

THORD

FIRETOOTH





Class PZ3

Book L6198

Copyright N^o Th
copy 2

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.



THORD FIRETOOTH



A blond young giant, with a dog to heel.

THORD FIRETOOTH

By

ALICE ALISON LIDE

and

MARGARET ALISON JOHANSEN

Illustrated by

HENRY PITZ

LOTHROP, LEE AND SHEPARD COMPANY

Boston

1937

New York

Copy 2

PZ3
L 6198
th
copy 12

Copyright 1937

BY LOTHROP, LEE AND SHEPARD COMPANY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in magazine or newspaper.



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

©CIA 107544 *CA*

JUL -1 1937

A. P. 1384/27

To

*Dr. Samuel Beekman Alison
and his wife, Emma Knox Lide*

A NOTE OF THANKS

to our dear Jens Nielsen, blond, blue-eyed descendant of Vikings, whose genial self and wondrous library of old Norse sagas gave inspiration and background to a pair of authors.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. CLIFFS OF SOGN	13
II. THE WAR ARROW	24
III. RAID OF THE JOM VIKINGS	32
IV. IN THE SEA WOLF'S DEN	44
V. THRALLDOM	58
VI. THROUGH THE FOREST	74
VII. GHOSTS AT HEGAN	92
VIII. DOWN THE DANUBE	104
IX. CAVE PRISONERS	117
X. THE BRIDE HUNT	128
XI. HERO OF THE RAGGED CASSOCK	141
XII. GATES TO THE CITY	152
XIII. CONSTANTINOPLE THE GOLDEN	159
XIV. THE WAY TO ROYALTY	174
XV. BEYOND THE PILLARS OF HERCULES	183
XVI. ACROSS THE SEA	199
XVII. GLORY	220

CHAPTER I

~~~~~ CLIFFS OF SOGN ~~~~~

A BLOND young giant, with a dog at heel and a fresh wolf hide flung over his shoulder, hastened homeward along the cliffs of Sogn Soe. Now and again this Thord Firetooth, son of Jarl (Earl) Sigurd, chief franklin of all the free-holding franklins on the wild west shores of Norway, stopped for a space to listen. Was that a human sound, far off and faint? Or was it merely bird call or animal call in the tumult of spring that filled the air? He strode on the faster, ear cocked to hear again that different sound.

This year, spring had been late in coming to the Northland. Winter, with its black days and nights, its shriek of storms and wolf howls, its wave thunder against the cliffs, had seemed to hold on forever. Then almost over-night, the thaw was in the air—little snow-falls in the mornings, but the sun coming up light though not yet hot; forests dripping and swelling; birds wheeling and circling and screaming joyously in the light; flighty “ha, ga, ga, ga!” of the cuckoo echoing from the deep woods; song of the marsh frog, restless trumpeting of forest beasts.

Uproar of spring everywhere! Through it all

strode Thord, his hunter's ear still intent to catch that one different, distressful sound, should it come again. As his thong-bound boots found the way along the heights, his eyes kept scanning now the fens that lay below the landward slopes, scanning now the dark waters of Nord Fjord that fretted and foamed against the sea-foot of the cliffs. He saw nothing that was wrong. Yet, ek-a! his inner senses told him that trouble lay somewhere near. He moved on, his whole mind listening.

Then from ahead, coming as it were between a seamew's shrill call and the bass of the frogs in the inland, he caught as once before that faint human cry—"help!"—just one cry.

Thord's long legs carried him forward. He mounted the cliff height on the rounding shore curve; stood peering out across the waves. It had come from the water—that call. Then down in the angry sea, Thord saw a small body that drifted with the wave-wash. Now it rode the wave top, near a boat that floated bottom-side-up. Now it sank beneath the waves.

In one quick motion, Thord stripped from him sword-belt and kirtle. He must be light for running. The way down to water was long and hard. Here was only cliff drop, but further on a path wound down and down with foot-holds in crevices and along ledges—a dangerous path, but one that Thord knew he could make, he had done it before.

Far below, the little body rose, went down again. Thord whirled back from his running. He could never make it to the water in time to save—not by

the land-path. There was one other way. He was back by his sword now. He cut the thongs of his boots, kicked off their weight, stood a moment poised on the verge of Sogn Cliff, saw nigh a hundred feet below the gleam of sun across black waters. Then he dived.

Down through the air past screaming sea-birds, down, down, till he smote the waves, down and down he sank, with water closing blackly over him. He went to the bottom, stunned and half-senseless, rose, floated weakly till air revived him. Finally enough sense came back for him to know that he must swim. He got on to the over-turned boat, used it as a float, pushed it before him till he could swim alongside a little form going out on the ebb tide. 'Twas Gisli, Hlodver's boy. Thord clutched a hand into the child's clothing, drew Gisli to him. Next instant, in the clawing, clinging desperation of one drowning, the child clenched onto his rescuer. Choking, strangling, Thord went under.

The boat had drifted beyond all hope of reach, when the swimmer at last fought back to surface. His childish burden hung limp against him now—insensible.

“Hola, Odin—help me—” the Norse fellow breathed the name of his god, “help me get him to shore—before the death-bird steals his life!” Striving to hold Gisli's head above water, and depending mostly on his powerful leg-stroke, Thord began his swim for land. Here was the fight for life. The cliff wall loomed sheer and high against any landing. The tide-draw sucked fiercely at the

burdened swimmer, seeking to sweep him out to sea.

Thord Firetooth swam till his very bones went numb, floated a space, swam again—heading always for a shelf of land far down the shore beneath the cliffs. The sun hung low by the time he reached that land-shelf and dragged himself and his burden up beyond the lash and pull of the waves.

Wetness, chill, utter weariness possessed him—yet there was still work he must make himself do. Thord struggled up to his knees, began a regular movement of the child's arms, stirring the breath of life back into that small form.

Finally Gisli came to, opened eyes, saw who bent above him. Weakly he caught at Thord's hand, held it to his cheek, wearily shut his eyes.

Progress up the cliff trail was slow. Holding the little boy in his arms, the tall young Norseman set his feet carefully into crevice there, onto a ledge here, and went up, step by step,—resting when rock shelves were wide enough, pushing on doggedly.

With the top gained, he set his burden down, stood there in the sunset glow, and breathed a great breath. Ek—the worst was over now!

Far on ahead of him, through a slashing in the forest, he could see the settled lands of Sogn Soe, the temple on its cliff, Jarl's Sig's great castle.

Thord the Firetooth, son of Sig, stooped and wrapped the shivering little Gisli in the hairy warmth of the new wolf skin that he had left flung down here on the cliff top. Then he, himself, drew on his crimson kirtle, bound on again his boots and

sword and belt. Shouldering-up the child, he set his feet on the home trail.

Because royal blood flowed in his veins, this Thord Firetooth could wear an edging of royal minever fur on his kirtle, could wear a jewel-hilted blade thrust into the sword-belt of golden rings at his waist. For all his young lankiness, the fellow stepped out with military precision, and his hand was forever slipping to his sword hilt. War was his birthright. On that day when he had first seen light in the great, sturdy, hewn-oak castle of Jarl Sig, he had been duly "water-sprinkled" in the good old pagan way and given his name "Firetooth" because of the strange fact that he had been born with two tiny teeth—a valiant omen, so a hastily summoned old wise-woman, or vala, had prophesied to Geirhild, his mother.

According to custom, he had been endowed with everything on his father's estate that was born or made on the day of his birth. So over his oaken cradle, Hlodver, the warrior-harper, had chanted a fierce birth song:

Thord the Firetooth
Then was born
In great Norseland;
Born to sax,
Born to sword,
Born to long brynja.
With ring-adorned helmet,
Born to sword,
With horses and men,
Shall he fight for
The lands of his father.

Of a truth, Thord Firetooth had been born to sax and sword. These were troublous days in the Northland, with internal wars, with jarls and king at each other's throats, with Sweyn Fork-beard raging to the south, and with the pirates of Jomsborg swooping hither and yon.

Great days they were, though, full of travel and warrior merchant princes, and the vikings having a hand at ruling in all the courts of Europe. Even some of the vikings went as far as the frozen shores of Greenland, and still others to Asia, the ancient home—so Norse tradition had it—of the "Asa folk" as the Norse tribes had once called themselves.

Jewels and swords and much of luxury were brought home to the barbaric splendor of the great Norse castles. These castles, with high smoky rafters and beaten earth floors, contrasted oddly with their owners' carved and gilded high-seats and ermine robes and golden armlets.

Very early in life the "omen jar" had been set before Thord to seal his fate by whatever object his hands grasped from within it. Had his fingers clutched the peeled willow wand cut with sacred runic writing, he should have been dedicated to Thor, and become a temple priest. This would have gone hard with grim Jarl Sig, who longed for a warrior son to rule after him. A number of other occupations were fated by a bag of earth, by a bit of wolf hide, by tiny figures of horse or sword or spear. But Thord's young hand had drawn up out of the weird omen jar a glittering little golden

boat. There had been rejoicing then! The sign of the golden boat meant that Thord the Firetooth was to sail far waters in the greatest of all Norse careers, a warrior king that battled on the seas. The old Jarl had been so pleased that he had sacrificed six fat kine, a ram, and a stallion to the gods in thanksgiving.

Thord Firetooth's earliest remembrances were of things martial. At the age of three his war training had begun. Hlodver, the warrior-harper, had taught him to handle his own tiny bow and arrow. From thence on that training had never ceased. In accordance with the hard Norse code of soldier building, one rigorous hardship after another had been laid upon him until his body was both supple and tough and like unto a smoked ash-wood bow frame. A stripling, verging into manhood, he could ride like a demon, making the running mount from the ground to his charger at full gallop. His sinewy young arms could whirl the sword or combat at archery with the best of them.

Small wonder that Thord Firetooth striding homeward along the cliffs felt his heart beat hot with excitement. On the morrow at the great spring festival to the sun god, he was to match his skill with other young bloods at the war games of the North Country. This new wolf skin, wrapped now about little Gisli, he would later take to the temple as an offering for the gods of luck to be with him.

As the Firetooth reached the watcher at the castle gates and passed within the walls, loud clang of a sword beaten against a bronze bowl rang out.

That was the castle's call to "evening meat," and a welcome call it was. Thord passed through the outer room, lifted the heavy leather curtain and entered the great hall of the castle. He set Gisli down beside his father, then made his own way up to the high table where were gathered the Jarl's family.

"Thord—Thord, you're wet," whispered his adored fair-haired little sister, Thora, when he stooped to slip into her hand a pretty stone he had picked up on the fens.

"Pulled Gisli out of the water—his boat turned over," was all Thord said.

Jarl Sigurd sat at the head of his table. He looked royal in every inch of his great height—eagle nose, piercing blue eyes, beard falling on his cloth tunic. A bearskin was flung across the back of his carved high-seat. Beside him sat Geirhild, his wife, stately in cloth of woven wool and stag hair, and belted at the waist with a silver girdle. Thord and Thora sat with these above the two huge salt-cellars. At the lower end were the jarl's henchmen and men-at-arms.

Within the great castle hall of Sogn Soe was a compound of richness and primitiveness. Fire blazed cheerfully on a wide hearth, but there was no chimney, merely a smoke-hole in the roof. For windows, there were high, narrow slits that let in a little light in summer, snowflakes in winter, and served best of all as loop-holes from which to hurl down weapons upon an enemy. To light the evening meal, torches blazed in iron holders set along the walls. The long

trestle boards of the table bore no cloth. There were no forks, None in those days had ever heard of such. Instead, there were good spoons of rowan-wood, and men unsheathed daggers to carve their meat. Wooden trenchers and bowls held the food—savory, steaming masses of stewed mutton and reindeer meat floating in gravy. Men reached strips of barley bread, fingers too, into the bowls, took out what they needed, but had the grace not to encroach on their neighbor's lawful section of the dish. Oh, the Jarl's men were well versed in the courtesies of their times! Chief glory of the Jarl's table were his tankards and ale mugs, many of them solid gold and silver, handsomely carved, set with great rubies and emeralds that gleamed in the torchlight along with the jewels set in ring-belts and head-pieces.

The small Gisli, leaning against Hlodver's knee, now and again pulled his father's head down to whisper into his ear. Children were not supposed to speak aloud at the table. Gisli's whispers were tense—the tale of the over-turned boat—the long drift in the dark waters—the strong form that hurtled a hundred feet down from the cliff to save him.

Hlodver looked toward Thord, but did not speak. He, the castle scald and story-teller, was most silent of men till his mind had imagined what he had to say. He slid his harp round from its place on his back, set it between his knees, drew his hand across the strings—a throbbing melody that turned men's eyes toward him.

The melody throbbed on. Hlodver still sat silent,

his mind forming his words. At last he rose and stood at full height, and his rich deep chanting rang through the hall.

Beyond Sogn's black cliffs,
A child is drifting and drowning,
Sea waters sweep over,
Sea waters close over
Gisli—Gisli, son of Hlodver,
Sinking in death.

Now from the cliff top,
The towering great sea-wall,
One stands on high and
Looks down on the sea,
Sees there a child
Sinking in death.

Quicker than bird wings,
Quicker than thought,
That brave one leaps down
From cliff top to sea,
Leaps to save Gisli
From sinking in death.

Who is that brave one?
That brave one is Thord,
Thord the Firetooth,
Son of Sigurd.
Then skoal to Thord,
Skoal, skoal to Sigurd's son!

Such was the song that Hlodver sang. It was his thanks to Thord. Men echoed it in a shout of "Skoal, skoal to Sigurd's son!"

Hlodver reached into the hearth and drew out a blackened coal. With it he made a rune writing on the wall. It read, "Thord saved Gisli," put down in the crude symbols of the Northland.

"Good," said Jarl Sigurd, "that shall last long on our walls."

"'Twill last longer in my heart," answered the scald.

CHAPTER II

~~~~~ THE WAR ARROW ~~~~~

THORD FIRETOOTH excitedly wriggled a clean skin under new garments. This was the great day—spring festival day of the Nordland. The whole universe looked as clean-washed as he; bright skies; sun as polished as new bronze; trees dripping a little in early morning freshness.

This was the day when the north country ritualistically shed the old dark deadness of winter, greeted the sun-glory in a triumphant celebration, and began the new life of a year.

Thord was out early. But even so, already in the walled yards of Castle Sogn Soe many bon-fires had been blazing. Men and maids had been hard at it, hauling out from beneath fur covers the old straw of winter beds and sticking the torch to it in blazing heaps that were the first fires of the spring ritual.

On every side the castle doors were set open to greet the sun. Within, walls were washed clean of winter's soot, and hung with festival velvets and banners.

Like Thord, the men and boys had raced for the river, plunged in for their spring cleansing, and

leaped out tingling, to thrust their glowing bodies into all new clothing from kirtle to boot-thong. The ladies and maids had been at it, too, but discreetly behind walls where little shrieks popped out when wooden piggins of water were dashed on.

Bowers of green branches had been set up down in the valley, ready for the feasting. Space had been prepared for those who wished to camp in the open. Plots of land had been marked off for the racing and wrestling and war-games.

Men, women, children, and cook pots moved out of doors.

A smell of festival rose full on the air—sweet smoke of the fires, aroma of holiday fare drifting up from the pits, seethed kid, barley groats boiled in milk, mutton hams, little bitter-sweet loaves of acorn flour, wine of cranberries, honey spiced with myrtle.

On this day, from Jadar at the south to savage Finestrand on the north, all the people of Norway were acknowledging the return of the sun with new fires on the hill tops. But here at Sogn Soe was especial celebration, for on the cliffs of Sogn towered a great temple to the sun god. Norway, even in the late years of the tenth century, was still pagan and worshiped the visible gods of the sun and the moon and the stars. True, a few trader-travelers, who had journeyed into far southern waters, had been "prime-signed"—that is, signed with the cross. But to these canny vagrants the sign of the White Christ meant little else than a form of passport that allowed them to barter and trade with the Christian

merchants of the rich southland. In their hearts, these Norse travelers still bowed to Odin and Thor, the Hammerer.

In the natural amphitheater of the valley below the temple heights, the pagan pageant of the spring festival filled the greensward. Here were gathered together for a few days of happy camp life in tents and cowhide roofed wagons, the dwellers from castles and fenced villages, the farming folk, the traders from river boat and sea craft.

Over everything swarmed boys in leather jerkins and wolfhide boots, dare-devil youngsters that got continually in everybody's way. This nimble-legged throng poked its inquisitive nose into all things. Now they lay prone behind the palisades surrounding the sacred grove and, with awe prickling down their spines, watched the fire sibyls take omens from the entrails of bulls and make incantations and brew magic broth.

Then they were off to watch the spring mating of the yearly crop of brides and grooms. This took place in the great stone sanctuary on the cliff where, on a raised platform in the crypt, reposed the ring—the glittering ring of solid gold, so heavy that a man could scarce lift it. Here the young couples were wedded by laying their hands upon it, for the golden circle represented the sun, the Norse god of all. After so much of solemnity, the boys surged relievedly down to the gayety of the gypsy traders bawling their wares, the horse racing, the dancing of the sword throwers.

Through this motely throng of screeching, tus-

sling youngsters, Thord Firetooth made his rather scornful way. A few festivals back he had been such as these, but now he felt immeasurably older. He was to contend in the man games this year.

He passed on into the temple to offer up his wolfskin to the gods. Coming out through the gates, he paused to give greeting to his mother and little Thora who were just entering the sanctuary. The child clung to him for a moment. She fairly worshiped her blond young giant of a brother. To give him luck, she whispered a rune of charm words after him as he hastened away to the horse paddocks.

Here within a walled compound was to be staged the wildest imaginable contest—the stallion fight. Only Norse dare-deviltry could have conceived it. Only Norse hardihood could face the hoof-thunder of the stallion ring. It was a game for the gods and all the high-born chiefs of the countryside were gathered for it. There was Egil of Arinbjorn, a slender young fellow kirtled in many-colored English cloth, largely embroidered in gold and set with gold buttons all the way down the front; there was brawny, high-shouldered old Jarl Kyrri, mantled in wolf-hide lined with crimson; and Halldor; and Thorolf and Ogmund and many another husky jarl.

Thord's stallion, Firefoot, was entered in this contest. It was a terrific battle, almost as if history had turned back her pages a few eons and staged some contest of antediluvian monsters. The neighing, screaming, pawing, upreared beasts seemed to fill the paddock with their raging. Behind them,

alongside them, yea, hanging to the very tails of them, followed their masters, howling, urging, prodding, in imminent death-danger every moment and all unaware of it. Thord came out of this hell's mêlée the victor, violently happy and miraculously whole—with only a hoof scar on his scalp and one leg bruised atrociously. But he felt no pain, only a surge of power rushing through his veins. He had won at this! He would win at all things! His wolf-skin on the altar was bringing him luck.

But fickle fate turned against Thord thereafter, and he won no more that day. Others carried off the honors at slinging and stone-throwing and dirk-play. And in the wild bull hunt, it was Egil who slew the creature and brought in the tail as a triumphant tassel to his headgear. To think that this fop of an Egil in his English-bought finery should have done that! It fairly turned Thord's stomach with jealousy. For this bull killing was no mild affair. The huge, lumbering, yet deadly swift creature had been maddened with dogs. The nimble Egil, for all his gold buttons, had shown himself a hero when, leaping from his horse, he had thrown himself astride the mad brute's neck, and only by the swiftness of his dagger had saved himself a horrible horning and trampling. He had come up out of the fray covered with blood and glory, and the other hunters had borne him home in triumph on their shoulders.

Thord was sportsman enough to do his share toward bending a shoulder to bring home the victor in proper style. But as he strode along his disap-

pointment came near to choking him. Why, O why couldn't he have won at the bull chase instead of the stallion fight? This latter seemed now the more glorious. And how he longed for glory! But the feast day was drawing to its end. One contest only was left now, and that was reserved for those chiefs who were battle veterans. On this sacred day of the sun god, no callow stripling who had never been to the wars could bend his bow in that most favored of all Norse amusements, archery.

Against the oxhide target set upon the hillside, many a Norse noble sent his arrow. Then finally the game narrowed to a contest between but two, Jarl Kyrri and Jarl Sigurd. In the play-off Kyrri shot first, and the arrow went to the very center. Then Sigurd lifted his bow, twanged the shot, and lo, his arrow entered the notch for the bowstring on his rival's missile and hung there, tying for honors at the target's center.

At this a great shout went up and "tu-tu-tua!" blared the lur blowers, challenging the contestants to further triumph.

Who—who would win? The whole countryside was on tiptoe and shivered under the delightful thrill of it.

Then the grim old Jarl of the wolfhide mantle straightened his shoulders and lifted fierce eyes to his opponent. "Dare you try with me with that skill test of royal Randver, to shoot a golden chess piece from off a living target's head?"

And before Jarl Sigurd could answer, a fellow in crimson kirtle and belt of gold had leaped forward

to stand between the contestants, shouting: "Hola, here's your living target!"

It was Thord Firetooth, hot-headed, intrepid, a little wild-eyed at the risk he was taking. But this was his chance! The last glory of the festival day should now be his. For death or for life, he was where he most wanted to be, in the very midst of the royal war game of the veterans.

Jarl Sigurd stood silent and pale. Affairs had taken a turn not to his liking. Life-risking of his only son went hard with him. Only his honor held him to the contest, and there was a look in his eye that boded ill for grim old Jarl Kyrri and all the Jarling's retinue if aught went wrong at this target shooting.

"But grant me first shot," was his husky acquiescence to the contest.

And now others skilled in archery came forward to prepare Thord Firetooth for his place. A long linen cloth was tied round his head, and two men held the ends, so that he could not move when he heard the whistling of the arrow. Jarl Sigurd went to his stand, muttering a prayer to his gods, and for an omen made the circle sign of the sun before himself and before the point of the arrow before he shot.

