

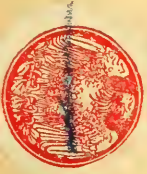
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The

Battle of the Scalds.



BY

EDWARD BRECK.

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Cambridge.

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EDWARD BRECK.



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THE BATTLE OF THE SCALDS.

Prologuc.

GLORIOUS shines the sun on the pleasant fields and
the highlands;
Gently the breezes of summer breathe on the opening
flowers;
Gone are the tempests of March and the piercing blasts
of December;
Songs of the happy birds are heard in the breath of
the morning.
We in our heated abodes, in the sultry air of the
summer,
Long for the coolness of autumn, the freshening breeze
of the ocean;
And as I sat to-day in the burning sun of the noontide,
Thoughts of the sea came to me, forgotten tales of the
Northland.
More than all the rest, a tale of the ancient Northmen
Pleased my wandering fancy and made me forget my
discomfort.

Hakon, scald of the Jarlland, last of the minstrels of
Norseland,
He of the flaxen beard, and the eye of the bell of the
heather,
Told it to me long ago on a beetling cliff of old
Norway, —
Stood on the storm-beaten rock and declaimed it to me
and the ocean;
And as he cried it aloud with the old Norse spirit
within him,
Wildly the sea dashed up on the sharp brown rocks
far below us,
Just as if all its old rage and forgotten deeds of its
vikings
Came to remembrance again by the minstrel's story of
battle.
Sea-birds shrieked o'er the blast like the death shouts
of Eric's bold warriors;
While, far away to the north, great Thor shook the
heavens with thunder.
This was the minstrel's tale as he told it to me by the
ocean.

THE SAGA.

BUSY the day had been in the banquet halls of old
Jarlland;

Olaf, the master of Jarlland, boldest of Norway's fierce
warriors,

Kept in his ancient home the holy feast of betrothal.

All night long would the hearth-stones burn with the
slain sacrifices;

All night long would the scalds in the midst of the
festive carousal

Sing of Sir Olaf's great deeds, and the wars of the
gods and the giants,

As long ago in Mycenæ the minstrels extolled Aga-
memnon.

Many an eye that eve in the brilliant glare of the
torch-light

Flashed with a beautiful zeal to honor victorious Olaf;

And as they came to the banquet, he and his beautiful
Sigrid,

Quick every guest sprang up and hailed them with
loud acclamation.

Handsome was he as a god, as handsome as glorious
Balder,

All save his bright blue eye, and that was of Thor,
god of battle.
Lovely was she as a goddess, as lovely as beautiful
Freyja,
Fitted by person and birthright to be the glad mother
of princes.
For in the terrible battle Sir Olaf had won lovely
Sigrid,
Torn her away from her father, the mighty King Hak-
ron, called Red-beard,
Won her and then was forgiven in good old Norse-
landic fashion.
Thus was the bride bravely won, and now, in the
evening Sir Olaf
Kept in his ancient home the holy feast of betrothal.
Many a scald was there to sing for the prize of the
oak-leaves ;
Out of the east and the west came they, the minstrels
of Norway,
Eager to join in the battle, the bloodless battle of
singers.
First of the battling scalds arose old Ulric of Upland,
Bowed his white head to the earl and struck from his
harp a wild measure ;
Then to the strains of his lyre he chanted this saga of
Sigurd.

SIGURD'S LAST BATTLE.

LOUD roared the wind that day,
High dashed the silver spray,
As, in his fierce array,

King Sigurd wandered.

Shrieking, the angry blast
Bent back the yielding mast,
Huge piles the billows cast

Over the vessel.

And as they forward pressed
Into the crimson west,
Over a breaker's crest

Saw they the foeman.

Blood-red his straining sail,
Red as the heaven's veil,
Blood-red the shining mail

Of each bold yeoman.

Bravely the shout arose;
Quick their undaunted foes
Sent back the echoes' blows,

In wild defiance.

Up rose King Sigurd then,
Gazing upon his men
Who, more than five times ten,
 Shared his alliance;
Shook his huge spear on high,
Smote the red gleaming sky,
While from his keen blue eye
 Leaped the forked lightning.
“Sons of the northern land,
Braver than Eric’s band,
See ye the foe at hand,
 In the sea whitening?”
Sure you have ne’er forgot
What is the warrior’s lot
Spear-thrust or arrow-shot
 Ends the life story!
Death in the strife to behold,
That for a viking bold,
For more than love or gold
 Is highest glory.
Now for the bloody fight,
Give us, O Thor, thy might!
Triumph, or else this night
 Sup we in heaven.
Let all the clarions ring,
‘Long live the ocean king!’

