,” Quendritha says quickly. “There are other ways. Your own name shall be free from so much as shadow of blame. Now I would that I myself had made an end before ever I said a word to you.”

“Had you done so—Peace. Let it be. You set strange thoughts, and evil, in my mind, wife.”

Then she leaves him, and in her face is triumph, for Offa has forbidden her nothing. Outside the door waits Gymbert, as if on guard, alone.

“All goes well. Have you sounded yon Frank?” she says.

“He is no Frank, but a Wessex thane and a hired man of Carl’s; moreover, he is Ethelbert’s friend.”

“Fool!” she says. “How far went you with him? What does he know—or suspect?”

“Naught,” answers Gymbert stiffly.

And with that he tells her what passed between us.

“Come to me tomorrow early,” Quendritha says, and goes her way.

But we slept in peace, deeming all well. Only Erling, sleeping armed across my door, was restless, for the cold eyes of the queen seem to be on him in his dreams.



CHAPTER X. HOW GYMBERT THE MARSHAL LOST HIS NAME AS A GOOD HUNTSMAN.

There was to be a great hunt on this next day after we came to Sutton, the stronghold palace.

It had been made ready beforehand—men driving the game from the farther hills and woodlands into the valley of the Lugg, and then drawing a line of nets and fires across a narrow place in its upper reaches, that the wild creatures might not stray beyond reach again. I should hardly like to say how many thralls watched the sides of that valley from this barrier to a mile or two from the palace. Nor do I know if all the tales they told of the countless head of game, deer and boar, wolf and fox, roe and wild white cattle, which had been driven for the kings, are true, but I will say that never have I seen such swarming woods as those through which we rode after the morning meal.



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I had no thought that Offa seemed otherwise than as we met him yesterday, and I suppose that all thought, or perhaps all remembrance, of what he and his queen had talked of last night had gone from him. Gay and friendly he was, and we heard him jesting lightly with Ethelbert as they led us. With them went Gymbert, smooth and pleasant as ever; and he nodded to me as his eye lit on me, and smiled without trace of aught but friendliness. I looked for nothing else, indeed; but seeing what he and Quendritha had so nearly asked me to do that day, it may be a marvel that he hid his thoughts so well.

Presently I had reason to wonder at somewhat which happened to me, and that would have been no matter for wonder at all if I had but known that the queen was doubtful how much I had gathered from that talk of mine with her servant. Of course I had not suspected anything, but a plotter will always go in fear that a chance word will undo all.

Now we rode with bow and quiver on shoulder, and boar spear in hand, as we had been bidden. All of our party, save the ladies, from East Anglia were present, and about the same number of Mercian thanes. Besides these there were swarms of foresters, and the thralls who drove the game. Hounds in any number were with us, in leash, mostly boar hounds. And as for myself, I rode the skew-bald, whom I had called "Arrowhead," in jest, after that little matter of the flint folk. It was the Lady Hilda who chose the name, and I had had the flint head Erling gave me set in silver for her in Thetford, as a charm, for they are always held lucky.

I suppose I might have sold that horse a dozen times, and that for double what I gave for him, by this time. There was not an Anglian who rode with us but wanted him, for he seemed tireless, and here already was a horse dealer from the south who was plaguing Erling for him. All of which, of course, made me the less willing to part with him, even had I not found him the best steed I ever knew, after a fortnight's steady use of him.

When we came to the narrowing part of the valley where the great drive up to the nets was to begin, I was set by the head forester off to the right of the line, being bidden to shoot any large game which broke back, save only the boar. Most of them would go forward, it was thought, and those which went back would be set up by the hounds again at the end of the drive, men being in line also behind us to harbour them. I cannot say that I have so much liking for this sort of sport as for the wilder hunting in the open, with as much chance for the quarry as for the man; but sport enough of a sort there was. The bright little Lugg river lay on our left, and for a mile on that side on which we were the woods and hills were full of men, who drew together in a lessening curve as we rode slowly onward. It was good to hear the shouts and the baying of the hounds in the clear May morning.



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Men said it was Offa's last hunt of the season; and that is likely, seeing that the time grew late. If it was, there is no doubt that he meant it to be his greatest also. Mile by mile, and presently furlong by furlong, as we went the game grew thicker, until the covers and thickets seemed alive with deer which tried to break back, and the undergrowth on either hand of me rustled and crackled with the wild rush of smaller game, to which I soon forgot to pay any heed. And soon I had no arrows to waste on anything less than a stag of ten, leaving aught else to be dealt with by the foresters behind me.

Once or twice Gymbert rode across the rear of the line, and called to me in cheery wise as he did so. He seemed to be seeing that no man was out of his place; which was somewhat needful, since as we drew together the arrows must be aimed heedfully.

Which matter was plain to me shortly. A great red hind crossed me, and I let her go, though I had an arrow on the string, and had aimed. Even as I lowered the bow, over my shoulder, and grazing it, came another shaft, missing the hind and myself alike. Some one had shot from behind at her.

"Ho," shouted Erling, who rode behind me, "clumsy lout, whoever you are! That is over near to be sportsmanlike. Have a care, will you?"

I turned sharply with the same thought, and angrily. But I could not see any man near enough to have shot, for the trees were thick, and we were in a glade of a great wood. Whoever it was had crossed this glade out of our sight, and doubtless was somewhat ashamed of himself. It was in my mind to tell Gymbert if he came near me again. The man who would shoot so carelessly was not safe in a drive like this.

Nor had Erling seen any one. He had heard a horse behind us, however. Now he pulled the arrow from a sapling where it had stuck, and showed it me. It was a handsome shaft enough.

Of course I forgot the matter directly. It was just one of the common chances of a hunt, which now and then will spoil the sport of a day. We were getting near the barrier now, and the kings must go forward. Gymbert passed word along our line to halt, and cease from shooting.

"About time, too," growled Erling as we pulled up.

Then we dismounted, and the foresters closed up and went forward. One of the head men left two couple of hounds and some men with me, saying that if I could not see the sport at the nets I might have a boar back, and could maybe bring him to bay here, unless the hounds were wanted. I thought that they would be, for there were sounds of wild baying from the midst of the line, forward where the kings were, and now and then



howls told me that some more bold hound had dashed in on a boar at bay and had met the tusk. I would that I could see some of that sport, but there was no chance of it.

However, my turn came before long. Sighard joined me, leading his horse; and another thane, a Mercian, came up also. They had been to right and left of me in the line, and had seen the hounds left with me. For a quarter of an hour we stood there talking a little under our breath, but mostly listening with some envy to the sounds of the hunt ahead of us where wolf and boar died at the nets, turning in grim despair on their foes. Then there was a shout of warning that a boar had broken back.



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He came into the glade at a swinging trot straight for us. After him were two hounds, who kept him going though they dared not near him. And after boar and hounds came Gymbert himself, on horseback, with his boar spear in his hand. I thought that he could not reach the boar by reason of the hounds, or else that he had a mind to let us end the matter, as guests.

The men with us let loose the hounds we had, and they sprang in on the boar at the sight of him. At that the great beast turned sharp on the first two, and gored one from flank to shoulder with the terrible sidelong swing of the flashing tusk; and then he had his back to a great tree in a moment, and was at bay, with the hounds round him, yelling.

We three ran forward, and with us came Erling, with a second spear for me. The horses were in charge of some thralls who had gathered to us. Then it was to be seen who should win the honour of first spear to touch that dun hide. Gymbert was already waiting his time, wheeling his horse round to find an opening among the hounds, and Sighard cried to him to let us have a chance, laughing. Whereon he reined his horse back somewhat, and we paid no more heed to him. One has no time to mind aught behind one when the boar is at bay.

One of our fresh hounds ran in, and in a moment was howling on his back before the boar, whose white tusk and dun jowl were reddened as he glared in fury at us from his fiery eyes. Then across the hound I had my chance, and I ran in with levelled spear.

There was a shout, and some one gripped my arm and swung me aside with force enough to fling me to the ground. As I fell, the broad, flashing blade of a spear passed me, and then in a medley, as it were, I saw the boar charge over the hound and across my legs, and I heard a wild stamping and the scream of a wounded horse.

I leaped to my feet, dumb with anger, and saw the end of that. Gymbert's steed was rearing, and one of the foresters was trying to catch his bridle, while the boar was away down the glade with the unwounded hounds after him, and a broken spear in his flank. And then my three comrades broke into loud blame of Gymbert, in nowise seeking to use soft words to him.

Then I saw that the flank of the horse was gashed as with a sword cut, and that the face of the rider was more white and terrified than should have been by reason of such a mishap. The horse dragged its bridle from the hand of the forester, and reared again, and then fell heavily backward, almost crushing Gymbert. However, he had foreseen it, and was off and rolling away from it as it reached the ground. I heard the saddletree snap as it did so.

"Hold your peace, master," said Erling to me, before I could speak; "leave this to us."



I looked at the Dane in wonder, and saw his face white with wrath, while Sighard was plainly in a towering rage. The Mercian thane was looking puzzled, but well-nigh as angry, and the foresters were silently helping up their leader, or seeing to the horse, which did not rise.



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“A foul stroke, Master Gymbert,” said Sighard, going up to the marshal; “a foul spear as ever was! Had it not been for his man yonder, you had fairly spitted my friend the paladin. Ken you that?”

“How was I to know that he was going to run in?” said Gymbert, trying to bluster. “He crossed my horse, and it is his own fault if he was in the way of the spear.”

“One would think that you had no knowledge of woodcraft,” said Sighard, with high disdain. “Heard one ever of a mounted man coming in on a boar while a spear on foot was before him? Man, one needs eyes in the back of one’s head if you are about.”

Then he turned to the Mercian thane.

“Is this the way of Gymbert as a rule? or has he only been suffered to come out today?”

“A man gets careless at these times,” answered the thane. “Anyway he is like to lose a good horse, and I will not say that it does not serve him right.

“It was a near thing for the Frank, Gymbert, let me tell you.”

“Well, I am sorry,” said Gymbert gruffly. “I was a careless fool, if that will suit you.”

“A mighty poor sort of apology that.”

“Well, then,” said Gymbert stiffly, and as I thought somewhat ashamed of himself, “I will ask pardon for a bit of heedlessness in all truth. Mayhap I did ride in somewhat over jealously.”

Now by that time I was myself again, and told him to think no more of it, so far as I was concerned. Whereon he blamed himself again more heartily, and so went to see to his horse, which was past use again for that and many a long day. Sighard turned away with a growl, and Erling said nothing, for the matter was ended for the time.

As for the boar, it was Sighard’s spear which he took with him. The thane had got it home in his flank as he gored the horse, but to little effect. Then the boar had taken to the thickets, and there the foresters had slain him.

Gymbert sent a man for a fresh horse, and so rode away without another word to us. The noise from the nets went on, shifting across the little valley as the kings went from place to place in search of fresh game at the barrier.

“Well,” said Sighard, looking after Gymbert as he went, “if yon thane had it in his mind to spear you, or to ride over you, or anywise to send you on the tusks of the boar, he went the right way to work. He rode straight at you from behind, as if he meant it.”



“But for his man here the paladin had gone home on a litter, feet foremost, for certain,” said the Mercian. “I do not know what came to Gymbert, for he knows more of woodcraft than most of us. Maybe he thought it his boar by all right, and was over hasty.”

“A jealous hunter is no pleasant companion,” answered Sighard, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “Well, there is no harm done, but to the poor steed yonder.”



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Then I thanked Erling for his promptness, for it was his hand which had swung me out of danger. Whereon he smiled, and said that he saw it coming in time and risked my wrath. But I could tell that he had more in his mind, and let the matter rest till we were alone. But Sighard and the other thane went on growling now and then over the closeness of the mishap, until the horns sounded merrily for the gathering of us all to the barrier, where was even more work for men and hounds than the kings could undertake. They had taken their fill of the sport also, and had no mind to leave their courts apart from it all.

So for a long hour or two we brought to bay boar and wolf under the forest trees or along the river banks, until I was fairly glad when it was all ended. There was hardly a chance for the quarry, and it was good when one either leaped the nets or swam the stream and was away. Maybe it is as well to have seen such a drive, but I do not care to take part in another. Better the horn calling one in the early morning, and the music of the hounds whose names one knows, and the long drawing of the cover while they work together well and keenly, and the breaking of the stag or boar from his holt, and so the air on one's face, and the swing of the gallop over the open, with friends to right and left, before or behind.

Maybe, then, one will end the day with the death of a valiant stag in some bend of the trout stream, or with the last of a warrior boar at the foot of an ancient oak; or maybe there will be naught to show for the long day's questing. But always there will have been the working of hounds and the paces of the good horse to dwell on afterward, with, over all, the sight of bird and beast under the sky with friends and freedom. Today I had not so much as breathed my horse, and had nigh met my end in a sort of foolish chance which came, as I had only reason to think, of the crush and hustle of men at the end of the drive. There was, in truth, a sort of wild excitement in the air at that time, and it brings heedlessness.

Presently they gathered the game to a wide clearing on the river banks, and such an array of lordly deer and grim boars, row on row of fallow buck, and heaps of gray wolves, I have never seen. Roe and even hares were there also, hardly accounted for in the numbering. Hunting would be fairly spoiled on the Lugg side for a season or two, maybe; but many a farmstead would be the better off for lack of the nightly harriers of field and fold.

But, most of all, men looked at the one mighty wild bull which Ethelbert himself had slain. He was the only one which had been seen, though it was said that another had escaped at the first, and the kine of the herd had been suffered to go free. Snow white he was, with black muzzle and ears and hoofs, and his short horns shone like polished ebony above the curling mane of his forehead and neck. He was a splendid beast, the like of whom my forefathers had slain in fair hunt among the Mendips long ago, until none were left for us today. The wild Welsh hills held them for Offa, as did his midland forests everywhere, as men told me.



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Now at this last gathering I did not see Gymbert. I thought he had most likely gone homeward, either on business or else because he would fain hear no more of what he had done in the way of bad woodcraft. Sighard said plainly that it was just as well that he had gone, or his clumsiness would have been spoken of pretty plainly. But all those to whom he did mention it, and they were many, seemed hardly able to understand it, for the marshal's skill was well known.

I suppose it was a matter of two hours before sunset when we started for the palace from where we ended the drive, with an hour's ride before us. We straggled back somewhat, for the kings rode on together, and men followed as they listed. So it came to pass that before long Erling and I were together and almost alone; out of earshot from any one else, at all events, for Sighard was behind us with one or two more of our own party, and the Mercians whom we followed were ahead.

"What have you done to offend this Gymbert?" asked Erling, of a sudden.

"Naught that I ken," I answered. "We had a talk last evening on the rampart, but it was of no account. Why?"

"Because that was his arrow which so nearly struck you, first; and then, if ever a man tried to spear another by a seeming accident, he tried to end you when the boar turned to bay."

"His arrow? How do you know that?"

"Easily enough. When he fell yonder, those he had left fell out of his quiver. They are easily to be known, and they were the same as that I showed you—peacock-feathered with a bone nock, and tied with gold and silver thread twisted curiously."

"A man does not shoot another with an arrow of his own known pattern if he means it" I said.

"You hear what they say of the skill of Gymbert? All the more reason, if his arrow in you were known, that men would say that of course it was mischance, and pity him more than you. Moreover, that is the word which would go back to Carl, whom they deem your master yet. Offa would fain stand well with him."

There was truth in this, and I knew it; and yet I could hardly believe such a tale of treachery to an unoffending stranger as this would tell. Then I minded how Erling had spoken to him in Welsh, and a half thought crossed my mind that he bore ill will for that. But in that case Erling was the man who had offended by plain speech on a matter of which every one knew. So I did not recall this to my comrade; it seemed personal to me.



“Tell me what you and he spoke of last night,” Erling asked me gravely, as I turned the matter over.

I told him all I could remember, and it came back to me clearly as I went on. Then he said slowly:

“There was more in that talk of a service to be done for the queen than he would care for you to know. Why should a stranger be asked if he might be led to undertake one, when there are scores of faithful Mercians who would be only too glad to do aught to please her? As it seems to me, they needed one who could be put away without being missed afterward, when his errand was finished.”



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"No reason why Gymbert should have tried to end me now in that case."

"The king's wine was potent last night. It may be that he cannot rightly remember how far a loosened tongue led him," Erling said. "Master, there is trouble in the air. I sorely misdoubt that errand of Quendritha's."

"Faith," said I, "if you did not sleep across my door I would wear my mail tonight."

"Ay," he answered, under his breath and earnestly. "Do so anywise. These great palaces have strange tricks of passages and doors which are hidden, and the like."

"Little shall I sleep tonight if you go on thus," I said, trying to laugh; though it did indeed seem that he had somewhat more than fancy in what he feared, and I grew strangely uneasy.

"Better so," he answered; and I gave it up.

Riding easily, we came back to the palace close after the kings; and in the great courtyard I looked round for Gymbert, but could not see him. There was nothing in that, of course; but when a man has apparently tried twice to end one, it seems safer to have him in sight. And Erling, as he took my horse, growled to me to have a care and wear my mail under my tunic; which in itself was disquieting.

Most of all it was so because the affair seemed unreasonable. I tried honestly to think that all was accident, but two such mishaps from the same hand looked unlike that.

So I went straight to my chamber and did as my comrade bade me, somewhat angry with myself for thinking it needful. I took a light chain-mail byrnie, of that wondrous Saracen make, which I had won from a chief when we were warring on the western frontier mountains by Roncesvalles, and belted it close to me that it should not rattle as I moved. It was hardly so heavy as a helm, and fell into a little handful of rings in one's hand when taken off; but there was no sword forged in England which would bite it, nor spear which its tiny rings would not stay. There was a hood to it also, which went under the helm, but that I took off now. Then none could see it under my tunic, and I myself hardly felt that it was there.

Then I clad myself in all feasting finery, with Carl's handsome sword at my side, and a seax, which Ecgbert had given me to match it, also handy to my right hand in my belt. And so I went out into the open, for I mistrusted the dark chamber somewhat after Erling's words, though he knew less of palaces than did I. Maybe, however, that was why I knew that he was not so far wrong.

I went round to the courtyard, with a mind to pass to the stables and look at the horses; but I met Father Selred, who asked me to come out into the fields with him. Ethelbert had gone thither, he said, and he would find some one to follow him quietly as guard.



So we went from the great gate across the moat, and then turned to the right, where the little Lugg flows under the palace hill across the meadows, and then found a path toward a little copse, which we followed. Father Selred told me that the king had bidden him seek him there presently. He had gone to meet his princess in such quiet as a king may find by good chance.



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They had cut a path round this copse, and through it here and there, and we walked slowly round the outer edge on the soft grass, with the song of the birds and the cooing of the wood doves pleasant to listen to in the last evening sunlight. And then we met the Lady Hilda walking, idly as we walked, by herself, and her face grew bright as she saw us.

“Two are company, my daughter,” said Father Selred, with his eyes dancing with his jest. “I doubt not that you are carrying out the rest of the proverb. I will also retire and meditate awhile.”

“No, Father—” began Hilda.

But he smiled, and swung his rosary, and so walked away from us, while I laughed at him. Then Hilda smiled also, and with that made the best of it, and walked with me to and fro under the trees. The king and the princess were here, she told me, for a little time, and she was in attendance.

Presently she told me also of the goodness of Etheldrida, saying that she thought the king and the land alike happy in this match. She had much to say of her; and it seemed that the wedding was to be in three days' time, here in the palace chapel. But presently she spoke of Quendritha, and as she did so her face clouded.

“I am afraid of her,” she said at last. “She is terrible to me, and why I cannot tell. She is naught but kind to me. All the ladies fear her but one or two who are her close friends.”

“Well, you will soon be away from her,” I said.

“I do not know,” she answered, glancing round her. “She has said that she would fain keep me here. What she says she means, mostly.”

“Then,” said I boldly, “I shall have to come and take you away myself.”

Whereon she laughed a little, but did not seem displeased at the thought.

“Stay,” I said. “You have that arrowhead I gave you?”

“An I have not lost it. I will search.”

“Send it me if you need my help,” I said; “then naught shall hinder me from coming to you.”

“Spoken paladin-wise,” she answered, laughing at me. “Mayhap that bit of flint shall chase you round Wessex in vain, and meanwhile the ogre will have devoured me.”



But she set her white hand on my arm for a moment, as if in thanks. Then she started and looked at me in the face wonderingly. She felt the steel.

“Wilfrid,” she whispered, “why do you wear mail under your tunic?”

I told her plainly; otherwise it would have surely seemed that it was a niddering sort of habit of mine, and unworthy of a warrior in a king’s friendly hall. And there was no laughter in her fair face as she heard, but fear for me. Like Erling, she seemed to see peril around us.

“Listen,” she said. “The princess dreams that she is to be wedded, and that even before the altar her bridal robes grow black and the flowers of her wreath fall withered, while the strawn blooms under her feet turn to ashes on her path.”



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“More dreams!” I said bitterly. “We are beset with them, and they are all ill!”

“Have you also visions?” she asked, almost faintly.

“No; unless you are one, and I must wake to find myself back in bleak Flanders, or fighting for my life in Portland race again. And I pray that so it may not be; for if I must lose the sight of you, I am lonely indeed.”

“Nay, hush,” she said; “not now. Wait till all is well for you and for the king—and then, maybe; but I pray you have a care of Gymbert.”

Now I would have told her that I had no fear of him, and mayhap I should have heeded her other words little enough. But at that moment Father Selred came back and beckoned to us, and silently we went after him. The king had seen him and called to him.

Then and there I was made known to the princess, and I thought her strangely sad for one so fair, when she was not speaking. She looked wistfully on Hilda and on me, as if she knew how we had spoken, and smiled; and then her face was as the face of a saint in some painted evangel, such as Carl had in his churches, still and sweet.

But Ethelbert was bright and cheerful as ever; and he bade me see him home to his apartment, for he would talk with me. And I thought rightly that as he had spoken in the Thetford garden of Etheldrida, and as he had also spoken with me more than once on the road hither, so he had much to say of her now.

So across the glades passed the princess and Hilda with the priest, and with them the brightness went from the sunset for us two, I think. We waited for a few minutes, and then followed slowly, saying little. We had each our own thoughts.

CHAPTER XI. HOW ETHELBERT THE KING WENT TO HIS REST.

Now it becomes needful that I should tell where Ethelbert was lodged, for I had not been to his apartments yet.

Across the upper end of the great hall there was a long building set, and this was divided into three uneven parts. From the hall one entered it by the door behind the king's high seat on the dais, whence I had seen Offa and his guest come last night; and then one found that the midmost of these divisions was a sort of council chamber, lighted by a window in the opposite wall, and with a door on the right and left at either end. That on the right led to the largest division, where were the king's own chamber and the queen's bower. Other buildings had been added to this end; and it had its own

entrance for the queen from the courtyards, as I knew, for it was behind the church and priest's lodging where they had bestowed me.

The door from the council chamber to the left led to the smallest division of the cross building, and there were two chambers for such honoured guest as Ethelbert. One could only reach these chambers from the council room, and they had no private way into the courtyard. It seemed that the guest hall, which was built against the great hall to its left, ran back to the walls of this end of the cross building, for there was a heavily-barred low doorway, which could lead nowhere else, in the wall of the outer living room. The only other door was that of the bedchamber, and that was opposite the entrance.



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Pleasant and quiet chambers these were; for the noise of the hall could not reach them and their windows were set to the westward, looking out toward the Welsh hills beyond the Wye, which showed above the rampart and stockading.

So with much ceremony, which was wearisome to Ethelbert—and need not be set down, for it would weary any one, and was of no use—we reached those chambers, and there, being ready for the feast myself, I helped to array the king, and so passed with the royal party to the high place when the time came.

“Come back presently with me when the meal is over,” the king said; “I have somewhat to ask you.”

Then I found my way to the place which had been given me last night, and so had Hilda for neighbour again, to my much content; for the order of sitting had been little changed, save down the hall below the salt, where some fifty more men from the forest had been made room for. It was a great feast and merry, and it seemed the more so to me after the rough camp life across the sea, or the rare state banquets which I had seen in Carl's court. There was none of our hearty fellowship there, and there was more feeling of difference between men of high and low rank, which made a feast go stiffly to an English mind.

Presently I saw Gymbert across the hall, and I thought he looked uneasy. As he had fairly spoiled his name as a good huntsman, I was not surprised, nor did it trouble me. I missed him toward the end of the feast; but no doubt he had his duties about the place as when I spoke to him last night, and that was nothing to wonder at. I did not see him go.

It was a long feast. We began by daylight, and ended in the red blaze of torches set in sconces all down the hall, and in the whiter shine of great wax tapers which armed housecarls held behind us on the high place. I had never seen such waste of wax before; but Offa was magnificent in all he did, in a rougher way than that of Carl.

When the time of eating was ended and the toasts were to go round, the queen came with a wonderful golden cup which even the Frankish treasury could not match, and standing beside Ethelbert filled it with the red wine and pledged him. Very beautiful did she look as she held the cup to the young king, and her words were soft and full of kindness. She seemed well-nigh as young as the stately and pale Etheldrida, her daughter.

After that she and the other ladies left the hall after the custom, and we sat on telling tales and listening to the gleemen and harpers, and taking each our turn in singing. The East Anglian thanes had a way of singing together which was new to me and pleased me well. The hall grew hot and full of the smoke from the pine-knot torches before the



kings rose up to go. By that time, too, the foresters seemed to be singing against one another, and the noise grew great with their mirth.

I rose and followed Ethelbert as I had been bidden, and passed into the council chamber, where Offa and his guest parted for the night, each going his own way. I thought Offa seemed heavy and moody, but in every wise friendly. Tired he was, methought, for it had been a long day.