"A-twanga!" flew the arrow.

Every breath in the vast concourse was stayed. Then—"a-a-ah!" came the gasp of relief, as clean and clear, Jarl Sig's arrow swept the golden piece from Thord's head without so much as lifting a hair.

Then Kyrri's arrow flew. A good shot that, but just a little close. A shallow cut nicked Thord's scalp.

The Firetooth stood blinking out through a tiny trickle of blood, forgetful of so slight a scratch in the surge of rejoicing.

Sigurd won! Sigurd won!

Jarl Kyrri, like the worthy foeman that he was, wrinkled his stern old face into a smile and congratulated his opponent on the feat.

Amidst the hurrahs, another arrow flew—the war arrow of the Northland. Into the turf arena it fell. And just beyond the palisade, the bowman that hurled it fell also, gasping out his dread message: “To arms! Pirates of Jomsborg are on the raid. They've burned Verbek, they're burning Holmin!”

Jomsborgers coming! The dread Jomsborgers who slew the old and spared only the young that could be sold into slavery!

Festival ended in tumult. Swift steeds were roped in. Hoof-thunder sounded on cliff trail and valley trail—men galloping westward, northward, to warn out the clans.

CHAPTER III

~~~~ RAID OF THE JOMSVIKINGS ~~~~

ERE the long shadows of dusk fell on that festival day of the sun god, the message of the war arrow had transformed the peaceful courtyard at the mighty hewn-oak castle of Sigurd of Sogn Soe into an armed camp. Already some hundreds of men of the winged helmet, vassals of the Jarl, had assembled and set up their black war tents in a hollow square. Each hour saw other fighting men pouring in to swell the ranks. If only the pirate horde would hold off for a space, Raud Hawkeye, brother to Jarl Sig, would be down from the north to fight for Norway. Even now was Hlodver, Sigurd's tall harper and swiftest rider, speeding the war arrow across the marshy fens to him.

Here at Castle Sogn all was keyed to a strained, busy, disorder. With bent backs and hurrying shovels, men threw up high protecting walls of turf against the fenced yard and dug a line of ditching beyond the fencing. Within the barricade white-faced women of the household turned their hands to warlike tasks—melting great pots of lead for pointing sling missiles, plaiting strong willow twigs to cover shield boards. In the midst stood Geirhild,

still in her festal velvets, but with housekeeping belt bound on in haste, busy among her men and maids, directing armor work, seeing to food and drink for the defenders. To the fringe of her robe clung the frightened little Thora, her fair hair still caught in its festival cap of netted gold and her necklace of rune-carved bangles still about her neck.

Above all sounds roared the thuds of hammers on anvils, beating out arrow-points and lance-points in red-hot showers of sparks. By flare of torch lights, old Snorre, the tanner, drove his half-naked crew as they sweated and strove at stretching tough bullhide across shield frames and pegged in bronze studs and bosses.

Through the night still other fighting men trooped in, husky plowmen and salt burners and fisher folk from along the Fjord. They came with much blowing of horns, and bearing strange weapons—fish tridents and clubs of ash wood and fire-hardened cudgels. Jarl Sig outfitted these with spears and shields from his own store as long as it lasted. With ceaseless energy the old leader marshalled his recruits, drilled them till the beaten earth of the courtyard resounded to the heavy tread of liege men practicing in ranks the shield burg, the spear attack, the sword thrust. The Jarl's blood was up; fire was in his eye. No Norseman pines to die abed. To the thrill of coming battle Jarl Sigurd lost twenty years.

There came a shout from the watchers.

Archers mounted the guards and commanded the

hill slope. From below, through the moonlight, a dark line could be seen approaching. Regular tread and rumble as of a war chant came to ear.

But Jarl Sigurd halted the arrow flight and stepped into the night to listen. No pirates these!

The troop drew nearer. The priests of Sogn marching out with their treasure! There were carved bowls of the blood sacrifice, robes, jewels. On they went to hide the sacred furnishings away from vandal eyes in the cliff caves. Their weird chanting drifted out behind them:

By the omens,
Valkyries ride,
Valfodi calls,
On to Valol!
On to Valol!

Presently the priests returned and joined the defenders of the turf walls, flinging off robes and uncovering mail-clad bodies beneath. Priests were warriors in those days.

Still again the night brought forth other seekers of the castle fort. Shouts from the watchers greeted a weary band of half-naked refugees plodding up to the heights through the ghastly pre-dawn moonlight. Behind them lay plundered homes. On their tracks hung the Jomsborgers.

Pirates behind on the land, pirates before on the sea! Now was it battle to the death!

Suddenly, at the break of day, into the long arm of the sea came the Jom's fleet, dragon ships with gaping beaks, great striped sails, and oak-wicker

housing to protect the pirates from the stone-throwing catapults manned on the cliffs.

On they came, forcing a landing beneath the Viking battle roof of close-held shields that saved the raider's heads from spear and arrow. A multitude of pirate warriors swarmed up the Nord Fjord shore like a pestilence—iron-clanking giants, tattooed faces, two-pronged spears, scythe-edged swords, war howls. The whole terrible yelling horde charged at once! From the forests beyond Sogn answered their brother ravagers who were harrying the country overland.

Sigurd's men, behind their turf and wood walls, met the tumult of sound with bellow of war horns. Shield clanked on shield as soldiers mounted the ramparts. Above mad clamor of lur blowers, rose the war chanting of the priests of Sogn, "Hola Odin! Hola Odin!"

With a fierce shout the pirate leader leaped high and shot the first arrow. An answering challenger, tall figure in glitter of new armor, rose above the turf works to hurl back barbed defiance. It was Thord, who dedicated all his wild young courage to the affray. Others leaped to the wall beside him to meet the onslaught—Egil, Ogmund, Halldor. A few hours gone, these had contested each other hotly. War now bound them close.

The hosts met. Came clang of shaft and gafflock, hideous whine of a thousand crossbows, shrieks of dying men.

Armored Norsemen had leaped from protecting ramparts to rush forward into the very teeth of the

charge. Wild howls and a devilish yell, "Blood! Blood! Blood!" met the Norse battle cry, "Hola Odin! For home and sanctuary!"

Cunningly dividing his men into two great hosts, Vors, the pirate leader, drew in close and closer, encircling the castle. All too soon his overwhelming numbers swept the thinning ranks of Norsemen back to their very walls. Furious hand-to-hand fighting began. On that day the Sogn soil drank deep of the life blood of its defenders. Brave old Jarl Kyrri lay slain. He had rushed into the foremost of the fight, his mighty bow speeding death at every twang. But a few seconds later he had fallen, pierced by a dozen missiles of the foe. High on the slippery, blood-stained barricade, Thord Firetooth, like some fate-charmed godling, fought on fearlessly, now almost alone in the midst of slain companions.

"Up—to the charge!" he yelled between sword clashes. "Are there no more to fight for homeland—forward—" His words died in a gasp. As though the protecting spell of his charmed life were broken, two Jomsborg swords meeting above his helmet felled him with a crash. But before the death blow could follow, the mighty form of the dying temple *Godi* of Sogn rallied upward to his knees. In one last movement, before he fell dead, the stricken priest hurled Thord from the castle wall into the midst of Jarl Sig's men fighting at the very castle door. Swift hands bore him behind the battle.

When Thord Firetooth came to himself and staggered to his feet, the castle hall where he stood

reeked of blood and smoke. With the loss of the turf ramparts, the courtyard, too, had fallen into the hands of the enemy, and now only the great oak walls of Sogn Castle stood between the remnant of Sigurd's little army and death. The Jarl, himself, slashed in hip and leg, fought propped beside the main light hole. With a marvel of skill, the old man wielded a spear in each hand and hurled forth his weapons with deadly aim. His few remaining archers and lancers manned the other light slits of the thick-walled castle. The defender of the south light fell, head cleaved by an axe hurled up from without. Thord dizzily forced himself to take the fallen one's place. In his heart he desperately prayed to his gods for a return of that first brave courage that had enwrapped his spirit.

Doggedly the besieged held their ground. If only the Northmen of Raud Hawkeye did but come! Upon these was the last hope of the remnant.

Day wore into night, a night of horrors, with fire-arrows zipping flames against the tarred and turfed roof. Blazing deaths that were continually smothered out under the hands of men who crept along the roof, moonlit targets for all below! Thord had twice risked his life thus, and got an arrow in his leg for his daring. With every death-fraught excursion to the top of the building, tense lookout had been turned to the north, seeking some sign of the rescuers, dark line of armed men, smoke signal of Raud on the march.

Raud's men would come! Northman always answered Northman's call to arms. The little band

gripped teeth and struggled on through the night. Morning must bring help.

Sunrise red as blood! In the great castle hall were gathered those that were left. Without, arrows swirled in a storm. Mighty battering rams, sheltered beneath shield-roofs, thundered against the walls.

Jarl Sigurd, his face dark and fierce, dragged himself forward, directing the efforts of the twoscore men left of all his hosts. "To the house-top with you! Up, Thord, Erik, a ten of you. Loose the rafters and beams to cast upon the battering dogs without. Women, keep behind the shields! In Odin's name, hurry on with your lead moulding. More sling balls, more lead for arrow points! Comrades! Friends! Carry on till the end! To the spoilers without, we must seem a thousand men. Raud will come! He may be fighting through—fighting through to us now—"

A faithful trumpeter, dying among the dead, up-reared himself to blow a last war call for his master's sake.

Blood-stirred by that valiant blast, weary men and women manned bows and slings, answered shot for shot, to missiles flying against the outlets. For among these fighters were women, heroic ones who for forty-eight hours had helped at the bows, toiled at the lead pots. No thought of giving up had occurred to these women. Death would be sweet compared to their fate at the hands of the Jomsborgers.

Above the fearful roar of axe clash and battering

ram, rose the more awful roar of flames. Now the last hope of the Norse besieged was gone. Neither Raud, nor others, could save them now. The castle walls and roof burst into flames that no human hand could stay.

Jarl Sigurd called hoarsely to Thord: "Hear me! My last command!"

In the midst of that hell of flames, the Firetooth knelt beside his warrior father.

"To the cellar with you. Uncover the little Thora from beneath the store of skins where she sleeps of a drugged potion. I had thought for her to have slept on into death had no victory come to us. But Jarl Sigurd's seed shall not be wiped out. There is a way, a hope. Save her. Take her out through the drain of the castle spring. It tunnels beneath the walls. Protect her—with—your—life! Go!"

"Nay. We stay. We die the warrior death with you in this flaming pyre that was our home!"

The old Jarl, his life blood ebbing, his eyes fierce in their last glazing, looked deep into the eyes of his son.

"Go—go! 'Tis the curse of Valhal to disregard the dying wish—go!" And the Jarl fell dead.

Intensity swept over Thord Firetooth. He must live for the honor of his race—for Thora—for his mother! With a cry, he dragged to her feet the tall fair woman who knelt above the body of brave Sigurd. "My mother—Geirhild—come! I must save you, too!"

"No, no! Haste while there is yet time! You can save only one, only Thora. Geirhild goes to

Valhal with her lord!" And with a wild splendid light in her eye the Norse woman seized Jarl Sigurd's battle sword and thrust it to her heart. Standing for but a moment with arms upflung in lofty exultation, queen of the fire death that roared around her, Geirhild sank down across her husband.

Thord Firetooth swayed backward, a wave of awful admiration surging through his soul. Before his eyes a great flaming oak beam of the doomed house crashed downward. Glorious pyre for the glorious dead it covered!

With warriors, wife, weapons, all enwrapped with him in crimson shroud of the flame, Jarl Sigurd was beginning the Valhal journey as a pagan chieftain should.

Pausing but to perform swiftly the last rites for his dead, Thord Firetooth retreated dizzily before the onslaught of the crashing, flaming roof pieces and fled down the narrow, precipitous stair set within the thickness of the main wall and leading beneath the castle. As through the suffocating reek of smoke he made his way down and down into the musty cellar depths, his ears resounded to the mad, victorious yelling of the terrible horde without.

Snatching up the limp, though warm and breathing, little form of Thora from its protecting nest of furs, he entered into the dark cavern hollowed by the cellar spring. His only mode of progress was a squirming forward, prone on his stomach, while he laboriously pushed his burden before him. For hours, years, an eternity, he seemed to live

underground, inching forward through the slime of ages. Life, death, battle, all seemed blotted out. Then came light, a tiny point that grew as he squirmed on to it. The light came through a thicket-fringed hole in the ground. A familiar spot, this little muddy sinkhole! He had passed it often, never dreaming of the tunneled depths it reached. Now he scrambled warily out and looked about him.

Behind him, and not far away lay fearful sights. Tattooed, clanking pirates were already looting the ashes of his and other homes. A shouting howling mass dragged off bronze vessels and carved posts and temple doors and jewels and furnishings. Already they had despatched part of their wretched prisoners to the honor of the old cruel gods of war. A horror of fascination held Thord in a frozen grip.

Then Thora began to awaken and whimper. In a panic Thord dropped back into the hole beside her, took her in his arms to quiet and comfort her. One of her rune bangles, loosed in the scraping underground journey, fell from its chain against his hand. Mechanically he gathered up the lost luck piece and thrust it into the bosom of his jerkin. It seemed an emblem of his and Thora's life luck, broken and lost.

For a day and a night he and the child crouched in their damp chilly hole. By degrees the furor of pillage above them seemed to quiet, to drift off elsewhere. The pirate avalanche was sweeping inland perhaps. After the clamors of war, silence had fallen.

Within the cave hole Thora, feverish and weak, begged in piteous whispers for food. At last Thord reared a cautious head up through the surrounding weeds and bushes. No sound, no movement met his ear. The smoky glow of the old castle timbers mingled gloomily with faint moonlight. Thord stepped out, paused to draw the bushes screeningly over the hole, and to caution Thora to utter silence. Then he moved out into the night and began a search. Nowhere in all the desolation about him seemed there to be any food—only ashes and broken casks and torn plunder trampled underfoot. Down on his knees where the raiders' cook pots had been, Thord, seeking ravenously for bones and meat rinds, felt a sudden sickening tightening of leather about his throat, and leaped to his feet, struggling in a noose.

A coarse laugh roared above him as a huge Jomsborg boatman dragged him along in his wake.

“Ha, the young warrior! By Arvog's hound, he and his ring armor may sell for a horn of ale!” And his captor drew him on behind him down towards the shore edge.

The boats—they were still at their moorings! Of course there were watchmen, set everywhere along this desolated land. A fool's fate had befallen him for his lack of wit. Thord Firetooth made no sound, although bitterness was flooding his soul. But he was not yet mourning over imprisonment; he was bemoaning hopes betrayed, a charge deserted. “O Thora!” he groaned.

When the Jomsvikings' ships and their vast boat-

loads of blood-bought plunder sailed from Norse waters back through the Skagerrack and the Kattegat, and into the Baltic again, Thord Firetooth went too, as a prisoner, thrust down into a reeking galley hold with other loot. To Jomsborg, the pirate stronghold built on Wollen Island where the German river, Oder, flows into the sea, Thord was carried. And Thora's broken, golden amulet, thrust beneath his jerkin, was all of the old life that went with the Norse slave into his captivity.

CHAPTER IV

~~~~~ IN THE SEA WOLF'S DEN ~~~~~

ON two sides of the triangular island of Wollen, flowed the divided stream of the River Oder, and on its long north shore beat the storm waters of the Baltic. The isle stood a rocky sentinel, half blocking the deep, indented sea mouth of the great river.

Here was built Jomsborg, stronghold of the Joms pirates, a strange citadel, governed by strange laws. None could live here who made not plunder and rapine their life business, and none could live here who scorned not death and scorned not women more. No female could set foot within the burg. No softening influence could touch the hard lives of the men there. Jomsborg was a synonym for all that was cruel and terrible. In the lands they raided with sword and fire, they beat out the brains of fair maid and old wife, cast babes upon the spear, and spared only strong men—that they might sell them into slavery.

At present there was an incoming of pirate bands from many shores. Bersec Ironsides was returned from harrying the monasteries of Angleland, where the White Christ was worshiped. From the bog

country of the Wends, Ungwahr the Shaggy had brought up some captured prams laden, not with coveted gold, but at least with a herd of broad-faced Slavonic peasantry that could be sold into thralldom. Last to arrive was the tattooed Vors with his Norse plunder. The rocky inlets of Wollen were jammed with sailing craft. In fearsome array the long ships lay like black snakes upon the water, and the sun gleaming fitfully through the storm clouds lit shields by hundreds and thousands.

From the great hall of Vors the Cruel, master chieftain of the Jomsmen, was the division of plunder made. It was a sinister room, long and low, its oak beams black with soot, its walls hung with raven banners of the pirates, battle horns, war gear, and some skulls and bones nailed thereon. For the lack of windows, flaring torches lit the scene, and from a huge hearth pit the smoke of burning logs drifted upward to the roof hole.

Much plunder had been portioned out, man to man, from rich and costly piles heaped upon the beaten earth floors. Here golden circle and carved silver blood bowl of the Norse sun-worshipers sat alongside of Christian cross and bell and embroidered trappings ravished from the altars of East Anglia and Northumbria.

The human plunder had mostly been disposed of: fiery Celts, blond Saxon giants, dark oafs of the bog country, all sold into the life of thralldom and bound for the rest of their days to the bondage of plow or pack. Headmen from the great landed estates of more civilized nations beyond the Oder

had bought some; fur traders packing peltries down from frozen Russia into the lands of the Franks and Teutons had bartered for others.

Two captives, however, had not been put forth for sale in the slave ring. They were Thord the Norseman and Brihtnoth a Saxon thane. Thord wondered dully why they were being retained, though in his present state of misery he cared but little what happened to him. Blows and ill usage had been his only portion of late. The untended arrow wound in his leg throbbed and festered; and Glaf, the dwarfish churl that served Vors, seemed to take cruel pleasure in stumbling against the injured limb as he passed back and forth bearing meat and ale to the feasters.

At the high table, Vors the Cruel, chieftain of the sea wolves, sat among his captains. At a lower table were feasted the lesser chiefs and their fighting men. As the mead horns went the rounds and ale flowed like water the black walls resounded to shouts and wild jest and the roaring song of Hubbac, the Pirate Scald, chanting the war deeds of one and another of the company. Song and drink set men's pulses to beating; they craved even wilder entertainment, some simulation of the war game that the song praised.

"A combat! A combat!" rose the shout. "Cannot Vors the Sea Wolf stage a fight to please his men?"

"Ho, the Norseman and the Saxon, set them at each other's throats for our pleasure!" came further suggestion.

“Nay.” Vors stood, lifted a hand for silence, a cruel look glinting in his eyes. “The Saxon’s a nithing and no follower of the old gods. Later he shall entertain you well. This Norse fellow can match his strength against mine own varlet, Glaf, the long-armed. Loose the bonds, men! At him, Glaf!” The master accentuated his words with a vicious kick that flung the hideous, dwarfish slave headlong into the improvised arena where space on the earthen floor had been cleared.

For a time the two contestants stood glaring upon each other and made no move to start the fight that had been thrust upon them. Thord, dour and sullen, crouched in his corner like an animal in a trap. Back in Nordland, men leaped free and eager to combat in trials of strength and prowess; noble met noble, and carl met carl in tests of courage. But this was different. He, a jarling, must fight this low-born beast for the pleasure of those drunken brutes. He’d not demean himself thus. They could kill him for it—better end it once for all, now, than be a thrall for the rest of his life.

But Glaf, circling him, squat legs bent, long arms hanging almost to the floor, lips drawn back from teeth in a bestial grin, was taunting him as craven and coward. The black-haired oaf well knew of the other’s festering wound and expected an easy victory.

The taunts did their work. Thord straightened, leaped. He was no nithing to stand passive under calumny. Memory of sundry sneaking blows this one had rendered him sent fury tingling through

his veins. Glaf was at him now. They gripped and swayed and strained, and dust from the earth floor that they fought upon rose in gray clouds about them.

The shouts and calls from the ring of drunken watchers that had gathered to revel in this bloody sport seemed to beat upon Thord's ears from some great distance. His every faculty was needed to fend off this creature that fought with treachery and meanness, that tore and twisted at one's ears, that thrust blinding thumbs into the eye. The wrestlers fell, rose, clenched, fell again, and with Thord forced under. He was near the end of his powers, but gathered the remnant of his strength to make one last muscular whirl to free himself, when a knife pricked at his throat and the voice of his opponent came to him in a hoarse whisper: "Cry now to me for mercy, or I will end you like a stuck boar! I conquer! I conquer!"

Even as the treacherous blade was slitting at his windpipe, Thord broke the other's grasp and with a clean throw of wrestling, cast the knave, knife blade and all, from him in one great upward move, then held him to earth.

"Help, mercy!" guttered Glaf as the shouting onlookers closed in.

"Ho, the Nordic wins! Give him a quaff of ale! Would that I had put my ring gold on him instead of the black-browed jackanapes!" And Glaf was kicked unfeelingly into a corner by those who had wagered some part of their plunder on his prowess, and had lost it.

“A boon, great Vors!” called out a brawny pirate who wore his hair in two long plaits that fell on each side of his face and had his arms well decked in huge golden bracelets. He seemed in great good humor, and evidently had won a wager through Thord’s wrestling. “Grant me this boon. Take back part of my spoils and give to me instead this Norseman as my thrall. He could serve me well, I trow.”