Death and defiance fling
 To the base craven."
Down came the hostile Dane,
Down o'er the angry main
Swift as a hurricane
 'Gainst Sigurd crushing.
Five ships to one they brought,
Yet nobly Sigurd fought.
Dear was the victory bought
 In the wild rushing.
High on the vessel's bow
Stood old King Sigurd now,
Gazing from o'er the prow
 Into the heaven.
Blood-red in stalwart grace
All but his grizzled face;
White that as foamy lace
 On the sea driven.
"Gods of Valhalla high
Since we this hour must die,
Unto ye all I cry:
 Grant my last prayer!
Gather each thunder stroke
And let your fire and smoke
Here in *these* ships of oak
 Scatter and tear!

Leave not one man alive!
With all your bolts arrive!
Let not these ships survive
 To mock your power!
Into Valhalla blest
Take us to sacred rest,
Fulfil ye my request
 Within this hour!"
E'en at his wild desire
Downward the bolts of fire
Swept as in awful ire
 On man and brother!
Thus died the old sea-king
To the loud thunder's ring.
When shall the minstrels sing
 Of such another?

Then as the minstrel ceased, broke forth the tumultuous
 plaudits,
"Hail to old Ulric of Upland, and honor the song he
 has sung us!"
Then said Sir Olaf to Ulric, "Thy saga has wonderfully
 pleased me,
Dear to my heart are the tales that tell of the deeds of
 my fathers."

Then ere the plaudits had ceased he turned to young
Aeger of Haafen,

“Now, young man, it is thy turn; come, sing us a
beautiful love-song!

Fain on the eve of my marriage I'd list not alone to
fierce battle.”

Aeger of Haafen arose and bowed to the master of
Jarlland:

“Even of loving, Sir Olaf, and short is the song I will
sing thee.”

THE FALCON.

THE lady rode out through the forest old
On her palfrey gray, with his trappings of gold;
And her favorite falcon sat perched on her glove,
His eye boldly flashing and proud of her love.
And there in the green-wood her lover she found;
Their steeds knew each other and neared with a bound;
To the death was the love of this beautiful twain,
The love that aye waxes, but never can wane.
“O Elsa, I love thee!” the gallant youth said,
“O Ronald, I love thee!” half whispered the maid.
The falcon had risen and hovered o'erhead,
With jealousy rueful his haughty heart bled,

And screaming he swooped on the youth from the skies,
And with beak and with talon he dashed out his eyes.
The gallant youth died, the lady's heart broke,
But the falcon lived gay in the heart of an oak.

All for a moment were silent, and then the chorus of
praises

Burst once again from the lips of the noble assemblage
that listened;

But for an instant, and then with troubled impatience
Silenced Sir Olaf the crowd, and thus he addressed the
young minstrel:

“Aeger of Haafen, how dar'st thou break in on my
happy assembly —

Cast down the hearts of my bride and my guests with
thy tale of ill-omen?

Hence, ere I charge them to kill thee and cast out thy
bones to the foxes!”

Thus was poor Aeger cast out and left to his bitter
reflections.

Then from the scalds came forward one who to all was
a stranger.

Strange was his garb and betokened a home in the far
distant Southland.

Strange and unknown was he, yet all listened with eager
attention.

THE ROYAL ALCHEMIST.

IN ancient Italy once there lived a king;
Ellano he was called; a mighty prince
Whose kingdom spread abroad from sea to sea;
Who conquered twenty nations by his sword.
A man of blood and pride; the cursed of God.
All gods he had defied. His heart was hard.
Now sixty years this sinful king had reigned,
And, looking o'er the history of his line,
He saw that all the kings before had died
At seventy years, according to a word
Which long ago a learned seer had spoke;
And as on this he thought, the haughty king
Much troubled was, and frightened in his heart.
“I cannot die!” he said. “Full surely now
There is some remedy for horrid death!”
And then he made a feast and summoned there
The wisest seers and alchemists and clerks,
And thus he spoke unto the learned band:
“Ye stand before me here, the wisest host
In my broad land; now let us quickly see
How wise ye are, for unto you this day