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Ethelbert signed to me, Father Selred, and Sighard to follow him, and we went into his apartment, closing the door after us. Out in the council chamber we left three of the Anglian thanes and three Mercian, who would act as guards for the night.

It was very pleasant in the silence of this cool chamber after the din and glare of the great hall. The moonlight came in at the western window; and though there were torches ready, the king would not have us light them, for he said we would sit in the dim light awhile till he grew sleepy. And so at first we spoke of the day's hunting, and, of course, Sighard had his say on the matter of Gymbert's carelessness.

Seeing that neither he nor the king had any doubt that carelessness it was, and naught else, I did not think it worth while to say anything of my own suspicions. I do not think that they could have believed that any harm was meant me had I told of the arrow. It seemed impossible, and if it were not that, it was a private matter of my own.

Presently that matter dropped, and there was a short silence. I heard then the sounds of shuffling feet plainly enough from somewhere close at hand, and thought that the wall between us and the guest hall must be somewhat thinner than it would seem, so that the sound came through thence. Sighard heard it also, and rose up quietly and looked into the inner chamber.

"What is it?" asked Ethelbert, as he came back and sat down again.

"Naught, lord. I thought I heard footsteps in your bedchamber; but there is nothing there. A strange house has strange sounds, and it takes time to get used to them."

"Some one passing under the window," said Selred the chaplain, laughing.

The little noise ceased, and we forgot it. Today I can seem to hear it as if it had thundered in our ears, for I know what it was and what it meant. Yet at the time there was no reason to think aught of it.

Then Ethelbert asked us somewhat which seemed strange.

"Have any of you noted aught in the look or way of King Offa which would make you think that he has not long to live?"

With one accord we said that we certainly had not done so, and that in some surprise. Sighard asked plainly what had put such a thought into his head.

"I will tell you," said Ethelbert in a low voice. "Between ourselves, here it is of no use to pretend that one does not know the name for ambition which Quendritha the queen has. Tell me what you make of this. Today I had a little private speech with her, and she would have me put off the wedding. She more than hinted that I might make a higher match, and that angered me. Whereon she told me that Offa might not have



long to live; that Mercia and East Anglia would be a mighty realm if united. And, on my word, it seemed to me that she would bid me wait till she was a widow.”

He laughed uneasily, as if he thought himself foolish; but we knew that unless he had full reason for that belief he would not have told us. That must have been a strange talk between this honest young king and Quendritha, if he deemed it best to speak to us of it.



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Sighard frowned, and said:

“If it is true that Offa is thus—well, we are forewarned. Quendritha has let us see that in one way or the other she would fain have East Anglia. I think that she spoke unwarily to you, my king.”

“Nay,” said Selred the priest; “I hold that she sounded you as to whether you had any thought of adding Mercia to your own realm. If it is true that Offa has some secret ailment which is slowly and surely bringing his end near, she looks onward to the time when she shall stand alone. She would find out if you are to be feared.”

“Maybe that is it,” said Ethelbert, with a sigh of relief. “It must be. She is a mistress of craft; and had I one thought of adding to my realm, that would have made me show it. However, she should be satisfied. I would hear naught of putting off the wedding, as you may suppose.”

I said nothing, but it was in my mind that mayhap there was more at the back of all this than they saw. I had heard overmuch of Quendritha to have much doubt that if she could see her way to reigning over both realms, she would stay for naught, even for the removing of Offa from her path if he stood in it. And almost did I tell the king of Thronð’s knowledge of her, but forbore. Sighard knew it also, and he was the best judge of that. But I will say that I was somewhat lighter of heart to hear this, for it was plain to me that Offa himself had no thought of guile toward Ethelbert; and to this day I do not believe that he had. His mind was far too great for that; and if he loved power, I hold that to have married his daughter to a king was fully enough for him. Beyond that all was from Quendritha. To tell the truth, if I feared for any one, it was for Offa himself.

Now Ethelbert rose and said that he grew weary and would go to rest. Sighard said that he would get him a light from the council chamber; but he would rather bide in the moonlight, which was enough to fill all the room. So we three went into his sleeping chamber with him. At one side was the state bed with its heavy hangings, and midway in the room, by its side, was a great chair, softly cushioned. The smell of the sweet sedges with which the room had been newly strown was pleasant and cool, and a little chill breeze came in from the window with the moonlight.

“Leave me for a while, my thanes,” he said; “I will call you anon. Wilfrid will no doubt be glad to go to his place; so goodnight”

He smiled at me, and held out his hand, and I bent and kissed it. So we went back to the other room to wait, for we knew that the king would pray. The door swung softly to after us.

Now I thought I heard the chair creak as the king went to it. Then there was a sound as of a fall somewhere near us, and a stifled cry.



“What is that?” I said, turning to Sighard.

“Housecarls outside,” he said. “It was from the place whence we heard the footsteps awhile ago. Listen! there they are again.”



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I heard the same sort of dull trampling as before, and there was also a voice.

“It seems to be almost beneath us,” I said.

But the footsteps were plainly going away from us, and growing fainter in the distance. I climbed on a settle and looked out of the high window, which was set aloft so that none could see into the chamber as they passed it. But I could see no man. There were some wood piles and sheds between the rampart and us, but nothing stirred about them so far as I could see. Whereby I supposed that they had passed round the corner. On the rampart an armed sentry was pacing, black against the low moon, and beyond him the fires of the Welsh—who watched us—burnt as brightly as last night.

Now there was a gentle knock on the outer door, and I opened it. One of the thanes said that the man who served me would see me, and I went out into the great hall, bidding Sighard and the chaplain goodnight as I did so. Down the length of the hall men were throwing themselves on the rushes to sleep along the walls in their wonted places, though there were yet groups at the tables still telling tales and drinking. The torches were almost all burnt out save where these men were, and across the open roof were strange white shafts of moonlight through the smoke, from windows and under westward eaves.

Outside the door, on the high place, stood Erling alone, for the tables there had been cleared away. Only the throne of the king remained. And in the light from the council chamber I saw that the face of my comrade was white as death.

“Where is Ethelbert the king?” he said, almost wildly, and clutching my arm.

“In his chamber,” I answered. “All is well. I saw him there not ten minutes ago.”

“How can that be? It is not that time ago since he stood by me on the rampart, where I walked alone, and spoke to me.”

“It was some one else like him,” I said. “He is going to sleep.”

But Erling stared beyond me, and grew yet paler. I saw the black rims grow round his eyes. Then his grip tightened on my arm, and he gasped:

“He stood before me, and that red line round his neck had drops like gems therefrom. He said, ‘Now do I die and pass to rest. I would that you came after me.’ And I said, ‘Trouble not yourself, king, for the like of me.’ And he smiled wondrously, and answered, ‘Nay, but needs must I, for you are the only heathen man in this palace garth. I would that all were well with you as with me.’ Then he was gone, and there was only a brightness, and betimes that faded. Then I came hither. There is ill which has befallen the king.”



“Impossible,” I said. And even as I said it into my mind flashed that strange, unaccounted for trampling, and I went back, with Erling after me, unbidden. The six thanes who waited in the council chamber stared at me, but I did not heed them. Across to the king’s door I went, and passed in. Selred and the old thane were talking quietly under their breath, and I had but been gone three minutes.



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“Back again, Wilfrid? Eh, what is amiss?” said Sighard, starting as he set eyes on Erling.

“Has the king called you?” I asked hastily.

“No; it is hardly time for him to do so,” Selred answered, smiling.

“Look into his chamber softly, I pray you, Father Selred,” Erling said in a strange voice. “It is upon me that all is not well.”

Now so urgent was the tone in which the Dane spoke that the priest went at once to the inner door and opened it very gently, and peered in. Then he started forward suddenly and threw the door wide.

“Thanes!” he cried wildly, and we were at his side.

The room was empty. There was naught but the bed in it, for even the great chair was gone. Only where it had been there was a square patch of floor which was not covered with the sedges I had noted as so lavishly strown. Nor was the king in the bed, whose coverings were unruffled. Sighard lifted its hangings and peered under and behind them in a sort of frantic hope; for though there was no sound, and no answer to his whispering of the well-loved name of his master, it seemed unbelievable that from this little chamber a man should have gone utterly and without a sound during these few minutes. Yet so it was.

I set my hands on the high sill of the window and drew my face to its level. It was too narrow for a man to get through, and there was nothing to be seen outside but the white moonlight, and the mist which rose from the Lugg and curled over the rampart, white and ghostly round the sentry, who leaned on his spear and stared at the twinkling hill fires.

“It is wizardry,” said Sighard, groaning, while cold drops broke out on his forehead. “He has been spirited away.”

“I saw him on the rampart,” answered Erling; “but it was his ghost that I saw. I knew it, and came and told my master here.”

Now there came a silence in which we looked at one another. Then Sighard went and began to search the walls for hidden doors—hopelessly, for the timbers were a full foot thick. And so of a sudden some frenzy seemed to take him, for he set his hand on his sword, and would have waked the palace with the cry of treason, but that Selred stayed him.

“Friend, friend,” he said earnestly, “have a care—wait! We are but two score amid hundreds, and that cry may mean death to us all.



“Wilfrid, call the other thanes hither.”

I went to the door of the council chamber, and there was that in my face which bade the thanes spring up and hurry to me with words of question. I looked first at the three Mercians; but their faces were blank as those of the Anglians. They expected naught.

“The king has gone,” I said. “You Mercians may best know whither.”

One of them laughed, and sat down again.

“You have a strange idea of a jest in Carl’s camp, paladin,” he said. “What is it? The king gone, with us sitting here at his door, forsooth!”



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“No jest, thane, but the truth,” I said, taking the tall wax torch which was on the table before them. “Come.”

Then they leaped up and followed me into the bedchamber, and stood staring as we had stared. It was plain that they knew as little as ourselves.

“He has passed into the guest hall,” said one of the Mercians, looking round him wildly enough.

But that was not possible, for the door was in the outer room whence we had come, and it was barred on both sides.

“We are disgraced,” said another, groaning. “Our charge has been made away with, and how we cannot tell. We shall pay for this with our lives.”

Then Sighard said, “He cannot be far off. Men—think! How can he have gone hence? Who would make away with him?”

But there was no answer to these questions. The thing remained a mystery. If there was any plot, these three honest thanes were not in it. And then as I walked uneasily from side to side of the room, turning over impossible ways of disappearance in my mind, I came near where the great chair had been. And under my step the floor creaked.

Now seeing how that house was built, this was a sound one would not expect to hear at all. It came into my mind that here was one of the few floors which were boarded, the most being of beaten clay, or paved with great stones wonderfully. So I trod again firmly in that place, and it seemed to me that the floor gave, somewhat.

I reached out for the torch which I had set on the sconce in the wall and looked at the floor, but why it creaked I did not make out. The boards were of hewn oak, and how thick one could not tell.

“Fetch Offa the king,” said a Mercian; “we had better tell him. No use in gaping here. We can swear that Ethelbert has not passed out of these doors.”

“No,” said Selred quickly; “that were to wake the whole palace. Let us seek further into this.—Thanes, if aught has been done amiss to our king, we are all in danger.”

The floor creaked under my foot again, and I looked back to it. What I saw now made me start and call the others to me.

“See here!” I cried.



Round that clear space where the chair had been was a saw cut newly made. It went through the flooring, so that the square was like a trapdoor. And it was uneven, as if it had been made in haste. Then I knew what must have been the meaning of the sounds we heard and thought nothing of—the creak, and the fall, and the stifled cry.

Sighard looked once, and then threw himself on his knees, drawing his stout seax as he did so.

“Have it up!” he said, with his teeth clenched, “have it up!”

Then a thought came to me, and I beckoned to Erling. It might be that armed men lurked under that trapdoor, and that our end was coming; but at least we would have fair play.

“Go and bar the door to the great hall,” I told him. “We will have none else in here if there is a fight. Then see if you can get the door to the guest hall undone.”



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He nodded and went out. One of the Mercians asked sharply where he was going; but Sighard paid no heed to him, for he was trying to get his blade into the saw cut, and so raise the square of flooring.

“Thane,” I said to the Mercian, staying him from following Erling, “he will shut the door to the hall, and let this thing be seen through in silence. Go you and watch at the door of Offa, for it has bided untended long enough.”

He went out in haste, and Erling watched him there. I saw him sit down to the table whence he had risen at my coming, and set his head on his hands as if in despair. I had no fear that he would call Offa yet, or that Erling would suffer him to go to his comrades in the hall. The other two stayed and watched Sighard silently.

Now the old thane had his blade fast in the timber and lifted. The square of floor rose slowly at that corner, and one of the Mercians set his hand to it. Another lift, and the whole was coming up, for the boards had been fastened together with cross pieces underneath, doorwise. As it rose I heard the fall of props that had kept it in place, and I bade Sighard have a care. I feared it would let him through suddenly as these props fell; but it had been roughly hinged at one end with thongs. He rose, and he and the Mercian heaved on the door and threw it back.

Then below us gaped a black pit which seemed to go deep into the earth, and for a moment we shrank back from it as men must needs do when a depth is suddenly before them. Nor should I have wondered if thence the bright points of waiting spears had darted upward in our faces.

But there was nothing save a little cold draught of wind that blew into them from out of that pit, and we looked into it. I held the torch so that its flickering blaze went to the bottom, and as we saw what was there a groan came from us.

There was the great chair lying, overturned on its side as it may have fallen, but it was dragged back from under the door somewhat. There were the cushions I had noted also—one lying on the stone floor of the pit, and the other on the seat of the chair. But there was no sign of the king—none but a stain of red on the cushions and on the floor, and on the blade of a sword which lay beside that terrible pool. And the sword was the king’s own.

Then said Sighard, and his voice came hoarse and broken:

“Our king is slain! Hounds of Mercians, tell us who has wrought this!”

One answered him from dry lips:

“We cannot tell. It is a shame on the house of Offa, and on the very name of Mercia. Kill us if you will, for we are niddering.”

He plucked his sword from his belt and threw it on the floor. The thane who had gone into the council chamber was on his feet and staring at us through the open doors, and Erling was ready to fall on him if he cried out. But the third Mercian, whose name was Witred, did not lose his senses thus.



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“True enough,” he said, looking fearlessly at the angry group before him. “But it were better to follow this passage and see if we may not overtake those who have been here.

“Bide here, paladin and priest, and keep our way back clear with my comrade yonder, and let us go quickly. If they slay us—maybe that is no loss, but at least we have done what we should.”

Without another word Sighard leaped into that awesome pit, and Witred followed him. Then went our three thanes, and Selred and I stood alone in the room. I handed the torch down to the last man, and so saw that from the place where the chair was set a low stone-arched passage led westward into darkness. It was some work of the old Romans, no doubt, for no Saxon ever made such stonework—strong and heavy as rock itself.

The light flashed from somewhat on the wall also, as it seemed, drawing my eyes to it.

“Yonder is a spear set,” I said to the thane, as he took the light from me; “hand it to me.”

He took it from where it rested against the wall and gave it me, turning at once to follow our comrades. Then I knew the spear well enough, for I had seen it over close to me once before. It was Gymbert’s boar spear.

CHAPTER XII. HOW QUENDRITHA THE QUEEN HAD HER WILL.

Slowly the footfalls of our comrades died away down the low passage, and then the last flicker of their torch passed from the stone walls of that terrible pit, leaving Selred and myself alone in the cold moonlight. Out through the doors toward the council chamber I saw the Mercian thane, who had been watching us in silence, sit down at the table and set his head in his hands wearily; and I heard Erling try the bars of the door to the guest hall, and finding it impossible to open, after a while pass into the council chamber, and set himself against the great door once more.

After that there fell a dead silence over all the place, and it was uncanny. It seemed impossible that all men should sleep in peace in the palace where such a deed had been wrought at our feet. I had rather the rush and yell of the Welsh over these ramparts they hated than this stillness of coldly-planned treachery.

Nor should I have been surprised if at any moment I had heard the tramp of men who came to fall on us and end what had been begun, or the cries and din of arms which should tell that they had fallen on the sleeping thanes of Anglia in the guest hall. Anything was possible after what had been wrought already, and indeed it was hardly likely that the king should be slain and the servants let go free.



I think that the stillness and waiting for unknown doings thus went near to terrifying me. I know that I started at every sound, if it were but the crackling of the little fire in the council chamber, or the low challenge of one sentry to his fellow as the word which told all well passed round the ramparts. Selred was on his knees, and I would not speak to disturb the prayers which we so sorely needed.



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The time seemed long as we waited, but it could not have been much more than ten minutes before I heard the footfalls of our party as they returned by the passage way. One by one they came out from under the arch, and I took the torch from Witred the Mercian, who came first as he had gone, and then helped them one by one to the room again from the pit. Their faces were white and hard set in the light, and Sighard seemed as a man broken and aged in a moment with trouble beyond his bearing. Then I knew that I had to hear the worst, and made ready for it. Witred the Mercian told it quietly.

“This passage runs under the ramparts, and ends in a thicket on the steep by the river. I knew that there were old stones in that, but not one of us knew of the passage. That end has been newly opened, and the tools with which it was done are there yet. A man sat by that entrance on guard outside, and as I came I spoke to him by name and told him who I was. Then he stayed, and we fell on him and bound him without giving him a chance to cry out. Whereon he told all, and it is an evil tale.”

He paused, and wiped his forehead, looking round as if he would have any man but himself tell it; but none else spoke.

“Yesterday Gymbert’s men sawed the floor through and made this trapdoor. Then they waited underneath, and the king fell, as they had expected, into the ready arms that waited him. There were Gymbert and half a dozen of his men. The cushion stayed his cry, and he was helpless. Yet he was very strong, and so Gymbert snatched his own sword from his side and smote off his head. Out by the river they had a cart waiting, and they bore him away at speed. We saw and followed the wheel tracks till we lost them, and could do no more. Then we bound and gagged the man, and have haled him halfway down the passage till we need him again. That is all.”

Then I said, with a cold wrath on me, “At whose orders was this done?”

The Mercian shook his head, glancing at his comrades. The other Mercian had come to hear from the council chamber.

“The man could not or would not tell; but I pray you think not that this is done by Offa. The one thing that the man begged us was that he might not be delivered to the king. And he said that Gymbert and his men would hide till Offa’s wrath was past.”

“There is but one other at whose word this could have been done,” I said.

“Ay,” said Witred, “I know. Yet Ethelbert was to be the bridegroom of our princess. Is it possible that Gymbert has looked so high, and would take him from his way?”

And at that one of the other Mercians answered bluntly:



“You speak of what is not possible, and you know it. Who but that one of whom we ken would have seen that those who wrought here with saw and axe were not disturbed? Let us say at once that the thing has been wrought by the hand of Quendritha, and have done with it. Which of us does not know that she is capable of it, and has never dared say so yet till this minute?”



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Then said Witred, "That is the truth, thanes. Now what will you, for the time goes on? This man said that it was thought that the deed would not be known till waking time in the morning. It is not midnight yet."

We looked at one another, for what was best we could not say. It was more than likely that the queen had planned against some too early discovery of the deed, and even now waited for any sign which should tell her to act. But for the staying of that man at the entrance, I have no doubt that by this time her men had been warned to fall on us. The gathering of the Welsh, and the open passage into the heart of the palace, might be seeming proof that we had planned the downfall of Offa, and so short work with us.

Now one said that it were best to tell Offa straightway, but Selred and my comrades would not have that. We were not so sure in our own minds that he was guiltless in the matter; and at last Selred said that he would try to reach the guest hall and wake the other thanes and bring them here.

So we passed into the council chamber, and I think we were all glad to be away from the side of that pit. Erling stood at the great door, and he had taken the bars down from that which led to the guest hall. If only we could make some one of our folk hear without too much noise, they could unbar it from their side.

"There is one asleep near to it," said Erling; "I heard him in the stillness."

I tapped sharply once or twice on the heavy door with my sword handle. I heard the sounds the sleeper made on the other side, and presently they stopped suddenly. Whereon I tapped again, and I heard a voice, and then another, as if men heard it. And then a tapping came back. The door was very thick, and made of oaken logs, bound together with iron, so that it was hard to hear. But I set my face close to it and spoke, thinking that no doubt an ear was not far off beyond.

"Unbar the door," I said—"unbar."

"Who is that?" came the muffled voice.

Then Selred answered, and presently I heard the great bars being drawn from their sockets in the door posts, and at last the door opened slowly toward us. A thane was there with his sword in his hand, staring at us.

"Let me in, for I have a word to say," said Selred quietly. "Be silent, for one does not want to rouse the place."

He passed in, and we closed the door. Beyond the other door lay the housecarls of Offa down the long hall where we had feasted, and within his own chambers there were a score or more of the young thanes of his bodyguard sleeping across his own doors.



Now we heard the still voice of Selred, and after it a stifled outcry, hushed almost before it arose, and then silence. In a minute the door was pushed gently, and the father came back with a pale face. He had told the thanes, and they were arming in silence. Then they would come and see what we had seen.



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“And after that?” said Witred.

“If I were in their place, naught should stay me here,” said the Mercian who had bided with me plainly.

“No,” said Sighard savagely; “I have a mind to bid them burn this hall over Offa’s head, and meet their end in the turmoil.”

“Thereby giving occasion to men to say that we wrought treason and were punished rightly, both ourselves and the king,” said Selred coolly. “That be far from us, Sighard.”

The old thane growled, and seeing that he was beyond reason, the priest set his mouth close to his ear and spoke to him. Whereon he calmed at once, and a new look of fear came into his face.

“Hilda,” he groaned; “I had forgotten her.”

Now the thanes came quietly through the door into the chamber, and one by one passed to that room where Ethelbert had been betrayed. Presently they were all gathered there, and when they saw, there grew a sort of panic among them.

“Let us hence while there is time,” said one, voicing the fears of the rest; “we are all dead men else. This is what the earthquake betokened.”

“It is the part of Anglian thanes to die with their king,” said Sighard angrily.

“An there were a king left us to die with—”

Then Witred broke in with words of common sense which ended the talk. He had every reason to wish us gone, to save the terror of a wild vengeance let loose in this palace; and that we should go was best in every way.

“Thanes, thanes,” he said, “listen to me. Tomorrow morning early men deemed that this would be found out. In the dawning the grooms lead the horses to water yonder at the river, and they are the first men afoot. Gymbert is gone, and on this thane here falls the task of ordering the stables. He shall bid your grooms keep together, and after watering lead your horses, as for airing, eastward to the forest paths. Go hence by this passage, and I will take you to some place which we will arrange, and there they shall meet you. Then make your way swiftly beyond the reach of Quendritha; yet it is in my mind that even Offa can no longer be blind to the evil she works. Her power will be little.”

The thanes looked at one another, and then one or two said that it was not the way of Anglian thanes to fly thus; but they had little voice in the matter. The rest had no thought but to fly, and I do not blame them. Save some such savage work as that which Sighard would set on foot, there was naught else to be planned.



But I minded the voice and pleading look of that mother who spoke with me in the garden at Thetford, and I had a mind to stay and see this thing to an end, for it was all that I might do. Maybe I could find the body of her son and see it brought back to her.

“I bide here,” I said; and Selred stepped to my side without a word.

“I also,” said Sighard; “I have words to say yet before I die.”



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They tried to persuade us, but in vain, and at last they left the matter. In silence they went each to his place, and took the arms and things which were of value, and so passed down the passage with Witred at their head, and I heard one or two threaten the honest thane with death if he played them false. But he did not answer them, for he knew that they spoke wildly as yet in the new terror which had broken their sleep.

After that we went back to the council chamber and sat down. The worst strain was past with their going, as it seemed to me, and the morning would tell what was to be.

"We will stay here," said Selred. "There should be three thanes and myself, and you two and Erling will seem the right number when men look into this room presently."

So again the silence of the midnight came down on us, and in the chill we waited for the return of Witred; and it was two hours before he came. After him we closed the trapdoor, and the doors of the private rooms of the king who had gone, and then the Mercian planned that matter of the horses.

"Halfway to the forest," he told us, "some of the thanes would fain have returned to fall on this place, and take revenge and die. Once I deemed that they would do so, but that fit passed from them. Then they went on with me, and now they are safe. It may be that they will get their horses, and if not, they will scatter and make their way home on foot. Men who come to such a gathering as this have money enough with them."

After that it was a question with us, and a hard one, to know what it were best to do. It seemed terrible to wait there until men woke and learned all; but save that we might find Offa himself, there was naught else to be done. We must wait him. It is not to be supposed that his thanes would hear one word which seemed to hint that he had had any hand in this deed; but it was plain enough that they feared what evil Quendritha might not have urged him to, else had they made haste to call him.

Now, while we waited there and doubted, word came from Gymbert secretly to Quendritha that her bidding had been done, and that Ethelbert stood in her way no longer. In the darkness a thrall crept to where the queen sat at a window and watched, and made some sign which she understood, and then in a little while our waiting was at an end.

For straightway she goes to Offa, and stands by his bedside with eyes that gleam in the dim light of the lamp that burns in the chamber, and wakes him, but not easily. On him the potency of that Frankish wine lingers yet, and he does not rouse quickly, but stares at her with wondering eyes.

"Wake," she says. "Today you are the mightiest king that has ruled in England yet."



“Ay, and was so yesterday,” he says, for so the songs of his gleemen tell him night after night.

“Rouse yourself,” she cries angrily; “hear what I have wrought for you.”



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Thereat some remembrance of those other words of hers comes into his mind, and he wakes suddenly, fearing, and yet half hoping.

“What mean you?” he says.

“I mean that naught stands in your way from here to the eastern sea. Call your levies and march across the land in all its breadth, and there is not one who will forbid you. East Anglia is yours.”

Now Offa looks on her face, and sees triumph written in her eyes; and he minds all, and knows that she has done that which he forbade her not, and round his heart is a terror and a chill suddenly.

“Wife,” he says in a harsh voice, “what have you done?”