“By Odin, not so, Ungwahr!” Vors seemed angered at the request, and was perhaps the more roiled in temper because his own thrall had been beaten by this one. “He has been reserved for another use than that. Hola, let there be no more of interrupting—on with the feasting, and see how bravely I’ll entertain you next.” He clapped his hands. “Forward, slaves! Set up the Saxon churl in the combat ground.”

As the serving men hastened to carry out the chieftain’s orders, Glaf, still in a state of tattered dishevelment from the wrestling, paused a moment beside Thord, who had once more been bound with thongs. “Hist, fellow,” he muttered. “’Twere better for you that you had died under my knife. Worse awaits you.” And shaking with silent hideous mirth, the creature strode on.

Events moved swiftly now, and Thord Firetooth had scant time to ponder the dark words.

As Vors the Sea Wolf had commanded, the men carried forth Brihtnoth the Saxon, of the fair hair and blue eyes, and tied him against one of the great posts that went up to support the roof.

Then Vors stood before him. "Ho, thou nithing, thou weakling follower of this god you call the White Christ, listen to me! Thou canst die either a hard death or an easy death. Choose for yourself. Cast away this worship of the White One, do homage here to the old gods, sing a song of praise to Odin and Thor and all the ancient ones, and you may go to Valhal by the easy road, a quick knife to the heart,—or—"

"I worship not false gods! Worship I only the One True God and the White Christ, His Son, our Saviour!" cried the Saxon.

"Then let him save you, if he can!" shouted the Sea Wolf and drove his fist into the helpless one's face, battering it cruelly.

"What can one god or another matter?" thought Thord as he shivered to see the other captive so vilely treated. "Better to sing songs to them all than to be beaten to death."

In Thord's north country, some people pinned their faith on Odin, others on Thor the Hammerer, and still others worshiped most devoutly a group of stars. Norse travelers to far lands sometimes brought back new religions that were in time grafted onto the old. Thus, the sacrifice of the bull and the reading of omens from its vitals had come to Norway from far distant Egypt, perhaps by way of Greece and the Mediterranean and the long sea journey around all the coasts of Europe. But come it had, by whatever devious route. For in these days Thord's own people worshiped both the sun and the bull.

So quite naturally the Norseman thought the Saxon a fool not to broaden his religious views a bit in order to save his hide. Who could tell which god was best, anyway? Did not the temple Hofgodi—Priest—teach that one brought the rain, another ruled the crops, and that Thor's hammer brought luck in battle?

Vors the Sea Wolf was a hard, cruel man, and it was a cruel entertainment he set up for his pirate followers on that day. A strange target-shooting he inaugurated, where men were to aim, not their best but nigh their worst—were to barely tip the target instead of centering it. Instead of a shield of bull hide, he placed a living target before them, and that target was Brihtnoth the Saxon! In this wise did the Sea Wolf torture the Christian prisoner who would not deny his god—a horn of ale or a ring of gold went to every man whose cast of spear or arrow drew blood on the body of Brihtnoth, yet did not kill him. From the midday feasting till late in the afternoon the awful game went on. Bleeding, cut and torn, the Saxon hung against the thongs that bound him to the post—yet he could not die.

Thord Firetooth, crouched in a corner, was sick with pity and disgust. He strove to turn his eyes away from the shameful sport of these bloodthirsty men. Yet even when he closed his lids he seemed still to see Brihtnoth, weak and fainting, yet true to the god he served. "Ah," thought the Firetooth as he swelled his muscles against the thongs that bound him, "if only my hand were free, I would

hurl a weapon true to the mark and end the victim's misery with one merciful blow."

Even as his pitying thoughts formed the wish, the spear of another entered the Saxon's heart and Brihtnoth's trial was ended. It would seem that another in all that wicked concourse of cruelty had had his fill of the shame deed done in the Sea Wolf's hall.

Well, for all his pain, his god had not saved him! Yet Thord and many another one were to be long in forgetting the look of glory that swept into Brihtnoth's face as he died for his faith. "Strange," thought Thord, "this one had the look of a conquering hero instead of a poor nothing done to a shame death."

But the Norse captive had little time to be thinking of another now. Events began to close about his own person with ghastly rapidity.

Without, the storm wind that had been rising, gathered fury and howled around the eaves of the timbered hall. Within the Sea Wolf's den a hush had fallen. It was as if from men gluttoned with cruelty, some Sinister Thing had demanded silence. And the silence held, till from out the twilight glow of dark spaces lit by smoky torch nubs, there rose a wild chanting. Hubbac the Scald, stirred to poetic frenzy, was singing the death song. Voice and harp mingled in weird wailing:

Death cold the hall is,
Death is here.
List to ghostly hoof beats!
On reddening ways,

The pale horse cometh,
Souls to bear to Hel.
One is dead,
Another shall die!
Hel dogs howl,
Another shall die!

Then up rose Vors the Sea Wolf. The wild notes of the song had stirred superstitious fear in his cruel face.

“Hel dogs shall not howl in vain!” Both fear and evil twisted his features. “Another victim is theirs. The old gods shall have their blood-fill this day!”

“’Tis you—the victim.” Glaf crouching near Thord, chuckled in fiendish pleasure. “See, he comes for you—to give you to the knife on the stone—”

Anguish froze Thord’s heart. He—the victim! For this, he had been saved from the selling into bondage. He, too, would die a shame death, a bound nothing hewed down on the sacrificial stone!

The hands of Vors were upon him.

Thord’s muscles, that horror had weakened, tensed back into strength as he made a mad desperate struggle to break his bonds, to wrench his body from the Sea Wolf’s grip. He slashed with his teeth, he beat his head against his enemy. But he was bound—and the bonds of bull hide held. The great hands of Vors closed down, lifted the youth, flung him across his shoulder.

Drunken men had set down their horns for a space to watch the struggle. Now they went back

to drinking, or battered their vessels upon the boards, yelling for more drink. Ugh—there was a shiver in the air! Drink! That was what men wanted now! None seemed to have desires to follow their leader and his burden out into the night.

Vors stiffened his bulky body beneath his shoulder-load, passed through the doorway, left the hall far behind as he strode in darkness, his feet following a trail along the cliff above the shore.

Now and again Thord writhed and lunged in that iron grip. Just the two of them—here in this wild darkness—Odin help him—strain the bonds—break them—give him a chance!

But the knotted bull thongs held.

Now was the end. In a lightning flash, a great sacrificial stone showed white, set at the base of a gnarled oak. Tree limbs whipped in the wind. Land storm and sea storm met in this high wild place. Wave spray beat up to meet rain spray that dashed down upon the stones. Lightning scarred the sky in vivid rents. Thunder rolled like huge muffled drum beats.

Vors laid his victim across the great stone—lifted the knife. But the hand that lifted the knife shook. The death chant, with its weird prophecy of future death, would seem to have cast the tremors into the iron frame of the Sea Wolf. Then of a sudden its tremors ceased forever. The knife in the uplifted hand seemed for an instant to be on fire as a bolt of lightning split the cliff oak asunder, leaped like a fire-serpent, sped the length of the weapon, and struck down Vors the Cruel. The

spent current touched Thord Firetooth, but only stunned him. As he lay in that brief space before insensibility overtook him, the Norseman's bedazzled brain seemed to vision the old gods riding the storm—Thorgerd and Irp whirling the fire-bow and the rain-spear! Then sleep was upon him.

For long Thord lay beside the stone of death in a heavy stupor. Then gradually the freshening beat of rain against his face brought him back to his senses,—a miraculously spared victim lying still bound beside the place of sacrifice. He sat up in the darkness and with infinite patience began to move his bound hands back and forth across a rough edge of rock. At last, after an eternity, he had sawed all his bonds asunder and could move about. Now he must find a hiding place.

As he circled the stone, crawling on hands and knees, he came against the cold stiff form of Vors the Cruel. With a touch of the horrors, he backed away in all haste, yet mixed in his tremors was a surge of triumph. His gods had fought for him that night. The Thunderer had cast a lightning bolt, and lo, Thord Firetooth was saved. Bah, the Saxon nithing's god was a poor god! He had not saved his worshiper!

But the glory of the Saxon's dying face—that had been strange and wonderful! As Thord crept away to hide himself in a cliff crevice above the sea he pondered many things in his heart. This Brihtnoth the Saxon had something no man else he'd ever met possessed, something which had made him strong in the midst of weakness, glori-

ous in the midst of shame. He had died, yet ere he passed he whispered, "I die but to live again!" What had he meant?

As he lay and pondered, Thord drifted into slumber. He had suffered much and was weak. For a while he would stay in hiding, then when he was able, he must swim for it, get himself away from this accursed island, escape to the mainland. From thence, somehow, he would make his way back to Norway and home. Now, with limbs gloriously free of bonds, all things seemed possible.

Thus Thord Firetooth planned, and in his dreams he seemed already back at Sogn Soe beside the blue waters of the Nord Fjord.

But a cruel ending came to his dreams. He who had visioned himself free, awoke with a new thong cord about his neck and with rough hands pulling him forth in the pale dawn light.

"See what a hulking lout he is, masters, well worth the two brasses and the piece of silver, is he not?" 'Twas the voice of Glaf, one-time thrall of this Vors that was dead. "He'll be worth two men at bearing a load, eh? These Norse swine make hefty slaves. Here, let's get him to the boat."

As the dwarfish, long-armed Glaf parted from the two fur peddlers to whom he had just sold Thord, he paused to mutter into the latter's ear: "Thou great clod that shamed me at wrestling, see what your strength will do for you now! I followed on from the hall and by the lightning flashes saw you hide. Glaf could have killed you, but in-

stead," a cruel grin twitched the ugly features, "instead, I have sold you into the *long death!*"

Before another day passed, Thord Firetooth, despite the arrow wound that kept him limping, was started south, bending under a great pack of furs. He had become but another pack animal among other beasts of burden. The thrall collar was about his neck.

As he moved on with the slave train, the weight on his heart was as great as the weight on his back. His own gods, if there were any, had played him a scurvy trick.

CHAPTER V

~~~~~ THRALLDOM ~~~~~

TWO lonely figures sat crouched beside a great round stone behind which grew a mighty oak sprayed with mistletoe along its branches. Here was almost the mountain crest of rocky Hohentweil, that guardian peak of Alemanic Land from the Black Forest to the Suabian Sea. Below the two watchers a steep path led threadlike and winding down to the valley. In the first gleams of coming dawn were faintly visible in the near distance the grim battlements and towers of Castle Hegau, its spreading fields and lowly mud hovels of the thralls. Far away was the belfry of a church.

As the fiery ball of the sun rose above the horizon the mountain watchers rose also and commenced a sort of ceremony. The taller of the two, a blond, hulking fellow with matted hair and a leathern-belted hauberk, swung a bunch of mistletoe around his head. Then he dipped it into a vessel of blood set upon the altar-like stone, sprinkled the ground thrice toward the rising sun, muttered a prayer to Odin, and emptied the remaining crimson contents into a hollow of the oak. His companion, a weazen-bodied, big-eared, yellow-skinned



Henry
Pitz

Swinging a branch of mistletoe around his head.

Magyar, a small captured remnant of that mighty Hunnic host that but recently had invaded Germany, performed his sun ceremonies in his own heathen way. The Magyar did a dizzy whirling dance as he mumbled wild prayers to Kutka, the cat-headed god of the Huns. Next he drew from beneath his jerkin a wax heart with a villainous thorn thrust through it. This he hung on a branch of the oak tree.

“Now hang there, heart of Bu,” whispered the small captive Oriental, “and see what curse the cat-headed one will bring upon you!”

Bu, Black Bu of Hegau, was his German taskmaster—a merciless one at that.

Other strange wax offerings hung upon the mistletoe oak, and the bleached skulls of three horses had been nailed to the trunk. Even in newly Christian Germany with its fine churches and feast days and processions, men occasionally lapsed back into hankerings after the old gods and stole out to the mountain tops to the old sacred spots where their forefathers had worshiped.

But the two sun-worshippers of the dawning were not even of this land. They were strangers from afar and frankly pagan.

The tall fellow started on his way down the mountain, limping a little. He concluded his devotions by flinging a pinch of earth over one shoulder. His companion hastened after him, glancing suspiciously behind him as he went. “Orra, a twig crackled—were we watched?” he whispered.

“Perchance so, but it matters not; nothing mat-

ters any more. It wonders me," he went on bitterly, "that I did even this small sacrifice to the Norse gods, for they seem to have forgotten me—forgotten Thord Firetooth!"

"We'd best hasten," whimpered the Magyar—Vaik, they called him—hurrying alongside. "But the Black will be after beating us if we are even a moment late at the plowing, may cut off even our bean bread—"

"Likely enough," answered the other sullenly. "What more can a thrall hope for?" And he limped on his way.

It was now three years gone since Thord Firetooth had got that limp in his leg—an old arrow wound from the horror night when the Jomsborg pirates had burned and ravaged his Nord shore homeland. He had passed through many another horror since then—bartered and beaten across half of Germany. Always on the go, passed from master to master! He seemed such a stupid young giant, sullen too, that nobody wanted him.

They'd been glad to trade him off for almost anything. Once he had been bartered for a pair of sheep, again for a wolf hide and an elk horn—Oh, just anything! The fellow's heart seemed dead within him.

Grief, ill-treatment, the babble of a strange language in his ears, and on top of that a forcible bowing down to a new religion! Along with a turn of other slaves—some dirty Russians and Magyars and the like—he'd been herded into the river for

what they called baptism. What with it all, he had been cowed into a sort of apathy.

Last year he'd been bought at the Zontog fair by Black Bu, headman for Lord Herrich Iron-Arm's great castle estate. He'd stayed here at Hegau longer than elsewhere. Big Bu knew means of getting work out of a man, even the most sullen.

Labor, blows, a hole-in-the-ground hut out behind the middens and outhouses—that was a thrall's life for you. At first Thord had bitterly resented the hut mate with whom he had been thrust in to sleep—Vaik, the Magyar thrall with his yellow, ill-shapen face and slant eyes. Ugh, a Norseman hitched to a tallow-faced Hun! A strange pair, indeed! But in the end common misery drew them together, that, and hate for Bu. And then too, after the homesickness died down somewhat in Vaik, his Hunnic mind got back a deal of its chipperness and he proved to be considerable of a comfort to Thord. Vaik had a dash of the story-telling gift, and at night, huddled together on the straw pallet, he could almost make Thord see wild Hungary, lost caves where Magyar treasure lay, galloping horsemen, skin tents, camp fires of the Nomads, song of horn and fiedla.

If he were only free! Far lands and far waters called—but he was a bound thrall. And the old sullen apathy would claim Thord again.

They were a sleepy pair after their chilly night's watch up on old Hohentweil's crest. The day and its labors seemed to wear on forever. At his plowing behind a yoke of bullocks, as he lumbered along

in a pair of wooden troughs of shoes, the Norse thrall shook his shaggy blond thatch out of his eyes to watch Lord Herrich's daughter, the Duchess Roswitha, and her train pass—anything to keep his miserable self awake. It was quite a procession—her brown-cowled, monkish tutor from the near-by Monastery of St. Ortfried, her round-headed Lapp serving woman, liege men with their swords clanking gallantly as they rode. Her fair face was like a flower above her ermines.

Thord halted his bullocks to stare after them, his laborer's leather-clad body steaming in the chilly autumn sunlight. Into the crushed, bruised soul of him crept an awakening, a lift of thought, emotion. The fair blond face, it brought recollections, longings. Yes, he knew now what stirred him so every time the duchess passed him. It was memory of Thora. The duchess looked so like Thora.

“O Thora, Thora, my own sister!” and he dropped his head between his hands on the plow handle. What had become of Thora? Would he ever know? He breathed a prayer to Odin and Hammerer Thor and to the unknown Christian God, too, by way of good measure, that the small sister were safe, that she, perhaps in the Northland, were on her shaggy pony making pilgrimage to her shrine, even as this fair Alemanic duchess had been on a recent reverent journey to her altar.

Ai! Well, he must be on with his clod-turning if he didn't want to get a stick across the shoulders. Bu the Black saw well to it in his master's absence

that he extracted every ounce of toil possible out of the thralls at his mercy.

Suddenly upon Thord's moody thoughts burst screams, wild hoof beats, and glimpse of a girl rider galloping across the fens.

For a moment Thord stood bewildered, like one visioning a nightmare; then, swift as an arrow from the bow, he was off after the runaway. His long legs that back in the homeland had been trained alternately to ride and race the shaggy fiery Norse steeds, unlimbered to an astonishing speed. Even his limp could not hinder him.

Now the frightened pony was taking to the marshes where all was a bog from the rains. The gods preserve her, this girl that looked like Thora!

Twisting and turning, leaping thicket and brake, Thord ran with all the wind of him bursting at his lungs. He got there none too soon. The Duchess Roswitha, clinging to the saddle trappings alongside the pony that had thrown her, was in a bog up to her neck. The horse was in about as bad shape and getting worse, as every struggle sunk him deeper. A great gap in the turf path where it had crumbled beneath those stormy hoofs told what had happened.

Thord, flat on his stomach on treacherous land that quivered like jelly beneath him, got a grip on my lady's robe and pulled like ten furies. He would have been sucked into the quagmire himself, had not help miraculously appeared at his elbow—the big-eared Vaik, who had raced after him. Together, with their leather shirts slashed into strips

and knotted rope-like to the roots of a great furze bush for anchorage, they managed to drag the girl out. For the pony, the best that they could do was to keep his almost humanly flesh-colored little nose a palm's breadth above suffocation. And thus the duchess's scared, galloping escort found them—one mud-cased female safe on higher turf, and two mud-dripping fellows gallantly struggling at the horse.

Many arms and more leather ropes got the pony out. All in a tremor, the duchess's train hastened off, carrying their charge to the ministrations of the Lady Alftruda, sister-in-law to my Lord Herrich, who had raised his motherless daughter for him.

Now that it was all over and the cause of the excitement had been wafted away amid a babble of serving women and men, the two thralls scraped their muddy selves as best they could with bunches of leaves and went back to the plowing. All they had got out of the adventure was mud in the hair—and, well, perhaps a certain warming of the heart.

But the adventure of the mud-hole had not ended. Before dusk of that day, came a couple of rather sniffy stewards from the castle, seeking the lout of a Norse plowhand. Their mistress would have a look at this blond fellow who had risked his neck in a bog for her.

So Thord was hustled up to an outhouse, soused in a wooden tub, fitted up to decent garments, and brought into the castle hall.

All tingling with cleanliness and excitement, and with hope rising within him, Thord dropped on one knee and made obeisance to the Lady Roswitha on

her high seat, as courtly as any Latin-learned Frank.

The young duchess leaped to her feet in delight and walked down closer for the better to see the Norseman. Forsooth, she thought it rather pleasant to be rescued by one so handsome. Then she spoke: "Big Bu hath clumsy taste to set such a shapely fellow behind the bullock plows! I hereby appoint him one of our castle huntsmen. I warrant me he pulls a strong bow! And now," becoming decidedly royal and stepping back to her throne-like seat, the duchess demanded, "what boon, my new huntsman, would you ask of us, for having pulled us out of a bog?"

"I—er—" stammered Thord confusedly, so much kindness, on top of all the foregone misery, having gone to his head until he could scarcely think, "I—there were two of us at the bog. Could that other one—Vaik, they call him—could he come, too?"

So the slant-eyed Magyar was fished out of the straw pile in the mud hut and brought to the castle. However, his looks being against him, the kitchen was as high as he rose. He was dubbed scullery helper to the fat, red-faced cook. That in itself, though, was a decided rise in the world and much better than being plowhand under Bu. Gretchen, the cook, was a jolly old soul and sometimes pampered her lively new underling with tidbits of raw meat, a Hunnic taste that Vaik couldn't quite outgrow, even in the midst of civilization.

To Thord, the Norseman, this close contact with

Germanic civilization was a revelation. Though humble pine knot and tarred reed torch of his Northland were used here too, the great castle hall was on occasion lit by candles in silver stands. There were times when rugs, soft silk and wool mosaics of color, brought from the East by caravan, thence on across the Black Sea, and on up the Danube spread the floor. And here were blown glass vessels from Greece and feast tables with fringed covers, not bare like the trestles of the sturdier north. And a strange closed stove instead of the old open hearth below the smoke hole. *And books!*

These last were the greatest mysteries of all to Thord—horn-backed volumes set with neat little monkish script on the parchment and with fascinating tall crimson and gilt letters at the headings. To him it was strange that these little twists and whorls and galloping lines of ink scratched on paper could hold so much of meaning. True enough, he knew something of the old Runic writing of the Northland, mystic lines and crosses and squares that had their origin in the priestly lore of casting tiny sticks in the air and taking omens from the shape they fell in. Mostly the Rune writings that he knew were luck charms on amulets or on sword hilts, or carved stone lists of virtues of dead-and-gone chieftains. But these books of the Southland, with their swift running hand-writing, held long, wondrous tales and histories and adventure.

Of a night in the castle hall by the candlelight, Lady Alftruda or perhaps Herlindis, the Greek waiting woman from Constantinople, often read

aloud to Roswitha and her attendants. The good Lady Alftruda, with an eye to the duchess's training, read for the most part from pious, dry-as-dust lives of the saints. Consequently, Thord, along with the rest of the listeners, rather welcomed the lively Greek woman's turn. She had brought up the Danube from her own home city a great wooden-backed book with golden clasps and a golden lock and a tiny golden key that the waiting woman wore on a ribbon around her neck. When Herlindis unlocked her book it was to read wonder tales of Constantinople, queen city of the Cape of the Golden Horn, tales of the seven hills that overlook Asia, and marble palaces and great chain that bars the harbor port, Greek fire playing over the water, the procession of the Emperor, his blue-eyed Varangian guard—ola, all manner of tales that dazzled with their splendor!

And the duchess, fired by so much of wonder, would fall to planning a pilgrimage down the Danube to Sancta Sophia, Church of the Dome in the city of the Golden Horn. Thord Firetooth, full of longings, devoutly hoped that a castle huntsman would be a necessary adjunct on such a pilgrimage.

Not all the nightly entertainment was reading, however. There were those of the duchess's retinue who could tell as good stories as ever any that were ink-written on a book leaf. Kuolja, the queer little round-headed Lapp woman who had nursed Roswitha through her babyhood, loved to spin yarns of the far icy land of the Nomad Laplanders that had been her home. Perhaps by as devious a route

as Thord had traveled—pirates, capture, selling into bondage—had she, too, come to be a fixture at this great grim German castle? Be that as it may, the little old woman seemed comfortable enough now in the security of the duchess's bounty and affection. She would live on the rest of her days among the Christian Teutons, bowing the knee to the book and the bell and the cross of the brown-cowled men; but in her heart she now and again journeyed in imagination to Lapland, that country famed for its sorcerers.

“Prut,” would say Kuolja, shaking her round head in its funny knitted cap with blue beads sewed across its front for luck, “prut, what do you stolid folk know of real witch women and sorcerers!”

Then she would proceed with her favorite tales of Sunna, the fair-haired witch who could prophesy the weather with a raven's feather blown in the air, or could set men singing poetry to her with a portion of that crimson magic dust pounded from the crimson toadstools. Sometimes old Kuolja would tell of Torne, the chieftain who kept a divining drum to help him locate strays from his reindeer herds. 'Twas just a common-looking drum, circlet of bone stretched with cover of deerskin, but attached by a cord was a tiny ring of silver, and on the face of the drum was drawn in magic ink of blood and soot, a map of the country. When Torne beat the drum with two silver-tipped sticks, the metal ring would slip and slide to the vibrations and finally settle on that portion of the map where Torne's lost reindeer were to be found. Oh, the

Lapps were great sorcerers—any one knew that!

When Kuolja grew too complacent in extolling the ice country's wonders, Master Boso, the chamberlain, would send one of the pages out to bring into the castle hall Schwartz Jacob, the swineherder, to uphold Alemanic prowess in the field of sorcery with his tales of the One-Eyed Man of the Hills, that ghost of the rocky peaks of Hohentweil. Schwartz Jacob, dressed in coarse felted frieze, bushy of hair and long of arm, cut a queer figure amid the soft candlelight and carved furnishings of the hall. But then, he was the only one of the castle folk who had so much as glimpsed the hillman, and that gave him a distinction of a sort even among his betters. He was a great, deep-chested, broad-shouldered fellow who could crack a boar's head at one blow, or with his bare hands bend an iron bar like a willow rod. Va—he was so strong that pious folk crossed themselves and whispered that perhaps he had done more than just glimpse the hillman, perhaps he had drunk beer with him in the dark of the moon and had been given the strength of two men. To such whispering Schwartz Jacob answered neither yea nor nay. It was nobody's business where he got his strength.

But the duchess had been good to Katrine, his wife, so for her sake Schwartz Jacob spun yarns aplenty; how, as he herded his black swine up among the crags of high forest where grew the little sweet acorns, he had come one day upon a great naked footprint hardened in the solid stone. And still another time, down in a far vale, he had

found a curious stone formation like a huge arm-chair. Truly, these properties must have belonged to himself, the old One-eyed Man of the Hills, for none else was big enough to own them. There were those in higher circles who thought the shaggy one was likely enough the ghost of old Baron Conrad the One-Eyed, who losing nerve in battle, had turned and fled from the enemy and got a spear in the back for his cowardice. But in thrall hut and kitchen 'twas felt that the hillman was just plain devil, consequently the vale of the armchair and the crag of the rocky footprint were rather well avoided.

Sometimes the Norse fellow was called upon to take his part in the story-telling with tales of far Jadar and Finnestrand on the north shores, and the bull hunts and stallion fights of the festivals. But though Thord took so glibly to books and yarns in the candlelight and many another soft elegance, it was the forest, the hunting, the good feel of spear to hand again that brought him real happiness. 'Twas almost like the old days of the free north to be out after wild boar and stag.

The duchess's table fared well under the régime of the new huntsman, who did indeed bend a strong bow and whose arrow seldom missed its mark. There were beaver from pond, haunch of venison, juicy bear ham, savories of grouse and partridge. In the early morning mists Thord even tried to stalk the rare capercailzie, giant wild fowl of the Alemanic forests.

Down in the thrall huts behind the middens, there

were those who watched Thord's rise into comparative freedom with jealous eyes.

“Umph! Why should this Nordic churl be set above other folks?” They'd show him a thing or two—the limping, over-handsome heathen! If he hadn't run so fast, likely enough some of the rest of them would have got there in time to have pulled Her Highness out—would have got themselves transported to castle life and plenty to eat. A murrain on the fellow and his long legs!

So were bred evil thoughts down in the darkness and misery of the mud huts.

Tangible evidences of the smouldering envy of his former thrall mates were the occasional peltings of mud that descended upon Thord's new raiment—black spattering shower, mocking laughter, running footsteps—but Thord could never quite catch the offenders. Sometimes, too, filth mysteriously found its way into his trencher of stew or his drinking horn.

These little malignances, the busy Thord thrust easily out of mind, all unaware of the insidious depth and strength of the jealous hatred that had bred them.

CHAPTER VI