I shall propound a question, which, methinks,
Requires the subtlest wit that lives in man.
This day my course of sixty years is done,
And though this hand is still of iron might,
Yet do I mark the signs of weakening.
I do perceive that ere a score of years
Have passed in flight, this royal frame
But so much royal carrion will be!
But unto you I say: the king would live!
Would never die until five hundred years
And more be flown,—now can ye answer this:
What shall I do to gain eternal life?
Sure now to wise men such as ye 'tis nought;
But if ye answer wrong your lives are lost!”
Aghast the wise men started trembling back
And could not speak, or dared not if they could.
“Speak, seers! for him who this day answers right
I will exalt e'en to the very crown!”
Again an awful silence held the hall
Till forth from out the crowd the eldest stepped
And thus with humble mien addressed the king:
“Great king, before whose throne whole nations bow,
Who can expound the riddle thou hast put?
To tell how one may live eternally
Is vain indeed for man to undertake!
Have mercy, sire, upon thy subjects true!”

Up sprang the maddened king in furious wrath.
“Have mercy on a pack of knavish fools!
Upon them, guards, and leave not one alive!
Ho! people, is there one among you all
Can answer me this question I have asked?
If one there be, advance and have no fear!”
But no one spoke. Another frightened pause,
Then through the crowd a trembling maiden came,
Advanced in fearless beauty to the throne,
And stood with eyes cast down,—a lovely sight.
“Ha, pretty one! What wouldst thou have of us?”
“Great king, ’tis not to win the guerdon rich
Which thou hast promised, that has led me here.
I come to tell thee, as my Master prompts,
What thou must do to gain eternal life.”
A fevered murmur ran through all the court.
The king astounded forthwith bade her speak.
“Then hear, O king, and give me leave awhile.
Christ Jesus said these words that I shall say:
‘For God so loved the world, that he did give
His only gotten son, that whosoever
Believes on him should have eternal life.’
Depart, O king, from these thy sinful ways;
Turn thou to Christ, and thou shalt never die!”
“Enough! thy beauty, girl, saves thee alone
From death. Depart and come not here again!”

And then the tender girl was roughly hustled off.
A firmer purpose now the king conceived:
To study alchemy, and for himself search out
An easy path to endless life.
To alchemy he gave his every hour
To make some strong elixir, magic drink.
Unto his son he left his crown, and down
Beneath the earth in blackest of deep caves
Which opened upward to the sky, he toiled,
But all in vain! Ten toilsome years in vain!
And now one night from off his wretched couch
He dragged himself, but, all too weak, his limbs
Refused to bear him up; he groaned and sank
Upon the stones, and stretched out helpless lay.
He knew that he was dying; all the fancied forms
Of hideous death rose up before his eyes,
And he was going mad with terror wild,
When suddenly from far above the sky,
He heard the sound of heavenly music swell;
Far, far away, and sweet as heaven's love!
His guilty spirit quaked as at a knell.
And louder rose the glorious anthem's sound
Till heaven rang with music and with praise;
Then died away into a distant chant,
Sweet wafted through the air from heaven's gates:

“Christ is risen! Christ is risen!
Glory to the Lord on high!
He has left the awful prison!
Soars all glorious to the sky!”

Thus sang they, and he, listening, felt his hopes
Flash once again into his burning heart;
Remembered what the Christian maid had said,
And throwing up his hands, he cried aloud,
“Oh, save me, Christ, thou man of Nazareth!
Look, Lord, I fall before Thee in my sin!
Oh, make me pure as Thou! In pity look!
Oh, save me from this death and awful doom!”
And then he seemed to see a glorious light,
And one who said, “’Tis I,—Be not afraid!”
A perfect peace filled all his fearful heart,
And, turning to the seer who entered then,
He said, as dying to the floor he sank,
“Go, tell them I have found eternal life!”

Silent was every guest intent on watching Sir Olaf
Who with his head on his hand sat wrapped in his
deep meditations.

Finally raised he his head, and smiled at his beautiful
Sigrid.

“Minstrel, thy story has pleased me and filled all my
heart with strange longing.

Surely to thee alone is due the chaplet of oak-leaves.
Fain would I hear again of this wonderful god of the
Southland.

Warriors, my spirits are heavy, leave me and go with
my blessing.”

Thus was the saga ended, but now in the prosperous
Norseland,

Reigns o'er the vikings' descendants the marvellous god
of the Southland.



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