“That which you would not do for yourself, but left to me. I have taken the weak out of the way of the strong, and hereafter East Anglia will thank me.”

Then says Offa under his breath, “Ethelbert has been slain in my house! There is not a thrall in all the land who will not sleep better than shall I hereafter. Yet I will not believe it. This is an evil dream. Let me hence!”

Then he springs from his bed, and the queen will not prevent him. Presently, she thinks, he will learn the truth and be glad of it. So she does but call the pages and armour bearers from the outer chambers, and bids them see to their lord, and so leaves him. Then he dresses and arms quickly, being minded, if the worst is not yet done, to see that all is well. Maybe she does but urge him to that which she would have him do again. And he will not do it. That much he knows clearly. For the rest, all is misty in his mind, and that is what Quendritha had planned.

So it came to pass that, even as we had made up our minds that we must needs call the king, the door to his chamber opened, and a page came out with the words that bid men meet the king, and we rose and stood to greet him. He came forth quickly, looking wild-eyed and haggard, with his sheathed sword grasped in the hand which held his cloak round him against the night air. He halted for a moment on the threshold, and stared at us; while from very force of habit we saluted, and spoke the words of good morrow that were but mockery today. And he knew it.

“Good morrow, forsooth,” he said, in a terrible, dull voice; “and I would from my heart that so it may be. Tell me, thanes, is aught wrong here? It seems that all is quiet. Mayhap I have but dreamed of ill—dreamed, I say, for it could be nowise else. I had an evil dream. I thought that Ethelbert, my guest and son to be, was harmed.”

He looked from one of us to the other, and our faces spoke to him, though we could find no words. The hand that held the sword tightened its grip on the gilded scabbard, and he strode forward into the room fiercely.

“It is no dream, but the truth,” he said hoarsely. “Answer me, is it true?”

Now I saw the wrath growing in his face. And I heard Witred stammer, for the fear of the great king was on him; and I knew not what Sighard might not say in his wrath, for already Selred had his hand on him to stay him. So I spoke for the rest, being a stranger, and of no account if the anger of the king sought a vent on me.



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“King Offa,” said I, “there is evil wrought by stealth here, and your thanes are not to blame. Come with me, and you shall see that so it is, and you will learn the worst. Keep your wrath for those who are not yet named. It is true that Ethelbert has been slain this night; but he does not lie here.”

The king went back a pace from me and paled suddenly. I did not know what he might do next, for I could not tell that this was but certainty to him of that which he had reason to fear. But he kept a tight rein on himself, and in a moment spoke to me clearly, if in low tones.

“You are Carl’s messenger to Ethelbert, and therefore trusted by him. You have no need to keep aught from me, nor do you fear me, as it seems. Tell me plainly what has been done.”

I think that he had not understood that Ethelbert had been taken hence, and that he dreaded to look on him. So I told him once more.

“Through the old passage which lies beneath his chamber men crept and slew Ethelbert. Then they took him hence; whither we cannot tell. It has been but chance that we have found it out before we went to call him in the morning.”

“Silently, without noise, was this wrought, then?” he said, as if he hardly believed it.

“So silently that if noise there was we could not tell it from the sounds of men about the house. I pray you come and see what was planned.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then knew that go he must, sooner or later.

“So let it be,” he said. “Bide here, you others.”

I turned, and led the way into the bedchamber. There I stooped and opened the trapdoor, and held the torch so that the light fell into the pit, without a word. He saw the fallen props, and the chair, and all else that told him the terrible tale. And as he saw he reeled a little, and I caught his arm. But he shook off my hand savagely.

“Tell me,” he said, between his teeth, “have you hunted for those who did this deed?”

“Such of us as might go have done so. Your own door was not left unguarded, King Offa. But the slayers had gone far hence swiftly.”

“An they were wise they would bide there,” he said grimly.

Now he was more himself, and his eyes sought the pit and the room for all he might learn. I saw that he knew the spear of Gymbert, but he said nothing of it. It came to my



mind that to his dying day King Offa would not forget aught that his eyes lit on in that place.

“There shall be a reckoning for this,” he said at last, turning to me with a stern look on his face. “Tell me, is it said that in this I have any part?”

“None have said it, King Offa,” I answered.

“They have but thought it,” he said; “that is what you mean. Well, what is that to me? Yet hereafter you shall tell Carl that in it I had no part.”

I bowed, and let that bide. It seemed that to be thought still the messenger for whose return Carl would look might be some sort of a safeguard to me if things went ill. Then Offa remembered somewhat.



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“What of the Anglian thanes? What will they say when this is known by them?”

His brow knitted, for he thought of the likelihood of wild turmoil in the palace, and what would come of the cry of treason.

“They know, and have gone,” I said simply. “It seemed best to them and to your thanes that, seeing that this deed was done and none could amend it, they should fly hence by this passage. It could not be foreseen how matters would go with them.”

“On my word, some of you have your senses still about you,” said Offa, in that cold voice of his.

And then all of a sudden his command of himself gave way, and he sat down on the bed and hid his face in his hands. With the passing of the Anglians the strain had gone from him as from us, and he was left with the bare terror of the deed he had half approved.

Presently he looked up, and the weakness had passed. Then he rose and signed to me to follow him, and we went out into the council chamber. And even as we closed the ill-fated rooms behind us, from his own door came forth Quendritha and moved swiftly toward him.

“My king,” she said, “they told me that somewhat was amiss.”

“Ay,” he said, and his words were like ice, “there is, and more than amiss. Get you to your bower, and we will speak thereof in private.”

He did not look at her, and went to pass her, almost thrusting her aside. And at that she gave a little plaintive cry, and would have taken his arm, saying for us to hear that he was surely distraught.

“Thanes, tell me what is wrong!” she said.

“We have no need to tell you,” said Sighard savagely, and unheeding the warning grasp of the priest on his arm. “What has been done is your doing.”

“What mean you?” she flashed on him with a terrible look.

Erling answered from where he stood with his back to the great door, “So you spoke in our old land on the day when our Jarl Hauk bade you confess the wrong you had done, before you were set adrift on the sea. It had been better had he slain you, as some would have had him slay, if it were but for the saving of this.”

Now Offa had turned angrily as he heard Sighard speak to the queen in no courteous wise, but Erling had not heeded his look or what wrath might light on him. Before he



could say aught, and it was plain that he was going to speak angrily enough, Offa heard the first words of the Dane, and checked himself.

And when he had heard, he said in a cold voice, slowly, "So that tale is true after all. I can believe it now, though once I slew a man who told it me."

With that he turned on his heel and passed through the door and was gone, paying no more heed to the queen than to us. For a long moment she stood and glared at Erling, and I think that she remembered his face in some dim way, so that the old days came back to her, and with that remembrance the terror that had been in them. And as she stood there in the torchlight she seemed to have grown old of a sudden, and her face was gray and lined, while her long white hands worked as they fell at her side.



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But not another word did she say, though her lips seemed to form somewhat, and in her eyes was written most terrible hate and anger. She took her gaze from Erling, for he did not shrink from it, and let it rest for a moment on Sighard with a meaning which made him pale as he thought of Hilda, who was yet in her hands, and so went from the room suddenly, and the door was closed after her from within.

Then said Witred the Mercian earnestly, "Friends, an you value your lives, get you hence while yet that passage is open. I am going with those who do go, for we who have seen and heard all this will not be suffered to live to tell it."

"It seems to me that Erling's tale is not new to some folk here," I said.

"It is an old tale with us, but we did not believe it. It had been well-nigh forgotten, for it was nowise safe to do so much as whisper it.

"But, thanes, did you mark the face of the king?"

"It was terrible," said Selred, shuddering: "it was as the face of the lost."

And then out in the courtyard the horns blew the morning call cheerily, and the hall buzzed in a moment with the rousing of the men who slept along its walls, and there reached us the sound of jest and laughter and shouts as they waked the heavy sleepers.

"Thanes," said Witred, quite coolly, "if we want to see another day dawn we had best be going.

"Brother, I rede you go to the horse watering yourself, and take your best steed under you; and I pray you bring mine also.

"Paladin, that gay steed of yours will be with the rest—and yours also, thane.

"Erling, you shall in nowise go stablewards, but come with us."

The thane who had to see to the stables leaped up, and without more than a nod to his comrade and us went his way down the hall in haste.

"There are two or three things I don't want to leave behind," said Witred, "but I shall have to forego them. A man need not stop to gather property when Quendritha is at his heels. Come; why are you waiting? I tell you that we shall find the far end of that passage closed in one way or another if we haste not."

"My daughter!" said Sighard, groaning; "she is in the queen's bower."



“So also is Etheldrida the princess,” said Witred. “She is of her court, as one may say, and will be safe. No harm can come to her.”

“I fear for her,” said Sighard, still hesitating.

“This woman, who has slain the bridegroom of her own daughter, will stick at little. I have offended her, and I know it.”

Then Selred said gently, “I am going to stay, and I can do more than even yourself. Today the archbishop comes, and I will tell him of Hilda. Go, for I am sure that Witred speaks no less than the truth, else he would not fly thus. For her sake you must go, and I will bring her home. Have no fear.”

“I am thought to be Carl’s man,” I said, “and one may suppose that I am safe. I will stay with Selred, and see what happens. It is in my mind to search for the body of the king, and surely none will hinder that. Erling must go into hiding, but in some way he must let me know where he is.”



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“That I can manage for you. I have men of my own in this palace, and they shall take any message. Erling can be hidden in the town easily.”

So said Witred, and with that he would wait no more. We heard men coming up the hall, and though it was most likely but the thanes who should relieve those who had watched during the night, there was no more delay. Sighard shook hands with me as if he would set all that he wanted to say into that grasp, and then they passed down the passage once more and were gone.

For a while I waited, fearing lest I should hear the sounds of a fight at the far end, but no noise came. But just as I was about to set the trapdoor back in its place I heard footsteps, and stayed. They came from whence my friends had gone.

It was Erling. He came into the pit, set his hands on the edge of the floor, and swung himself up sailorwise.

“I did but go to see that they got away safely,” he said. “You may need a man at your back, master, before this day is out.”

“Erling,” I cried, “I will not suffer this. I think I am safe enough.”

“Well, mayhap so am I. If Quendritha slays me, it is as much as to say that my tale is true. Say no more, master, for on my word our case is about the same; and if I must die, I had as soon do it in good company, and for reason, as be hunted like a rat through the hovels of yon townlet.”

CHAPTER XIII. HOW WILFRID AND ERLING BEGAN THEIR SEARCH.

Selred smiled and shook his head at Erling when we went back to him, but I could see that he thought no less of the Dane for standing by me. Nor did I, as may be supposed, but I had rather his safety was somewhat more off my mind than it was likely to be here. As he had returned for care of me, it would seem that we were each pretty anxious about the other; but there was no use in showing it.

Now the thanes who had the morning watch to keep came in, fresh and gay, with words of good morrow, and stayed suddenly and stared at us, for we three strangers had the council chamber to ourselves.

“Where are Witred and his fellows?” one asked me.

I thought the best thing was to tell them the truth, and I told all the tale of the night’s doings in as few words as I could, and at the end said that offence having been given to



Quendritha, it had seemed safest for those of whom he spoke to get out of her way for a while. Whereat the thanes made no denial, but seemed to agree that it was the best way for all concerned.

“This thing will be known all over the place in an hour or so,” one said. “What will you yourself do?”

“I stay here to search for the body of the Anglian king, and for aught else I may do to help the chaplain here, and the ladies of the Thetford party.”

Then Selred went into the inner chamber and gathered to him the little crown of the king, and one or two more things which were of value because of him who had worn them, and said that he would bestow them in the church until they might be taken back to his mother in Norfolk. I took his arms, and the sword we had found in the pit, for Sighard had brought that up from thence. And so we three went down the hall, none paying much heed to us, and into the church.



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It was strange to see the gay bustle of the place going on with all manner of preparations for the wedding that should never be, and yet to say naught to stay it all. That was not our business.

Selred found the sacristan in the church, for it was the hour of matins, and between them they set what we had brought in the ambry which was built in the chancel wall. I do not know if Selred told the man why they were to be kept there. Then came Offa's two chaplains, and the bell rang for the service; and it was good to kneel and take part therein, while outside the quiet church the noise of the great palace went on unceasingly, as the noise of a waking camp. Beside me knelt Erling the heathen, quiet and attentive.

Somewhere about the midst of the service it seemed to grow very still all about us of a sudden. Then there were the sounds of many men running past the door, and a dull murmur as of voices of a crowd. The news of the deed of the night had been set going, and it was passing from man to man; and each went to the hall to learn more, for presently none were sure which king had been slain, and then many thought that it was Offa. Before the service was ended he had to show himself, and at the sight of him a great roar of joy went up, and men were at ease once more—concerning him at least.

When the little service was over I went to the church door and looked out on the courtyard; and the whole place swarmed with folk, for work had been stayed by the news, and none knew what was to be done next. If one could judge from the looks of those who spoke to one another, there were some strange tales afloat already. Some recognized me, and doffed their caps; but it was plain that they had no thought that I had been so nearly concerned in the matter, and I was the easier, therefore. And while we watched them Selred came to us.

"Now I am going to try to see our poor ladies," he said. "We must learn what they will do, for if they will go homeward, we are the only men who can ride with them. I know that you would fain go home, but I will ask you to help me in this. Indeed, it is a work of charity."

"Of course I will, father," I answered; "I am at your service and theirs, till you need me no longer. My folk do not so much as know that I am likely to be in England, let alone on my way to them."

"Why, then, your homecoming will be none the less joyful for you, good friend. But I pray you have a care of yourselves, both of you, awhile."

Now we went back through the church, and so passed into our lodging by the door which was between the two parts of the building of which I have spoken already. The priest had somewhat to take with him, book or beads or the like, and I would fain rest awhile after that night of terrible unrest.



“Go to breakfast in the hall,” said Selred, “and there I will come to you.”

It was somewhat dark in the outer room, and darker yet in the little chambers. Selred had to grope awhile before he found what he wanted; then Erling opened the outer door for him, and he went his way, and I would have the door left open after him for more light.



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Then I went to my own chamber, sliding back its door and speaking to Erling at the same time, so that I had my head a little turned aside. Whereby, before I had time to hear more than a sudden scuffle within the dark chamber, out of it leaped a man upon me, sending me spinning against the opposite wall with a blow on the chest which took the breath from me for the moment, and then smiting Erling with a sort of back-handed blow as he passed him; but the Dane saw him in time, and set out his foot, and the man fell headlong over it. His head struck the doorpost with a great thud, and there he lay motionless, while something flew from his hand across the floor, rattling as it went. It was the hilt of a knife of some sort.

Erling shut the outer door in haste, and then helped me to rise, asking me if I were hurt.

“No,” I answered. “Ho, but what is that?”

Out of my tunic as I straightened myself there fell a gleaming blade, and I picked it up. It was half of a Welsh knife, keen and pointed, which had broken on my mail shirt, leaving only a long slit in my tunic, and maybe a black bruise to come presently on the skin where the dint fell.

“I owe life to you, Erling,” I said. “And I laughed at the thought of wearing the mail, and well-nigh did not put it on. But he smote you; has he harmed you?”

“The mail saved me also,” he said, “for the knife broke on it; otherwise—No, master, I am not hurt; not so much as a cut tunic. I wonder if there are more of this sort in these dens?”

I drew my sword, and we looked cautiously into the chamber, and then into Sighard’s, but there was no one there. This man had been alone, and he had fared badly. He lay yet as he had fallen, breathing heavily.

“This means that Quendritha is after us,” said Erling. “Our old saw is true enough when it says, ‘Look to the door or ever you pass it;’ and that we shall have to do for a while. Now I have a mind to tie this man up for a day or two; we have a spare chamber for him.”

“Do so,” I said. “Then we will pass out through the church, and Quendritha will think that he waits us here yet, and we shall be the safer.”

So we bound him and set him, still senseless, in the empty chamber of Sighard, making fast the door with the broken dagger so that, even if presently the man worked his bonds loose, he could not get to Quendritha to say that he had failed. Then I made Erling don a buff coat of Sighard’s, good enough to turn most blows. He might need it if this went on.



“It is in my mind,” said I when this was done, “that a crowd is the safest place for us just now. Let us go and see how matters fare at the stables. It is time that the horses came back from the water.”

We passed through the church and went stable-wards, among all the idle and half-terrified thralls and servants; and when we came to the long stables with their scores of stalls, there was talk and wonderment enough among the grooms. Gymbert was nowhere to be found, and the other thane, who took his place and gave the orders when he was busy, had gone out with his horses, and had fled with the Anglians, it was said. None seemed surprised that they should have gone hastily, but the going of the king’s horse thane was a wonder.



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However, all that was good hearing to us, and I went to see what horses had returned. It was plain that Witred's plan had worked well, for only those which the ladies had ridden, the pack horses, and our own had been brought back. The young king's steeds were both in the stable where Offa's own white chargers were kept.

Somewhat late the breakfast call sounded, and I went back to the hall, not by any means wishing to seem put out by the flight of the Anglian party, as Carl's messenger. Erling sat where I could see him, below the salt; and I went to my own place on the dais, as before. There were not many thanes present at first, and Offa never appeared at all; and the meal was silent, and carelessly ordered, for the whole course of the great household had been set awry by the word of heavy rumour which had flown from man to man.

As the time went on a few more thanes came in and sat them down with few words, and those curt, and mostly of question as to where such and such a friend was. And soon it grew plain that man by man the guests of Offa were leaving him and the palace.

Maybe that was mostly because there had come an end of that for which they had gathered, but there were words spoken which told me that many who might have stayed left because of the shame of the deed which had been wrought. The great name of Offa was no cloak for that. Few spoke to me as I sat and ate, though many seemed as if they would like to do so but were ashamed. Those who did speak were only anxious to tell me that their king was surely blameless; that it was some private matter of feud—surely some Welsh treachery or the like; but no man so much as named Quendriitha, whether in blame or in excuse.

Presently there came up the hall quietly one of the young thanes, boys of fifteen or less, who were pages to the king and queen; and he sat himself down not far from me below the high place, where they had their seats. I noticed him because he was the only one of the half-dozen or so who came to that breakfast at all, and also because he seemed to look somewhat carefully at me. As I still wore my Frankish dress I was used to that, and only smiled at him, and nodded a good morrow.

Presently two men near me rose and went, and as they did so the boy rose also, and taking a loaf from his table handed it to me gravely.

"Paladin," he said, "I think you need this."

He was a little below me, of course, and I bent to take it. He had both hands to the loaf, and with one he gave me it, and from the other dropped something small into my palm at the same time, so that the bread covered it there. I thanked the lad, and while he watched me eagerly, looked at that which he had hidden in my hand. It was that little arrowhead which I had given Hilda, and which I had bidden her send me if she was in danger or in anywise sought my help.



Somehow I kept my countenance when I saw that. I suppose it was because I knew that the need must be great when Hilda sent the token, and that no doubt the queen had her spies everywhere on me; but what thoughts went through my mind I can hardly set down. Fear for Hilda in ways that I could not fathom, and wonder as to how I was to help her, were the uppermost. I halved the loaf with my dagger, and handed the half back to the boy, who came close to the edge of the dais again for it.



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“In the church, presently,” I said to him, and he nodded.

I thought he might have some message also from her who gave the token.

Then I made myself bide a little longer, and it was hard work. As soon as I might I went out, Erling following me, and turned into the church. There I waited impatiently, with my eyes on the door of the great hall, in the porch, and at last I saw the page come out as it were idly, and turn toward me. Then a man came up to him and spoke to him, and the boy seemed eager to get away. At last he glanced toward me, and went away with the man, passing the door of the church, and turning toward the rearward buildings. I had little doubt that he was purposely being prevented from having more words with me.

That troubled me more than enough, as may be supposed, for what the need of Hilda might be I could not tell. And what I should have done next I can hardly say, for I was beginning to think of going and asking to see her; so that it was as well that as I stood in the deep porch I turned at the sound of hasty footsteps, and saw Selred coming to me from out of the building. He had passed through our lodging to the church as he had gone. His look was grave and full of care, but not more than it had shown before he left us.

“I have seen none of the ladies,” he said. “The palace is in a turmoil, and Offa has shut himself up, seeing but one or two of his thanes, in grief for what has been done, as men say, and as may be hoped. Nor will Quendritha see any one, or let her attendants pass from her bower and its precincts.”

“Father,” I said, “I have had a token from the Lady Hilda to say that she is in sore need of help.”

And with that I told him of our talk yesterday in the little wood, and of the coming of the page to me.

“I do not know what this may mean,” he said gravely. “They say that the poor Princess Etheldrida is overborne with grief, so that they fear for her life. I thought that Hilda was with her; but this would suggest that she is not. Yet all the ladies of the court are within the bower.”

Now there was a stir round the great gates, and a little train of clergy came through them, with a few lay brothers, who led mules laden with packs, after them. The whole party were dusty and wearied, as if they had come from far on foot; and indeed only one of all the dozen or so was mounted, and that was a man who rode, cloaked and hooded, in their midst on a tall mule. Before him the weariest looking of all the brothers carried a tall brazen cross.



“The archbishop,” said Selred. “He has not turned back, or maybe the news has not yet reached him.”

This was Ealdwulf, the Mercian Archbishop of Lichfield, and he had come for the wedding from his own place. He was a close friend of the king, who indeed had wished that Mercia should not be second to any realm, and had so wrought that an archbishop's see had been made for him, subject to neither Canterbury nor York. I suppose that somewhere men had been on the watch for him, for now came the clergy of the palace to meet him, two by two, with the chaplain of the king at their head.



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They came and bent before him, and he blessed them with uplifted hand; and then I think that the first word of what had befallen was told to him, for as the chaplain rose and spoke to him the archbishop started somewhat and knit his brows. Nor did he offer to dismount as yet, but sat on his mule, seeming to question those before him, while his clergy gathered round him as close as they dared, listening. The men who had been hurrying about the courtyard had stayed their footsteps, and there was a strange silence while the bad news was told.

Presently the chaplain looked round and spied us, and at once came toward the church porch and said that the archbishop would fain speak with us.

So together we went across the court, and with me came Erling. Like us, he bent for the blessing of the archbishop's greeting, and then we had to tell what we knew of the end of Ethelbert. Ealdwulf would have it from us, as we were of the train of the young king. And when we had told all in few words, he said:

"I bide in this house no longer. Not until the day when King Offa will send for me will I stand here again, save for sterner reproof than I may give to any while one doubt remains as to who wrought this deed. Mayhap you men deem that you have reason to blame a certain one; but I need surety. Now, I lay it on you that you search for the body of your king; and when it is found, bring him to me at Fernlea, where I will abide. It is not fitting that these walls should hold him again."

And then, taking that brazen cross of his into his hand as token of his office, there, in the open court for all to hear, he laid such a ban on the one whose mind had contrived and on those whose hands had wrought this murder that I may not set it down here. But I thought that none who had any part in it could live much longer thereafter.

So he turned his mule and went away, leaving men staring aghast at one another behind him.

Selred and I followed him beyond the gate, watching how he rode with bent head, wearily, by reason of the trouble which had come to him, for he had loved the young king well, as men told us. And after he had passed out of sight I said that I had hoped for help for Hilda from him.

"Quendritha would not have seen him," said Selred. "I do not know what he could have done. Courage, Wilfrid! for all this is but a matter of last night, and even now the day is young. Get to horse, and do as he bade you; and presently, when you return, I may have news for you."

Loath enough I was to leave the palace, but yet there did not seem much use in loitering about here. I should not see Hilda, and Selred would be more likely to learn what was amiss than I. He said, also, that if he heard of any danger to her he would seek the king

straightway, and demand speech with him on urgent business, so that he should see matters righted. And then a thought came to him, for I told him of the man whom we had bound in the empty chamber.



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“My son,” he said, “it were better that you were out of this place. Neither you nor Erling nor myself will dare sleep in peace tonight if such deeds are still planned. Listen. Arm yourselves, and go on your search. Take your horses with you, and presently follow the archbishop to Fernlea for the night. It will be thought that you have fled also. Let the man go to tell his tale, and it will seem certain that you have done so, in fear of what may happen. Then be in that little cover where we spoke with the king and Hilda tonight at the same time, and there I will come to you and tell you all I know.”

“That is good advice, father,” said Erling. “Well I know what holds the thane here, but he can do naught.

“Master, if yon thrall is come to himself, we will speak words which he will take to his mistress, and then we shall have time before us. He shall think that we have fled eastward with the rest.”

Not anywise willingly, but as it were of our need, I knew that these two friends of mine spoke rightly; so we left the good father and went back to our lodging, there to gather what few things we would take with us. I had no thought that we should return to this ill-omened place.

In Sighard’s chamber we heard the man shifting himself and muttering; and as those sounds stilled as we entered, we knew that he had come to himself, and that he was most likely trying to free himself from his bonds.

“This is no place for us, master,” said Erling pretty loudly; “it is as well that we go while we may. Presently the road to the eastward may be blocked against us.”

The man was very still, listening, as we thought.

“The sooner the better,” I answered. “One might put thirty miles between here and ourselves before noontide. I have no mind to ride through Worcester town, and we must pass that either to north or south. Then we were safe enough.”

Now the man shifted somewhat, and we heard him.

“That thrall lives yet,” said Erling. “He listens.”

With that he grinned at me and went to the door, drawing the knife blade from it, and sliding it back so that the dim light filled the chamber. As he went in the man was still, and seemingly insensible, as we had left him; and Erling bent over him, as if to listen to his breathing. Then he rose and came out, sliding the door carelessly to behind him. We had no need to keep the man now. It was plain to the Dane that he was waking enough.