~~~~~ THROUGH THE FOREST ~~~~~

IN the late autumn days there came a messenger from the castle of neighboring nobility, sent to inquire if the duchess cared to journey to Verburg to the festival with Lord Urkhard, Count of Raventweil, and his men-at-arms. It was to be an excellent festival with banners and processions. A relic, the arm bone of St. Theopontus, richly set in gold and jewels, and very healing, was to be borne forth to work miracles. Also, what with masques and music and trade booths full of trinkets—

“La, ’tis wonderful kind of the noble count,” cried the duchess, all aglow with excitement. “We accept his offer; we will go.”

“Nay,” burst out Lady Alfruda, anxiety making her pale face still paler. “At times of festivals and great crowds the lonely spots of the high road are oft menaced by robbers. ’Twere risky to go so far from our castle walls.”

“The Lord Urkhard hath knights and armed men about him,” spoke up the messenger somewhat stiffly.

“Oh, Aunt Truda—the relic!” put in Roswitha.

“We may never again get a chance to touch or even see a sacred bone of a saint. Perchance ’twill cure the pains in your back and Thord’s limp. And there’s the town and the booths!”

The good Lady Alftruda, sadly torn between her fears and her piety, could not bear to think upon her niece’s missing the great religious procession. And in the end it was the poor, long-gone St. Theopontus’s arm bone that finally won the day for those who were longing to go to the festival.

The next dawning saw a little group of riders go forth from Castle Hegau’s massive walled court to join with the impressive cavalcade of the old Count of Raventweil.

A full half day’s journey down into the valley lay the merchant city of Verburg, so it was past noon when the white-bearded Urkhard and the crimson-robed young duchess and their respective trains of retainers rode through the gates of the town. To Thord Firetooth this German city was all strangeness. There was nothing like it in the Northland. Here were high-peaked wooden houses with overhanging gables; cobble-paved streets; tradesmen’s booths opened right upon the thoroughfare with rich displays hanging within—jewels, laces, glitter of new armor.

For the noble ladies of the party the landlord of Verburg Hostel, with much ado, finally arranged suitable quarters, but because of the crowds, the Firetooth, along with Chomu and Wovell, the horse boys, did well to secure straw shakedown at the end of the great hall. After a supper of boar’s chine

and brown bread, the castle huntsman sat long in his corner watching the gayety about him. At the high tables, away from the trestles of visitors of more common clay, the Count of Raventweil and his nobles lingered at their goblets of spiced red wine of Meersburg, which as any one knows will turn to liquid fire in a man's brain.

The day of processions came bright and clear. At an early hour the eager Roswitha had her Hegau retainers out on the streets where festivity held sway. Music resounded on every side. A group of olive-skinned bards from some Mediterranean country played upon instruments such as the Norseman had never seen before—tambourines, double flutes, the nine-reed pipes of the syrinx. Jugglers did tumbling tricks. Hawkers called their wares, caged starlings that could whistle and also gibber a few words; seed cakes; honey cakes; complexion unguents from far lands. Strange to say, for some of the latter Thord Firetooth traded the sum total of his wallet—a moleskin and a bright stone flecked with gold. The Firetooth was securing this ointment as a gift for his friend Vaik the Magyar, whose yellow hide was something of a mortification to him now that he dwelt among such a blond race as the Teutons.

Then down the street, with blare of oboes and chanting of priests, came the sacred procession—banners and pennons, gorgeously robed abbots on palfreys, after these marching monks. The latter held aloft many wondrous treasures from the monastery chests—silk embroidered pictures of scenes

from Holy Writ, crosses and staves set with gold and jewels. In the center of all this splendor was carried a silver casket wherein reposed a dry, yellowed portion of bone set with gems and precious metal—the arm bone of the martyred Theopontus.

“The saint! The saint! The bone of the martyred one!” rose a great shout from all sides until a roar of voices filled the air like a thunder of waves upon the shore. Some knelt to pray. Some thrust forward, striving for a touch of the healing relic.

“Oh, my aches, my pains, I must touch it!” wailed the Lady Alftruda, half smothered by the nigh frantic mob.

Thord Firetooth lifted her to his strong shoulders. Other retainers so carried the duchess. Into the throng, and pressing after the procession, moved the Hegau cortège.

All this religious fervor made its impress upon Thord Firetooth’s pagan heart. Thoughts seethed within him. In Norway there were many gods. These German people claimed but one God, then bowed the knee to bits of bone set in jewels. It was strange, puzzling.

Memory turned back to Brihtnoth the Saxon, whom the pirates had done to death for his religion’s sake. His bones were healing if any were. Thord wondered if some day they’d be set in jewels and knelt to. He tried to ask the Lady Alftruda about this, but press of the crowd was too great. There was time for naught but push and struggle. Then at last they were close and closer to the

portable shrine with its trappings of velvet and silver and its little mortal piece of him who had died for faith.

The Lady Alftruda, high lifted on Thord's shoulder, was thrust forward; and for one fleeting moment, for a mere catch of a breath or flick of an eyelid, her hand touched the relic—then it was gone on.

Lady Alftruda's eyes were bright with excitement, her cheeks were flushed as any girl's, and the ache was all gone out of her, she said. Faith in something had helped her. Thord wished forlornly in his puzzled heart that he, too, had some god to pin his faith onto. The old gods of his fathers no longer satisfied him, and he could not seem to understand this Christian God who was meek and healing and had no fire and thunder about him. Thord longed for magnificence in his god. Well, perhaps someday he would find his god—

His meditations were cut short by the turmoil of the crowded street. While most of the throng was still swarming after the relic and its accompaniment of banner bearers and musicians, the Hegau party had turned about, and was striving to get out of the press, striving to head back in another direction. It had come to the Lady Alftruda's mind that now was a good time for further religious pilgrimaging. Less than a mile beyond Verburg, at the Cloister of St. Radwig, was a spring reputed to have great healing in its waters. With haste, there would be time in plenty for a visit to this blessed spot before the hour set for home-going.

Once free of the throng, and on a cobbled side

street, it was a quick matter to reach the hostel, get the horses, and clatter on towards this new objective.

Thord found the Spring of St. Radwig a simple spot. A stone trough caught the trickle of a tiny stream that came from a rock crevice. Great pine trees rose around the place. A soft tinkling of cowbells echoed from beyond the slope. At a call from the visitors, an old monk in a faded robe emerged from a stone hut nearby and blessed the water as the Lady Alftruda and her maids caught little vials full to carry away with them. There was a peaceful quietude here that made one rather long to linger on a bit.

Only there was no time for lingering, not if the duchess and her party were to make it back to Hegau Castle before darkness fell. So it was hasten on back toward the city!

Even in the brief hour of their absence, Verburg had shed some of its holiday noise and festivity. The priestly procession had departed for another town. Already, some of the street-hawkers and peddlers had packed up wares and followed after, to be on hand for sale-making at the next assembling of a crowd.

When the Lady Alftruda, the duchess and their train rode up to Verburg Hostel, dismounted and entered, a bleak surprise awaited them. They had been deserted, left behind by that gentleman who had so gayly offered himself as their protector on the expedition.

The Count of Raventweil, his strong guard, his

bowmen, his pike-staff wielders—they had all departed full an hour ahead of the set time!

“Well gone in his cups, and full of red wine, my lady,” explained the innkeeper. “Methinks his lordship knew not what he was doing. Perchance you can overtake him. He departed, being held in the saddle, and not traveling over-fast.”

“To horse, men and maids!” cried the quite distracted Lady Alftruda. “In their numbers lies our protection! Forward! Forward!”

Away galloped the duchess’s train of less than a score of men and serving women, speeding along the highway which led up from the valley toward home.

Some hours later they were at the very beginning of that most dangerous part of the journey, the forest route whose tree-bordered path could hide any number of perils. In the distance before them appeared a great cavalcade hastening onward like themselves through these wilderness reaches.

“The Count—the Raventweil party!” went up a glad shout, and the little band urged wearying horses into a faster gait.

But haste brought only disappointment. Drawing nearer, it was seen that this was no train of a noble and his men-at-arms, but instead, a motley crew. Here traveled the peddlers, the mountebanks, juggling folk and such who had teemed on the Verburg streets for the festival. Now they were journeying astride laden asses and rack-a-bone steeds on to the next merchant town, Ruenstaldt in the highlands. At a road which cut across

the forest way this rabble turned off and went due west toward the city of the next festival.

Thord Firetooth heaved a sigh of relief to be rid of such tag-end company of traveling companions. He had kept a hand on his sword throughout the whole of the ride, for he liked not the craftily appraising gazes certain of the hard-faced rabble had cast upon the duchess's and Lady Alftruda's rich robes and fur-edged mantles.

The steady upward climb of the rolling country was beginning to tell on the horses. There were no more spurts of galloping, merely a stolid plodding on and on. In the lengthening shadows Thord's eyes noted here and there certain landmarks which stirred his remembrance—yon lightning-blasted pine, that bald-faced crag with a little oak in its cleft. Ola, yes, he had come this way that day he and Bowman Brugg had chased a stag so far. This must be a shorter way back by which Master Boso, the chamberlain, was leading the party, and home could not be too distant now. Along with his remembrance, a little shiver ran up his spine. Just about here, old Brugg had told him, was a path that led into the One-Eyed Hillman's domain. He wondered if, perchance, the ghost of the cliffs would descend upon them, and he slid his hand to his dagger in its hip sheath—though, what good was mortal weapon against a ghost!

But soon Thord Firetooth had need of weapons against visitants decidedly un-ghostly.

For a second time on this lonely road came a

thunder of hoof beats, but this time behind them, and a menacing sound that pursued nearer and nearer. Even the tired Hegau horses seemed to feel the danger and broke into a ponderous galloping.

Another moment and through the dusk an ugly horde rode into view, some on rack-a-bone steeds and some on asses. 'Twas a party of knaves from the peddling rabble, trekking back and descending like vultures to snatch easy pickings from this small body of travelers. Swirl of arrows told of their intentions as they dashed into view.

The Hegau men staged a fighting retreat, striving to hold off the vastly out-numbering attackers until the womenfolk could be hurried through the mountain gap and started down the valley for home. The less than half score of castle men, from behind a storm-felled tree, with their pikes and cross-bows, held off the marauders for a space. This stand lost, a great boulder served next as intrenchment for the retreating ones and gave chance for Boso, the chamberlin to wind again the throw-cord of his powerful arblast, and for fresh arrows to be put to bow.

Then, hard-pressed, they were fighting at the very pass itself and might have held that narrow defile had not a series of accidents occurred. Thord's vicious, high-necked old nag, wounded to the death and rearing unmanageably, fell and half pinned Thord beneath him. Nor was this all; in the wild thrashings of the beast, Chomu's spear and the bow of another were broken. This was the end for Thord.

In the press of attack he could not be extricated. But he could die fighting.

“Arrows, more arrows!” he cried. “Give them to me, and a spear also! Barricaded by the dead horse, I can hold the pass for a space. Go while I last—all of you!”

But Boso stayed with him, as also did Otker Bowman. Three brave men to hold the defile against twoscore and more! The shades had begun to descend darkly now. To make their beleaguered selves seem more, Thord and his companions shouted and called and beat a sort of battle tune with dagger against sword hilt. They needed what courage their din might bestow upon them, for from behind every tree trunk seemed to fly arrow-death, and following this attack, the rabble swept up the gulch.

Boso was dead. Otker Bowman had shot his last arrow. Only Thord, propped against his stiffened horse was left to pull a bow against death. Then suddenly behind him the brittle bush growth of the mountain side crackled sharply to some swift impact, and a great shaggy, lumpish creature flung itself with a heavy leap into the pass beside him. From a tube grasped in hand, the apparition hurled blue fire this way and that, a devilish, ghastly glow that stung and burned and lit the twilight in weird flashes.

“Hillman! Ghost of the mountain!” Thus Thord thought he heard some of the Hegau women scream far down the mountain side.

Ere he fainted there came to his ears clatter of

the vagabond thieves in wild retreat from the spectral defender of the heights. Then his senses left him as a mighty grasp dragged him from beneath the dead black horse.

When Thord next opened his eyes he was in a cave, lying upon a shelf of stone up against the wall. A sheepskin was beneath him, while another was thrown over him for cover. He could move one leg with difficulty, for it seemed bound about with crude splints. Memories of the fray pulsed through his brain. Something had fought beside him, rescued him—what? With a shudder he remembered—the ghostly Hillman!

“The Hillman—again!” Thord gasped weakly and covered his head with the sheepskin. He could be brave enough against mortal combatants, but the thought of being in a ghost’s power turned his very bones to water.

The creature emitted a creaking, gargling sound, like the turning of a rusty hinge.

“Ho, fellow, brave enough in battle, and now so cringing!” The one eye above him glittered balefully. “I like it not—for I cringed once myself. When you were brave—I fought for you—”

“W-what be you—man, or ghost?” quavered Thord.

“Mostly ghost—or so men think me,” muttered the shaggy one. “That serves my purpose well, now that I’m a wolf-head and an outlaw and can never wear the purple pell of a baronetcy again. Enough of gabbing! Here, drink this.” And from a horn filled with a pungent, bitter herb juice Thord

was drenched with a great vile dose like a sick horse in a stable. A sweet peacefulness stole over him again.

Indeed, in the days and weeks that Thord stayed on in this strange cave he slept a great deal. Strength and healing came to his crushed leg through the rest and through various dosings of herbs applied to him within and without. In this interim he came to know that the old One-Eyed Man of the Hills was quite human and no ghost at all. In fact, he was none other than the outlawed Baron, One-Eyed Conrad, whom all people believed to have been killed in his disastrous flight and to have ever afterwards haunted the scene of his death.

At nights, with a glow of fire between them, the wolf-robed old fellow told Thord much of those times when he was young and a power in the land.

“Ah, me,” he of the one eye would sigh, “all is changed since the score and ten years gone when I lived as a man and not as an accursed ghost on a hilltop. Barons were kings in their own right then, and not mere puppets pulled on a string by any domineering emperor.

“But this Otho—may the evil one ride his neck!—he must be emperor over everything. One by one he summoned the barons to his court and made them swear allegiance to him and give security for the promise. All who bent not the knee to him had their roofs burned over their heads.

“Against me, the One-Eyed Baron who bowed the knee to none, he sent the imperial spears, but I met them with an army of my own, and mayhap

would have won out had not some madness turned my brain and made me a coward, so that I fled and became a man with a price upon his head, a wolf to be hunted. Most men thought I died in battle that day, and the One-eyed let men think so. Better to be a ghost than a hunted craven to be shot down for a price,—better still had I died before the madness struck me! *Conrad the Coward*—'tis an evil name."

So long the old outlaw sat sagging back in his hewn-out rock chair, shaggy head bent down in withered old hands, that Thord, to distract his benefactor's mind from the gloom of the past, hobbled around the fire and touched the other's shoulder. "Baron Conrad is skilled in the arts," he ventured, breaking the silence. "He knows many healing herbs and can make blue fire in a tube—"

"Prut!" burst out the old fellow, shaking his head from side to side with the lumbering motions of a great bear. "I live enough among the herbs to know something of them; and as for the fire tube," his one eye gleamed excitedly, "that, indeed is an art little known this side of the Alps. In the days of my youth, when I was a free baron and as good as any king, I went down into Italy to fight and gain renown, as ever Germans have been doing since Charlemagne had the crown of Rome set upon his head. There the master flame maker, Raxedos, taught me much about the fire tube and the blue naphtha fire to be spouted upon the enemy and scatter them as with dragon's breath."

"Blue fire—the blue Greek fire that plays over

Constantinople harbor when their royalty enters port!" put in Thord. "I have heard the Greek waiting woman at the castle tell of it too!"

"Um—yes, the wily Greeks! They would have us think they invented the fire tube, but methinks they merely borrowed it from another and older race. Tradition has it that men on the other side of the Asia continent were the first firework-makers. It matters little to Conrad where the thing was thought up. Whoever did it served him a good deed. A flash of blue fire in the dusk keeps these country folk well away from my den. And that suits the wolf-head."

Thord found in the wild free life of the mountain and the company of this strange old warlock a style of living that appealed to him. He would have liked well to stay on here through the winter in the cave of the crags. But after his leg healed, the Hillman, for reasons of his own, perhaps because the habits of thirty years solitude were too strong to be broken, sent him back down the mountain side to civilization.

"From my lookout in the cliffs," he said, "I too often these days see men from the Hegau Castle nosing around my hunting grounds. They are seeking you, no doubt. Go back to the castle life. But before you go, make me two promises." The old one reached out and took Thord's hand in his crooked, knotted grasp. "Swear to me first, for it is the most important, that never will you turn from your danger, but will always face it. To turn the coward's back is to lose more than life itself,"

and a twitching shook the old hand. "Then promise, for my sake, to tell none that I be human and no ghost, for my ghostliness is my protection."

And Thord promised and went away down the mountain side, little wotting what such promising could cost him. For long before he came in sight of the castle's grim battlements he came upon a party of castle thralls, woodchopping under Bu the headman.

With wild cries they fell upon him.

"Ek—the runaway thrall! The consorter with ghosts!"

All the evil jealousy of the other serfs, from whose midst the duchess's favor had in the near past lifted Thord to ease and castle elegancies, now flared forth in ugly fashion. Black Bu, whose authority in the matter of the Norse thrall the young duchess had so lightly set aside, joined his axe swingers in their taunts.

Thord's heart stood still at the threats in the voices about him. But he merely nodded his head in assent. To keep his promise to the Hillman he would have to admit that his friend of the fight was a ghostly visitant.

"*Donnergugi!* May the thunder beetle bite me, if you'll be bringing blue fire and black spells down the mountain to bewitch the rest of us with!" And stepping forward a space, the headman suddenly swung his wooden mallet and cracked Thord such a blow on the head that he fell in a heap.

At night when the woodcutters returned to the castle one of the thralls carried to the steward, to



The old one reached out and took Thord's hand.

be carried on in to the Duchess Roswitha, Thord's leathern hauberk, well spattered with brownish, dried blood stains. Along with the coat went the message that the Norseman thrall most surely was dead.

That the mistress of Hegau sincerely mourned the loss of the brave young huntsman was evinced by a great pile of rocks she had erected out in the castle garden in his memory, along with the stone piles raised to Boso and Bowman Otker, whose bodies had been found a month gone, back in the pass.

CHAPTER VII

~~~~~ GHOSTS AT HEGAU ~~~~~

TROUBLESOME times set in at Castle Hegau. What with a ghost in the mountains, there also began to be ghosts in the very domicile itself!

'Twas mostly out in the quarters of such servants as slept at the castle that the spirits walked. This was in the old section built in ages past, long before the stones were laid for the present "baron's hall," which was set well to the fore of the turrets and over-topping roofs of the ancient hall. Here at the back was a great old round tower, or watch-bartizan, whose circular walls housed a score of chore boys and kitchen scullions and the like. The place, with its winding stairs in the very walls and slits of windows to let in weird lights and moaning of the doves in the upper reaches, was an uncanny enough habitation to begin with. And now, with tappings and whispering sighs that could not entirely be the wind, it was fair distressing as a place of abode.

During this period Vaik, the slant-eyed kitchen helper, went decidedly off his feed. His straw pallet was on one of the lower floors of the tower, and he got full benefit of this new and ghostly visitant at the castle.

“But tell me,” he asked of the fat cook, who had a room elsewhere in the great rambling domain and was not greatly concerned over the ghost tales of the younger fry, “what lies beneath the floor where I sleep?”

“Only the old dungeon,” answered Gretchen, neatly trussing two fowls upon the spit and handing them to her assistant to hold above the coals and roast to a turn. “Mind you now,” said Gretchen, “you baste them well with the vinegar and butter gravy and see to it also that you nibble not off a wing and eat it raw, as I’ve caught you doing!”

Gretchen emphasized her orders with a knuckle thump on the other’s shock head, though, forsooth, it was more a playful tap than anything else, for she was rather fond of this Vaik.

“A dungeon!” quavered Vaik. “Then perchance, ’tis the prisoners I hear rattling their chains and wall tapping of a night, instead of ghosts?”

“Ho hum, not so,” sighed Gretchen. “Those good old days are long past now when the castle lords used to run in the fat merchants in fur coats and flat caps and bales of goods from the packs and let them cool their heels in a dungeon cell until an envoy from the burgomaster of the merchant’s town would come with a long purse to pay the ransom. ’Twas rich living then. But this Emperor Otho seems to side with the silly burghers and he gives them protection. What’s more, he keeps the barons so busy fighting his imperial enemies that they have small time to think of aught else. Our own lord

baron has been gone from home for nigh a twelve-month."

"And so the dungeon is empty of humans—illah ya; then it must be ghosts that thump beneath me!" and Vaik near dropped the chickens, spit and all, in the trembles that seized him.

"Go to, thou chump!" snorted the cook, shaking him roundly. "But burn up those fat fowls, and I'll be making a ghost of you! 'Tis naught but rats in the hole beneath you. And see to it that none of your foolish fears be peddled up to the duchess's ears. Our lady is grieved enough now, what with three good men lost in that jaunt to the festival town! Just wait till our baron comes home, and he'll make old Count Urkhard's ears smart for falling in his cups and forgetting to escort our lady home."

Vaik tried to think as he was bid, but the ghostly tappings still pursued him, even though he moved his pallet to a higher floor and crowded himself in with the other occupants hereon. The sounds were fainter, but Vaik's keen ears could not fail of hearing them.

"Thump, thump,—thump-thump-thump!"

There was a ghastly rhythm to the bumping, and suddenly it came to the Magyar's mind that this staccato beat was the measure Thord used to beat with a stick upon a hollow tree, keeping time to Vaik's fluting on a length of reed. That had been back in the time of their plowhand days.

Faintly, it came again: "Thump, thump,—thump-thump-thump!"

Vaik's shaggy thatch fairly stood up on his head, and his tallowy face went a shade paler. That was

Thord's ghost! Ek-a! Cook or no cook, the duchess must be told.

One day when his courage was screwed to sticking point, the homely, big-eared Vaik, as he served the platters of pastry and beans and brown sausages to the duchess's own table, dared paused for a scared moment by the high-seat and whisper: "Thord's ghost—in the dungeon—let it out!"

Then in his excitement he let fall all the sausages.

But Roswitha was too stirred by his whispered communication even to reprimand him. She leaped to her feet. "How, now, shall it be done? What say you?"

"Oh, my lady, I have a plan." In his fervor Vaik forgot to be frightened. "Out in the land where I was born, when a ghost walked some one took a lock of the dead man's hair or a shred of his garment or something that had been upon him, and placed this thing in a crevice in a rock. It was then pegged in stoutly and incantations said upon it. After that the ghost walked no more, unless, perchance, a lightning blast or an earthquake wracked the rock asunder and let the spirit out again. Now then, take Thord's coat brought in by the woodsmen, a shred of it—"

"Nay," spoke up Lady Alftruda firmly, "that would be heathen doings. We will send for Father Ambrose to sprinkle holy oil and lay this ghost in a seemly fashion."

So forthwith a messenger was posted off to the Monastery of St. Ortfried to bring Father Ambrose in haste. The fat monk came rather reluctantly.

Laying ghosts in Lord Herrich's dungeon was not altogether to his liking. But the Baron of Hegau being a patron of the monastery, he could in no way refuse the call.

It was a solemn procession that wended its way back to this ancient part of the building and entered into the base of the old bartizan tower. After the opening of the heavy oaken door that creaked and grated horribly on its rusty hinges, fat Father Ambrose with his oil and Lady Alfruda bearing a lighted candle marched in. Behind them came Roswitha and Vaik and old Kuolja with the Lapland luck beads on her cap all a-jingle with excitement. At a more discreet distance the gardener, the cook and some of the houseboys straggled.

As the footsteps went down and down to the dungeons, answering sounds arose—faint piping squeakings, a rustling and a pattering.

“The ghost!” cried some in awed whispers.

But these were only rats, great silvery fellows with little glaring eyes. They dashed off in all directions.

After this hasty exodus of rodents came a breathless silence. The little procession stumbled on through a mass of discarded truck that cumbered the first floor underground—ancient bits of cloth and sacking and leather, rusting helmets, broken spears, cracked earthenware and kitchen odds and ends.

Then suddenly as they were in the midst of this ancient lumber, the dreaded sound came to ear, from the floor beneath them or out of the solid

walls around them—illah, who could tell from whence?

“Thump, thump,—thump-thump-thump!”

No one spoke. Lady Alftruda’s hand shook till the candle nigh fell out of it. The monk and Vaik and Roswitha stood frozen.

Again: “Thump, thump,—thump - thump - thump!”

“ ’Tis under us—the trapdoor must be opened,” whispered the Lady Alftruda. Then raising her voice and staying its trembling somewhat, she commanded stout Rolf, the gardener, to help Vaik lift the door.

But Rolf had long since departed up to air and daylight, muttering to himself that it ill suited his nerves to be hounding out such spirits as thumped the foot-stones by night. Next they’d be twisting one’s neck with a hand not seen.

So fat Father Ambrose showed himself to be a man of valor. Girding his robes, he pulled up the great door by his lone strength.

Out through the opening came a rush of foul air, clank of a chain dragged, a weird moaning from the darkness.

“The ghost—it walks!” shrieked the women.

“Lay it quickly, Father,” muttered the weazened Vaik, helping the holy man find again the oil vessel set aside in the shadows.

“*Media vita in morte sumus!*” chanted Father Ambrose, lifting the holy vessel high. “*Quem quaerimus—*” But his pious Latin hymn was never finished.

Out of the black hole below rose calls decidedly human: "The duchess! Vaik! Help! It is I—Thord, in the dungeon in chains. Get me out, or I die!"

More candles were brought. Down the iron ladder into the black dungeon went the monk and brought up in his stout arms a poor, weak Thord, with a festering welt across his brow and a ball and chain about his legs.

He had lost all count of the long days he had been in the dark keep, subsisting on such bread and water as Black Bu thrust in for him occasionally. Black Bu had put him here—for what, he knew not.

Black Bu, hastily summoned from his forest woodcutting to appear before the duchess's high-seat, defended himself stoutly for his action: "The Norse churl, besides other heathenish ways, has spent much time with the ghostly One-Eyed Man of the Hills. He'll be bewitching us all for fair, if folks don't look out," and he emphasized his words with a fist shaken in the direction of the late prisoner of the dungeon. "I did but shut the fellow in the lock-up to keep him safe till our Lord Herich's return. Va—question him yourself about ghosts and such, and see what answer he'll make," ended the headman. "See how he'll admit he's been in league with devils and the fire-spouting ghost."

Thord was too weak and sick to drop on his knees, but he reached out a feeble hand and touched the lady's garment pleadingly. "Because of a vow, I can answer neither yea nor nay to Black Bu.

But no harm have I done to Hegau property, and no harm will I ever do to it."

Duchess Roswitha found cases of witchcraft and ghostliness too difficult a knot for her young mind to unravel, so she wisely dismissed the whole affair with a wave of her small hand. "Our huntsman hath twice risked his life to save mine, so my judgment is to set him free and reward his courage, and let matters rest thus till our lord, the baron, returns."

"So be it," muttered Black Bu to himself, departing to his work of overseeing the thrall labor, "but when Lord Herrich Iron-Arm returns there'll be many a one that'll sing a tune out of a different side of his mouth."

With proper care Thord's crack across the head healed up nicely. The good nourishing stews that Vaik and the fat Gretchen concoted for the late ghost soon brought him from his bag-of-bones state back into his natural vigor.

In Hegau affairs dropped once more into their normal routine. Time passed by monotonously. Christmas was upon the castle almost before one knew it. The week before the festival was a feverish one, with everybody dodging the other. The Lady Roswitha and her maids went about doing much embroidery in gold thread and silks and hiding things in their work-baskets at each other's approach.

Down in the kitchen was a mighty bustle. The grinning Vaik and the whole apartment in general smelt of cardamon and spice. Even Thord Fire-

tooth was making preparations for Christmas, though much his pagan self knew about the occasion! Every dawning now saw him out in the dim cold fastness of the forest, waiting beneath a certain roost tree, a stone image for stillness, ready bowstring pulled taut to ear. Ohime, but he would get that capercailzie! What a mighty Christmas pie the huge bird would make!

On Christmas morning the long procession of all the castle folk marched down the frosty road to the Church of St. Ortfried. And here, what with the dark green of fir wreath and gleaming candles and robed priests and chanting of the story of the Christ birth, Thord of the North Country felt something stir at his heart. He knew not what it was, but never again would he be quite his old pagan self.

Back at the castle the rest of the day went gayly, with gift giving and a visitation of masked mummers from the village, comic, clumsy figures in bear-skin and wolf hide and painted wooden masks. One shaggy fellow made weird music on a cow horn hung by leather cord round his neck, while his fellows danced and swayed and brought the castle folk almost to tears of merriment by their antics.

Last of all came the Christmas feast, a feast beneath which the boards groaned. Savory was the dining hall with fried pilchard and hake, browned grouse and pheasant, roasts of venison, white bread, wine, cakes baked in star shapes and set with nuts, and crown of the feast, a mighty Christmas pie that took four men to lift to the table—a royal pie built up of layers of apples,

bacon, onions, and mutton, and at the bottom Thord's capercailzie, larger than a sheep and with a six-foot stretch of wings. Ah, it was a marvel of a pie, and the air was fragrant with the mixed odors of its ingredients!

And in the midst of the Christmas feasting, Lord Herrich Iron-Arm and his fighting men came home. The great hall was all a-clash with shields and armor and drinking and bales of plunder. For the fair Roswitha her doughty father had brought a strange Christmas gift—a jewel casket he called it. 'Twas a box of silver lined with crimson velvet and decorated without in queer carved figures of the Savior and Saint Peter and Saint Paul—a relic-holder from some looted monastery. To Lord Herrich Iron-Arm, his emperor's enemies were his also—the more so, if there were any rich pickings to be had from rebellious bishop or monks in far-off Saxony. Quite to his liking had been the chance of a raid brought on by the late unpleasantness between the rich monks of Craylo and the king, wherein they had refused to pay additional taxes to the crown. Aoi! In the ashes of their monastery, Lord Iron-Arm had taught them a lesson in tax paying.

The Lord Herrich's return brought on many a change at Castle Hegau. With the next morning, as he strode out to oversee his possessions, there came to his ears from the thrall quarters dark, envious hints against Thord—whisperings that the pagan from the north had indulged in heathen abominations at Hegau!

That slab of rock beneath the oak up yonder was the Odin altar. Assuredly, they had seen it with their own eyes in the early dawn light. And the slant-eyed Magyar had been at it too. Small wonder the land had been cursed—with such goings-on! These pagan wretches—no doubt of it at all—had brought down hail on the fall barley. There was the pigsty, too, lightning blasted and six fattening hogs dead in it. Kept on here, these two heathens would likely enough cast further spells, murrain the cattle, lame the geese, bring chalk stones on one's fingers. The Norse one had run with the Hillman too. Best be off with the scoundrels, beat 'em and hang 'em.

And so, because of jealousy and because of the strange combination of devil worship and spirit fear that went hand in hand with the superstitious Christianity of the old Alemanic Teuton, Thord Firetooth and the Magyar were dragged out of their respective pallets, hustled down to the night-shrouded lake shore, and beaten half to death. Lord Iron-Arm would teach thralls to make spells against his crops and cattle! To old Bu and two serving men was left the task of stringing the poor wretches up to a tree.

But sometimes cupidity is stronger even than devil fear. Black Bu had an itching palm and loved a little trade on the side which would line his own pockets. So it happened that Thord and Vaik and a good length of hemp rope round the neck of each, were turned over to some Danube boatmen up in the lake country who were scouting for cheap labor

to set at the oarlocks, and Black Bu in the trade got his pockets the heavier by a golden thaler, two Greek denarii, and a handful of brasses. The master had told him to get rid of the pests—um—well, he'd gotten rid of 'em, hadn't he? And Black Bu pleasantly jingled his brass and gold as he strode home through the night.

It would seem that the old Norse Nornir knew well their business of fating human lives. Had not Thord Firetooth drawn the golden boat out of the omen jar in sign that he'd travel far waters?

And was he not now traveling far waters? The power of the golden boat continued. In the course of events Thord was on the Danube, broad water road of his dreams, bound for the wondrous jewel of the Black Sea, Constantinople, city of the Golden Horn.

But ai, what a twist life did give to fate! Thord was traveling, but 'twas no golden life on a golden boat. Life of an oar thrall on the oar-bench of a clumsy-bowed merchant galley was a life reeking with sweat and misery.

CHAPTER VIII

~~~~~ DOWN THE DANUBE ~~~~~

HOI! Ya, woe!" monotonously chanted the oarsmen of the squat, dingy merchant galley. Two men to a pole, they bent weary backs to the rowing.

At one of the sixteen-foot row poles labored a queerly assorted pair, a weazened Magyar and a tall Norseman whose native fairness had weathered into tawny gold.

"Hist you, Thord," whispered the Magyar. "Canst swing the oar alone for a space while I untie a knot in my wind cord?"

Thord merely nodded, to conserve breath, and bent nearly double under strain of the oar's sweep.

Furtively the other drew from beneath his ragged tunic a thin strip of wolf hide knotted fantastically. It was that awesome thing, "a wind cord," a bit of leather string which had been tied in many knots and boiled in oil under the weird conjuring of some old sorcerer of the Magyar steppes. The Magyar oarsman firmly believed that a gale lay behind the untying of those potent knots. "Shall Vaik loose one knot or five knots—a breeze or a storm?" he whispered to his oar mate.

“Loose the whole accursed string of them,” panted the Norseman. “Anything to fill this black hulk’s sail with wind and save my arms a space of pulling.”

But Vaik’s dabbling in witchcraft came to an untimely end as a six-lashed whip descended vengefully across his and Thord’s backs.

“Up with you! Swing the oar in unison, you laggards. Dost think Zartel the merchant bought you for to loiter?” As Sla, the galley master, passed on down the deck planking between crouched rows of human beings, his whip lashed action out of fatigue and hopelessness, and the boat shot forward amazingly. Somewhere behind it, in the foam of the wake, the Magyar wind cord, lost overboard, drifted on, its storm knots still safely tied.

Doggedly the two swayed and bent to their oar, and cast resentful eyes up at the heavens where the utter stillness of cloud and air seemed to hold no promise of a relieving wind, though, in this strange southern land they were coming into there was no depending on all known wind signs. Storms could shatter calm in the drawing of a breath.

For months now they had been coming down the Danube. A weary enough journey, which to the two thralls seemed to encompass a whole lifetime of misery and hardship. Existence held nothing beyond labor at the oars and brief spaces for snatching at food and the sodden sleep of exhaustion. For fear of river pirates or attack from various barbarian tribes along the watercourse, the merchant Zartel’s little fleet of six galleys carried armed

guards and fairly bristled with axes and javelins. So always, rowing or resting, the oar thralls were under a surveillance from which there was small chance of escape.

Back in the Suabian lake country, where a tributary of the Danube wound between the hills, this long boat journey had begun. Preceding the start down river, there had been held Zartel's fair. This was as far up as the trader's crafts could go. So on a broad Suabian meadow he had spread out his wares in tents. And here from miles around, the country folk had congregated to bargain with this suave, smooth-talking, black-bearded merchant from Constantinople.

A sort of glamour clung about his chests of wares brought two thousand miles from the lands of the sunrise, up through half the nations of Europe, into Germany. There were burnished bronze mirrors from cities of northern Africa, finest glass beads from across the Black Sea, Greek-made trinkets of delicate filagree, soft woven stuffs from India, fibulas and finger rings set with charm stones.

Bartering was brisk. These solid Germanic peoples craved the dazzle and romance of the things from afar. When at last the foreign merchant had folded his tents, he took his fleet of prams down the river laden to the oar-tholes with wares received in barter.

From here had begun Thord Firetooth's life as an oar slave. Among Zartel's hundred and twenty galley-thralls that manned his trade boats were sons of many nations, prisoners of many wars and tribal

strifes, bought at the auction block by the canny trader because of their brawn and endurance. On the bench before Thord rowed two Britons, behind him a Scythian and a Gaul. Here some Greek convicts; there flame-haired savages from Hibernia. Many of the slaves had made numerous trips up and down the Danube. What tales they could have told Thord Firetooth of the far lands his insatiable curiosity was forever craving to hear about! Only talk was forbidden among the galley slaves. A hurried whisper, muffled tattoo of a knuckle thumping the boat edge in a crude code—"The master sleeps" or "The whip is coming"—these had constituted Thord's contacts with his fellow men during the long months down the Danube.

But his eyes had been his own, and with them he had seen much. Out of that small tributary river the great, winding old Danube had caught up the little fleet. And here on the vast ancient highway of antiquity there was much of navigation, many kinds of craft to be seen, divers races of people, a traffic incomparable to any other waterway of the period. Not a day came but one met a vessel toiling up stream or, because of the swift driven oars of Zartel's slaves, one passed other vessels on the way down. To Thord Firetooth it seemed that the whole world was scraping sides with them. The trade fleet followed the river past mountains and cities. Past the Hills of Buda, where sat the wild bloody city of the Huns, and on past marsh and lake where primitive folk still dwelled in stilt-legged huts set high above the water. They drew

in their bridge-like approaches when any sort of craft went by.

With fifteen hundred miles of river behind him, Thord had had chance aplenty to glimpse the Magyar tribes, sometimes tent encampments set away on the hills, sometimes skin-coated herdsmen driving their animals close along the river bank. Not an hour gone a rabble of Magyar riders on wiry little ponies had forded the stream and raced their snorting steeds up the bank just as the boats swerved around a river bend. This was Vaik's homeland, the thousand-mile pasture land of Vaik's nomadic tribesmen. Ah-illah! If only the little Hun could make some sign to his wild kin of the plains! Might he not start them on a raid or a rescue?