He nodded to me as he returned, as if to say that all went well, but aloud he said that the man was still enough. Then we armed ourselves fully, donning mail shirt and steel helm, sword and seax and spear for myself; and leathern jack and iron-bound leathern helm, sword and seax, and bow and quiver for Erling—each of us taking our round shields on our shoulders, over the horsemen's cloaks we wore. None would think much of our going thus, for so a thane and his housecarl may be expected to ride in time when there is trouble about, more especially if there are but the two of them.



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As we armed we spoke more yet of flight, and haste, and so on, till the thrall must have deemed that he knew all our plans.

We had little more than our arms that we would take. All that bright holiday gear I had bought in Norwich and Thetford, first against my home going, and then for this wedding that was to be, I left behind, taking only, in the little pack which Erling would carry behind his saddle, what linen one may need on a journey, and fastening my little store of jewels about me under my mail. Little enough there was, in truth; but what I had was from Ecgbert or Carl, with one little East Anglian brooch, set with garnets, from the lost king himself, and these I would not lose.

Money I had in plenty for all needs and more, as may be expected of a warrior who has seen success with Carl. Mostly that was in rings and chains of gold, easily carried and hidden, for a link of one of which I could anywhere get value in silver coin enough to carry us on for a fortnight or more.

Then we went round to the stables, leaving the place by the door away from the church, not minding who saw us go out. We had no doubt at all that word would go to Quendritha that we were unhurt and away so soon as we were seen to come thence; whereon she would send to seek her man.

"I would your steed was not quite so easily known," growled Erling to me as we crossed the open garth round the palace and entered what I call the street of small buildings which went toward the rear gate. "He will be easily heard of."

"When they find that we have not gone to the one side of Worcester, therefore, they will try the other," I answered; "that is, if any take the trouble to follow us, which I doubt."

"I doubt not at all concerning that," said Erling grimly. "Too well I ken the ways of Quendritha. Neither you nor I who know the truth of her sending to this land may be suffered to tell that tale, if she can prevent it."

The great skew-bald whinnied as I came to him, glad to see that I meant to take him out across the open country, and the grooms came in haste to see what I needed. And as they saddled the two horses, Erling was watching all they did, and had his eye on the doorway from time to time. But here it was peaceful enough, for the first turmoil of the morning had passed, and there were none but a few of the grooms about. There was no man to ask us aught, and we mounted quietly, without seeming to find much notice from any.

Now, as I have said, the rear gate of the palace enclosure led toward Mercia, and we rode straight out of it, and away down the road, grass grown and little cared for, which the Romans had once made and paved for the march of their legions. At first we went in leisurely wise, and then before we were fairly out of sight from the gate spurred away

in haste. And so we rode for two miles or so, into the heart of the woodland country, where the road became a mere track midway in the crest of its wide embankment. Then we drew rein and took counsel as to whither next.



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“Master,” said Erling as we stayed, “did you see a man staring at us from out of a stable across the road as we started?”

“Ay. But I did not heed him; he was only one of the thralls.”

“So he looked; but if that was not Gymbert, I am sorely blind today. Moreover, I looked back as we passed the gate, as if one of the guard spoke to me. The man was hastening toward our lodging. And he walked like Gymbert. Many a man can disguise his face; but, after all, his back and gait betray him.”

Now if this was indeed Gymbert whom Erling had seen, it was plain that he waited about the palace precincts for speech with his mistress, or for some fresh orders, and I did not by any means like it. However, when I came to turn the matter over in my mind, I thought that after all, whether inside the palace garth or out, he would not be far from the call of Quendritha, so that maybe it did not so much matter. At all events, what I would do would be to bide as near to the place as I might without being known, and be content to hear from Selred that at least naught was wrong.

Troubled enough I was in my mind at this time in all truth. For it lay heavily on me that I had promised the poor queen away in Thetford that I would watch her loved son and if need be die with him, and I had lost him and yet lived. I know now that I had no real need to blame myself in this; but the thing was so terrible, and had been wrought as it were but at arm’s length from me, that for the time I did so bitterly, framing to myself all sorts of ways in which a little care might have prevented all. As if one can ever guard against such treachery!

And then there was the fear for Hilda, none the less troublous that I knew not what her need might be. One could believe aught of cruelty from Quendritha.

Only these two things remained to me—one, in some measure to redeem my word to the mother of the king by finding his body; and the other, to stay here and watch as well as I might for chance of helping this one who had suddenly grown to be the best part of my life, as it seemed to me. And these things I told Erling, for he was my comrade, and together we had been in danger, and so were even yet. Rough he was, but with that roughness which is somehow full of kindness. And I was glad I had told him, for he understood, and straightway planned for me.

Most of all the difficulty in this planning lay in the outrageous colour of my good steed. Once we thought of tarring him; but a tarred horse would be nearly as plain to be noticed as a skew-bald. I think it says much for the steed that neither of us thought for a moment of parting with him. In the end we said that we would even take our chance, for if we were sought it would not be near the palace.



So we bent ourselves to plan the search for where the body of the king might be hidden, and that was to unravel a tangled skein indeed. All we knew was that the cart which had borne him from the end of the hidden passage had gone northward along a riverside track. Beyond that, we guessed that it might not have gone far, whether for fear of meeting folk in the dawning, or because the slayers would not be willing to cumber their flight for any distance with it. Moreover, Gymbert was in the palace, as Erling was certain.



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We would ride northward and seek what we might till the time for meeting Selred came, working down the river toward the palace from far up stream. Sooner or later thus we should meet with the wheel tracks, and perhaps be able to follow them whither they went into the woodlands from the old stream-side way which Gymbert had at first taken.

CHAPTER XIV. HOW WILFRID HAD A FRESH CARE THRUST ON HIM.

Now we were just about to ride off the ancient road into the woods when we heard the muffled sounds of a party coming along the way. For a moment I thought that we were pursued, but then I knew that whoever came was bound in the direction of the palace. The causeway was straight as an arrow, as these old Roman roads will be, but the track men used on its crest was not so. Here and there a great tree had grown from acorn or beech nut, and had set wayfarers aside since it was a sapling, to root up which was no man's business. So we could not see who came, there being a tree and bushes at a swerve of the way. The horses heard, and pricked up their ears, and told us in their way that more steeds were nearing us.

"Ho!" said Erling suddenly. "Mayhap it is just as well that these good folk should see us in flight eastward. Spur past them, and look not back, master."

I laughed, and let my horse have his head, and glad enough he was. Round that bend of the track we went at a swinging gallop, and saw a dozen foresters ahead of us, bearing home some deer, left in the woodlands wounded, no doubt, after the great hunt, on ponies. They reined aside in haste as they saw us coming, while their beasts reared and plunged as the thundering hoofs of our horses minded them of liberty; and through the party we went, leaving them shouting abuse of us so long as they could see us. And so long as that was possible we galloped as in dire haste, nor did we draw rein for a good mile.

Then we leaped from the causeway, and went northward through the woodlands, sure that the chase for us would hear from the foresters whither we were heading, and would pass on for many a mile before they found that no other party had seen us. Whereon they would suppose that we had struck southward to pass Worcester by the other road, even as we had said in the hearing of the thrall in the house.

Then I thought that the chase for us was not likely to be kept up long, for it would grow difficult; but Erling shook his head. He had a deadly fear of Quendritha.

Now we rode for all the forenoon in a wide curve, northward and then westward, across the land which the long border wars had ravaged so that we saw no man save once or twice a swineherd. More than once we passed burned farmsteads, over whose piled ruin the creepers were thriving; and all the old tracks were overgrown, and had never a

wheel mark on them, save ancient ruts in which the water stood, thick with the growth of duckweed, which told of long disuse.



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And at last we came to the valley of the little Lugg river which we sought, and then were perhaps ten miles north of Sutton and its palace stronghold. The day had grown dull, and now and then the rain swept up from the southwest and passed in springtime showers, just enough to make us draw our cloaks round us for the moment, soft and sweet. In the river the trout leaped at the May flies that floated, fat and helpless, into their ready mouths, and the thrushes were singing everywhere above their nests.

Those were things that I was ever wont to take pleasure in, and the more since I had been beyond the sea. But today I had little heart to heed them, for the heaviness of all the trouble was on me. Maybe, however, and that I do believe, I should have been more gloomy still had I been one of those who have no care for the things of the land they look on, lovely as they are. I dare say Erling the viking took pleasure in them, if he would have preferred the wild sea birds and the thunder of the shore breakers to all this quiet inland softness. At all events, he had no mind that I should brood on trouble overmuch, and strove to cheer me.

“Thane,” he said presently, even as I began to quest hither and thither by the riverside for the track of the cart, which indeed I hardly thought would have come thus far, “it seems to me that food before search will be the better, an you please.”

“Why,” said I, having altogether forgotten that matter, “twice men have told me that when Quendritha is at a man’s heels he had better not wait for aught. Yet I blame myself for having forgotten. It is not the way for a warrior to be heedless of the supplies.”

“When the warrior is a seaman also he cannot forget,” quoth Erling. “Had you bided with Thorleif for another season, you had found that out. I have not forgotten. Dismount, and we will see what is hidden in the saddlebags.”

We went into a sheltered nook among the water-side trees, and he brought out bread and venison enough for two meals each, and I was glad of the rest and food. He had helped himself at breakfast, he said, being sure that sooner or later we should have to fly the palace.

“Well, and if we had not had to fly?” I asked.

“Betimes I wax hungry in the night,” he answered, smiling broadly. “It would not have been wasted.”

When that little meal was done I leaned myself against a tree trunk, and said naught for a time. Nor did Erling. The horses cropped the grass quietly at a little distance, and the sound of the water was very soothing.



The next thing that I knew was that Erling was bidding me wake, and I opened my eyes to see that the sun was not more than two hours from setting, and that therefore I had had a great sleep, which indeed I needed somewhat sorely after that last night. The sky had cleared, but here and there the rain drifted from the sky over the hills to the west. I sprang to my feet, somewhat angry.



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"You should have waked me earlier," I said. "Now it grows late for our quest."

"About time to begin it, master," the Dane said, "if we do not want to run our heads into parties from the palace. Maybe they will be out also on the same business. What we seek cannot be far from thence."

Then we mounted and rode down stream, quickly at first, with a wary eye for any comers, searching the banks for traces of wheels, carelessly for a few miles, and afterward more closely. But we saw nothing more than old marks. The track ended, and we climbed the rising ground above the river, and sought it there, found it, and went back to the water, for no cart had newly passed to it here. And so we went until we were but a mile or two from the palace, and then we were fain to go carefully.

In an hour I was due in the copse to meet Selred, and then men would be gathered in the palace yards in readiness for supper, so that we might have little trouble in being unseen there. Now, on the other hand, men from the forest and fields might be making their way palaceward for the same reason.

"I would that we could find some place where we might hide the horses for a while," I said. "What is that yonder across the river?"

There was some sort of building there, more than half hidden in bushes and trees. Toward it a little cattle track crossed the water, showing that there was a ford.

"The track passes the walls, and does not go thereto," said Erling. "It may be worth while to see if there is a shelter there."

So across the ford we rode, with the trout flicking in and out among the horses' hoofs. The building, whatever it was, stood a hundred yards or more from the river on a little southern slope which had been once terraced carefully. Over the walls, which were ruinous, the weeds grew rankly, and among them a young tree had found a rooting. The place had been undisturbed for long years; and I thought that it seemed as if men shunned it as haunted, for of a certainty not a foot had gone within half arrowshot of it this spring.

We stood in the cattle track and looked at it, doubting, for no man cares to pass where others have feared to step for reasons not known.

"It is an uncanny place," said Erling; "which may be all the better for us. At any rate, we will go and look into it. Stay, though; no need to make a plain track to it hence."

The cattle tracks bent round and about it, and as we followed one it seemed at last to lead straight into the ruin. So we went with it, and found the entrance to the place. Last year the cattle had used it for a shelter, but not this, and there were no signs that any man had followed them into it. And then I knew what the place was, and wondered at



its desertion little, for it was a Roman villa. Any Saxon knows that the old heathen gods those hard folk worshipped still hang about the walls where their images used to hold sway, not now in the fair shapes they feigned for them, but as the devils we know them to have been, horned and hoofed and tailed. Minding which a fear came on me that the marks we took for those made by harmless kine were of those unearthly footsteps, and I reined back.



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“What is there to fear?” said Erling—“fiends? Well, they make no footmarks like honest cattle, surely. Moreover, I suppose that a good Christian man need not fear them; and Odin’s man will not, so long as the horses do not. The beasts would know if aught of that sort was about.”

Whereon I made the holy sign on my breast, and rode to the gap in the white walls which had been the doorway, and looked in. I suppose that some half-Roman Briton had made the house after the pattern his lords had taught him, or else that it did indeed belong to the Roman commander of that force which kept the border, with the Sutton camp hard by for his men. If this was so, the Briton had kept the place up till Offa came and burnt the roof over it, for the black charcoal of the timbers lay on the floors. Only in one place the pavement of little square stones set in iron-hard cement still showed in bright patches of red and black and yellow patterning, where a rabbit had scratched aside the gathered rubbish. Across walls and floors the brambles trailed, and the yellow wallflower crowned the ruins of the stonework everywhere.

One could see that there had been many rooms and a courtyard, bits of wall still marking the plan of the place. And in this one corner there was shelter enough in a stone-floored room whose walls were more than a man’s height. The cattle had used that for long.

“This is luck,” said my comrade. “Here we can leave the horses, and if one does happen past here before dark and spies a pied skin, he will but deem that kine are sleeping here. After dark, who will come this way at all?”

“We shall have to,” said I, somewhat doubtfully.

Erling leaped from his horse and laughed. “We may hide here for a week if we must,” he said. “I think that the trolls have all gone to the old lands where men yet believe in them; and seeing that we are on a good errand, your fiends should not dare come near us. I care not if I have to come back here alone to fetch the horses when you will.”

I dismounted also, for he shamed me, and I said so. Then we tied the steeds carefully, loosening the girths, and managed to get a sapling or two from the undergrowth set across the door to keep wandering cattle out. More than that we could not do, but at least the horses were safe till we needed them, and that would hardly be long, as we hoped. They had well fed as I slept.

Then we went away from the ruin, passing behind it up the little slope on which it stood, meaning, if we were seen, to come down as if we had not been near the place. And from the top of that slope we could see the walls of the palace, with the white horse banner of Mercia floating over them. From the roof of his villa the Roman captain could have seen his camp, and maybe that deadly passage into its midst was for his use. It led this way.



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We waded through the ford again, and wandered down stream once more, looking as we went for the first sign of wheel marks. I was on the banks above the water by twenty yards, and Erling was at their foot, close to the stream, when we had the first hope of finding what we sought. I spied a rough farm cart standing idle and deserted fifty yards away from me and the river, in the brushwood, half hidden by it, as if thrust hastily there out of sight; and the very glimpse of the thing, with its rough-hewn wheels of rounded tree-trunk slices, iron bound, made my heart beat fast and thick, for I feared what I might see in it.

I called Erling, and as he ran to me I pointed, and together, without a word, we went to the cart and looked into it. It was empty, but on its rough floor were tokens, not to be mistaken, which told us that it was indeed the cart which Gymbert and his men had used. And so we knew that we could not be far from the place where they had hidden the king's body.

Now, if there had been traces of that burden which would once have led us to its hiding place, the rain had washed them away, and we had naught to guide us. The turf held no footmarks of men, and it was not plain how the cart had come to this place; for men had been hauling timber and fagots hence, so that tracks were many, and some new. All round us was wooded, and it seemed most likely that somewhere among the bushes they had found a place; and so for half an hour we went to and fro, but never a sign of upturned ground did we see.

"They brought the cart far from the place," said I presently.

And at that moment from the palace courtyard the horns called men to their supper, and I started to find how near we were to the walls. We had wandered onward as we searched, and it is a wonder we had seen no man. But perhaps it was because this place was mostly deserted, being out of the way to anywhere, that Gymbert chose it. The traffic of the palace went along the road to Fernlea and the ford of the host there, away from here. The carting of the wood cut during winter was over now, and it was too near the palace for the deer to be sought in these woods.

"Selred will be waiting me, and all men else will be within the walls," I said. "I must go to him. Will you bide here and search, or risk coming with me, comrade?"

"I come with you, of course," Erling answered. "The search can wait. There is moonlight enough for us to carry it on again this night, if we will, between these showers."

It rained again as we went through the thickets. Under cover of the driving squalls we might pass unseen to where the little copse we sought came close to the river. And we cloaked ourselves against the shower, pulling the hoods over our helms. None, if we were seen, would take us for aught but belated men hurrying to the hall.



Unseen, so far as we could tell, we came to the edge of the little copse and entered it. The whole breadth of it lay between us and the palace; and under its trees was pretty dark, for the sun had set. We turned into the path where I had walked with Hilda, and I half hoped to see the priest there, but it was lonely. Down that path we hurried and turned the corner, but an arrow shot from the ramparts, and again I saw no one coming.



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"We must bide and wait," I said. "He will come when the men are in hall."

"I don't like it," Erling answered, speaking quietly. "You were to meet him at the same time as before; yet he cannot have come. None would wonder at a priest staying out after the supper call, but maybe men might wonder at his leaving after it had sounded."

For a quarter of an hour we walked to and fro in the wood, down one path and up another. Then we thought that we might be following the priest round the wood as he looked for us, and we dared not call. The watch on the ramparts was set already. Now the loneliness of the wood had made us bold, and we thought we had best go one each way, and so make sure that we should find Selred if he were here.

At that time we were at the far corner of the wood, which was square, with a path all round it and one each way across. It was a favourite walk of Offa's during summer, men told me.

Erling turned to the left and I to the right, and we walked fast away from each other. It was getting very dim in these overarched paths under the great trees, but not so dim that one could not see fairly well if any figure came down the way. There was no wind to speak of, and it was all very silent. One could hear the noises from the palace plainly at times, and in one place the red light from the hall shone from a high window through the trees. Just at this time the clouds fled from off the face of the moon, and it was light, with that strange brightness that comes of dying day and brightening night mingled.

I came to the corner where my path turned, and before me there was a figure, as it were of some one who had just turned into the wood from toward the ramparts. The way by which Selred and I came here last night was there. And it was surely the cassocked priest himself, though I could not see his face. I hurried toward him with a little word of low greeting which he could hardly have heard. My foot caught a dry twig in the path, and it cracked loudly, and with that the figure stopped suddenly and half turned away.

Then I said, "Stay, father; it is but I."

And with that came a little cry from the figure, and it turned and came swiftly to me.

It was Hilda herself, and how she came here alone thus I could not guess. She had on a long black cloak which was like enough to the garb of the chaplain to deceive me at first in the dim light, so that I made no movement to meet her. I think that frightened her for the moment, for she stayed, as if she doubted whether I were indeed he whose voice she thought she knew, until I spoke her name and went toward her.

And then in a moment she had sought the safety of my arms, and was weeping as if she would never stop; while I tried to stay her fears, and bid her tell me what had befallen her. And it was many a minute before I could do that.



As we stood so Erling came hastily, having heard the hushed voices. More than that he had heard also, for his sword was drawn. He half halted as he saw who was here, and pointed over his shoulder toward the palace gate, and then held up his hand to bid me hearken.



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I lifted my head and did so. There were footsteps in the stillness, and a gruff word or two, and the steps came this way, and nearer, fast.

“Hilda,” I said, “are you likely to be pursued?”

For I could think of nothing but that she had managed to fly from Quendritha, and that perhaps Selred had bidden her seek me here.

“I cannot tell,” she said, and her voice was full of terror. “Take me hence quickly—anywhere. That terrible queen told me that you had fled, and so thrust me out to seek you—”

I did not wait to hear more, for the steps came on. Between us Erling and I half carried the poor maiden back toward the place where we had entered the wood, and we went swiftly enough. Yet we could not help the noises that footsteps must needs make in the dark of a cover, where one cannot see to pick the way.

Nor, of course, could those who came, as they tried to follow us. We heard them plainly entering the wood as we came to the edge of it and passed out toward the river bank.

“We must get back to the horses, and then ride to Fernlea and the archbishop,” I said, under my breath.

“Ay, if we can,” Erling answered; “but that is more easily said than done.”

He pointed to the river and up it. The moonlight was flooding all its valley, and the last of the day still lingered in the sky. If these men came to the place where we stood, they could see us before we had time to get to any cover.

As we came hither we had gone easily, under the shelter of the gray rain, because no man was at this place to spy us. It was different now. The men were in the wood at this time as we stood and doubted. Next we heard them running to right and left, that they might be sure to meet whoever it was they sought; and plainly that could be none but Hilda, unless we had been seen. Yet we could hardly have been suspected to be any but late comers homeward.

“There is but one thing,” I said suddenly. “We must cross the river. They will be here in a moment and looking into the open.”

Hilda shrunk close to me in terror, and Erling looked at the stream. It was coming down in full volume after the rain, for up in its hills there had been much more than here. Across the stream were bushes enough to hide us.



“You have your mail on, and there is the lady. But it is not far; maybe we two could manage. We can’t fight these men, or we shall have the whole place out on us like a beehive.”

So said Erling, looking doubtfully at the water. I asked Hilda if she feared, and she shivered a little, but answered that aught was better than to bide and be taken by Quendritha.

“I can trust you,” she said quietly. “Do what you will.”

“Faith,” said Erling, “one must do somewhat to stay these men, or else little chance shall we have of aught but a good fight here against odds. I count six of them by the voices. Wait a moment and we will try somewhat. Get you to the water, thane, ready.”



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I set my arm round Hilda and led her to the water's edge. Erling went to the very verge of the wood and listened for a moment. The men from either side were nearing each other, but as yet neither party could see the other. Then, of a sudden, Erling lifted his voice and called, as if hastily:

"Back, back! Get round the far end—quick!"

The footsteps stopped, and voices cried in answer. Each party thought the other called to them. Erling gave a hunter's whoop, as if he saw the quarry, and cried them back again. Then there were a quick rush away on either side, and more shouts, and at that Erling came to us, laughing.

"There will be a bit of a puzzlement at the other end of the cover," he said. "Now, master, let me see what water there is."

He stepped into it, trying the depth with his spear as he went. For ten paces it deepened gradually, and then more quickly. He passed on, up to his waist, then to his elbows, and so to his neck. Then he disappeared suddenly, and Hilda almost cried out. His head came up again in a moment, and he swam for three strokes or so, and then he was on his feet again.

Now he turned toward us, and felt about with his spear once more, and so walked steadily back to us—not quite in the same line, but with the water hardly more than to his shoulders.

"It is easy enough," he said. "I did but step into a hole, and so lost my footing. Pass me the cloaks, for we will have them over dry."

I took his from where he left it by me, and rolled up mine and Hilda's in it. Silently, but with a little wan smile, she took a scarf from her neck and gave it me to tie them with. Then Erling took them on his spear and waded back till he could toss them to the far bank, and so turned to my help.

By that time I had taken up Hilda as best I might, holding her high, bidding her fear not, and clutch me as little as possible. She said nothing, being very brave, but nearly choked me once when the water struck cold as it reached her.

The rising flood water swirled and beat on me as I went deeper and deeper, and glad enough I was when Erling came to my side upstream and helped to steady me. Once we stopped and swayed against the rush for a long moment, half helpless; but we won, and struggled on. Then a back eddy took the pressure from us, and we went more quickly and steadily, and so found the shallows, and at last the bank.

Thankful enough I was, for it had nearly been a matter of swimming at one time; and if that had happened, I hardly care to think how we should have fared.



I set Hilda down and gasped. She was not light when we started, but with each step from the deeps to the shallows she had grown heavier with the dragging weight of wet skirts; and that had puzzled me in a foolish way, so that I thought that the weeds were holding her down. Now we three stood and dripped, and were fain to laugh at one another; while the men we had escaped from were talking loudly at the far end of the cover, where they had met.



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“That will not last long,” I said; “they will be back at the water’s edge in a minute.”

Thereat we took to the bushes, which were thick here, in a little patch. Beyond them was a clear space of turf a hundred yards wide, which we must cross to reach more wooded land, where we might go as we pleased back to the ruin where the horses waited. Hilda went slowly, for the wet garments clogged her, and were heavy still.

We must bide here till the men went away, or till it grew darker; for there was no need—though they would hardly follow us—to let them know who was with their quarry, or that she was anywhere but on their side of the water. We might find our way to Fernlea cut off. We took Hilda into the thicket, and crept back to see what happened, leaving the dry cloaks with her.

The loud voices had stopped suddenly, and we knew that it meant that the men were coming back through the wood, beating it cautiously. We lay flat under the nut bushes and alders, watching, and the edge of the cover was not more than an arrow flight from us.

Presently there was a rustle in it, and a man looked out, but we could not see much of him. He spoke to another, and then came into the open, peering up and down the moonlit river. Another joined him, and this newcomer wore mail which glistened as he turned. A third man came from the other side of the wood and saw these two, and came to them, and there they stood and wondered.

“I could swear the girl went into the wood,” said one; “I saw her plainly.”

“Then she must be there still,” answered the second comer. “Get back and look again.”

“We have beaten the wood as if for a hare,” said the third. “Unless she has climbed a tree she is not there.”

“Well, then, look in the trees,” said the mailed man, and with that he came down to the water, and turned his face toward us.

It was Gymbert himself.

“Mayhap she has drowned herself,” said one of the men sullenly.

Gymbert growled somewhat, and turned sharply, going back to the wood. The other men looked after him, and one chuckled.

“Best thing she could do,” he said. “Gymbert would surely have sold her to the Welsh.”

“Maybe made her his own slave, which were worse.”



“No, but he is out of favour just now. The money she would fetch will be more to him maybe. He dare not let Offa see him.”

They turned away slowly. At least it did not seem that these two were much in earnest in the matter. As they went, one asked the other who cried the chase back after all.