Thord stole a sidewise glance at his oar mate. The Magyar's face was working, his slant eyes ablaze with excitement. Thord's heart leaped. Ya! Vaik looked as though he had seen something, was planning something.

But if Vaik had a plan, Thord was never to know it. A muffled insistent tapping broke his train of thought, dragged him back to his ever-present misery. "Row! Row! Beware the whip!" came a sudden thumped message relayed nervously down the boat sides.

The oar thralls bent swiftly to their labors. But not swift enough, it seemed. All down the line sounded a brutal thwacking of ash rod to back. Thord got a slanting blow across head and shoulders.

"Hoi! Hoi!" bellowed Sla. "Haste, you dogs!

What with a storm bearing down upon us and pirates like enough lurking along these cliff caves, we must make it on to Strague by night!”

“Umph!” thought Thord. “Vaik’s wind cord seems to have loosened something upon us, but wurra, ’tis a thrall’s luck—the wind is against us.”

Strain and pull, strain and pull, forcing the clumsy flatboats straight into the teeth of the gale. From the after end of the boat, where sat the beater, keeping time for the oars as he thumped with a gavel upon hollow wood, came a swift cadence that drove arm and lung mercilessly in its urge.

“Faster, faster!” screamed Sla, the driver, adding his whip lash to the gavel’s demand for speed, speed.

Fear was in those cries. Was it pursuit, attack that was driving the trade galleys swift and swifter into the gale?

Roped to his bench, Thord could see nothing, hear nothing save the whirl and roar of the tempest into which they were rushing. Then, as he breathlessly bent and dipped, he glimpsed a slender, rakish craft speeding through the rain storm, now alongside, now on past, beating down into the gale with swifter oars. Another and another sped past, a whole fleet, more than one could count in this nightmare of blows and driven labor that was bursting one’s heart out.

Thord wondered dully what it all meant as his muscles strained and knotted in agony.

Then came strange, incoherent commands, “Turn—turn—upstream!”

More blows, more straining, as the unwieldy craft backed and turned feebly against the current, moved by the mechanism of over-taxed human arms.

Suddenly upon the laboring boat, as she hung helpless, broadside to the stream, descended one of the swift dark galleys, rushing up river, sail set, speeding like a bird before the gale, and with all oars moving. Out-tumulting the shrieks of men in terror, rose the grind and crash of collision, as the bronze-beaked robber ship rode afoul of the merchantman, tearing whole quivering timbers asunder.

Roped to his bench and to his oar mate, Thord suffered the quick horror of a wild hurling skyward as the doomed vessel burst apart in the over-riding. Then came a sensation of water, drowning, oblivion. Back to the surface he and his half-unconscious mate surged, bobbed about for a dreadful moment amid crash of river battle, other ships ridden down, peals of fright, crews drowning in vortexes.

Then came a second sinking and a second rising with its gasping return to air more painful even than drowning. Wind and storm dashed the sodden prisoners of the galley plank against the river cliff. A wild swirl of water caught them up on a dizzy whirl, sucked them under, battered them cruelly against rough walls of a basalt tunnel, then shot its victims forward into the shallow waters of a cave beneath the cliffs.

Thord, more sturdy than his comrade, came

first to his senses. He found himself flat on his back, nostrils just above the shallow water of the cave, his whole body swaying to the outward suck of this strange current.

As strength returned he frayed his rope bonds asunder on a rock. A ray of light filtered down from somewhere. By its faint gleam he frantically set about reviving the battered Vaik. Thord rolled him across a water-rounded boulder, pumped his arms, forcing air into his lungs, hugged him close, and watched his eyes open slowly. For long the two sat side by side, close and chilly, and in a state of numbed exhaustion. From the outside, beyond the walls of their strange water-locked refuge, there drifted in faint echo of the still raging battle, war crash and howl and dying shriek queerly muted as though coming from another world.

Once a broken oar was sucked into their tunnel. It drifted close to their feet, like a message from the world they had left. Then after a space it floated back out again. With its going all bond to the outer existence seemed severed. In the weird sense of unreality that hung about these two prisoners of the cliff, it seemed to them that their past life was obscured, that the Danube, the voyage, the horror of slaving at the oar, were things that never had been. Only the cave, the sodden damp, the sullen suck of water at their feet—only these were real.

Gradually the dim ray of light from above faded. Darkness descended upon the cave. Silences of the night without swallowed up all sound. Battle, plun-

dering pirates, storm—it was as though these things too, had never been.

By some quirk of the mind Thord was dreaming that he was swimming in Nord Fjord—the cold sea water beside his old home—that Thora was with him, her arms about him. They were going down, down, down; water was closing over them.

With a snort of dismay the Norseman awoke, struggled to sit up, found that he and Vaik, clutched in each other's arms, had in their sleep rolled off the slab of rock into the shallow water of the sloping cave bottom.

It was daylight again, as the filter of light above their heads testified. Thord with difficulty got to his feet, stretched—ow-ee! But any movement hurt! Tenderly he felt his body with his hands to see if any bones were broken. He seemed whole, just merely a mass of aches and bruises from the cruel buffetings of storm water and cliff. Cautiously he began a tour of inspection around his cave prison. It seemed a spacious place, with several tunnels of eroded limestone leading back in various directions. Suddenly as he crept about the walls a more brilliant ray of sunlight bursting through the crevice above illuminated an awesome sight there in the limestone before him. It was as though he were sunken in the center of an ancient cemetery—an animal cemetery. Fossilized into the rocky shale about him, empty sockets gazed balefully out at him; here were skulls of pig-like monsters, carapaces of turtles unlike any turtles living, shin bone of giant rhinoceros that no longer roams the upper

jungle. With a scream Thord fell on his face before these gruesome souvenirs of a vanished age. He had a feeling of one dead and gone to another world. In answer to his cry Vaik came stumbling back to him and fell down too before these envaulted bones.

For long they lay, all the natural heathenish instincts of their minds aroused in abject terror. In what manner of place were they? What witchcraft dwelled in those hideous fanged skulls?

But as time passed and nothing happened, no curse of mind or body fell upon them, the two scrambled to their feet and backed away from the place.

Then Vaik, his bright, slant eyes becoming accustomed to the cavern light, broke forth into a scream—a scream of delight.

“The cat—the sign of the cat god!” he cried, rushing forward to a portion of the wall scored with crude drawings.

“Cat god—what?” Thord, all in a tremble, pressed close beside his companion. This strange cavern’s sights were fraying his nerves.

“’Tis the sign of Kutka, the god of the Huns. Know you not how in the long ago, when my ancestors, the Huns, scourged Byzantium and held Europe to tribute, the King Attila in a vision beheld Kutka in his tent in the form of a cat playing with a golden ball? The vision told him that so would he, King of the Huns, play with the round world. And the cat became thereafter the king’s banner sign.” Reverently the Magyar knelt to this strange symbol of royalty. Then gently he touched

a finger to the crudely scratched figure. "To think," he whispered, "that Attila, the great king himself, has been in this cave, has stood where we stand!"

To Thord's mind, the grotesque feline scratched on the wall was part and parcel with skulls and bones and other monstrosities of the cavern. The pantheon of hardy Norse deities held no such creeping creature as the cat for worship. However, the mere thought that human hands had cut the symbol on the wall, that human feet, even in the long ago, had trod this gruesome place, sent comfort to his chilled heart.

He drew closer to view this thing which had so touched Vaik. And then, because his eye was entirely undimmed by any emotion, he saw something that the other had entirely overlooked—a glint and glitter in a crevice beside the cat sign. Reaching up a hand, Thord scraped out of the crack and onto the damp stone at their feet, a mass of golden rings, glittering jewels, crosses of many a rifled bishop, necklaces snatched from high-born Rome and learned Athens, coins from the civilized coffers of the world.

"Attila's treasure! Lost treasure of the king!" gasped the awed Vaik, crouching beside the scintillating pile. "Riches beyond dreams!"

With vast cunning these two, but so recently slaves at an oar pole, disposed about their persons the more portable portions of their find. Beneath tattered leather tunics, little rags knotted full of gold and diamonds and rubies, and tied to a belt

cord about the waist, rubbed unctuously against lean bodies.

Laden with as much as they could comfortably stir under, they stored the remainder of the treasure back in the crevice beside the cat sign of Attila, King of the Huns. Since he had so well sat guard over the jewels, Thord now regarded the cat in a much more friendly fashion.

With full purses, but empty stomachs, the two prisoners of the cave put their heads together to plan a way out of their cliff dungeon. Besides the treasure cache and the crude picture scratched beside it, they found other evidences of human occupation, a sort of seat hewn out of the rock, ashes, charred bones, and other signs of a hearth and cooking further back in the cave. If in the old days men had come and gone from the cavern, there must be, besides the dreadful, water-filled tunnel, a way out now. There was need of haste, too, for it was all of twenty-four hours since they had eaten, and hunger was gnawing most unpleasantly.

The crevice through which light filtered down was plainly out of the question. That high opening, rent through solid rock by some age-gone cataclysm of nature, was far too narrow to offer passage. Moreover, the cave roof sloped sharply up to the crack in a fashion that defied climbing.

But the tunnels, they must lead somewhere! Vaik and Thord went groping down the first one, only to have it peter out in a mere crack that went down into the earth. Another outlet, and yet an-

other ended thus. It was as though the mighty force which had hollowed out the main cavern had soon expended itself in tunneling the short cracks that radiated from it.

CHAPTER IX

~~~~~ CAVE PRISONERS ~~~~~

IN a sort of hopeless persistence Thord and Vaik entered the last tunnel. It curved more than the others, dipped into the rock occasionally, as though following a wavering strata of softer substance. Sometimes it closed down to a mere crawl-passage. Sometimes it lifted into spaciousness. On and on it went. Then Thord's hand, feeling along a wall, struck something that sent a thrill of joy through him. Wood! It was a wooden brace into which he had bumped. There were more of them further on; the whole passage was propped for a space. Wonderful!

They were going the right way at last! Man had carved this pathway through the earth, and to man's haunts it must surely lead. Expectation lent speed to faltering feet. The two pressed on excitedly through the darkness, hoping each moment to glimpse the far pin point of light that meant an opening, an escape into the world outside.

Then Vaik, who was in the lead, gave a cry as he thudded into a mass of earth and wood. There in the darkness they dug and clawed at the opposing wall with all their strength. But they were blocked—hopelessly. A landslide of cavern roof had burst

through and crumbled up the old supporting braces. The way out here was closed forever. All in a tremble, the cave prisoners turned and slowly began to retrace their steps.

When at last they again reached the great main cavern, they dropped weakly down on their sleeping rock of the night before. A daze of fear held them. There was nothing else now save to make a try at getting out the way they had been swept in, through the terrifying blackness of the water tunnel.

Finally Thord got to his feet and nervously began tying together the frayed bits of rope that had formerly bound him and Vaik to the oar seat. After he had achieved a cord of some length by piecing it out with strips rent from their leather garments, he and Vaik tied themselves together. There was sufficient rope between them to allow freedom in swimming.

Shivering, they crawled down, down the cave floor. The water deepened to hand's depth, over the body, then to unknown vastness. Desperately the two kicked and swam there in that awful cavernous tunnel where a smother of stone roof rose a bare six inches above the water. But strive as they might, a terrible suck, a current like the undertow of a tide, drew them back, back into the rocky hollow beneath the cliff. There was no escape. Beaten and pounded, they let themselves be drawn hopelessly into the shallow wash of the cavern backwater. Almost too tired to move, they dragged themselves partly out of water and lay across the rock to rest,

Another night fell and after an eternity another day broke and sent a ray of light down into the cave.

That day a dead fish was washed into the cave trap. The prisoners tore it into two parts and devoured it ravenously, washing the food down with gulps of river water. An unpleasant, soggy diet, but it helped. The comfortable sensation of food was cheering, after a fashion. Other fish might drift in. Or perhaps with a bone from this one as a hook they might even set lines, catch finned food in plenty for all their wants. With meat and water they could last indefinitely.

A monotonous underground existence, to be sure—and they with the wealth of half a kingdom knotted about their skinny waists! The crude cat drawing on the wall seemed to leer down at them. Who were these puny mortals to think they could make off with the treasure he had sat guarding for six hundred years! Something of this passed through Thord's mind. The stolid leer of the Hunnic cat irritated him. He felt an insane desire to fling off from his person this worthless gold that was a mockery now.

But the anger and the indignation stirred his befuddled brain. With a return to his native shrewdness the Norse fellow remembered something, remembered the broken bit of oar that had been sucked in after them. Where was it?

All athrill to experiment, he dashed to the rear of the cave, dragging the roped Vaik after him. Gathering up the few precious faggot ends left from the

crude hearth of long-gone occupancy, he hurried back to the tunnel mouth.

One by one, and with long agonized waits between, he flung in the bits of wood, and with heart-breaking regularity, saw them sucked back into the trap hole. Then at last a charred faggot swirled out and returned no more. With a mad cry, Thord, with Vaik behind him, plunged on hands and knees down the tunnel slope into deeper water, swimming frantically; and with the strangely fluctuating pull of the vortex sucking them now toward the outer world, they gained the blessed open of the river.

Horror of the place from which they had just escaped sent them swimming on desperately. Then exhaustion claimed them and they rolled on backs and floated. For a space they drifted thus, past cliff walls, on into a meadow stretch where reedy banks sloped gently to the river edge. Here they managed to pull ashore, to stagger drippingly a little way into the warm sunny grasses, and to drop in weary contentment. There was no sign of boat on the river behind, no movement of life on the plains before them—unless that dark, far-away speck in the dim distance might be a horse or horses.

“Hark,” whispered Vaik as they lay in the grass, “I would keep that a secret.” He touched the other’s wet tunic where it faintly outlined the lumped treasure beneath.

“Um—yes,” agreed Thord drowsily and was asleep the next moment.

The distant dot on the horizon resolved itself into other dots, the whole drew nearer, a galloping

mass of horses and herders seeking a Danube drinking hole before dusk. They swarmed on like devil riders of the twilight, the Magyars of the plains, circling with piercing whistles around the vast horse herd and rounding up the whole at the river bank. Some of the foremost fellows, ecstatic with rush of life and wind, dashed their small tireless chargers smack into the river, swam about, and clambered out, shaking themselves like soused poodles emerging from their bath.

Into the midst of this swirling *mêlée*, Vaik and Thord, suddenly coming up like two half-drowned, battered spectres from out of the river grass, thrust themselves. Horses snorted; not a few riders laid ready hand on knife or dagger strapped at wrist. A swift leather lariat hissed through the air and there were the two of them trussed up together, helpless at one end of a rope, while at the other a half-wild horse bucked and reared beneath his rider, ready to be off at a run, to fray this roped hindrance to bits on the plain.

Then as Vaik burst into a guttural flow of explanation, all in their own tongue, the swarthy herders crowded in with words of welcome, and apologies for their near mistake. Thord, with his mere smattering of Magyar gleaned from Vaik, caught only here and there understandable words. He could piece together something of the conversation though.

Hui! Prisoners and slaves they'd been! Plowing—bound to an oar—tch, tch! A dog's life to be sure! The wiry, leather-faced fellow with more

arm ornaments than the others and with a gold stud thrust through the cartilage of his nose, ran a hand through his lank black hair. No, he couldn't say he'd ever heard of Vaik's father, Kenebog, nor his uncles, Ellwan or Essgau the Swift. Couldn't know everybody on these thousand miles of pasture; but wait, there was a camp out beyond the valley land, herder chieftain there named Juga Dun, claimed to be kin to some sort of Swift One—maybe he was a cousin—they could ride that way sometime and see.

With true hospitality of the plains the herder opened his food bag, a skin with holes around the edge through which ran a thong to gather it up. It contained curdled mare's milk in clotted lumps, which he offered to the strangers, and which those famished ones found tasted far better than it looked.

Then two herders lassoed for themselves a wild steed apiece, and with the newcomers up on their saddled beasts the whooping cavalcade was off. Thord, stiff and unpracticed after the long months of oar work, felt hugely over-big and clumsy among these supple, yellow-faced little horse herders who seemed as one with the steed beneath them.

All the Magyar wealth was horses—horses and the odds and ends of plunder they had snatched from the terror-stricken civilizations of Europe in their various invasions. But the invasions were done for; the Magyar hordes had had the last fang pulled by Otho the Third, King of the Germans. From now on this seething, swashbuckling, brawling

mass of Asiatic pagans was to be confined beyond the Danube. And with their wild raids halted, these kumiss-drinking tent dwellers settled down into the free nomads of the steppes to live their own galloping style of life beyond the pale of civilization.

The Magyar herders kept the wealth of half-wild horses together by forever riding round them, adroitly giving them the direction wanted, and at the same time preventing any from straying.

Into this careless, free existence Thord and Vaik were easily absorbed, half prisoners, half guests. They did their part of the hard riding and ate and slept with the others. After perhaps a moon of herding, the continual changing of pastures brought them near Juga Dun's camp, he who might be a kinsman of Vaik.

Juga Dun accepted Vaik with little concern. Likely enough they were cousins. A man couldn't keep up with all his relatives in these days.

He looked at Thord Firetooth of the fair mane and big limbs rather askance. This was a queer sort to be consorting with a Magyar. But old Juga Dun, with all his vast herds to be looked after, could always use more men, so he took them on, especially after he had heard of their life at the German castle. If they could cook, that was fine!

Vaik had not exactly planned on being set to cooking when he had hunted up a supposed kinsman. But there was no particular way out of it—not at present, anyway. Juga Dun was a chieftain and rather a power in these parts. Later perhaps Thord and Vaik could drift on eastward and northward

and come in contact with Vaik's wandering family and close kinspeople.

Thord Firetooth cooking for a parcel of mangy Magyars! The tall Norseman, casting his mind back to other days, felt that this latter indignity was some nightmare incredible, a thing that could not be.

But here he was in all reality, bending his back above a Hunnish pot and stirring the stew with a peeled willow wand in lieu of a spoon. And he was not even head cook at that—Vaik, with his culinary experiences at the castle, perforce must lead.

The two of them were hard put to accomplish anything in this new line of endeavor that was forced upon them. What with jealousy of the weazened old females who had hitherto ruled the pots and with the vast lack of ovens and pans and seasonings, the cooks were at their wit's end to produce anything savory.

A hole-in-the-ground oven was finally evolved where they managed to bake a flat bread in the ashes and roast fish and such. Tough horse meat for stew was made tender by being pounded between stones and flavored up with seasonings of onions and leeks. The fat, red-faced cook back at great Castle Hegau might have thrown up her hands in holy horror over the queer messes her erstwhile pupil concocted, but Vaik's and Thord's cooking seemed to tickle old Juga's leathery palate.

Their baking and boiling pleased other palates too. For whenever they could, Tzana and Hur-

reeka, Juga Dun's daughters, would steal back to the busy place of pots and hearths to learn the stranger's arts—they said. But more likely it was Thord's wholesome comeliness which drew the two damsels. For he was far handsomer than the usual run of big-eared, yellow-skinned Magyars.

“Tell me more about that German castle, or, no—better still, tell me about your sister, that fair princess of the icy north—her furs—the long-haired horses she rode,” Tzana would command from her perch on a great wagon wheel above the pots.

She and the small Hurreeka were rather pretty for Magyars. True enough, Tzana's face was flat and her skin of a colorlessness, but her sparkling eyes were richly black like old honey and her red lips and white teeth could smile most provocatingly. She was still half-child, hardly half through her teens. But soon she, and also the younger Hurreeka, would be betrothed and married off for a price to some horse-herder chieftain of the plains. Upon her would descend house-keeping cares of a tent or a leather-roofed wagon and its attendant rattle of brazen pots.

“It's best I should learn some of your secrets of brewing and baking,” said Tzana of the wistful smile, scrambling down from her perch. “How many grouse eggs and how much of cardamom do you mix in the—”

But Tzana's cooking lesson came to an untimely end. Her cousin Zohac, tramping in from the rear, roughly knocked her aside and sent her scuttling up front, muttering after her, “May Kutka shame

you—the chief's daughter—forever seeking out this alien, who like enough will bewitch you, even as he has bewitched our horses." Turning back to Thord, Zohac's voice rose in an angry shout, "You heard me, si, you devil, son of devils! We've found you out, you bewitcher of horses! Seven of them were dead behind the gulch this morning. You did it—you with the foreign curses you've brought among us. But your throat'll be cut by night—ek, great Juga Dun shall be told all—great Juga Dun will have no foreign sorcerers in camp—"

"It is false—I could not have harmed the horses—" Thord faced his accuser. "Not for days have I left camp. All here know that. I have been at the pots. How could I have been elsewhere at the same time?"

"Si, si, easy enough, sorcerer!" interrupted a cracked old voice, as a frowsy woman's head thrust out through a tent opening. She was one of the supplanted cooks. "Si, si," her harsh voice, hoarse and dry, crackled on, "my ghost double warned me last night to beware of this horned viper warming himself among us—warned me he was up to mischief. He'll be the death of us all. I say stone him!"

"Ek—yes—stone the sorcerer! Juga Dun'll stone him, or knife him!" Other voices took up the refrain of threats.

A shiver of despair swept over Thord. Simply to deny would be useless. Witchcraft, which stirs the ugliest depths of primitive peoples, is one of those weird accusations against which a vow of innocence

bears small weight. Thord Firetooth knew well enough that his guilt could never be proved, but neither could his innocence.

Thord also knew that Vaik would never desert him, though a Magyar himself. He had endured too much suffering alongside of him ever to be anything but a friend. Even now Vaik came to stand beside him, a picture of dumb misery, and offering the only thing he had—his steady devotion. Thord felt that Tzana and Hurreeka had not deserted him, either. But what could two girls do? Or again, what could Vaik do?

For the rest of that day Thord sat dazed and useless beside the crude earthen oven. Vainly his mind tried to conjure up some escape from the terrible situation in which he found himself. But there was no way out. He was trapped here among jealous tribe folk who wished to see him die. It was no use to try to escape on the plains. Though unfettered, he could feel, rather than see the vengeful glitter of watchful eyes.

He could only wait—wait for Juga Dun's return and Juga Dun's judgment.

CHAPTER X

~~~~~ THE BRIDE HUNT ~~~~~

THE return of Juga Dun affected Thord's case in a decidedly unexpected way—as unexpected to the accusers as to Thord himself. After a day of suspense in the Magyar camp where suspicion had hung over him like a cloud and hate had flashed upon him at every turn, he did not expect justice.

Finally Juga Dun had come home and found his camp in confusion; his cook pots deserted, and a man accused of sorcery.

Perhaps Juga Dun was out of humor because he was hungry and had been looking forward to his evening meal. For he turned against his underlings in a manner most surprising.

“Sorcery!”

The voice of Juga Dun was full of contempt.

“What one of you horse herders or old women of the tents has any knowledge sufficient to speak of sorcery! Like enough the seven horses ate of the devil weed and died of cramps. At some later day when we come nearer the cave of the Hermit Z'faa, who is an oracle, I will ask him of this matter and learn the truth of the seven deaths. Time enough then to settle this question of how to kill him!”

With a lordly wave of the hand the matter was dismissed.

Thord was saved. Relief swept over him and left him weak and giddy with emotion.

Yet with saner thought the sentence sounded more like a reprieve. He was to be saved over for a space for some purpose—very likely merely to cook a feast for the old fellow's friends. After that his life hung on a word from a weird hermit whom he had never seen, and whom the jealous Zohac might easily manage to bribe into a decision against a hated stranger from beyond the great river.

None the less a reprieve was better than nothing, and hope blossomed anew in Thord's breast. Many things might happen before the herds grazed as far as the cave of Z'faa.

So Thord settled back into his labors at crude hearths and swinging kettles and racked his brain to help Vaik prepare tender messes which would appeal to old Juga Dun's appetite. Safety in this hostile gathering seemed to lie that way. The chief hindrance to any very successful culinary achievement was the continual moving of camp. By the time he got used to one hole-in-the-ground oven, he had to dig another some forty miles further on.

The grazing herds fed in a vast circle. To Thord's eye the lands into which they were coming in the second moon of his life with the Juga Dun band seemed vaguely familiar. The rolling aspect of the country, the highlands that might be cliffs over there on a river—all things reminded him of the place where he and Vaik had first crawled out of their

Danube refuge onto the reedy banks of the bordering plain.

Suppose they were ever drawing nearer the secret cliff cave! Dim plans for escape began to formulate in Thord's mind.

But for a space events closed in with such rapidity that there was scant opportunity for any thinking. It was now the time of the year when the great Magyar herd chieftains gathered in a sort of council to settle range disputes and decide boundaries for this and that tribe's pasture land. What with the women folk and children brought along and the bartering of brides and the swapping of news, it was a festal occasion. The wily Juga had planned a great feast for a select part of this gathering, with a canny eye on gloriously feeding up the prospective husbands of his two marriageable daughters in view of extracting a better marriage price for them.

For many days preparations went on for this auspicious event. Besides the carcasses of the rare wild urus oxen and tender colts, a quantity of fish and fowl and small game of the plains was brought in. From all over the camp rose a sound of grinding. Out of doors before the tent flaps yellow-faced Magyar women were hard at it, pounding grain between pestle stones for the making of the flat cakes.

Thord and Vaik were up to the ears in the dire task of concocting a great pie. Of civilized oven and pan and what-not-else there was naught. But old Juga Dun had once dined on meat pasty pie somewhere up in the land of the Franks, and meat pasty pie he must have for his festivity. So as

Thord and Vaik rather valued their hides, they were diligently making meat pasty pie.

For lack of other arrangement Thord was squatting beside a broad flat-topped rock with a fire beneath it. Here he anxiously tended the delicate browning of huge thin slabs of dough kneaded flaky with ox tallow, the crusts for the many layered pie that was to be! With equal intensity Vaik hovered over a kettle of steaming pie filling, minced horse meat and onions and fish and every known variety of small game and fowl and a richness of spice seething through it all. Fine smell of baking and boiling fair smothered the camp in appetizing odors.

With a rumbling and rocking of ponderous two-wheeled carts and a mad gallop of riders, the guests arrived. Men in embroidered leather and silver buttons, many a one using as saddle blanket a rich tapestry or priestly vestment rifled from some far-away Christian monastery, women perceptibly heavy-footed under a weight of jewelry and bangles, young girls with bright ribbons plaited in their hair and coin necklaces above their bodices.

Not a few of the matrons had come on horseback, and here and there one shook a youngster out of the skin bag tied to her back, a flat-faced, slant-eyed morsel of humanity that had early got the galloping in its blood. All Magyars were born to horsemanship and looked well, mounted. But on foot, their defects of lean, shrunken bodies, ill-shaped faces, narrow, suspicious little eyes were

doubly emphasized. Thord Firetooth, peering out from swirls of spicy steam, could not repress a long-drawn "ai-ee-ho!" of dismay at the massed Magyar ugliness before him.

In preparation Juga Dun had had a carpet of hay and straw spread over a great space within the camp. Here the noisy crew flung themselves, sitting at ease with crossed legs, to await the serving of the meal.

And how they did eat! A whole spitted and roasted ox was brought forth first, followed sumptuously with stuffed fowl and fish and stews and tidbits of liver.

And while the great leathern vessels of wine and ale were going the rounds, in came the pie! It had been built, perforce, in a mighty cauldron, layer upon layer, crusts upon meats, and an uproar of spiciness steaming up from it. 'Twas like naught ever seen in civilized land, but it suited well old Juga Dun's Hunnic guests. With cries of delight the whole troop fell upon it ravenously, though how in the name of sense they could hold any more amazed the wondering Thord. With their short swords they hacked out wedges of pastry, grabbed in for meaty bits with their fingers, and scraped out the last crumb in short order.

Though matters of lands and feuds and boundaries might be settled throughout the eating and afterwards even during the screech of fiedla and clash of cymbal and the mad whirling dancing of the younger crew, Juga Dun craftily waited till the bowls of spiced drink were brought forth for deeper

revelry before he would listen to offers for the buying of his daughters.

A square-faced old herder from halfway across Asia had come to help his equally square-faced son buy a wife. There were young, devil-may-care riders from the region of Hortobagy and from the plains of Sogdi and from nearer Gatya—all wife hunting. Old Juga Dun had herds enough to interest them. And his daughters were not bad looking.

It looked as if the thing could never be settled. Far on into the afternoon the wrangling went on. What would be the dowry, and how about the bridegroom's gift?

Tzana and Hurreeka, the two child brides whom all this most vastly concerned, were not consulted at all. They could have no say whatever in this casual disposing of their future lives, but must be stolidly sold off like an ox or a horse.

The bidding waxed high. Pounds of gold and silver, herds of horses, leather tents were offered. An unexpected contestant entered the race—Zohac, who had had an eye on his Cousin Tzana all along. By an extra horse, he out-bid the rather genial-looking Si Lora from up Sogdi way. Si Lora met his offer and added a sheep. And thus it dragged on till everybody had offered all that any wife in reason was worth. Still matters were tied.

Then amid this general dissatisfaction, Juga Dun arose and cut the bothersome knot with the announcement that the affair should be settled with a good old-fashioned bride hunt, with everybody on

horseback and a race. The contestant who caught a girl should have her, provided he had the price.

A great "hulla!" went up. Fine! Besides his good feasting Juga Dun was providing a bit of extra excitement.

Away from the laughter and the shouts, the slim Tzana made her cautious way to the rear where Thord and Vaik, ostensibly scrubbing pots with sand, were in reality disposing of various flat packages of pilfered food about their persons. They leaped to their feet in startled dismay at her approach. But Tzana was too absorbed in her own troubles to notice anything amiss.

"Please," she begged, her little fingers all atremble as she plucked at Thord's sleeve. "Oh help me! It's to be a bride hunt after Hurreeka and me. Zohac—we hate him so; he's cruel; we once saw him beat a horse to death—he rides the fastest stallion of the plains; he'll catch one of us—"

"B-but," stammered Thord.

"Wait, hear me," hurried on the girl. "You want to be away from all this—want to escape; I can help you, get you both off."

Thord and Vaik crowded closer, faces lighting. It had been in their hearts to make an attempt this very night. They were sure now they were near the cliff cave where they could hide.

"Listen well—but promise me you'll help me if I tell you?" pleaded Tzana.

The two nodded.

"That gully, behind the camp, you know. Penned in there are Juga Dun's fastest horses. While every-

body's drinking, get out a couple. You'll find a narrow, stone-blockaded entrance out there by that thorn bush—yonder, there. Oh, you can't miss it. And when you are mounted and off, do—do this for us, for Hurreeka and me."

The girl thrust into Thord's hand a crimson bundle, which unrolled, revealed itself to be a couple of brilliant crimson mantles, exact counterparts of the mantle knotted about Tzana's shoulders.

"Wait for us, a little while, out there beyond the rolling hills. We'll be far ahead of the others. When we catch up, give us then our chance, our chance for happiness. When we doff our red robes for blue and ride for the east, you two, wrapped in these crimson mantles, head for the west and the Danube. Bend low in the saddle, lead them on, make Zohac think you are women."

"Another skin of ale, more wine!" came cries from the feasters.

As Thord hastened forward, bending beneath a great skin bottle, Tzana nervously halted him for a moment.

"Can—can you tell him of Sogdi, Si Lora, what you know—which way we ride?"

"Yes, yes," and Thord was gone with his load.

Warmed by his wine, Juga Dun's guests had lifted their voices in singing. Two old chieftains struck up a ballad about King Attila's loves, and the whole assembly joined loudly in the ribald chorus to a screeching accompaniment of fiedla and horn. Thord thought he had never heard such a heathenish

racket. But the tumult served him well. As he filled Si Lora's bowl, he managed to whisper: "Tzana rides east. Follow not red, but blue."

And the young fellow nodded solemnly at him over the rim of his bowl.

One drinking bout followed another. And after the singing, more dancing—and then more wine again, until it seemed that no rider would be clear-headed enough to straddle a horse. But Huns are a tough-livered crew, and it takes a deal to down them.

At last, when wrestling, warlike exercises and racing came to their turn, Thord and Vaik got a chance to steal out from camp unnoticed.

A quick run down the gully paddock, out through the secret opening behind the hills, swift horses beneath them—ola, it was hard not to be off at once, off for the Danube and freedom!

But the promise to Tzana held them.

The horses fretted and stamped. And the two young fellows sat wild-eyed and trembling. When would this thing be over? When could they get into action? And the same spectre of fear rode each one's shoulder. Zohac of the swift stallion! Zohac the cruel! Suppose they couldn't outrun him? Suppose he rode down one of these mock brides! To the unarmed runaway, it could mean naught but death. Life was sweet. Illah, but they must be off, leave Tzana to her fate! But something held the two shivering fellows to their promise—chivalry perhaps, a remembrance of a little trembling hand plucking at a sleeve.



He rode as he had never ridden before.

Somewhere out behind, the tumult began. Horns, shouting, hallooing, thud of racing hoofs! Over the hilltop surged two splendid horses, bestrode by two girl riders bowed low and weeping with fright. Like a couple of little wild beasts they were to be run down and caught.

A moment the four riders huddled together for a short word of farewell. Then the two girls changed crimson mantle for blue, eased around a thicket, and headed east.

As the tumult of the bride hunt stormed over the hill, the leaders spurred onward after a pair of crimson draped riders fleeing across the westward plain.

Alas for any hopes Thord Firetooth had entertained of escape! Zohac the Magyar was most splendidly mounted. His handsome bay stallion kept the lead of all. Straight into the glow of the setting sun he galloped, gaining, gaining on the rider just ahead. Because Thord was the taller, and supposedly Tzana, he was Zohac's victim.

Across the plain the race strung out. The Norseman rode as he had never ridden before, lashing and pushing his steed for every ounce of speed he possessed.

"On, on!" he prayed through set teeth.

The Danube, it was in sight—he must make it!

But the panting of the bay stallion was close behind him.

In the twilight glow, Thord swerved and dodged, but Zohac's strong, cruel hands were around him, dragging him off from the horse. He was shouting, "I have you, you swift Tzana! I'll tame you!"

And in that instant Thord, the erstwhile cook, snatched from beneath his garment a packet of pepper, flung the whole burning contents into his captor's eyes, and wrenched himself free.

As Zohac with a howl of pain lunged forward, Thord sped for the river, leaped in, and disappeared beneath the waters.

CHAPTER XI

~ HERO OF THE RAGGED CASSOCK ~

AS though sullen fate had once more deigned to smile on him, Thord had the luck again to reach the mysterious refuge of the Danube cliff cave—the cave that had once been so hateful to him, but now in his extremity seemed a dear haven.

Leaping clear of Zohac's hand, racing up bank to a position that he prayed was above the cave, plunging into the water, and surrendering to the will of the whirling currents, Thord Firetooth had been half smothered in the swirl of the pool, but withal had lived to surge through the tunnel into the comparative safety of the cavern.

Vaik was already there. Being less hotly pursued, he had gained the refuge first. For three days they held to their chilly underground abode. The packets of food they had managed to store about their persons and the muddy river water kept life within them. And despite the twilight atmosphere and dank discomforts, their spirits soared high.

They had outwitted their enemy—made a mummox of him, so to speak. What wouldn't they give to be able to steal back invisibly to the Magyar camp to listen to the weird, superstitions, around-

the-fire talk concerning the witch brides that had led the bridegroom to be, Zohac, astray across the plains and evaporated before his eyes into a river mist!

But could they have known in reality the vengeful talk and plans of Magyar Zohac, their little bubble of self elation would have been cruelly shattered.

In the dawning of what they figured must be about the fourth day they abandoned their cave, letting themselves be drawn back to the surface by the out-suck of the strange whirlpool current. From the reedy river bank they cautiously surveyed the great plains stretching green and rolling to the eastward. No sign of camp or herds or human beings showed upon the horizon. Juga Dun and his train had moved on, it seemed, to another sector of the thousands miles of grass.

To his late captives, however, the other side of the Danube appeared more safe and appealing. Consequently they set about gathering such lengths of driftwood as they could lay hands on and with a wattling of vines, fastened these together into a crude raft.

In the haste of their making, the raft was too flimsy to float even one of them. It served only as a sort of support they could cling to with one hand while swimming valiantly with the other. The river, smooth and quiet as it looked, carried them a good way down before they could make the opposite shore. And then they landed in a reed bed at the outlet of a mashy lake where a host of wild

fowl and duck whirred up indignantly at the intrusion.

Thinking it best to put more space between themselves and any chance stragglers from Juga Dun's herders, they halted in the marshlands merely long enough to bind more logs to their raft and to add two poles to their equipment. Then, alternately paddling and poling in the shallow depths, they worked laboriously onward along the edge of the lake that stretched back into the wooded country for miles. It was a wilderness world they were coming into—great dark trees fettered in lush vines, pale sunshine filtering through the rank growth, stealthy movement of deer and wild ox seeking the water holes.

In keeping with the sylvan wildness of the place was a queer craft they suddenly came upon as they rounded a wooded promontory. It was a box-like affair hewn out of a log and roofed over with a mass of green branches. Unpropelled by oar, this extraordinary thing drifted with seeming aimlessness in the slight current and nosed into a growth of rushes. As a covey of wild fowl soared up ahead of it, from out of the floating bower of leaf work an arrow twanged and yet another, bringing down accurately a couple of plump ducks. Simultaneous with the fall of the game, the shooting screen above the dugout parted to a great rustling of branches and the huntsman concealed beneath upreared himself and reached for his birds. This personage, here in the wilds of a Hunnic swamp, the two fugitives viewed with open-mouthed astonishment. For the

thin, freckled, red-bearded figure that uprose like an apparition out of a swamp boat wore a brown cowl over his head and a faded brown cassock that hung to the knee in a ragged fringe. Along with his rosary, a quiver of arrows was tied to his waist cord.

“Eheu!” exclaimed the ragged apparition, evidently as startled to see them as they were to see him. “Eheu, by the beard of holy Patrick, the blessed saint is at last sending me some one to convert. Oho, welcome, welcome to Elkorka’s little world!” he added in such a mixture of the Irish, Latin and Magyar tongues that the two on the raft scarce understood a third of his greeting. Nevertheless, they paddled nearer, drawn by the kindly welcome shining in the thin pale face.

However, did these fugitives but know it, ’twere not so strange a thing to be finding an Irish monk even in this wild place. For the fiery zealots of Erin, ever since their conversion by the beloved St. Patrick of Armagh, had for centuries been coming over into Europe to do their share in converting the heathen there. Even now the Celtic brotherhood was sending its representatives along with mighty Olaf to Thord’s own northern homeland. Down in Burgundy and Gaul and Saxony they had already labored for hundreds of years. And now here was one godly fellow come all the far way across into Magyar land to bring by his lone self the Gospel to these wild people.

Paddling his dugout closer, the kindly, nimble little man of the cassock helped the newcomers

make a landing with their clumsy raft and drew it up on the lake shore. Then he led them along a dim path to his hut, a mere brush and wattle affair set before the mouth of an earthen hollow eroded by the elements back into the hillside. True to his stern Celtic upbringing, the good father had naught of comfort in his half-hut, half-cave dwelling—merely a pile of leaves for a bed and two rounds of tree trunk for seat and table. However, such as he had was at his guests' disposal. With courteous grace he set out before them a portion of dried fish and a little bitter loaf made of acorn meal. This wiry, self-appointed missionary to a savage land was beholden to no man's bounty for a living. By the sweat of his own brow had he felled the timber for boat and hut, and by his own fish spear and arrow did he gain his scanty sustenance. And like a hermit he had dwelled here some months now in seclusion and prayer in preparation for his going forth to the Magyars.

That some pious dispensation of providence had sent these fellows direct to him for conversion Elkorka never for a moment doubted. And straight into spiritual wrestling with their still half-pagan minds he entered. The simple meal was eaten to an accompaniment of lively conversation wherein the story of Thord's and Vaik's hard adventures were well mixed with Elkorka's inquiries after the state of their souls and how far they had proceeded into regeneration. And then, in the midst of Father Elkorka's shocked exclamation after his two wanderers had informed him that they had more often

worshiped the sun, than Him who made the sun, there burst a sound of mighty trampling down on the lake shore and clang of shield and shouts.

Thord and Vaik, prickling to their hair roots in a shiver of fear at the sound—it was Zohac's voice that roared above the rest—rose and glided soundlessly back, back into the earthen recesses of Father Elkorka's cave. This sudden descent of the enemy sapped their courage. Who would think that they would have been tracked so soon? And trapped in here now, with no way out!

In the midst of the psalm that Father Elkorka began peacefully to chant, through the doorway burst the Magyar Zohac, a bandage across one eye and a rabble of followers at his heels.

“Where are those vile sorcerers, those witch men that have escaped us? The rogues! One shall be hanged and the other chopped into little morsels!” he shouted angrily. “We trailed them by muddy footprints, by log raft; they are here. Hand them over!”

But ever so quietly the old monk came forward.

“Peace, my son. Seest thou not thou are disturbing my worship?”

In amazement at such calm, the barbarian fell back a little. The gleam of eye, the uplifted hand of the man of God, no doubt struck him with a certain awe; but as he retreated he muttered on: “I want them; they must die.”

“Kneel!” cried the holy man in his smattering of Magyar. “We will pray over this matter. This is the house of God. Thou must beware!”

Like men in a trance, the wild ruffians obeyed and bowed their heads. But in the midst of Elkorka's long prayer for their souls the Hunnic men rose up and ran from the hut, holding up their hands as if to ward off something. To their crude minds the fervid utterings of this fiery-eyed priest were mere incantations that sat heavily upon their heathen hearts. They feared an evil eye or some other curse from the sonorous splendor of his unknown Latin declamation.

"Ah, they are gone! And I had hoped to convert them!" he announced regretfully, gazing after the rout of Huns taking to horse and galloping off through the trees as though the devil himself were on them. After this startling experience Vaik felt more strongly than ever the urge to be on his way to his own kin and the home tents of his tribe. He fell to pleading with Thord to be away with him up into the northern steppes of Hunland, to lead the wild free life forever. But the grip of the south was upon Thord Firetooth. Constantinople, city of his dreams was calling him. Some day destiny must lead him there. And perhaps its golden gate would open the way back to Norway by the ships that rove the sea paths—back to Nord Fjord, back to seek the little lost Thora.

But the parting held deep grief for both Thord and Vaik. They had seen so much of life together—this strangely assorted pair, blond Norseman and yellow-skinned Magyar. Their love, though, had nothing to do with skin. It was wound about their hearts.

The wrench of parting left them both shaken. The call of blood kin drew Vaik on, a lonely small figure, tramping off on the north trail with a food pack and little else. Thord, after a last tight hand-clasp, stood watching his friend go, watching till his eyes blurred and he had to drag his knuckles across them.

Yes, Vaik had to go. Thord had to stay. It was fated, perhaps.

Father Elkorka, who had been on many a pilgrimage himself and knew a deal about Danube boats and the pilgrims thereon, held out a hope to Thord that likely enough some pilgrim convoy would come down the river that he could join and go in safety to the "City of the Many Shrines."

Then, too, the ragged, fervent, red-bearded Irish monk strangely fascinated the Norseman. This man had power. Had he not, unarmed and by mere words, put to flight a Hunnic rabble? Thord would know more of this power. An admiration for the strong spirit in the frail body awoke in his heart.