“Some fool on the other side who doesn’t care to own to it now, seeing that he must have fancied he saw her,” was the answer.

Then they turned into the wood again and were gone. Still we waited; and it was as well, for suddenly Gymbert came back, leaping out into the open as if he thought to surprise the lost object of his search. He glanced up and down, and then went back. I heard him call his men together and rate them, and so they seemed to pass back to the palace. Their voices rose and died away, and we were safe.



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CHAPTER XV. HOW WILFRID'S SEARCH WAS REWARDED.

For ten minutes after the last voice was to be heard we waited, and then, leaving two pools of water where we had lain, we crept back to the open and sought Hilda. I feared to find her chilled with the passage of the river; but, in some way which is beyond me, she had made to herself, as it were, dry clothing of the cloak she had given to Erling. What she had taken off had been carefully wrung out, and lay near her in a bundle. She laughed a little when I told her that I had been troubling about her wetness.

"What, with three dry cloaks ready for me?" she said. "I have fared worse on many a wet ride."

Then we crossed the little meadow swiftly, and entered the scattered trees of the riverside forest. After that we had no more fear of Gymbert and his men, and went easily. In that time I heard what had happened in the palace, and how this strange meeting had come about.

"Offa the king has shut himself up, and will see no man," Hilda said. "Nor will he go near the queen or suffer her to see him. He has had guards set at the doors of the bower that she may not go from it, so that she is a prisoner in her own apartments with her ladies. The poor princess is ill, and has none but bitter words for the queen; for all know by whose contrivance this has been done. I heard that all our thanes had fled."

There she would have ended; but I had to hear more of herself, and it was not easy for her to tell me. Only when Erling fell behind us somewhat, out of thought for her, would she speak of what she had gone through, after I had told her that her father was surely safe, and maybe not far off.

"The queen turned on me when she was left a prisoner. I do not know why, but I think my father had offended her in some way. I know that he speaks too hastily at times when he is angry. First she told me that he had slain our king, and seeing that I would not believe it by any means, said that you had done the deed—that she had hired you to do it. Thereat I was more angry yet, for the saying was plainly false, and had no excuse. And because I was so angry I think she knew that I—that I did think more of you than I would have her know. After that I had no peace. I tried to send the arrowhead to you by the little page who was left with the queen, and I do not know if you had it. He told me that you were yet in the palace."

"Ay, I did, and therefore I am here," I said.

"I was sorry afterward, for I did not know what you could do. The page was not suffered to come back, I think, for I have not seen him again. This morning the queen told me



that you had fled, after slaying a man of her household. So she went on tormenting me, until I could forbear no longer, and told her to mind that my mother had befriended her at her first coming to this land, and it was ill done to treat her daughter thus.



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“Thereat she turned deathly white, and she shook with rage, as it seemed. At that time she said no word to me, but turned and left me, and I was glad. Presently one of her ladies, who pitied me, told me that Gymbert had done the deed, as all men knew by this time, and that I was to be brave, for all this must have an end. And that end came as the sun set. I was with the princess, and Quendritha came in. First she spoke soothingly to Etheldrida, who turned from the sight of her, being too sick at heart to answer her; then she spoke to me, looking at me evilly, so that I feared what was coming.

“‘You minded me that your mother was one of our subjects,’ she said, in that terrible, cold voice of hers. ‘Now I will see you wedded safely, to one who is a friend of ours.

“‘No,’ she said sharply, for I was going to speak, ‘you have no choice. Whom I choose you shall wed. The man I have in my mind for you is our good thane Gymbert.’”

“I suppose that she sought an opportunity against me, and she had her will. I do not rightly know what I said. The end of it was that out of the palace I was to go, and she bade me seek you, Wilfrid. It is in my mind that she meant it in insult, or that she deems you far away, careless of what befalls me. And I think, too, that after me she meant to send Gymbert.”

Then she set both hands on my arm, and leaned on it, shaking. I knew that she was weeping with the thought of what had been, and I did not know what to say rightly. Only I was sure that the secret of the queen’s coming was at the bottom of this, as Quendritha must have feared that Hilda knew it all, either from me or her father.

“Your father would not have fled had he not known that Selred and I were to stay and look after you,” I said, lamely enough. “Have you not seen the good chaplain?”

She had not, and it seemed most likely that in some way he had been prevented from leaving the palace. Afterwards I knew that Offa had had all going out of the place stopped, hoping to take some man who knew more of the secret of Ethelbert’s end, if not Gymbert himself. Hilda had been thrust out by a private postern hastily, and doubtless Gymbert had been told where to seek her long before. I believe it was no affair of the spur of the moment, but wrought in revenge on Sighard and myself.

Now what more I said to Hilda at this time is no matter, but at the end of the words I made shift to put together she knew that I could wish no more than to guard her with my life, and for all my life, and naught more was needed to be said between us. What we might do next remained to be seen, but the first thing now was to get to the archbishop, with whom we should be in safety no doubt. Even Quendritha would not dare to take Hilda from his charge.



I had forgotten my fear of the old walls when we came to the ruined villa. Maybe I thought thereof when I and Erling went in and found the horses all safe and ready to take to the road again; for in one corner of the wall among the grass shone a glow worm, and it startled me, whereat Erling chuckled, and I remembered.



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We made a pillion of my cloak, and lifted Hilda up behind me; and so we set out in the moonlight to find our way to Fernlea, striking away from the river somewhat at first, and then taking a track which led in the right direction. And so for an hour we rode and saw no man. The land slept round us, and the night was still and warm, and I forgot the troubles that were upon us in the pleasure of having Hilda here and safe with me.

Presently we came out of forest growth into the open, and passed a little hut, out of whose yard a dog came and barked fiercely as we passed. There was no sound of any man stirring in the hovel, however, and we went on steadily. As the crow flies, Fernlea town was not more than five miles from the palace; but we wandered somewhat, no doubt, being nowise anxious to meet any men on the way, and also wishing to come into the town from any direction but that of the road from Sutton.

A quarter of a mile from the hut where the dog was we entered a deep old track, worn with long years of timber hauling and pack-horse travel, and under the overhanging trees it was dark again.

Now we had not gone fifty yards down this lane when my horse grew uneasy, snorting, and bidding me beware of somewhat, as a horse will. Hilda knew what the steed meant, and took a tighter hold on my belt, lest he should swerve or rear.

“’Tis a stray wolf or somewhat,” said Erling from behind us. “The horses have winded him.”

Then out of the shadows under the trees came a great voice which cried in bad Saxon, “Ay, a wolf indeed! Stand and answer for yourselves!”

“Spurs!” I cried to Erling, and the great skew-bald shot forward.

Out of the darkness, from the overhanging banks, and seemingly from the middle of the hollow road, rose with a roar a crowd of white-clad dim figures and flung themselves at the bridles, and had my sword arm helpless before ever I had time to know that they were there. And all in a moment I knew that these were no men of Gymbert’s, but Welshmen from the hills spying on the doings of Offa at Sutton. Some one had told me that they were in doubt as to what his great gathering meant.

Now, if Hilda had not been with us, there would have been some sort of a fight here in the dark, for I should certainly have drawn sword first and spurred afterward. As it was, my only thought must needs be to save Hilda from any harm.

“Hold hard!” I cried in Welsh; “this is a lady travelling.”

“Yes, indeed,” one of the men who had hold of my bridle answered; “he says truly.”



“A lady?” said the voice which had spoken first. “Let her bid her men be still, and we will speak with her!”

Then Hilda answered very bravely, “So it shall be. Bid your men free us, and we shall harm none.”

The leader spoke in Welsh, and his men fell back from us. Then he came to my side and asked what we did here so late. And as he spoke it came to me that the best thing to do would be to tell him the very truth. No more than himself were we friends of Offa and Quendritha.



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“To tell the truth, we are flying from Sutton,” I said. “We belonged to the train of Ethelbert of East Anglia.”

“Why fly, then?”

“Have you heard nothing of what has been done?” I asked.

“No. We heard that there was a king with Offa; that is all.”

Then I told him what our trouble was, and the men round me—for I spoke in Welsh, learned when I was a child from our thralls—understood me; and more than once I heard them speak low words of pity for the young king. They had no unfriendliness for East Anglia.

“Then that is all that the gathering was for?” asked the leader.

And then he suddenly seemed suspicious, and said sharply, with his hand on the neck of my horse:

“But to come hither from Sutton you had to cross the river. Your horse is dry. He has not had time to shake the water from him yet.”

“That is a longer story,” I said. “But he was on this side; we had to wade to reach him.”

The chief set his hand on my leg and gripped it. Then he laughed. “Reach down your arm,” he said.

I did so, and he laughed again.

“Very wet,” he said. “But the lady?”

“Very wet also,” answered Hilda. “I pray you, sir, let us pass on, if only for that reason. I would fain get to the archbishop at Fernlea shortly.”

“Why to him, lady?”

“Because even Quendritha will fear to take me thence.”

“Eh, but you are flying from her! Then speed you well, lady and good sirs. We have little love for Offa, but he is a warrior and a man; whereas—Well, I will bid you promise to say no word of this meeting, and you shall go.”

That promise we gave freely, as may be supposed. If the Welsh chose to swarm over the border and burn Sutton Palace, it might be but just recompense for what those walls had seen; but I thought that, with their fear of the gathering at an end, the man who had



lit yonder hillside fires would disband his levies for the time. So we parted very good friends, in a way, and this chief bade one of his men guide us for the mile or so which he could pass in safety. We were closer then to Fernlea than I thought, and in half an hour we were at the gates.

Where our Welshman left us I cannot say. Somewhere he slipped from my side into the darkness, and when next I spoke to him there was no answer.

Now we had to wait outside the town gates—for the place was, as might be supposed, strongly stockaded against the Welsh—until one went to the town reeve and fetched him, seeing that we had not the password for the night. But at last they let us in, and took us to the house of the reeve himself, for the archbishop was there. And there is no need to say that when he heard our story he welcomed us most kindly, promising Hilda his protection. There, too, the good wife of the reeve cared for the maiden as if she were her own daughter, and I saw her no more that night.



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As for myself, I sat down at supper, which they had but half finished, with the archbishop and his little train; and glad enough I was of it, and I and Erling ate as famished men who do not know when their next meal may be.

The archbishop watched us, smiling at first, and then grew thoughtful. After I had fairly done, he said:

“My son, I thought you had come to me with news of the finding of the body of your poor king. That is a matter which lies heavily on my mind. It must be done.”

“I think I can tell you within a few yards, father, where it must needs be, for today I and my comrade have searched where it was taken. We have found, at least, the cart Gymbert used, and it cannot be far thence. We think that the cart was left close to the hiding place.”

Then one of the priests said eagerly:

“Father, the moon lies bright on all the meadows, and we might well seek in the place the thane has found. This is a thing done at night in most seemly wise, as I think.”

“Ay,” answered the archbishop thoughtfully. “Yet it were hard to ask the thane to turn out once more.”

“This is a quest which lies close to my heart, lord,” I said, rising. “I will go gladly if you will let me guide your folk.”

“Yet you are weary, and need rest.”

“I have slept for long hours in the open today,” I said. “I am fed and rested. Let us go.”

For indeed, now that Hilda was in safety, the longing to end the quest came on me, and I should have slept little that night for thinking of it. Moreover, I should have no fear of Gymbert and his men spying me, and thereby making fresh trouble.

So in the end the archbishop said that we might go, and with that four of his priests and the reeve with half a dozen men made ready, and in a very short time we rode out of the gates again in the moonlight, on our way back toward Sutton. The river was between us and the Welsh we had met, and they were not to be feared. The monks were riding their sumpter mules, and the reeve and we were mounted on horses from his own stable or lent by his friends, and his men trotted after us, some bearing picks and spades.

Under the little hill whereon the palace stands we rode presently, and I suppose that we were taken for a train of belated chapmen, or that the guards saw we were headed by monks, and would not trouble us. Maybe, however, the disorder of the palace had put



an end for the time to much care in watching, but at any rate we passed without challenge.

And so we came to the riverside track which should lead us to the end of our journey, and, as I hoped with all my heart, to the end of our quest. Already I could see the trees under which the cart stood.

Out of the southwest came one of those showers which had been about all day, and which had not yet quite cleared off from the hills round us. It drew across the face of the moon, which had been sending our long shadows before us as if they were in as great haste as we, and for a few minutes we stayed in the dark to let it pass. And as it passed there came what men sometimes hold as a marvel.



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The rain left us, passing ahead of us like a dark wall, and the moon shone out suddenly from the cloud's edge, and then across the land leaped a great white rainbow, perfect and bright, so that one could dimly see the seven colours which should be in its span. And one end rested on the river bank close under the place where the cart stood among the trees, and the other was away beyond the forest, eastward somewhere.

"Lo," said the monk who had bidden us come, "yonder is the sign of hope, leading us as it were the pillar of fire of Holy Writ!"

"Men say there is ever treasure hidden under the end of a rainbow," said the reeve; "but never yet did I meet with a man who had found it. Yet I have never seen the like of this. I have heard that they may be seen at night."

And so said another and another; for indeed men look to their feet rather than to the sky at night, and thereby miss the things they might see. But a strange thought came to my mind, and I spoke it.

"Under the end of that pillar does indeed lie the treasure we seek. See, it is not on the wood, but on the river bank. We searched not there, comrade."

"Ay, we shall find it there," Erling answered. "It is Bifrost—Allfather's bridge. He takes his son home across it."

The rainbow faded and passed to the north and east with the rain, and it went across the land through which Ethelbert had ridden so gaily but a few days ago. Sometimes I love to think that its end rested here and there on house or village or church which had been the happier for the bright presence of the king, and betimes I think that a strange fancy for a rough warrior like myself. Yet I had ridden with Ethelbert, and the thoughts he set in the minds of men are not as common thoughts. I hold that once I rode and spoke with a very saint.

There fell a sort of awe and a silence on us after that. Silently we went on up the riverside track, for I was leading with Erling, and that strange belief that by the river we should find what we sought would not leave me; and when we came below the place where the cart was, I saw marks where its wheels had riven the soft earth close to the water. Without a word I signed my companions to spread abroad and search, and I dismounted, and with the bridle of my horse over my arm, I went scanning each foot of the ground in the moonlight.

Twenty yards, not more, from the water, where some winter flood had left a wide patch of sand and little pebbles, I saw the marks of the cart again. It had stopped there, and round the spot were deep footprints of men. They went on for a few yards, and then there was a little fresh-turned place. Out of that lapped a piece of cloth, plain to be seen



in the light of the moon, but easily overlooked in the haste of those who had left it. And then I knew that I had indeed found the king.

Now I lifted my hand, and the rest saw me, one by one, and came to my side, and for a moment we stood still, not daring to disturb that resting. Then I took the spade one man had, and gently turned the gravel from that bit of cloth, and there was surety. They who set him there had but covered him hastily, no doubt because they heard our friends after them.



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Little by little, and very reverently, we uncovered, and so took him from that strange resting, and the water welled into the place where he had lain. And as we thought, his head had been smitten from his body, and it was that which we found first, wrapped in the cloak whose end had betrayed his hiding. Yet had it not been for the token of the rainbow we had hardly thought to seek here, so near the water.

Men speak today of the finding of Ethelbert the saint by reason of the pillar of fire which shone from where he was hidden, and they tell the truth in a way, if they know not how that marvel came from the heaven before our eyes who saw it. Let the tale be, for from the heaven the sign came in our need and it is near enough, so that it be not forgotten. There is many a man who has seen the like, but not at such a time or as such a portent; and, again, for one man who has seen the bow in the clouds over against the moon are mayhap a thousand who may go through long lives and never set eyes thereon. Whereby it happens that there are some who will not believe that such a thing can be.

Now we wondered how to bear back this precious burden, until we bethought ourselves of that cart which had been used before. Erling and two of the reeve's men went to seek it, and it stood untouched where we found it. Moreover, those who fled from it in haste left the rough harness still hanging anywise from the shafts, and we were able, therefore, to set one of the horses in it without trouble. Then we made a bed of our cloaks in the bottom, and thereon laid the body, covering it carefully; and so we went our way toward Fernlea, silently and slowly, but with hearts somewhat lightened, for we had done what we might.

But yet I have to tell somewhat strange of this journey, and how it came about I do not rightly know. Nor will I answer for the truth of it all, for part of that I must set down I did not see for myself; only the priests told me, and they heard it from the men who did see.

This cart was old and crazy. I think that Gymbert must have taken it from some deserted farm, whence it would not be missed. It was open behind, and its wheels were bad. Still it served us; and glad enough we were of it, for the road was rough, and heavy with the rain of the day. It pained me to see the thing jolting and lurching as it went, knowing how little it befitted that which it was honoured in bearing.

Presently out of the roadside rose up a man, and joined us.

"Good sirs," he said, "I am a blind man, and would fain be led to Fernlea. May I go with you so far as the road you take lies in that direction?"

"Truly, my son," said the eldest priest. "But you are afoot late."

"'Tis a priest speaks to me, as I hear," said the man, doffing his cap in the direction of the voice and laughing gently. "Is it so late, father? Well, I have thought so, for there seem to be few men about. Yet I slept alone in a shed last night, and know not for how

long. I think I have also slept some of today, for I am out of count of the hours. There is neither dark nor light for me.”



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He fell back and walked after the cart, saying no more. Now and then I heard his stick tapping the stones of the way, and once one of our men helped him in a rough place, and he thanked him.

Now we came to a terribly bad place in the road, and there the cart seemed like to break down; and it was the worse for us that a cloud came over the moon at the time, and it was very dark. Whereby the blind man was of much help in the care for the cart, until the moon shone out again suddenly, when he was left behind us for a few minutes. Then we heard him calling.

“Two of you help the poor soul,” said the reeve, “else he will hardly get across that slough. He has fallen, I think.”

He named two of his own men, and they went back. After a while the blind man’s voice came again, and he seemed to be shouting joyfully. I thought it was by reason of the help that came to him.

“Thane,” said the eldest priest to me just at this time, “I pray you ride on and tell the archbishop that you have indeed found what we sought. It is but right that all should be ready against the time we get back. We are not more than a mile away from the gates, and you will have time. This is slow travelling, perforce.”

Erling and I rode on with the reeve, therefore, and I thought no more of the blind man, as one may suppose, until I heard what had happened.

When the two men went back to his help, he sat again by the side of the road, hiding his face in his hands on his knees. And he was trembling.

“Friends,” he said, “now I know why you go so sadly, welladay! For evil men have slain some one young and well favoured, as I learned even now, when I helped you yonder. Tell me what has befallen, I pray you, for I am afeard.”

“Why,” said one of the men, “we are honest folk, as our being with the good fathers may be surety. The trouble is ours to bear.”

But the blind man still kept his eyes hidden, and when the other man bade him rise and come on with them he did not move.

“I know not what ails me,” he said. “Even as I set my hand on him you bear yonder, there came as it were a great flash of light across my eyes, and needs must I fall away and hide them. I fear that, not you, friends. I pray you, tell me what has been wrought.”

“His foes have slain a bridegroom, most cruelly,” one of the men answered after a pause. “We do but bear him to Fernlea.”



“What bridegroom?” he asked, in a hushed voice.

And then the pity of the thing came to him, and he wept silently. Presently he raised his head, dashing away the tears as he did so.

“It is a many years since these eyes of mine have wept,” he said. “It seems to me that to weep for the woes of another is a wondrous thing.”

His eyes of a sudden opened widely in the moonlight, and he cried out and clutched at the man next him.

“Brothers! brothers!” he said; “what is this?”



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And again he set his hand to his eyes as if shading them, as does a man at noontide.

“What ails you?” one of the men asked, wondering.

“I have no ailment—none. I see once more!” he cried. “Look you, yonder is the blessed moon, and there lies a broken tree; and see, there are fires on the hills of the Welshmen!”

Then with both hands wide before him he said:

“Now I see that I have set my hands on one who can be naught but a saint most holy, for therefrom I have my sight again. Who is this that has been slain?”

The men answered him, telling him. The blind man had heard, of course, of the poor young king, and had, indeed, been brought hither from wherever he lived that he might share in the largess of the wedding day.

Now the men would go their way with him again, wondering, but yet half doubting the truth of what the man said.

“It is in my mind that you have not been so blind as you would have us think,” said one, growling.

The man pointed at the cart as it went.

“Would I lie in that presence?” he said.

And with that he broke into the song I had heard. Some old chant of victory it was, which he made to fit his case, being somewhat of a gleeman, as so many of these wanderers are. And there the men left him in the road, singing and careless of aught save his recovered sight, and hastened after the party.

Yet it was not until the next day that they told the tale, and whether the once blind man was ever found again I cannot tell; but I have set this down as I knew of it, because it was the first of many healings wrought by the saint we loved. I ken well that the tale is told nowadays in a more awesome way; but let that pass. Tales of wonder grow ever more strange as the years go on.

Men call Ethelbert a martyr now, I suppose because he was slain. That is not quite what we mean by a martyr, for that is one who gives up his life rather than deny his Lord. Yet Ethelbert was indeed a witness to the faith all his life, and so the name may stand.

So presently they brought back the body to Fernlea, and its resting was ready in the little church which had come into the strange dream by the riverside. And I knew, as I



watched by it all the rest of that night till the hour of prime, that this was what the vision foreboded.

CHAPTER XVI. HOW WILFRID SPOKE ONCE MORE WITH OFFA.

Now that I had Hilda safe with the archbishop, it mattered nothing to me if all the world knew that I was yet here. So when Ealdwulf, the archbishop himself, asked me to ride with him to Sutton Palace and tell Offa of the finding, I said that I was most willing. I should see Selred, and maybe bring him away with me, and at least could tell him that all was well with Hilda.



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I will say now that she was none the worse for the wetting and the rest of last night's doings, but that I saw her come fresh and bright to the breakfast in the little hall of the reeve's house. There she would bide till she could go with the archbishop homewards in some way, most likely from nunnery to nunnery across the land, as ladies will often travel, with parties of the holy women—that is, if Sighard was not to be found. In my own mind I thought that he would not be far off, most likely with Witred, the Mercian thane who had arranged the flight.

Presently, therefore, we rode away from Fernlea toward Sutton, there being but one priest with the archbishop, and six of the townsmen, besides Erling and myself. It was no state visit, but the going of one who would speak with an erring friend in private. Sorely downcast was the good man, for he loved Offa well, and this terrible wrong lay heavily on his heart.

Halfway or so to Sutton we passed the place where trees were thick, and I saw a man lurking among them as if he was watching the road. Wherefore I watched him, and presently saw that he was coming to us, as if half afraid. Somehow the walk and figure of this man seemed known to me, though his face was strange, and I thought that he made for myself. Soon I knew that this was indeed the case; for finding that there were none whom he need fear in the party, the man came boldly from the trees, and, cap in hand, stood by the wayside waiting me.

"Well, friend, what is it?" I asked, as he walked alongside my horse.

He answered in Welsh, and then I knew that he was the guide we had been given last night.

"Jefan ap Huwal the prince sends greeting to the thane on the pied horse, and bids him and the lady come to him if there is need for help. He has heard that the thane serves the Frankish king who hates Saxons beyond the seas, and thinks that mayhap he has foes here in Mercia."

"Thank your prince from me," I answered, after a moment's thought, in which it came to me that no offer of friendship was to be scorned, "and tell him that if need is I will not forget. Tell him also that, thanks to him, the lady is safe and well, and that I have no fear at present."

"That, said Jefan, is what a thane would answer," said the man. "Whereon I was to tell you that yonder evil queen was to be feared the most when she seemed to be the least dangerous. He wits well that she is shut up."

Then it seemed plain that the Welsh prince had spies pretty nearly inside the palace; which is not at all unlikely. However, I said nothing of that, and thanked the man again,



looking to see him leave me. The archbishop had ridden on with the rest, for I went slowly, to talk to the Welshman. Still the man did not go, and he had more to say.

“Also I was to tell you that he had a chief of your folk in his hands. But that he deems that he belongs to East Anglia, he would have set him in chains. He is hurt, and is in our camp, free, save for his promise not to escape. His name is Sighard.”



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“Sighard?” I said. “How came he in your hands?”

“He came over the border, lord, and we had him straightway,” said the man simply. “Methinks there were men after him.”

“Where is he?” said I, anxiously enough. “He can pay ransom.”

“He is ill,” said the man; “he cries for his daughter. Jefan thinks that he is that thane whose daughter was in our hands last night with you.”

“Ill?” said I; “is he much hurt?”

“There had been a bit of a fight before we took him. One smote him on the helm, and he was stunned. Thereafter he came to himself, and again fell ill. He will mend, for it is naught.”

“But where is he?”

“We have many camps, and I cannot tell you. You are a stranger. But, says Jefan the prince, an you will come to him I am to guide you.”

Now I was in doubt indeed, for this was a dangerous errand. The man saw that I hesitated, and smiled at me.

“Wise is our prince,” he said. “He knew that you would fear to come, therefore he bade me say that you were to mind that once he had you, and set you free, and that he does not go back on his doings, save he must. He has no enmity for the friends of the slain king, but a great hatred for him who slew him.”

“Would he not let Sighard the thane come to Fernlea, where his daughter is?”

“Truly, if you will. But it is safer for you to come to him. There Jefan will have all care for all of you until he may send you home. It is told him that Quendritha has sworn the death of four men—of the thane who rides the great pied horse, of his housecarl, of Sighard of Anglia, and of Witred of Bradley, who helped the Anglians to escape.”

“How knows he all this? It is more than I have heard—if I have guessed some of it.”

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“Thane,” he said, with a sidewise smile, “a man who is thrall to a Mercian may yet be a Briton. The Saxon may make a slave of his body, but his heart will be free.”

Now I was the more sure that this Welsh prince had some good source of knowledge of what went on inside the palace, and I thought that mayhap he was right. Across the



Welsh border might indeed be the safest place for any man who had brought the wrath of the queen on him. I would go to Sighard, and take Hilda with me. One thing I was fairly glad of, and that was that so far as I knew none in all the court of Offa had heard who my folk in Wessex were, else there might be trouble for them; for Quendritha's daughter was not unlike her mother, if all I heard was true.

"Meet me tonight, then," I said. "I will go to Jefan, and will bring the lady."

"You do well," he answered gravely. "I will meet you somewhere on the westward track, a mile from Fernlea ford. You shall but ride on till I come. You shall choose your own time, for I cannot tell what may stay you. I have naught to do but wait. If you meet other Britons, tell them that you seek the prince, and they will pass you on. If so be you come not tonight, I will wait for another, and yet another. After that—"



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“If we do not come, what then?”

“Doubtless we shall burn Sutton walls. A curse lies thereon now, and it may be that we shall wreak it.”

With that he leaped across the brook which ran by the road, and passed into shelter. Then I turned to Erling, who waited for me across the road, and asked if he had understood what was said.

“Ay, all,” he answered. “It is good enough; otherwise I might have put in a word. This Jefan has the name for an honest man, as I have ever heard.”

“The one thing about it that I dislike is that we seem to be running away from hearsay,” I said.

“Mighty little hearsay was that which set Sighard flying across the border, I take it,” Erling answered. “Seeing that you have no more to keep you here, it is about time we went also. We have foes we cannot see, and are in a land of which we know not a foot. Jefan will help us to ken the foe, and will guide us when we need it.”

Now of all things which I had in my mind, the first seemed to me to be that I must ride eastward with Hilda and see the mother of the slain king, to give what account I might of that charge she had laid on me. But if Sighard had been prevented from getting homeward, it was certain that so should I. Wherefore we should not be watched for on any westward road, and that way, at least, was open. Thence we might find our way when the days wore on and Sighard could travel. That remained to be seen; and, take it all round, I was more easy than I had been.

So also seemed the archbishop presently, when I told him the message I had had. And he agreed with us that we might do worse than go to Jefan at once with Hilda; matters being as they were, it was not safe in Mercia.

“He is a good prince and honourable,” he said; “and if I say that, I speak of one who is the foe of our folk. He has suffered much from us, and has cause for enmity with Offa—and maybe with Quendritha. I can say plainly now that her restless longing for power has kept our armies busy many a time when they had been better at rest.”

He sighed; and then came somewhat which turned our thoughts, and no more was said at the time, either of Quendritha or of my doings. For now we were in sight of the palace on its little hill, and from its gates came toward us a train of folk, guarded by men of Offa’s own housecarls in front and rear, as if those who travelled were no common wayfarers. In the midst of all was a closed horse litter, beside which rode two or three veiled and hooded ladies and a priest. Save the captain of the guards, there was no



thane with the party, and but a few pack horses followed them, and I thought it would be some abbess, perhaps, who was leaving the palace.

We drew up on the roadside to let this train pass, though I suppose that by all right the archbishop might have claimed the crown of the way for himself, had he been other than the humble-minded man that he was. As the leading guards passed us they saluted in all due form; and then one of the ladies knew who was here, and bent to the litter, and so turned and spoke to the captain, who straightway called a halt, and came, helm in hand, to the archbishop, praying him to speak with the lady who was in his charge.



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Who this was I did not hear, but I saw the face of the good man change, and he hurried to dismount and go to the litter. And thence, after a word or two had passed, came the priest I had seen; and when he uncowed I knew him for my friend Selred, and glad I was to see him.

“Why, how goes it, father?” I said, as my hand met his. “You were not in the wood of our tryst, and I feared that you were in trouble.”

Very gravely he shook his head, looking sadly at me.

“There is naught but trouble in all this place,” he said. “I could not come to you, for the gates were closed early, that Gymbert might be taken. He was not taken. And yet I have heavier trouble to tell you than you can think.”

“No, father,” I said quickly, seeing that he had learned too little, and doubtless believed Hilda either drowned or else in the hands of Gymbert and his men—whichever tale Quendritha had been told or chose to tell him.

“I was in the wood, and thither came the lady we ken of when she was set forth from the place. I was in time to get her away, and she is safe.”

It was wonderful to see the face of the chaplain lighten at this.

“Laus Deo,” he said under his breath, and his hand sought mine again and gripped it. “That is a terrible load off my heart,” he said. “Yet I have heard that our good Sighard is slain. They have burned the hall of honest Witred over his head, and he is gone, and it was said that Sighard fell there with him.”

“It is not half an hour ago that I heard how he fled to the west, where the Welsh saved him, for hatred of Offa and pity for the betrayed Anglian king. He is safe, if a little hurt.”

Now the horse of Erling reared suddenly, and I looked up. It was still in a moment, and he spoke to it without heeding me. But as soon as he caught my eye when I first turned, he set his hand carelessly across his lips, and I knew what he meant. I had better say no more of where Sighard was or how I hoped to see him.

So I said what I had to tell him of the finding of the king, and how we had come to tell Offa thereof; and as he heard, Selred the chaplain knelt there by the roadside and gave thanks openly, with the tears of joy in his eyes. The rough housecarls heard also, and there went a word or two among them; and their grim faces lightened, for one shame, at least, had been taken from the house of their master.

Now there was a sound as of a woman’s weeping from the litter, and Selred heard it and rose to his feet.



“It is Etheldrida the princess,” he whispered to me. “She is flying to some far nunnery—mayhap to Crowland—that there she may end her days in what peace she may find. It is well, for here with her mother is but terror for her.”

The archbishop signed to me, and I went to the side of that litter, unhelming, while Erling took my horse’s bridle. There I knelt on one knee, and waited for what I was to hear. It was a little while before that came, but the sobs were at length stilled. I heard one of the ladies, who were those who came from East Anglia, say to the other that it was good that she had wept at last.



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And presently from behind the curtains of the litter the princess spoke to me, very low, and I do not think any other heard.

“Good friend of him whom I loved, I thank you for your loyalty to him. The archbishop has told me, and you have given me back a little of my trust in men. I had deemed that all were false for aye, but for you, I think. Now I go hence, and beyond the walls of some nunnery I shall never pass, and there I will pray for you also. And for you there shall be happy days to come, in the meed of utmost loyalty.”

I could not answer her, and still I knelt, for there was somewhat needed to come ere I could part from her without a word. But before I could frame aught she set her hand through the curtains, and in it was somewhat small, as it were a silken case cunningly woven round a little jewel, perchance.

“There was none whom I would ask to do what I longed for,” she said; “but now it will be done. I pray you set this on his heart, that it may go to his grave with him.”

“There it shall most surely be, lady,” I said. “I am honoured in the duty.”

“Go!” she said faintly; “and farewell.”

I rose up hastily, and went back to my horse, while the lady who had spoken just now busied herself in caring for her mistress. Selred took my arm and walked aside with me.

“You must not come back to East Anglia,” he said. “I know that you would fain see the lady of Thetford, but it were useless danger for you. I will tell her all that you have done, now; and if in after days you may come to us, do so. Bide and tend Sighard and Hilda, and mind that there is sore peril to both of them so long as Quendritha lives. She is shut up now, but all the more has her mind freedom to plan and plot the fall of those who have seen her at her worst. One cannot shut up such a woman as she, but she will have her ways of learning all she will, and her tools are many.”

“I would that you could bide here,” I said.

“I also; but I must pass eastward with this poor lady and these others. Yet I am sure that Offa will do all honour to our king. He has been seen by none as yet save his pages. They whisper that he is fasting, and bowed with shame and grief.”

For a little longer we spoke, and then we must part. The sad train of the princess went on, and swung into the eastward track which she would take, and the archbishop signed to us to follow him. And that was the last which any man in Mercia saw of the fair princess who had been the pride of the land, for she came safely to far Crowland, in the fenland, and there pined and died.



It is said that the parting between her and her terrible mother was such that men will tell little thereof. I know that in that time some strange gift of prophecy came over the maiden, and she foretold the death of her who planned the deed, even to the day, and the awesome manner of it; and that also she wept for the knowledge given her that the deed should bring the end of the line of Offa and the fall of Mercia—things which no man could think possible at this time, so that she seemed to rave. More things strange and terrible, I heard also, but them I will not set down. Mayhap they were not true.



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Now we went on slowly up the hill, and at last rode into the gates. There men loitered idly, as yesterday; for the head of the house sat silent and moody in his chamber, and none had orders for aught. Across the court we went to the priests' lodgings, and thence came the chaplains to meet their lord, and with him I was taken into the house.

"I have come to see the king," said the archbishop; "take me to him straightway."

"He will see none," they said; "it is his word that no man shall disturb him."

"If he will hear what shall make his heart less heavy, he will see me," said the archbishop. "Tell him that I have news for him. Or stay; I will go to him myself."

The priests looked at one another, but they could not stop their lord; and with a sign to us to follow, he passed across the court again, up the long hall, and so into the council chamber. At the door which led to Offa's apartments there was a young thane on guard, but no others were to be seen. I suppose that never before had Offa been so ill attended, for the very courtiers feared what curse should light on the place and all who bided in it.

"Tell your lord that I demand audience with him," said the archbishop to this thane. "The matter will not wait; it is urgent."

The youth rose and bowed, and passed within the door. In a moment or two he was back again, throwing the door open for us.

"Yourself and no other, lord," he said.

"I take these two," answered Ealdwulf the archbishop. "I will answer to the king for their presence."

So we two, Erling and I, followed him into the chamber of the king; and with my first glance at Offa there fell on me a great pity for him.

He sat at a great heavy table in a carven chair, leaning his crossed arms before him on the board, and staring at naught with hollow, black-ringed eyes, as of sleeplessness and grief. His face was wan and drawn, so that he seemed ten years or more older than when last he sat in hall with us; and he was clad in the same clothes which he wore when he came forth to us on the morning of terror. None had dared to touch aught in his room; and bent and soiled among the rushes on the floor lay the little gold crown which he wore at the last feast, as if he had swept it from the table out of his sight, and had spurned it from him thereafter in some fit of passion. Hard by that lay a broken sword, and its hilt flashed and sparkled with the gems I had noted in the hall. It was his own.



On the table was neither wine nor food, but there was a great book, silver covered and golden lettered, and it was open at a place where a wondrous picture in many hues showed a king who seemed to humble himself in fear before a long-robed man priestlike.

He did not stir when we came in, nor did he say a word. Only he looked at Ealdwulf, as it were blindly, waiting what he should hear from his lips. And into his look there crept somewhat like fear.



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But there was naught terrible or hard in the face which he looked on; it had but deepest sorrow and pity.

“My king,” said Ealdwulf, seeing that he must needs speak first, “here is one who has a word for you. I think that you will be glad to hear it. Know you where the body of Ethelbert was hidden?”

“No,” said the king in a dull voice. “My men search even now. It is all that I can do.”

Then Ealdwulf bade me tell the story of the finding, and I did so. Yet the look of Offa never brightened as he heard, nor did he ask me one question.

“It is well,” he said, when I had no more to say, and his fingers moved restlessly on the table.

But he did not look in my face, nor had he done so since I came before him. I stood back, and Ealdwulf was alone near him.

“My son,” said the old man, “my son, this has not been your doing. I will not believe that.”

Offa set his hand on the great book with its picture.

“As much my doing as the slaying of the Hittite by David the king. It was planned, and I hindered it not.”

Then he set his hands to his face, and his voice softened. And at that I passed silently from the room, leaving those two together, for this was not a meeting in which I had wish to meddle. Erling came with me, and we sat in the council chamber for half an hour, waiting.

Presently—after the young thane had told us how that Quendritha was closely guarded, and that the voice of all blamed her utterly for every wrong that had been wrought in Mercia for many a long year, now that the fear of her was somewhat passed—Erling rose up.

“With your leave, thane,” he said to me, “we have a few things left here, and our other horses still stand in the stable. It is in my mind to see what I can take back with me.”

We went out together, for the stillness and waiting grew wearisome. There were none of the pleasant sounds of the household at work or sport in all the palace. It was as a place stricken with some plague.

So we passed through the church to our lodging, and took our few goods, and Sighard's, and so went with them to the long stables where our two spare horses stood



in idleness. The rows of stalls were well-nigh empty now, those who had gone having taken their steeds.

“I wonder ours are left,” quoth Erling. “These Mercians are more honest than some folk I know.”

He called the grooms, and we made ready, taking the horses out to where the folk of the archbishop waited in the sunny courtyard, and there leaving them. Then we went back to the council chamber, and again waited for what seemed a long time. The young thane had a meal brought for us there.

Presently Ealdwulf himself came to the door and called me softly, and I followed him back to the presence of the king. I cannot tell what had passed between those two, nor do I suppose that any man will ever know; but Offa was more himself, save that on his face was a deep sadness, and no trace of hardness or pride therewith.



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“Friend,” he said, “is it your duty to go back to Carl the Great?”

“I have left his service, King Offa; I am on my way homeward. It was but by the kindness of Ethelbert, to whom I helped bear messages, that I came hither.”

“Well,” he said, “I will not hinder you. Had you gone back, I would have asked you to tell him plainly all of this. As it is, Ealdwulf shall send churchmen to tell him; I would have him know the truth. Now I must thank you for this that you did last night, and tell you what shall be done in atonement for the death of your friend.”

There he checked himself and bit his lip.

“Nay,” he said unsteadily, “there is no atonement possible. There is but left to me the power of showing that I do repent, and will have all men know it for aye. There shall be at Fernlea, where he will lie in his last sleep, the greatest cathedral that has been seen or heard of in this land, and men shall hail him as the very saint that you and I knew him to be; and after his name shall it be called, and in it shall be all due service of priest and choir for him till time shall end it. What more may I do?”

“I think that the place where his body lay should not be left unmarked,” I said boldly, for so it had seemed to me. “May not somewhat be done there, that the spot may be kept?”

“Ay, at Marden,” he said eagerly, as if he did but long to do all that he might, “there also shall be a church, that it may be held holy for all time. It shall be seen to at once.”

After that promise Offa bade me farewell sadly enough, and I was glad to leave the chamber. Nor had we long to wait before Ealdwulf came out, and we were once more turning our backs on the palace of Sutton. On its walls I never set eyes again, nor did I wish to do so.

As we went in leisurely wise back to Fernlea, the archbishop told me those few things which I have set down concerning the way in which Quendritha had beguiled the king into suffering the thought of this deed of shame. No more than was needful for me to understand how little part, indeed, Offa had had in the matter did he tell me, for all else that had passed between those two was not to be told. Both he and I think that had the evil queen left the doing of her deed until morning it had never been wrought, for Offa would have come to himself.

Yet one cannot tell. What Quendritha had set her heart on was apt to be carried through, even to the bitterest of endings for those who were in her way thereto. How she would fare now Ealdwulf could not tell me. It was true that she was almost imprisoned, as I have said, but none could tell whether that would last. Yet he thought, indeed, that Offa would have no more to do with her.



So we came back to Fernlea, and when I saw the little church I minded once more that strange dream of the poor young king's. I had heard the words which told that it would come to pass. Nor was there any doubt now in my mind that all those things which we had deemed omens were indeed so. The fears we had tried to laugh at were more than justified.



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CHAPTER XVII. HOW WILFRID AND HIS CHARGE MET JEFAN THE PRINCE.

Now I went straightway to Hilda with the news of her father, telling her that it seemed almost the best for us to trust to the word of the Welsh prince, and go to him, rather than to risk a journey hither for the thane if he was wounded.

"I trust you altogether, Wilfrid," she said. "Take me to him. I know that you have bided here in sore risk for me, and maybe you also will be safer if once we are across the Wye. The Welsh are not the foes of East Anglia."

I did not tell her that they were very much so of Wessex, on our western border; for at all events ours were Cornish, who had not so much to do with their brothers beyond the Channel here. So, having bidden her keep up heart, I sought the wife of the reeve, and would have given her gold to buy such things as she might think Hilda needed for travel.

"Dear heart!" she said, bridling, "set your gold back in your pouch. May not the reeve's wife of Fernlea give of her plenty to one so fair and hapless? I will see to that in all good time."

She stood by a great press against the wall, and as she spoke, as if by chance, she swung the door open, so that I had a glimpse of the mighty piles of homespun cloth and linen, her pride, which lay therein, Truly she had to spare, and I laughed.

"Mistress," I said, "be not offended. I am in haste, for we must go hence tonight. There is no time for planning and cutting and making."

She turned, swinging the heavy press door to and fro.

"Tonight!" she said, with wide eyes; "why so hasty?"

"Because her father lies wounded across the Wye, and we have to go to him. Maybe we shall have to ransom him."

"Man," she cried, "those Welsh are swarming beyond the river. Ken you what you are doing with this poor damsel?"

"Ay," answered I plainly: "I am taking her out of the way of Quendritha and of Gymbert. I have the word of Jefan the prince for our safety."

"Get to him," she said at once, "get to him straightway; he is honest. And on my word, if Gymbert is the man you saved her from last night, there is no time to be lost."

"He does not know where she has gone."



“Did not,” she said. “By this time he kens well enough. Go, and all shall be ready.”

I thanked her heartily, for she was a friend in need in all truth. And then I sought her husband, and told him what we must do. I do not know if I were the more pleased or disquieted when he said much the same as his wife. He would have us go from the town after the gates were shut, and he himself would see us across the ford. Once beyond that he did not think there was any risk. Most likely Jefan and his men were on Dynedor hill fort, their nearest post to the river, for he had seen a fire there. What he did fear was that Gymbert had his spies in the town, and would beset all the roads.



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“He cares naught for reeve—or for archbishop either, for that matter,” he said. “He has half the outlaws on these marches at his beck and call, and one has to pay him for quiet. Nor dare any man complain, for he is the servant of Quendritha.”

So his advice also was that the sooner we were gone the better. I have somewhat of a suspicion that he half feared that his house should be burned over his head, like Witred’s. It seems that when the archbishop came back here from Sutton he excommunicated, with all solemnity, every man who had aught to do with that deed of which he had been told. Wherefore Gymbert, if he cared aught for the wrath of the Church, might be desperate, and would heed little whom he destroyed, so that he ended those he meant to harm.

Then I called Erling, and we planned all that we might for going, and after that we two went into the little church where lay Ethelbert the king. There was silence in it, and little light save for two tall tapers which burned at the head of the bier on which he lay, but I could see that all had been made ready against his showing to the people on the morrow. A priest sat on either side of the bier’s head, and one of them read softly, so that I had not heard him at first. So I stood and looked in the face which was so calm, and then knelt and prayed there for a little time.

When I rose I was aware for the first time that behind me knelt Erling, but he did not rise with me. He stayed as he was, and in the light of the tall tapers was somewhat which glistened on the rough cheeks of the viking. I knew that he had been mightily taken with the way of Ethelbert on our long ride with him; but he was silent, and said little at any time of what his thoughts were. I had not thought to see him so moved. Now he looked up at me as it were wistfully, and spoke to me, yet on his knees:

“Master, this poor king, who talked with me as we rode, bade me be a Christian man, that hereafter we might meet again. And you ken that I saw him, and how he spoke to me, that night when he was slain, so that from me you learned his death. Now I would do his bidding, and so be christened straightway, if so it may be.”

I did not know what to answer, for it was sudden.

Not that I was much surprised, for Erling had ever been most careful of all that might offend in his way when he came into a church with me, but that here in the dim church the question came so strangely and, as it were, fittingly. I held out my hand to him, and looked round to the priests, who had heard all. One of them was that elder man who went to seek the king’s body with us, and he rose up and came to us, and bade us into the little bare sacristy apart.

“My son,” he said to Erling, “it is a good and fitting wish; yet I would not have you do aught hastily. How long has this matter been in your mind?”



“I think that it indeed began long years ago, when my lord here kept his faith with Thorleif when he might have escaped. That made me think well of Christian men. He had not so much as taken oath.”



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“Carl the Great would christen a heathen man first and teach him afterward,” said I, meaning indeed to help on Erling’s hope without bringing my own name into the matter thus, and minding Carl’s rough way with the Saxon folk.

“Carl’s man has taught first, and that all unknowing,” he said, smiling. “I do not know what he speaks of, but it has been worth doing.”

“I only kept my word, father, as a Saxon should.”

“As a Saxon Christian has been taught to keep it, by his faith, rather,” he answered, smiling at me. “Well, well, so may it be.

“Now, my son, you will need many a long day’s teaching, mayhap.”

“I think not, father,” said Erling. “I have been in Wales, and there I learned well-nigh enough. They gave me the prime signing there. You have but my word for it, but Ethelbert himself said that an I would be baptized he would stand sponsor for me. He said it as we rode on the day of the great mist, when it chanced that all of us must pray together. He saw me make the holy sign, and asked presently if it was that of Thor. And I told him that in Wales I was what they call a catechumen. I mind me that so ran the word for one prime signed.”

“And thereafter he spoke to you?”

“He said many and wondrous things to me.”

I minded how often Ethelbert had spoken with Erling. I had deemed that he did but ask him questions of Denmark, as once he did in my hearing at the first.

So I wondered. But the old priest asked Erling to say the creed, and that he did well, and with a sort of gladness on him. After which the good father said that tomorrow should surely be the baptism, in all form.

“Nay, but here and now,” begged Erling. “Tomorrow I must be away with my master beyond the river, and I would fain be christened here—in yon presence.”

“Ay; why not,” said the old priest, half to himself, “why not? Yet I will fetch the archbishop.”

He led the way back into the church, and we entered just below the sanctuary steps. In the little chancel lay the king; and almost in shadow, for no window light fell on it, the font stood at the entering in of the nave, opposite the one south door.

“See,” said the priest, “some one has come in. Maybe he seeks you twain.”



I looked toward the door, and dimly I saw a tall figure standing close to the font, but I could not see who it was. Erling knew him.

“It is Ethelbert,” he said very quietly; “he said he would be my godfather.”

The priest set his hand on my arm and half shrank back. The other priest lifted his eyes from his book, and so bided, motionless. But I did not rightly take in what they meant, and looked more closely. Then some stray gleam of light from the broken sky overhead came into the door, and it shone round the tall and gracious figure—and it was that of Ethelbert himself.

I saw him, and there he bided while he turned his face to us, smiling at us. And so he set his hand on the font, and smiled again, and was gone.



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“Brother,” said the seated priest, “did you see?”

“I saw, and I think it is but the first of many wonders which we may see here.”

Now we stayed there still and hardly daring to move, looking yet for the king to be yonder again, but we saw no more. Then at last the priest begged me to go to the archbishop and bring him, telling him what had happened. I went, and when Ealdwulf came there was no more delay, but where the form of Ethelbert had stood there stood Erling, and was baptized by the archbishop, I and the old priest standing for him. And thereafter he knelt at the steps of the sanctuary, and on him the hands of the archbishop were laid in his confirmation.

That was the most wonderful baptism I have ever seen, and it bides in my mind ever as I see another, even if it be but of a little babe of thrall or forester, so that for a time I seem to stand in the church at Fernlea once more, and hear the voice of Erling as he made his answers firmly and truly. Betimes it seems to me that it was but longing and the work of minds in many ways overwrought which showed us the form of the dead king there by the font—and I cannot tell. Yet the watching priest saw, besides us three who had searched for him.

Presently, on the morrow, and again in days later, when the body of the king lay for the people to pass and see, and when it was taken with all pomp to its resting in the great new cathedral which men call that of Hereford, there were many healings and the like, as they tell me. And at Marden, where Offa built at once the little church which should mark where Ethelbert was hidden, that water which welled from the place whence we took him healed many.

Now we went forth from the church for a little while, and presently I went back alone and placed the little gift which Etheldrida had given me on the breast of the king, hiding it next his heart in his robes. I had learned that they would not be moved again. Ealdwulf knew that I had done it, and when I came back to him, where he talked yet with Erling in the reeve’s chamber, he asked me if I knew what the little case held. I did not, and that is known to none save to her who gave it me.

“I think that you two will value this more than other men,” he said then.

And with that he gave us each a little silken bag, square, with a cross and a letter E worked thereon. He had cut for us each a lock from the head of Ethelbert, and had it set hastily thus for us. And he was right as to the way in which we held it of more worth than aught else. Hilda wrought the little cases as she sat waiting in the house. It is my word that mine shall go to my last resting with me.



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Now all too soon the dusk came, and we must set ourselves back from these wondrous things that had been to the ways of hard warriors again, with a precious charge in our keeping. With Hilda we supped, and then it was dark. Out in the stables the horses stood ready, my brown second steed being made ready for the lady, and Erling's second carrying the packs, as on our first journey from Norfolk. And then we heard the last words of farewell from the archbishop, and knelt for his blessing, even as the watch mustered outside in the street, and the last wayfarer hurried into or from the gates, and I heard the horns which told their closing. It was dark overhead, and the moon had not yet climbed far into the sky; which was as well for our passing the ford unseen, if Gymbert had it watched.

Then the reeve came in, armed and ready, and we must go. There was a little sobbing from the good wife, as was no doubt fitting, but by no means cheering; and so we passed from the warmly-lit little hall into the street, and mounted, clattering away toward the westward gate of the town, with the reeve ahead and two of his men after us.

The gates swung open for us, and two wayfarers took advantage thereof to get inside, which was to their good fortune. Then we had a quarter of a mile of road to pass before we came to the ford below the field where our camp had been when we came. After us the gates were shut again, and we rode on.

Then befell us a wonderful bit of good luck. There came the quick tramp of a horse coming toward us, and out of the gloom rode a man in haste. He pulled up short on seeing us, and I heard another horse stop and go away directly afterward. It was too dark to see much against the black trees and land among which we rode, and the plainest thing about this comer was the little shower of sparks which flew now and then from the paving of the old way and from his horse's hoofs.

"Ho," said the reeve, with his hand on his sword hilt, "who comes?"

"Is that you, reeve? Well glad am I. Are you out with a posse against those knaves at the ford?"

"Eh," said the reeve, while we all halted, "is the ford beset with the Welsh?"

The man laughed somewhat.

"Not Welsh, but thieves of nearer kin. I ride homeward along the river bank, and they stop me. It seemed to put them out that my horse is not skew-bald, and that I am alone. However, they would rob me."

The reeve whistled under his breath.

"How have you got away?" he asked.



“Rode over one of them who held my horse. There was one after me, or more.”

Now the reeve turned to me.

“What is to be done?” he said blankly. “This is what we had to fear most of all. This is surely Gymbert with his men.”

“How many may there be?” said I.

“Ten or a dozen, and mostly mounted,” the stranger told me.



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Now I had no time to think of aught, for the men who waited for us heard the voices, and had been told that we had halted; whereon here they came up the road at a hand gallop, in silence. The two men of the reeve made no more ado, but fled townwards, and after them, swearing, went their leader. With him the stranger went also, shouting, and we three were left in the road with plunging horses; and then, with a wild half thought that we might meet and cut our way through these knaves ere they knew we were on them, I bethought me of somewhat. I cried to Erling, and caught Hilda's bridle, and so leaped from the road to the meadow, and held on straight across it toward the dim outlines of bush and furze clumps which I remembered as being close to our first camp.

I suppose that against the black woodland, with the town rampart beyond us, we were hardly noted, or else those who came made sure that we must try to get back to the town. At all events along the road they thundered, past where we had stopped, and on after the reeve and his men, who were shouting for the guard to open to them.

So we did not turn to right or left, but rode our hardest across the soft turf, among the ashes of our camp fires, until we were close on the place where Ethelbert had dreamed his dream of Fernlea church under the riverside trees, by the pool where I had bathed and frightened the franklin by my pranks. That schoolboy jest had flashed into my mind with the memory of the shallows and half-forgotten ford across them. I thought I might find it again.

"They are after us," said Erling. "Whither now?"

Hilda drew her breath in sharply, but made no more sign of fear.

"There is a ford here," I said, "if I can but find it. Let the packhorse go, if need be."

"No need yet; they are at fault," my comrade answered.

Now I saw the tree which had sheltered the king, and close to it was the ford, and already I scanned the surface of the swirling water for the breaks in its flow which would mark the shallows. The pursuers had spread abroad somewhat, and were keeping on a line that would lead them past us, for we had turned down to the river somewhat sharply.

Then the river water flashed white suddenly, and I pulled up. This ford was beset also, for across it, waist deep in the middle, hustled and splashed a line of men whose long spears lifted black lines against the gleam of the pool below. And I suppose we were seen at the same time against the white water; for there came a yell from behind us, and the hoofs which followed us trampled wildly after us.



At that the men in the water hurried yet more, passing to the Welsh side, and that struck me as unlike the men who would seek to stay us. And Erling knew what it meant.

“Welshmen,” he said—“raiders! After them, and call to them.”

With that I lifted my voice, and spurred my horse at the same time.



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“Ho, men of the Cymro!” I cried in Welsh. “Ho! we are beset. Ho, Jefan ap Huwal!”

The Welsh stayed in a moment, with a roar and swinging round of weapons. Not fifty yards behind us, as the horses plunged into the ford, there was a shout for halt, and Gymbert’s men reined up with a sound of slipping hoofs and clattering weapons on the steep bank above us. A sharp voice from the other bank called to know who we were and who after us.

“The Anglians!” I cried back. “Gymbert and ten men in pursuit!”

Then was a yell from the Welsh, and past us back they came with a rush that told of hate for Gymbert. For a moment the longing to get but one blow at that villain took hold of me, and I half turned also.

“No, no,” said Hilda at my side, and I remembered I might not go from her.

So I passed through the water, and on the far bank turned to see what I might. The white-clad Welsh were still swarming back, and their leader began to try to stop them. I heard, as did he, the sound of retreating horsemen as Gymbert found out the trap into which he had so nearly fallen, and made haste to get out of it.

Now we were safe, and a tall Welshman came to me and welcomed us. All this far bank was like a fair; for it was full of cattle, and sheep, and horses, with a gray dog or two minding them.

“Jefan told us you were to come,” he said; “but we looked for you to cross at the great ford. We thought none knew of this now.”

I told him how I found it, and thanked him for timely help. His men were coming back, laughing and talking fast over the scare they had given their enemy. They had taken one horse also, in the first rush, but Gymbert had escaped.

The chief gave a short laugh.

“We were in time, indeed,” he said; “but your coming fairly frightened our rearguard across the water more quickly than our wont. We could not tell who was coming. A wise man runs first and looks round afterward, when he is in this sort of case.”

“It seems to me that you have been somewhat bold tonight,” I said.

“Yes, indeed; which made us fear the more. But we have had a fair lifting, as you may see, dark as it is. Save that Offa has gone to sleep, as men say, we might not have come. We have lifted every head of stock well-nigh up to Sutton walls since dusk,” and he chuckled. “There was no man to hinder us.”



Then he told us that we were all bound for Dynedor hill fort together, and that there we should find Jefan. And so we went slowly, with the herd of raided cattle before us, with a silence which made me wonder. Presently I said as much, and the chief chuckled again.

“Tis practice,” quoth he. “An you had had as much raiding as we borderers, you would have learned the trick of quiet cattle droving. I doubt if ever you had need to lift a herd.”

I heard Erling laugh, and he answered for me.



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"The paladin has most likely stolen as many head in a day as you may find in a year. And I ken somewhat of the trade myself: I was driving his countryside when I first met him. But we have both done it with the high hand, and I think that yours is like to be the best sport. You are first-rate drovers!"

That pleased the raiders, and there was pleasant talk enough of old days as we went on. Presently the moon came out, and we went quicker. It shone on the white faces of the great Hereford oxen and kine, and showed us the keen dogs herding them skilfully as men.

So at last the black hill of Dynedor, crested with its works, rose before us, and from it shone a score of watch fires.

"See, Hilda," I said, "yonder is your father, and all will be well."

She answered me cheerfully, with a little shake of the reins, as if she longed to hurry on; and I told her that now I must keep her back, as she had kept me just now.

"Each to their own way," she said, sighing somewhat: "the man to his weapon, and the woman to the sickbed that comes thereafter. See what one evil deed has let loose on this land. It is terrible to me. And how long it seems since we came to Fernlea in the bright sunshine, deeming that all was to go well!"

"Yet all is not so much amiss," said I, seeing that the fears of the day had hold of her.

And so I told her of Erling's christening, and of what we saw in the church; for of this I had had no time to tell her before, save when Erling himself had been with us.

Then in very gladness, for she liked my comrade, she lost her gloomy thoughts, and would tell him softly of her pleasure. And so we climbed the steep of the hill, and were met at the gate by Jefan himself, with a frank welcome.

There were rough huts across the camp, set more or less at random, and among them burned the fires which we had seen. There would be about fifty men at most in the place, now that all had returned; but the prince told me presently that he had had more when first the alarm had been raised that Offa was summoning his thanes to him for some unknown reason; whereby I gathered that here he had waited for us.

"Lady," he said, as he helped Hilda from her horse, "your father is but weak. I think that he began to mend when I told him that doubtless you would be here tonight. I hope your ride has been easy and without alarm."

"Hardly," said the chief who had rescued us. "It was a hard ride for a matter of ten minutes, and we were frightened sorely. The lady is the bravest I have ever met, for she screamed not once; and the thanes are no bad judges of cattle raiding."



“Why, you have met with men after your own heart, Kynan,” laughed Jefan. “More of that tale by-and-by.

“Well, lady, you are safe, and that is the best. Now you shall see your father.

“See to our guests, brother.”

Jefan took Hilda’s hand and led her to the best of the huts, and, with a word to one within, entered. In a moment he was out again, with a smile on his face in the firelight. I knew from that how Sighard had met his daughter.



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Kynan gave some orders to his men, and they took our horses, leading them to a far corner of the camp. After that we were set down to a great supper, and the tale of the flight and the raid was told and retold. Then at last one fetched a little gilded harp, and Kynan ap Huwal, the raider of cattle, set the whole story into song, and did it well and sweetly.

After that was done came a white-haired priest, and we knelt for the vespers; and then the watch was set under the moonlight, and Erling and I stood in the gateway of the fort, and looked out on the quiet land below us. It was no very great hill, but the place was strong. How old it may be I cannot say, perhaps no man knows; but since Offa drove the Welsh to the Wye it had been set in order, with a stockade halfway down the steep earthwork round the hill crest, so that men on its top could use their weapons on those who were trying to scale it. The dry ditch was deep and steep sided, and, so far as I could see in the moonlight, on this side at least it would need a strong force to take it by storm, were it fairly manned by say two hundred men. The gate had been made afresh of heavy timber, narrow, and flanked on either side by overhanging mounds, whence men could rain javelins on those who tried to force it; and outside the gate were slight fences, which bent in wide half circles, inside which the cattle we had driven in were penned. Peaceful enough it all was, and the stillness of this hilltop after the long unrest seemed as of a very haven after storm.

Presently Jefan and his brother came back after posting their men, and then for half an hour I sat with Sighard and Hilda in the hut. The thane had indeed had a narrow escape from the burning hall, and had been left for dead by his pursuers. However, he had been but stunned by the blow which felled him from his horse, and presently recovering, had managed to get across the river and to some Welshman's hut, whence Jefan took him.

As for those who had burnt the hall, he was sure that they were led by Gymbert, and that they were no housecarls of Offa's. They had slain Witred and another of the Mercian thanes who had fled with him.

Then I asked him of himself and of his hurt.

"I am old to have the senses knocked out of me, and a blow that you might think little of is enough to keep me quiet for a time. However, that is all. Now that Hilda and you are safe, and the king is found and honoured, I have naught to do but to get well. Trouble not for me."

It seemed to me that there was no need for me to trouble about aught either, and out in the open air, by one of the fires, I slept till the dawn woke me, without so much as stirring.



CHAPTER XVIII. HOW JEFAN THE PRINCE GUARDED HIS GUESTS.



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In the stir which comes with the waking of a camp, I and Erling went out of the eastward gate and watched the sun coming up over the Mercian hills across the river. The white morning mists lay deep and heavy below us, and the little breeze from the southwest drifted curls of it up the hill and across it, mixed with the smell of the newly-lighted fires; and as the sun touched the drifts they vanished. In the cattle enclosures the beasts moved restless and ghostlike, lowing for their home meadows after the night on the open hillside. Jefan had ridden out to go round his posts, and I was waiting to bid Hilda good morrow before breakfast.

“What shall you do next?” asked Erling, with his eyes on the misty treetops below us.

He was silent beyond his wont this morning, and I did not wonder at it.

“I can hardly say. I have thought that by-and-by, when Sighard is fit to move hence, we might get to one of the Welsh ports, and so cross into my own land, Wessex, unknown to any in all Mercia.”

Erling nodded.

“That is good,” he said. “I only wish we were a trifle farther from the Wye now, or that we had a few more men.”

“You think that Gymbert is still to be feared?”

“I know it. Unless we get hence shortly we shall be fallen on. The reeve told me that he could gather five-score men of the worst sort in a day by the raising of his finger.”

“It would need men of the best to take this place.”

“Outlaws and suchlike I meant—men who will have Gymbert’s promise of inlawing again if they will do his bidding. See, here comes Jefan!”

Up the hill from out of the mists rode the prince, and with him ran a few of his men, swiftly as mountain men will, so that the horse was no swifter up the steep. After them, through the mist, from men I could not see, sped an arrow, badly aimed, which fell short, and told of danger.

One of the two men who were at the gate on guard turned and whistled, and the rest, busy over their cooking, dropped what they held and ran to their weapons. Kynan came hastily to us, and watched his brother as he rode up.

“Jefan is in a hurry,” he said. “Get your arms, thane, for there must be reason. Mayhap it is naught, however, for one is easily scared in a fog.”



Still he was anxious; for if he had looked at me he would have seen that I was already armed, and that so also was Erling. We needed but our spears to complete the gear for battle—if that was to come—and they stood, each with the round shield at its foot, by the fire where we slept, twenty paces off.

Now Jefan pulled up, and tried to look back through the mists. They were thinning fast as the sun climbed higher, but were yet thick. His men came on and entered the gate, while Kynan asked what was amiss.

“There are men everywhere,” one said—“Mercians. They must have slain the outpost toward the ford, and so have crept on us under cover of the thickness.”



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“Trying to see where their cattle are,” said Kynan. “They will not come up here.”

The man shook his head, but laughed.

“They are bold enough to shoot at us, however,” he said.

“You would do the same if you met a Mercian cattle lifter,” laughed Kynan. “That is naught.”

Jefan rode in slowly, bidding us good morrow cheerfully as he came. Kynan said that he supposed the owners of the kine were about.

“They, or some others who should be on the other side of the river,” answered his brother carelessly, as he dismounted. “Send a picket down on the west side of the hill, and bid them be wary. Let them eat their breakfast as they go, and send men to keep in touch with them. I can see naught in this mist, and if we have to leave here we must know in time. Come, let us get to our meal.”

Plainly enough I saw that there was more in the matter than Jefan would let his men know yet; but if I was anxious, I would no more show it than he. So we sat down to the food his men had ready, and before we had half finished a man came and spoke to him quietly and went his way again.

“One of the western picket. It seems that here we must stay for a while.”

So said Jefan, and laughed a short laugh. But he did not look at his brother, nor did Kynan look at him.

“That is the worst of a raid,” said Kynan. “It stirs up such a hornet’s nest round one’s ears. However, we on the border are somewhat used to it. We can take care of ourselves.”

We went on eating, and then a second man came; and Jefan told him to call in the pickets, after he had heard what was said. Then he turned to me at last.

“Thane,” he said, “we seem to be beset here, but how and with what force we cannot yet tell. I am sorry, for your sakes and the lady’s, that so it is. I fear our raid has made trouble for you, by bringing Offa’s men on us in the hope we may be forced to return our booty.”

“Our fault, I fear, for keeping you here, prince,” said I. “I think that of your kindness to us you have stayed longer near the river than you might have done at any other time.”

He smiled.



“That were to credit me with too much,” he said. “Mostly the Mercians care little to follow us. There lies our mistake.”

“Then it may be that Gymbert is after us,” said I, “and this has happened because he knows that we are here. He is doing Quendritha’s bidding.”

“Not likely in the least,” said Kynan; “it is just a cattle affair. It is my fault for suggesting a raid last evening. I would go, though Jefan had no mind for it.”

“Wrong, brother.

“Do not listen to him, thanes. I did but stay here because it was his turn to go. One of us must needs bide in the camp.”

Then they both laughed, and I dare say would have gone on with their jest; but there came a cry from the gate, and they both leaped up. It was the word that a man bearing a white scarf on a spear was coming.



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They went to the gate, which was not yet closed, and Erling and I climbed the rampart near and looked over, bareheaded, lest our English helms should tell who we were. In my own mind I was pretty sure that we were sought.

The mists had thinned to nothing, and only lingered in the hollows and round the scattered tree clumps. Long ago the Welsh had bared all this hillside, and there was no cover for a foe as he came up the hill. Across the grass came one man alone, and that man was Gymbert, as I had half expected. It was ourselves whom he was after. Maybe his only chance of regaining favour with the king being through Quendritha, he was trying his best to please her. Or else she had threatened him. Either would be enough to set him on his mettle, for none with whom I had spoken thought that the forced retirement of the queen would last long. She would soon be as powerful as ever, they said.

Now he came within half arrow shot of the gate, outside of which the two princes stood. There he halted, and lowered his spear to the ground.

“Jefan ap Huwal the prince?” he said in the best of Welsh.

“You know me well enough by sight,” Jefan replied. “There needs no ceremony. Tell us what you want here.”

“I bring a message from Offa the king. It is his word that, if you will give up the English fugitives you have with you, this matter of the cattle will not be noticed.”

“We have no objection to its being noticed,” said Jefan. “I don’t know what else you could do about it. But you say this message is from Offa?”

“Ay. You have here with you a Frankish thane, so called, being a Wessex man in disguise, a heathen Dane his servant, and a girl, escaped thrall of the queen. Doubtless you have apprehended them for us, and I only need ask you to give them up.”

“This needs no answering, Gymbert. You never were known as a truth teller. This is your own affair, or Quendritha’s, for Offa has seen no man to give any such order to. Nor dare you go near him on your own account, or short would be your shrift. Get hence, and take your lies back to her who sent you. Mayhap you have told that queen that you have slain Sighard the thane. If so, another lie or two will make no odds.”

Thereat Gymbert grew purple with passion. Plainly that was just what he had told the queen. And now he began to bluster, after his wont, stammering with rage. He had forgotten what we must have told the princes.

“You hear the message? Pay heed to it, or it will be the worse for you. Set these folk outside the walls straightway, or else—”



He shook his spear at the gate.

“I will not give them up,” said Jefan; “and if—”

He set his hand on his sword hilt and laughed. Naught more was needed.

Then Kynan, who was fairly stamping, broke in, being nowise so patient as his brother:

“Hence, knave and liar! If there were naught else, it were enough that you have called a freeborn thane’s daughter a thrall to your evil mistress. The truce is at an end.”



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His sword flashed out, and Gymbert was ware of bent bows on the rampart which had more than a menace for him. He turned his horse slowly and went his way, only quickening his pace when he was out of range. Just before that some man loosed an arrow at him, which missed him but nearly; and at that Jefan's pent up rage found a vent.

"Take that man and bind him!" he cried to those on the rampart. "Shame on us that a truce bearer should be shot at. Bind him, and set me up a gallows that the country round may see."

I saw the man throw down his bow and hold out his hands.

"The prince is right," he said in a dull voice.

Jefan walked up to him and looked at him.

"So you own that? Well, you shall not die.

"Set him in a hut till this affair is ended, and then we will think of what shall be done to him."

His passion had blazed up and passed as the fierce rage of the Cymro will. They took the man away, and he turned to us with a word of regret on his lips, and that was cut short by a yell from the rampart, while the gate was swung to and barred hastily. I ran to my spear and shield, while Kynan cried to his men to get to their places; and scattered enough they seemed as they lined the ramparts. Already they had driven the cattle from the enclosures westward down the hill to the woodlands.

As I took my spear from the place where it stood upright, I looked toward the hut where Hilda was, and saw her standing in the door. It was the first sight I had of her that morning, and now her eyes were wide with wonder at the cries and bustle of armed men.

"Wilfrid, what is it all?" she cried.

"Gymbert has gathered some men, and is trying to make Jefan give us up," I said, knowing it was best to tell her plainly. "But you need have no fear; this place is strong, and the man cannot have any following worth naming."

"There will be fighting?"

"I think there will be little; but the arrows may come over the rampart, and you must keep under cover."

"Shall you take part if there is any?"



“Why, of course,” said I, laughing; “it is for you.”

She looked at me, and I know that for a moment she had a mind to beg me not to fight; but that she could not do, and so she only smiled a wan smile and bade me have a care. So I bent and kissed her hand, and she went back into the hut. Sighard was calling to her to come and tell him what all the turmoil was.

Then I hurried to where Jefan stood on the works by the gate, whence one could see all over the camp, and half round the hillside as well. Not a shred of mist was left, and it was as glorious a morning as one could see; only it was hotter than the wont of a Maytime morning, and over the southward hung a heavy, white-topped cloud bank, with a promise of thunder in its pile. Not that I noted it now, but I had done so. From the ramparts there was more than enough to keep my eyes on the hillside.



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Up the steep came three bodies of men, to right and left, where the hill was sharpest, and straight for the gate, where there was a long, even slope ending in a platform, as it were, before it. Gymbert himself headed this company on foot, and men whose names the princes seemed to scorn altogether led the others. Altogether there were not less than a hundred and fifty men; but as they drew nearer I saw that they were not at all the sort of force with which I should hope to take so strongly stockaded a place as this. Outlaws, runaway thralls, and such-like masterless men they were, ill armed and unkempt and noisy. Their only strength was in their numbers, so far as I could see.

As for ourselves, the gate was the weakest place, by reason of there being no ditch before it, and that the ground was level, or nearly so, for twenty paces outside. I did not think it in the least likely that our men could not hold off the two side attacks; for the stockade was well placed and high, and the ditch sheer-sided and deep. Take it all round, it was hard to see how Gymbert expected to take the place, or why he would try it at all.

“Quendritha is driving him,” said Kynan, laughing, when I said as much. “If that woman bids a man do a thing, he has to do it, or woe betide him. But it will be a fight, for a time.”

Now Gymbert halted his men beyond bow shot, and called to Jefan once more to give us up; and so finding no answer beyond a laugh from the men who were watching him from the rampart, drew his sword and bade his men fall on.

They broke into a run for a dozen paces, and then some half of either company halted, and while the rest went forward, those who stood began to try to clear the way with arrow flights, shooting over their heads so that the shafts might drop within the stockading. And at the same time our men began to shoot, somewhat too soon; for the Welsh bow will not carry so far as the English, though the arrows are more deadly, being heavier.

Seeing that, Jefan bade his men hold their hands until he gave the word; on which Gymbert called to his men, and they came the faster. The arrows met them then at short range, and in a deadly hail, and they faltered. Many fell under them, yet they still came on; and now the men who had been shooting found that the Welsh were too well sheltered under the stockade timbering for much harm to be done them, and they ran and joined their comrades at some call from their leaders. Then without stay the whole three companies threw themselves with a great shout against the defences, leaping into the ditch on either side, and surging up against the gate itself.

In a breathing space our Welsh were ready with the long spears, and as one by one the heads of those who climbed gate or stockade showed themselves, hoisted up by their comrades, or climbing in some way or other, back they were sent with a flash of the terrible weapon, falling on those below them. And now and again the Welsh spears

darted through the spaces between the timbers of the stockade at some man who came close to them and was spied, or at those who tried to help their comrades to climb. The whole place was full of yells and shouting.



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But it was harder work at the gate, for there the foemen were more densely packed before us, and they seemed to climb in an unending stream. More than one fell inside the gate, and there lay still; but none had won his way to the ground alive, nor had we yet lost a man. The loss was all on the side of the attack.

Then at last the men at the gate drew back for a time; but from the side attacks came a new danger. With spear butt and seax they were trying to undermine the stockade, and one could hear the creaking of the stout timbers as they tried to tear them down. It would have gone hardly with us had there been but a few more men, or if these had brought pick and spade with them.

As it was, that attempt did not last long. Into the crowd of men who worked the heavy javelins fell, and through the timbering the reddened spears went and came, driving at last the foe to safer distance. And so the first attack ended, and for all that Gymbert from the gate tried to urge them on, his men stood sullenly in the deep ditch and under the gate, where we could not well reach them, save by casting javelins and darts high into the air, that they might pitch among them; but there were few throwing weapons to spare.

“He would have done better to attack at one point only,” said Jefan, sitting down on the rampart above the gate. “He might have overwhelmed us so, for he has men enough.”

His brother laughed.

“There is a difference between us in this way,” he said, “and it is a great one: there is little fight in his men, and we must needs fight our best. Listen! they are passing some word round.”

So it was, for there fell a silence on the humming men below us, and we could hear muttered words from one to another. Then the attack came again from the same three places, but I thought it was not pushed home as at first. Nor did it last so long. In a few minutes men began to get out of the ditch and away down the hillside while the Welsh were too busy to shoot at them. There they scattered, and stood and watched. And then the attack on the gate ceased, and back the foe went.

“After them, and scourge them home to their mistress,” shouted Kynan, leaping down to the gateway, where his men did but wait some word which should tell them to throw it open for a sally.

I looked for Jefan; but he was across the camp, seeing hastily to the weakened places in the stockade.

“Kynan,” I cried, “have a care! This is what they want you to do! Wait!”



For I could see that in the open Gymbert had the advantage of numbers, and I suspected that he was trying to draw the fiery Welsh from their works. There was surely some reason for this half-hearted attack on the stockade that had been already proved too strong.

He did not hear me. It is in my mind that I may have called to him in the Frankish tongue of my last warfare. That is likely enough, for with the clash of arms again I know I had been thinking in the familiar tongue once more. I do not know, but again I called him, and he seemed not to hear. The gate flew open, and with a wild yell of victory out went the Welshmen, with the prince at their head.



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Jefan heard and turned back, and called to him to stay; but he also was too late. He had but a dozen men with him, while from the opposite side of the camp those who had driven off their foes had joined those who poured out with Kynan. One or two of Jefan's men shouted, and went with them, unheeding the call of their leader to stay.

Then in a moment I knew what the word which had been passed meant. The Mercians who had drawn off from the side attacks closed up and charged down on the scattered Welsh, on whose pursuit Gymbert and his men turned. We could do naught but stand and watch, helpless, for we dared not leave the gate, which we could not close against the retreat which must come.

Round Kynan and his men Gymbert's force swarmed, and the din of wild battle rang as the ancient foes, Welsh and Mercian, met on the level turf. I saw Kynan's red sword rise above the turmoil, and heard his voice rallying his men to him; and then he had them together in a close body, outnumbered indeed by two to one, but better fighters and better trained than the mob against them. And then they began to cut their way back to the gate.

We stood there across it, waiting, and then it was our turn. Of a sudden out of the ditch on either hand leaped men who had waited there unnoticed for this moment, and they fell on us. We were eight, and but four of us could stand in the gateway at a time. Jefan and I and Erling and a tall Welshman were the first, and before us were some dozen Mercians, and more to come as they could find room on the narrow causeway.

Now it was a question whether we might hold the gate till Kynan won back to it, or whether when he did come he should find it held against him; and for one terrible moment I had a fear that men would be coming over the stockade in the rear upon us. And I could not look round, for I had all my time taken up in keeping my own life from the attack in front.

I think it was about that time that Kynan began to sing some wonderful old Welsh war song, which rang above the clash of weapons and the cries of those who fought. It took hold of me, and I seemed to smite in time to its swinging cadence. Yet he came back very slowly.

Jefan went down first. Into the ditch he rolled, with his grip on the throat of a Mercian; for his sword snapped, and he flew at the man. One from behind us took his place with a yell of rage, and he went too far, and was gone also, speared at once. Then another, and another to my left; for the tall Briton was down, and still Erling and I were not hurt. I would that Kynan would get back more quickly. He was coming, but the press before us was thick.

So we fought, and I fell to thinking what a wondrous sword this was which Carl the Great had given me. It shore the spear shafts, and the brass-studded shields seemed



to split before it touched them, and the tough leather jerkins of the forest men could not hold its edge back. The wild song of Kynan never ceased, and he seemed to sing of it. He was getting nearer, but the Mercians thronged between his men and us.



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Now there seemed to be a grim joy in the faces of the men before me, and the Briton at my right fell. There was none left to take his place, and there were but three of us in the gate.

“Kynan! Kynan!” I cried, for in a moment he would find his retreat barred. I do not know whether any voice came from me, but I seemed to call him.

Then Erling and I were alone in the gateway, and the snarling Mercians leaped at us. The last Welshman had fallen, hurling his broken sword at a man who smote at me, and so staying the blow.

“A good fight for a man’s last, master,” said Erling to me through his teeth, standing steadily as a rock with his hacked shield linked in mine, and his notched sword swinging untiringly to the grim old viking war shout “Ahoy!” as it fell.

Kynan was twenty yards from us, and now I saw Gymbert among those whom he was steadily driving back.

A shadow swept over me, and it grew darker. I saw all the land below me lying in brightest sunlight, and then the great swift cloud shadow fled across it, though round us there was not a breath of wind. I think the men before us two shrank back a little at that moment, so that I had time to note all that went on, as a man will at such a time, and yet without taking his eyes from the foe before him.

That was but a breathing space. With a fresh yell the Mercians fell on us again, and I had three of them on me; and my hands were full, though they hampered one another. The old Wessex war cry which I had not heard for so long came back to me, and I shouted “Out! out!” and met them. There needed but a little time and Kynan would be on the causeway. His song rang close to us.

Erling reeled and steadied himself against me, and the Mercians howled. His war shout rang once, and then he fell across my feet, face downward, and I stood over him in a white rage, and set my teeth and smote. It came to me that there were more men on the causeway now, but that they would not near me. I was fending spearheads from me, and I forgot Kynan.

Then of a sudden those who were on me seemed to know that his song was in their very ears, and they looked round. His men were on the narrow gate path, and they were between them and me; and with that they yelled and fled into the ditch on either side the causeway, and I was aware that for a long minute I had kept the gate alone.

But I did not think of that. Out of the way of heedless, tramping feet of those who came back into safety I must get my fallen comrade, and I threw my sword within the gate and stooped and dragged him after it, setting him on one side, on the steep rampart bank,



out of the way. He smiled and tried to speak, but could not; and even so much cheered me, for I had thought him dead.

Some one came swiftly and touched me as I bent over him, and I saw the old priest.

“Leave him to me,” he said. “See to Kynan now; there may be work yet for the lady’s sake.”



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Even as I rose at his word, loath to leave my comrade, but knowing that I must, and while I still had my face from the gate, there came a blinding flash of lightning from the ragged black edge of the cloud overhead, and with it one short, awesome crash of thunder. The storm which had crept up behind us had broken on the hilltop.

After that crash came a dead silence, and then were yells of terror such as the fight had had no power to raise from men on either side. And among them one voice cried shrill that this was the work of Ethelbert, the slain king.

Then as the foe fled back the gates swung to, and I heard the bars clatter into their sockets, and Kynan came to me.

“Holy saints!” he said; “look yonder!”

I went a pace or two up the earthwork and looked over toward the foe. Some twenty yards from the gate lay as it were a blackened heap, round which reeled and staggered men with hands to blinded faces, and from which those who were unhurt fled in wildest terror down the hill, casting even their weapons from them. Save only those who could not fly, not one Mercian was staying.

“Yonder lies Gymbert,” Kynan said in a still voice. “The bolt struck him. It is the judgment of Heaven on him for that which he wrought in darkness.”

CHAPTER XIX. HOW WILFRID CAME HOME TO WESSEX.

For a moment I looked and then turned away, with but one thought in my mind, and that was the knowledge that it was a good thing that the punishment of this man had been taken from our hands. I do not think that I took in all the terror of it at the time, for on that field there was death in so many forms—death brought needlessly by his contriving again, and in all injustice—and this end of his was to me but right and fitting. Some terrible fate the man deserved, and he had met it. Now I had my own friends to think of.

“See to Jefan!” I said to Kynan, without a word of Gymbert. “He fell at the gate, in the first onset.”

“My fault,” groaned the brother, “my fault. I should have waited his word before sallying out. I heard you call me back, too, and heeded not.”

He called some men, and they opened the gate and passed out hastily, while I knelt at the side of Erling. The old priest was trying to stay the bleeding from a great wound in his side; but he shook his head at me, and I knew that it was hopeless.



Erling knew it also.

“Get to the others, father,” he said; “I am past your heeding.”

“They will fetch me if I am needed, my son,” the old man answered. “There are few of us who cannot tend a common wound. I am but wanted at the last.”

“Ay, for the one thing,” said Erling, with a great light springing into his weary eyes. “For me also, father.

“Tell him, master.”

The old man looked at me, and I nodded. He was a British priest, and one had been told that they and our priests hated each other and quarrelled over deep matters; but what was that in this moment? Neither Briton nor Englishman, priest of St. David’s nor of Canterbury would heed that here and thus. He rose and went hurriedly, and we two were alone.



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“We kept the gate,” he said.

“Ay, we kept it; and all is well.”

“Jefan is not dead,” he said next; “he lay and watched it all. I could see him.”

Then across my shoulder he saw some one, and smiled. I turned, and there was Hilda, white and still, standing by us, and she set her hand on my shoulder. Then she bent toward my comrade.

“Ay, you two kept the gate, and all are praising you. They say that but for you the fort had been lost.”

The lightning came again, and after a second or two the thunder, close still, but not so terribly so. The rain would come presently, and I longed for it, but not yet. I dared not move Erling, and there was the priest to come.

Now he came, and with him brought that which was needed; and so we two knelt, and there came one or two Welshmen, gently, and knelt also, unlike our Saxons, who would have stood aloof, with bared heads indeed, but unsharing.

I will say naught of that little service. When it was ended Erling closed his eyes and sighed, as one who is content; and we waited for them to open again, but they did not. It was the first and last sacrament of the new-made Christian.

The priest ended his words, and looked at me. Hilda took her cloak and gave it to him, and he set it across my comrade, and that was all. He was Ethelbert's first follower to the new place he had won, and that also seemed good to me.

Through the gate came Kynan, followed by four men who bore on a spear-framed stretcher their prince who had fallen.

“All well,” he called up to me cheerfully. “Naught but a broken leg from the fall, and no wound.”

Then the rain came, sweeping in a sheet across the open hilltop. Hilda took my arm.

“Come,” she said, “take me to the hut again. My father is well-nigh raving because he is too weak to fight. Once he rose and staggered to the door, and there fell. He cried to you as you stood alone with those savage men before you in the gate. Did you not hear him?”

So she spoke fast, and drew me away to the hut, and there Sighard bade me tell him all I might of the fight. It had been hard for him to lie and hear the din going on, to know



that the battle was for Hilda and for him, and not to be able to share it. And he grumbled that the girl would not look out on it and tell him how it went.

“But I saw Wilfrid in the gate,” she said, “and I feared for him for a moment, until I saw that the foe feared him; and then I was proud. But Erling has gone, father.”

“A good man and steadfast,” Sighard said. “I think that you and I owe life to him and Wilfrid alike. It will be long before we forget him, or before you find such another comrade and follower, Wilfrid.”

More there was said of him at that time, but not too much. I had known him but a little while, but in that we had gone through peril together with but one mind. It hardly seemed possible that it was only a matter of six weeks since I took him from the Norwich marketplace.



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The thunder rolled round us while we talked of him, passing but slowly, and the rain fell in sheets, washing away the more terrible stains of war. Through it came back, unarmed and humbly, some of the Mercians, begging truce wherein to take away their comrades, and Kynan spoke to them. As we had reason to think, the whole affair was the doing of Gymbert, so far as his men knew. Behind him was the hand of Quendritha, of course, but of that they had heard no more than that to take us would please her.

When the storm ended, with naught but a far-off mutter of thunder among the hills beyond the Wye to mind us of it, I went out to find Jefan. At that time there were folk from the Welsh woodlands coming up to help in any way that was needed, for a fire on the highest point of the ramparts was sending a tall smoke curling and wavering into the air, and the meaning of that was well known to them. One might see by the way in which they were tending the wounded and digging two long trenches without the ramparts, where the slain should rest presently, that such fights were no new thing to them on the marches of Mercia.

Jefan the prince lay in a hut, and he smiled ruefully as I came in. His ankle was broken, and the old priest had set it, skilfully enough, but it would be many a long day before he could use it again. He held out his hand to me before I could speak.

“Are you hurt?” he said anxiously.

I was not, save for a scratch or two of no account. More was Kynan, and that was a wonder, or his luck, as he would have it. But Jefan said, trying to laugh:

“I would that I might see just one bout of sword play betwixt you two. I had held my brother as the best swordsman in all the West, but I saw a better in the gate. There I must lie helpless, with a Mercian across me moreover, and it was somewhat of a comfort that there was that to watch. I had seen naught of it but for the fall.”

So I had not been learning all that the best men in the Frankish armies could teach me of weapon craft for nothing, and hereafter I learned that such praise from Jefan was worth having.

But as for my thanking them for this protection of us, they would have it that the whole trouble was of their own making, since they had stayed so near the border after a raid. Even now we must hence, for the sheriff would gather a levy to follow them no doubt. It needed no command from Offa for that; but he would be here anon, in leisurely wise perhaps, but certainly.

“Wherefore we must go,” said Kynan. “Then, as usual, he will find no one to fight with, and naught but a few broken marrow bones to remind him that last night we feasted on Mercian cattle up here.”



Now I would that Erling might have been laid to rest in Fernlea, near to Ethelbert, but that could not be. We set him in a place near the gate which he had kept so well, raising a little mound over him, and Jefan said that it should be a custom with every warrior of the Cymro who entered the camp in the days to come that he should salute him, and that the tale of his deed should be told at the camp fire here from age to age, so long as harp was strung and men should sing of deeds worth minding. Maybe that was the resting and that the honour the viking would have chosen for himself.



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And he was set there with all the still rites of the ancient Church of the Briton, in the way which he had learned to love.

Alone, unmarked Gymbert lies, out of sight of the warriors against whom he came. The Mercians dared not touch him, and the Welsh would not. But Jefan bade that man who had shot at him see to him, and that was the punishment for his deed. Men say that when a storm breaks round Dynedor hill fort it is ill to be there, for then he wanders round the gate unquiet and wailing; and so he also is not forgotten, nor the evil which he wrought.

That evening we were in some Welsh thane's house, far in the folds of the Black Mountains, and there not even Offa could reach us. The people had come with litters and hill ponies, and slowly and somewhat painfully we had gone our way from the hill, gathering the cattle, and leaving men to bring them after us still more slowly.

"Hurry no man's cattle," quoth Kynan, "except when they are by way of becoming yours by right of haste homeward to the hills."

In this homestead, whose name I cannot write, we rested for a fortnight or so, while Sighard gathered his strength again and Jefan's ankle knit itself together. For me there was the best of hunting in the hills and rich forests with Kynan, who was a master of all woodcraft, and with our host. Wonderfully plentiful was game of all sorts, whether red deer or fallow, boar, or wolf, or badger in the forests, and here and there beaver as well as otter in the swift trout streams. There were the white wild cattle also; and there were tales of a bear somewhere in the hills, but we never came on his tracks, though I knew them well from having seen them often enough on the Basque frontier lands. That one chance of having slain the bear there was the only matter of hunting in which I was ahead of my hosts.

At the end of the fortnight we went from this village to the ancient city of Caerleon, travelling slowly, though Jefan made shift to mount a horse, and so ride with us. Pleasant were the June days that passed among the hilly ways, under the great green mountains, and through the forest lands, with good friends and pleasant halts by the way. And I was going homeward now in all truth.

Jefan had a wonderful palace in Caerleon, which his forbears had held since the days when they took the place of the Roman governor by whom it had been built. I think that it had been but little altered, and on its walls were still the pictures the artists brought from far-off Rome had painted, and its floors were laid with the wondrous patterned pavement of the old days, so beautiful that it almost seemed a shame to tread on them. The old Roman walls stood round the town, and there were more houses, less but well-nigh as good, in the place, and the great tower the Romans made.



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Yet, being a Saxon and a forest-bred man, I cared not at all for the stone-walled houses. They seemed low and hot to me, and above one was the ceiled roof, all unlike the high open timbering of our halls, where the smoke curls, and the birds are as free to perch on the timbers as they were in the oaks whence they were cut. The walls round the town irked me also, for one does not like to feel shut in from the open country. One must have fences, of course, and maybe in border places earthworks and stockades, but surely no more should be needed. Yet in a day or two I grew used to all this, and I have naught but good to say of Caerleon elsewise.

For when we had been there a few days Jefan would speak with me, and together we went to the walls of the city and looked southward across the river toward the Severn sea, beyond which lay my home.

“See, friend,” he said, “there is your way, and there is a ship crossing to the old port at Worle tomorrow. Now, from all you have told me, there is a chance that through her daughter Quendritha may yet try to harm you.”

“I think she cannot,” I said. “So far as I know, she has never learned where my home is.”

“Yet,” he said, “go home and see how things are for you. Well I know that your first thought is for the Lady Hilda, and that is right. I am going to see your wedding. But you cannot take her home without going there first to learn whether she will have any home to go to.”

“That is what I have been thinking,” said I. “You are but first in speaking of the matter by a day or so.”

“Well, then, do you go at once. If all is well, then you shall come back here, and so there will be a wedding. If not, come back, and I will give you a place with me.

“Nay, but listen. I have sorely troublesome tenants, the Danes, in our land of Gower, and you can take them in hand for me. You are the man I need as what you would call the ealdorman there. You may take such a place in all honour.”

“Jefan,” I said, “you are indeed a friend, and I will not say no to you. All seems to go well when you have a hand in it.”

“Sometimes,” said he, laughing. “I only wish that everything was as easily arranged as this. Well, go. I want you back to stay, and yet I don’t, as one may say. At all events, we will have the wedding here.”

Now it need not be said that on the next day I did go, landing in the early morning under the ancient walled camp of Worle, which the Eastern traders made when they used to



come for our Mendip metals; and there I hired a horse and rode homeward, sorely longing for my good skew-bald steed, which stood in a Roman stable at Caerleon.

Now I cannot tell all the thoughts which came into my mind as I climbed the last hill and looked down into the wooded hollow where lay our home. The long years seemed to roll back, and it was but as yesterday that I had been there. And then I met a man I knew, one of our own thralls; and he seemed to have aged all in a moment, for I had thought, before he drew near, to see his face as it had been on the day when I went to Winchester to see the bride of our king brought home. He did not know me, but he doffed his cap.



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“Wulf,” said I, “how fares the thane?”

“Well, lord,” he answered, staring at me. “He is in the hall an you want him.”

And then of a sudden a great smile began to grow across his face, and he roared in his honest Wessex voice:

“By staff and thorn, if it is not our young master home from the wars! Good lack, but how you have grown and widened!”

He clutched at my hand and shook it, and then kissed it, after a friend’s fashion first, and then as a thrall should, saying all sorts of welcomes. And then he turned, forgetting any business which was taking him to the hill, and must needs lead my horse with all care down to the hall. And as he went, whenever he saw any man of the place he shouted to him, and one by one men came running, until I had half the village after me. That was a good old Saxon welcome, and I could not find fault with it.

So we came to the hall gate, and the dogs ran out and barked; and I thought I could tell those which had been but pups when I left home, for they had been my charge. Then they bayed and yelled, mistrusting what all the noise meant, though they saw none but friends there, till two gray old hounds rose from the sunny corner of the court and came running, and they knew me; and I called them by name, and the rest stilled their clamour.

Then, with his sword caught up to him, my father came to the great door and called for silence, and so saw me as I sat in my outland mail and stretched my hands to him; and after him came my mother. So I was home once more, and all was well.

I need say naught of the feasting which they made for me, nor of all that I had to tell of my doings since that day when the Danes came and took me. Little enough there was to tell me, save of the village happenings; and that was well, for it meant that there had in every way been peace.

Two days after I came home my cousin came from Weymouth, rejoicing to see me safe and well once more, for he had ever blamed himself for my loss.

Presently we spoke of Ecgbert, but there was yet no chance for him to return. Our Wessex queen, Quendritha’s daughter, was bad as her mother, in all truth; but Bertric the king was just and wise, save only when he was swayed by her. Moreover, to him Ecgbert had sworn fealty when he came to the crown, and until he was gone he would do naught.

And then there was the question as to whether it was safe for me to come home.



There was an old thane who came to see me at this time, and he had been to Winchester within a few days; and he settled the matter, having heard all the court news from Mercia.

“Quendritha’s power is over for good and all,” he said. “Offa has sworn a great oath that he will never set eyes on her again. They say that she is shut up in some stronghold, with none but men of the king’s own round her, and that there she pines and rages in turn, helpless for harm. You may be sure that no word of you has come hither. Doubtless she believes you fled back to Carl the Great. You may sleep in peace.”



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“Get married, my son, and settle down,” said my mother softly. “I may not bear to lose you again.”

So that other matter was easily settled, as may be supposed, though no doubt my good mother would have fain had somewhat more say in the choice of a wife for me. But when my father and cousin heard of the way in which we two had met, and what we had gone through together, they said it was good that I had found no fair weather, fireside bride, and there was a great welcome ready for her as soon as we could bring her home.

Ten miles south of Selwood, on the forest’s edge, lies that hall which was my mother’s, and to which I had the right as her son, and there I was to live. I think that I have spoken of it before as that which gave me the right to the rank of thane. Now and then we had gone there and bided in the hall, seeing to the lands, and so forth, but mostly it had been left to the care of the steward. So it was waiting for me, and thither I should bring Hilda as soon as all was ready.

And I need not tell of that time of preparation, which seemed long to me; but at last we sailed across the still sea from Worle to Caerleon—my father, and my cousin, and half a dozen others of our friends—for word had gone and come from Jefan by the fishers of the Parrett river, and he would welcome all whom we would bring with us.

“Make it as good a wedding as you may,” was his word to me.

I think that Offa once sent an embassy to Caerleon, and that they were the first of our race who had ever been within its old walls. But I know that never before had a Saxon party been welcomed there as we were welcomed, nor had there been such a feast since Jefan himself was wedded.

It seems to me that I am leaving out a many things now; but who wants to hear of that wedding? If any one does, he must even go to Caerleon and call the bards to him, if they will come, and ask them to sing the songs they made thereon. Otherwise he may ask any man of Caerleon to tell him what he saw of it himself, for indeed I cannot say that I had thought or eyes for any but one figure in all the splendour of that ancient court. I do mind that Jefan’s fair princess had clad Hilda in wondrous British array, which passes me to tell of, and that Kynan and Jefan and the men of their host had decked her with gold and pearl and mountain gems, such as lured the Roman hither. They had a splendid sword and mail shirt and helm for me, too, better even than that which Carl gave me, because of the holding of the gate.

Now if one listens, as I have said, to the tales they tell over there, it will be heard how I was said to have kept that gate against all the host of Mercia, not to say Offa himself; for, like our own gleemen, the Welsh bards do not fail to make the most of a story. But how much thereof to believe those who have read my own tale will know. I suppose

they are obliged to make too much of a matter, so that about the rights thereof may be believed.



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At that wedding there were a surprise and a pleasure for me which Jefan had prepared. He had heard of a vessel new come to Swansea, where the Danes are, and he had sent thither to learn what she was. And when he heard, he bade her captain to this feast to meet me. And so it came to pass that when we landed I saw two men in the Danish array standing behind the Welsh nobles, and I seemed to know them. One was tall and grim and scarred, and the other broad of shoulder and white of hair and beard. They were Thorleif and old Thronð, come from Ireland to see their friends in this land, and so Jefan's guests.

So that was a great wedding, in which I had the least part, being overlooked, as mostly happens with a bridegroom. And after it we passed home again to peace and happiness in the old hall in the land of Wessex, and there none will care to follow me. It is the troublous part of a man's life that makes the story to all but himself. He is glad enough when it is over and there is no more danger left of which to make a tale.

When I first came back to Caerleon I had some news to hear from the Mercian border, and that was nothing more or less than that after all Offa had stretched out his hand to grasp that realm which Quendritha had plotted to give him; for he had gathered his levies, and marched eastward into East Anglia. There was none to oppose him, and he took it, and so reigned from the Wye to the sea, the greatest king who had ever sat on an English throne.

And Quendritha was dead. That which her daughter had boded for her as she left the palace had come to pass, and she had gone. She had never set eyes on her husband again, and never heard how that which she planned had come to pass.

That death seemed to take the last doubt of our peace from us; but now Sighard would no more go back to his lands.

"I was Ethelbert's thane and his father's; I will not hold from Offa. Let me come back with you now until I know what I can do."

So when our wedding was over he crossed with us to Wessex, and there for a time he bided. Then came a message from Thetford that the widowed queen, Ethelbert's mother, would speak with him, and without delay he went to her. Offa had left her in peace in her own house; but now she would go to Crowland, that she might be with her who should have been her daughter, and thither Sighard took her. Then he went to see what had happened with his own place, and found it untouched. Offa, when he took the realm, had at least proved that he had no mind to enrich himself with lesser spoils.

So Sighard sold his right of succession, and all else that was his own in East Anglia, and thereafter bought a place for himself near us; and there he lives now, well loved by all and honoured. Many and kind were the messages which he brought back from the

queen to me and to Hilda, whom she had loved, rejoicing that the way to Sutton had at least brought happiness to us two.



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My good skew-bald steed I could not take across the sea with me, and I was loath to sell him. At last I persuaded Jefan, our friend, to take him as a gift, for I cared for none save the prince himself to ride him.

“He is nowise a safe steed to go cattle-raiding on,” said Kynan, “for one can mark him for miles. Nevertheless he is a princely mount, and a good rallying point for the men after they have been scattered in a charge.”

So they laughed, and were well pleased, as was I. Erling’s horse I gave to that man who had been our guide when we fled, and there was no difficulty in finding owners for the rest.

Now one will ask concerning Ecgbert the atheling, whose friend I had been for so long.

All men know that today he is the king of all England, and the greatest who ever sat on her throne. But for long years we waited till the time for his return came. While Bertric lived, to whom he had sworn fealty, he would do naught, in utmost loyalty, and with the Mercian throne he had no mind to meddle.

Two years after the death of Ethelbert, Offa died. His bright young son took the throne, and was gone also in a few months, and then the house of Offa was at an end. An atheling of some younger branch of the Mercian royal line took his place peaceably, and under this king, Kenulf, Mercia was at her greatest. The doom of Offa fell not on him.

Ecgbert bided with Carl the emperor, learning all he might of statecraft and of war until his time came, and well he learned his lesson. Then at last, through Quendritha’s teaching, came the end of the Wessex line, and thereafter the fall of Mercia from her first place among the English kingdoms. For, after Quendritha’s way, Eadburga would poison some thane of the court who had offended her; and Bertric drank the cup she had made ready for his servant, and so perished. Eadburga fled to Carl the emperor, as men had then hailed him; and he received her kindly for Offa’s sake, and at least England knew her ways no more. Then we had all ready, and sent for Ecgbert; and from the time of his coming began that day of greatness for Wessex which has led him to the overlordship of all England and the end of the old divided and warring kingdoms.

One may see many tokens of the repentance of Offa for that deed which was wrought unhindered by him. Greatest of all, perhaps, is the cathedral which he built at Hereford over the remains of the murdered king. There the saint rests in peace, and will be honoured while time is. But where Offa himself lies no man knows. His folk buried him in a little church which he had loved, hard by Bedford, in the heart of his realm, on the banks of the Ouse. But in one night of storm and rain the ancient river rose and swept away both church and tomb and what lay therein, not leaving so much as the foundations to tell where the place had been. And yet, not a stone’s throw from the edge of the rapid Lugg, the little church of Marden, built where we found the body of the

murdered king, stands, and will stand, unharmed by the waters which once made soft his resting.



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The wonderful palace of Sutton lies shunned and ruined. After that which had been done there, Offa would live within its walls no longer, and it was deserted by all men. Only, as the wind and rain wrought their will unchecked on the timbered halls, the thralls took what they would for huts and for firing, and slowly at first, and then apace, the palace sank to heaps of rotting rubbish, where the fox and the badger have their lairs, and the boar from the forest roots unscared. Presently naught hut the ancient Roman earthworks will be left to tell that once it was a place of strength against the Briton.

And with bated breath the thralls tell of a white wolf which haunts the ruin from time to time, deeming it the witch queen herself, who may not leave the scene of her ill doing.

Now, for myself, I have but to say that for the sake of old days in the Frankish land I stand high in the honour of Ecgbert the king. And yet it seems to me that greater honour still it is that I should have ridden across England on that strange wedding journey as the comrade of Ethelbert the king and saint.

Often I am asked to tell the story of that ride and all that came thereafter, for men say that they cannot learn it better than from me. And so I have set all down here that men may read. Yet, whether I write or not, I know well that forgotten Ethelbert can never be.

The end.