Father Elkorka was a worthy antagonist in the war of words they continually waged throughout Thord Firetooth's stay in the hut by the lake. Thord had been "prime signed" with the sign of the cross up in Germany, and had listened to a great deal of chanting by the plump, comfortable monks of the Hegau monastery. Never before, however, had much understanding of Christianity sunk into his heart.

"But how, good Father," Thord would say, remembering back to his wrongs and his enslaving,

and thirsting for vengeance, "how can a strong man suffer violence without fighting back?"

And Elkorka would answer: "Eheu, man, it sometimes takes more of strength *not* to fight than to fight."

As they hunted through the forest for their daily meat and labored at the hut, the good monk was ever at his explaining how love was better than hate, and peace than war, and the White Christ better than pagan Thor or Frey.

And the nights with the millions of stars and silver disk of moon and hush of the universe—it was the night most of all that helped Father Elkorka turn Thord Firetooth from a desperate groping after the old bloody gods into a trust in the One God.

"Ha, Thord, has one god marshaled the stars and another god fashioned the moon, and doth another god hang the sun in the sky every morning? What, can one deity water the earth while a rival god nourish the harvest, and yet other jealous powers rule ocean and rivers and sea, rule animal kind, mineral kind, mankind! Na, Thord, think! All things are in harmony. The power that brought forth the stars brought forth all. Why not worship that one power—the One God?"

But there came a time, all too soon, when Thord's guidance in things omnipotent was cruelly cut off.

As he neared the hut one day after he had been afar up on the lake shore fishing, a cry of mortal anguish sent him racing through the undergrowth in a swift, noiseless run, hand defensively grip-

ping his fish spear. It was a piteous sight he burst upon—Father Elkorka weltering in a pool of blood, while above him crouched Zohac, snarling: “There, thou old sorcerer! Thou’l bewitch no more!”

With a cry of rage Thord leaped upon the murderer, choking him backward to the ground, spear point at his heart.

“Lift thy blade—peace!” came a faint arresting cry from the stricken priest. “Enough of blood is shed. Be strong enough—not to shed more—my son, be strong”—The words ended gaspingly.

Thord held his iron grip. After a space the voice went on: “Surely, O Thord, if I forgive this man, thou canst. This poor wretch hath a soul to be saved too, and I would save it—and I would save it—my one convert in all this land. Bring him near me.”

With the Norseman’s strong hand at his throat the Magyar bowed before his victim. But even without compelling he must yet have come, drawn against his will by the power in those dying eyes.

“Kneel—closer, quickly, before I go,” with a mighty effort Elkorka lifted his hand and touched Zohac. “Here on the brow I sign thee with the cross of Christ. Go—and sin—no—more.” and with these failing words life failed.

For a moment Zohac knelt on, a strange wild light in his eyes; then he leaped to his feet and fled into the wilderness.

And Thord hindered him not.

But “Oh my Elkorka, my Elkorka!” burst from his anguished lips as he flung himself to the ground.

“You were right! It takes far more of strength not to fight—not to fight for you!”

When many days later a boatload of pilgrims came down the Danube, Thord Firetooth, lonely watcher of the river bank, was allowed to join their safe convoy. To Constantinople, “City of a Hundred Shrines,” the Norseman went, carrying enshrined in his heart many a blessed word of Father Elkorka, writ there in a Martyr’s Blood—words that Thord Firetooth remembered, and only sometimes forgot. For Constantinople the Glorious was a city not only of beauty, but of dangers too for one with a belt of unspent gold about his waist.

CHAPTER XII

~~~~~ GATES OF THE CITY ~~~~~

ACROSS the warm southern waters of the Black Sea labored a blunt-nosed river ship, a Danube craft, that with many another humble bit of shipping had drifted the far winding way across half a continent and had swept with the river current into this inland sea.

From Black Sea waters, the boat passed into the narrow famous waterway of the Golden Horn. Somber figures in brown tunics and monkish hoods now thronged the boat sides—pilgrims bound for the holy shrines of Constantinople. Before their ecstatic eyes there arose in the glow of sunset the seven towers and the gleaming marble masses of palaces, cupolas and churches. Here above the blue waters stood out the dark green of royal cypress groves, there the gigantic dome of Sancta Sophia, and further on the towering granite of transplanted obelisks.

Not less eager than the pilgrims themselves was the blond, ragged Norseman in their midst. Thord Firetooth was overcome with his own species of awe as he gazed upon the glittering city of the Cape of the Golden Horn.

Galatia in Asia lay only a stone's throw to the left of them, but Europe's golden sacred city to the right held every attention in that boatload of pilgrims. Their craft swept down the waterway, past the port of the Ferry, and on to that port known as the Gate of St. Peter, and much frequented by foreign sailing masters. At last they were in the harbor itself, but not yet could they make a landing. Already many another ship, square sails set and all the oars at work, had pushed in ahead of the dingy river craft and secured place along the quay. The commotion at the ancient landing was most uproarious. With great shouting of the oarsmen a vessel was brought close and anchored and the unloading begun. Camels and porters and donkeys, drawn up in noisy array, were loaded with the cargo and disappeared up the shore citywards.

From many a land came the ships that, like flying birds seeking a rest, hovered in sea berths near the quay—spice galleys from India, lateen sails of Egyptian craft, and once a splendid pleasure boat all white and gilt, with gilt and crimson oars and a crimson canopy. Ola, this last vessel must bear royalty! Thord, straining his eyes through the mysterious flashes of blue Greek fire playing over the harbor in honor of this one's approach, saw an array of battle-axes drawn up on the shore and behind them priestly banners and vestments. Music of horns and cymbals rolled out.

With all this performance on land and sea it was night, and flash of torches flared along wall

and shore by the time the pilgrim passengers made port and came to the city wall. They stood at that high entrance, the arch of St. Peter's Gate with its contradictions of peaceful gilt figures on its pedestals and a massive, dart-throwing engine of war set upon its top. In these days of barbarian nations warring almost at one's doors, Constantinople turned a cold and military frown upon those who came to her walls. So it was that the humble, brown-cowled suppliants seeking the city's shrines found her gates locked against their nighttime arrival. The massive leaves of the entrance were folded shut, and above a narrow, iron-bolted wicket a centurian and his armed comrades held guard. Those who chose to enter the city by night must pay, and pay well, for the privilege. This was a perquisite the guards demanded for their own pockets—an arrangement quite without the city's knowledge, be it said to Constantinople's credit.

“Thy silver—let us see thy silver!” challenged the warder, Symachus, his avaricious eyes lowering disdainfully over the poor-looking crew without. “Think you the imperial guard of this imperial city will open the bars for mere oboli of brass and copper? A silver piece from each of you!”

This unforeseen dilemma sent dismay through the monkish band without. Like most poor wayfarers to the shrines, they had little of coin to be spent in aught but bare sustenance. But in the midst of their opening of lean wallets Thord Fire-

tooth, who had been fumbling at the weighty belt beneath his own ragged garments, suddenly stepped forward, holding up to the gate centurion's very nose a splendid, glittering golden ring—a ring that must have graced some potentate's hand ere Attila's Huns had looted it.

“Wait, good fathers!” he cried. “My piece of gold will open the gates better than all your silver. Ha, will it not?” and he turned the gorgeous jewel to catch the torchlight on its facets.

“Yes, yes!” The gateman pocketed the fee he had unlawfully forced, and his greedy eyes gazed in amazement at the ragged fellow who had proffered such wealth.

As though oiled with gold, the massive leaves of the entrance folded back. The pilgrims were within the city; yea even more, under the centurion's order a couple of his men were hurrying them forward in a seemingly kindly escort through the maze of streets to some hostelry afar from the place.

But one pilgrim, that newest and humblest of converts to Christianity, Thord Firetooth, was not with them. In the confusion and haste of the entrance a mail-clad leg had tripped him to a nasty fall in the dust of the roadway, and the massive gates clanged shut before his face. Now ere he could rise another kick landed on his ribs, and out of the torch-lit dimness a voice snarled at him: “Up varlet! Hand over the rest of the gold! We saw you draw the ring from the hidden store beneath the rags.”

In a daze Thord still crouched. His gold! His jewels! This robber of a gateman would steal all from him, would likely enough kill him into the bargain. Ya, but would he? In one swift, strong leap Thord plunged up and forward, butting his assailant violently in the stomach. With a groan the Greek doubled across the middle and staggered drunkenly. In that moment Thord, his head reeling from its own blow, dashed for darkness and freedom. However, he had not counted on the centurian's fellow accomplices. A spear whistled past his ears, another and another. He brought up pantingly, trapped against an out-jutting flange of the wall, got his back to a corner, and faced his pursuers desperately, his wooden stave in one hand, drawn knife in the other.

Two of them were at him; but he fought them off, swinging his stave in lightning parry to sword thrust. "Hola Odin! Hola Odin!" All unconscious, the old war cry of the north rose to his lips. Metal had slashed him, but his stave had cracked against bone. Illah-ya, his wounded arm was numb through! He was weaking fast. "Merciful Christ, save, save!" he panted between blows.

Then "Hola Odin!" came an echoing cry to his astounded ears. At a rush of oncoming footsteps his opponents fled. "Hola Odin!" it came again, closer. "Northman answers Northman! Where are you?"

"Here, here!" and Thord dashed forward from his wall niche.

The thieving warder of the gate and his accom-

plices evaporated as into thin air. Some wicket in the city wall opened and closed behind their nefarious backs. But there before the battlements of Constantinople, in the uplifted, searching light of their torches was revealed to Thord Firetooth such a sight as had not gladdened his eyes in all the long years of his exile—Norsemen, some six or seven of them, great blond giants in surcoats of bearskin and dragon helmets and bearing glittering battle-axes on their shoulders.

“Who gave the Odin cry?”

“ ’Twas I, Thord Firetooth, one time of the North Country. The gate warders here were like to have robbed and killed me. But you—” amazed, he limped nearer, reaching out a hand to touch the newcomers. “Who are you, dropping down out of the night like the old gods?”

“Not gods,” laughed the foremost of the Norsemen in a pleased note withal, “but we be part of the Varangians, of the battle-axe guard of His Majesty, ruler of this holy city. From the plight you were in, ’twere lucky for you, it seems, that His Majesty lost a missive of state at the landing this eve and sent us back to recover it.”

“The Varangians!” Thord Firetooth caught his breath. Who had not heard of the famous Norse guard of the Greek emperor, picked corps of northern warriors come hither across the pathless wastes of Russia or adown the ocean and across the Mediterranean in their longboats, answering the lure of adventure! The known world had rung to their valor.

“E-hu! Friend of the North Country, now that we have found you, best come on into the city with us,” kindly added Hervor, captain of the battle-axes. “Else those harpies of the gate will be after you again. Follow on.”

The officer led away from St. Peter’s Gate and on along the outside of the walls. At last after a wearisome circuit they arrived at a small sally port opening on the interior of a massive advance work which formed an entrance to the city itself. Three swift raps and the password, “Ho, Varangians,” served as talisman to open the portal. The small heavy door swung inward; four warders, each presenting a spiked battle-axe, guarded the passage. At sight of their comrades without, weapons were grounded and an entrance permitted. Over a long narrow bridge projecting across the city moat and here inclosed in the rampart, the soldiers, with the ragged Thord in their midst, came not only into the city, but into that great dwelling of the emperor himself, the Palace Bucoleon. Thus the Firetooth came into Constantinople, not by the common gateway, but through an entrance trod by many a king. As his soldier friends hustled him on to an humble apartment near their own Spartanly bare barracks, he caught glimpses here and there of the palacial elegance through which he was wafted—silken carpets, lamps of incense, marble and gilt and frescoing.

The ragged wanderer darted excited glances every whichway at once. Ehui! What an entrance he was having into the city of his dreams!

CHAPTER XIII

~ CONSTANTINOPLE THE GOLDEN ~

HE who sits in the Portico of Praxedo can see the world go by!" so said the dwellers of Constantinople.

The young man in the purple cloak and the gold-embroidered shoes, who sat slouched against a wine table just within the portico, thought there must indeed be truth in the saying. Even in one turn of the hour-glass, the watcher at the wine table had seen such a cosmopolitan throng surge from the water front, through the bazaars, and on up the great paved plazas as would prove Constantinople to be the trysting-spot of the nations.

Before him had passed Syrians, Bulgars, Slavs, Franks in clanking armor, velvet-clad Italians, shaggy-haired Patzinaks and Khazans, also Hindoos, Negroes, and even an occasional Chinese. The watcher had blinked a bit at the costumes. Here had passed stately Arabs, swathed in striped robes from head to foot. In close conjunction strode a string of blacks from the African Kush, huge ebony fellows, naked to the waist, with tiger-tooth gorgets and ivory anklets. Now had come a bevy of women, veiled (for Greek Constantinople was

well touched by Oriental customs), and stepping mincingly along on wooden sandals with blocks under them to raise the feet out of the dust. Other veiled women of higher degree had gone by in their gilded boxes, or sedan chairs, borne on the shoulders of livried runners. A Turk in a turban so colossal as to give him a magnificent aspect; a Russian in fur hat and fur robes, smelling reminiscently of fish, but well looped in gold chains; a Bulgarian with three knives in his belt; student youths with manuscript rolls under their arms, monks in brown robes, monks in gray robes, a Gypsy story-teller seeking listeners—oh, the world crossed your path here!

Belled donkeys leading long files of camels, gilded arabas drawn by oxen, horse-drawn telekas with satin curtains went up the *Mese*, or paved way.

The watcher behind the wine glass looked on, but without great interest. In the months that he had been here, he had already seen so much. This one was Thord Firetooth, but a very changed personage from that Thord who had fought for and lost a castle in the North Country, who had served over half of Europe as thrall to plow, huntsman for a duchess, slave to an oar, and lately had been a wanderer over the Hunnic marches till he had found freedom of body in Father Elkorka's hut and freedom of mind in Father Elkorka's words that had taught him the true meaning of the One God.

Back in Germany at the castle of Lord Iron-Arm, the Greek woman had told the Firetooth of

the splendor of the churches of Constantinople. Blessed Father Elkorka had planned to come some day to its hundred shrines. Humble pilgrims on the boat down the Danube had looked with longing to the time when they should set foot within this great religious center with its churches and its monks' cells on every hill.

So to Constantinople, city of his young dreams and ideals, Thord Firetooth had come with a quiver of hope in his heart of here being in nearer touch with God.

From the lodging that Hervor the guardsman had gotten for him near the barracks, Thord had set out to see and to learn what this city held for him. With other pilgrims, he bent the knee at many shrines. He stood in the nave and listened to the chimes and chants of Bartholdi Chapel. He followed the paved way up beyond the Aqueduct of Valens to services at the Church of the Apostles. He attended a stately midnight watch in the greatest church of them all, Sancta Sophia, with its domes and gilded columns, its jewels in altar and rail and pillar. He saw the sea of light from swinging silver lamps. He heard choirs chant from hidden balconies. It was all grand, spectacular, beautiful. But it left him cold. There was no humanness in it, no reaching out in brotherly love. No one here preached God. All the sermons he heard were full of cant and creed, and the hard words some Christian sects had for other Christian sects in the ritualistic battle that had split Christendom into schisms. Such things as whether it was right

to bend the knee twice, as the White Brotherhood contended, or thrice as the Gray Brothers declared. "Heretic!" was the name given to all who did not agree to the set order. And heretics—so Thord heard tell—were often given dreadful punishments when the brotherhoods could bend the law to their will.

Once indeed, a young monk—he might have been from Thord's own cold north, so blond was his hair, so fiery blue were his eyes, Brother Nila, he was called—did start a preachment that held his Norse listener spellbound. It was in a chapel of the Sancta Sophia. Thord, along with a packed concourse, stood upon the stone floor, eyes turned to the preacher, who loomed tall and still, no movement of long arms or body, but whose voice had all the fire and movement.

"Listen, all men, we of the great city have become so embattled in our schisms and divisions that we have lost sight of the real meaning of our religion. 'Twere better to think about loving your neighbor, and feeding the poor, and succoring the sick in Christ's name than to spend all time in quibbling over how many bows to make, how to bend, and how to make the sign with the fingers. Better just to say the simple creed, 'I believe in God and Christ, His Son,' than to go wandering off in a fog of words containing pronouncements our Lord never made. Love of God and love of man, is the only Way to Heaven. Nothing else shall avail. What matters it that the Gray Brotherhood say make the sign of the cross with three fingers, and

the White Brotherhood say make it with two fingers. That is a mere clutterment. I say cast all clutterment out of your lives, follow the straight Way—”

The preacher never finished his fiery sermon.

“Heretic!”

It was a dread epithet, hissed on the air.

Gray hoods took it up. White hoods spread it. “Heretic! Heretic!” A mass of robed men closed around the speaker, swept him from view. Sonorous chants filled the chapel. But they did not fill Thord’s heart. He wished to hear more of the speaker. What had happened to him?

Afterwards, Thord came again to that small stone-paved chapel, came again to other churches near by. But he heard no more preachers like that Nila—heard, instead, only factions of a divided church warring against each other in words. Greek worshipers noisily left the cathedral when those of the Roman branch of Christendom were wont to take their Sacrament. Roman orders made unpleasantness for the former worshipers. It was not religion. It was only two human factions, each trying to force its own way upon the masses.

So it was that Thord Firetooth had failed to find in Constantinople the spiritual ideal which he had dreamed. A something that he had believed was snatched from him. His heart held a terrible emptiness which he sought to close over, sought to hide under other phases of life.

But Constantinople, that had failed in one way, had lurement in plenty to offer in other ways. It was

a city of passing strange dazzle and wonders. For a hardy youth from the North Country, it unrolled a temptation of soft luxuries such as he had never dreamed existed.

The sleeping quarters that his Varangian friend had first secured for Thord Firetooth, was on a side street beyond the barracks, a clean, small room, with a matting rug, a bench for a bed, and a stool to sit upon. From here, the Norse fellow, with a fortune in gold and jewels in his belt, had stepped forth, walked a few hundred yards, and found himself engulfed in a world of luxury. Behind him lay the whole south-east angle of the city, given over to the Imperial Palace Compound, one hundred and fifty acres of buildings for the housing of royalty! Just north and west of this lay the Augustaeum, a plaza more glorious than anything Rome ever saw. A thousand feet long, three hundred wide, marble-paved, it was bounded by palaces, the marble elegance of the Baths of Zeuxoppos, churches, the senate house and the vast bulk of the Hippodrome.

From here the Mese, the great triumphal paved way of Constantinople, led on between palaces, clear across the metropolis to emerge at the Golden Gate, magnificent arched entrance in the south-east city wall.

Every vehicle that traveled the Mese seemed patterned in luxury, sedans inland with gold, carriages spread with gilt and carvings and lacquer. Small wonder that for the Norseman walking on his own legs down this luxury street—the more so, after the starved years of blows and toil that had been

his—the soft city elegancies began to awaken a passion for luxuries. Not many days after his arrival, he had the chance to see the most pompous of all the poms of the Golden City, and with it opportunity to prostrate himself along with the rest of Constantinople before the emperor. That august personage rode abroad of a morning in a style of state imported from the East. Before Thord Firetooth's wondering eyes there paraded a huge animal, the like of which was all unknown in his northern world—the elephant! On its back, housed in a palanquin of crimson and ivory, sat the head of the imperial government. About him advanced a cloud of waving plumes and flashing lances. The high crest of the sounder of the sacred trumpet went on before, clearing the way for royal progress. It was all most showy and wealthy and magnificent. And Thord Firetooth, rising up out of the roadway and shaking the dust from his garments, felt a sudden passionate longing to be magnificent also, to be bowed down to.

And so a goodly part of his jewel hoard went for fine raiment and a rich apartment and a round of pleasures. The gay night life of Constantinople took him into its insidious embrace and showed him a side of living of which he had never dreamed. He saw no more of the soldiers of the guard. Their stern, sturdy existence, like unto his own old life up in the North Country, seemed bare of glamour compared to dazzling wineshop and tavern and a host of other excitements. Forgotten now were all the high plans made back up in Magyar Land—

plans that were to lead to a ship, the sea-paths, the way back to Nord Fjord and Thora. Father Elkorka, who had died for Christ, became a dim vision of the past. Instead of high thoughts, giddy hours at the Gardens of Cybele filled all Thord's time.

It was a strange place—that place of the Gardens of Cybele. In the long ago when the site of Constantinople had been a heathen settlement, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Cybele had been inaugurated on this spot. The shrubbery of the garden was still set with slabs of semi-defaced hieroglyphics and huge fantastic images having cow-heads and dog-heads and other strange-headed creatures of the wild Egyptian doctrines. Here a swarthy-faced Oriental conducted a pleasure garden with gay wreaths on the extravagant images, and little tables for dice, and dancing girls in Eastern robes to while away the hours.

Soon, to the clean-minded Norseman, the brazen pleasures he sought came to be an emptiness and an oppression. Yet in a young man's stubborn bravado, he plunged in the deeper. The gamesters of Cybele had won full half of his treasure—more than enough to have bought the ship he had once dreamed of. Already over this gold that had been his, he had seen one drunken gambler knife another in the back. And in that moment, his soul went sick over what he was doing with his wealth.

Then it was, too, he had first begun to hate this golden Constantinople. So much of its glitter covered misery. It was a city divided against itself.

It had a multitude of churches with golden domes and mosaic floors, but its church people and its preachers were split asunder by bitter wranglings. It had long streets full of marble palaces and sculptured columns, but it had many more streets that were vile lanes of mud and dust, bordered by windowless dens, unlighted at night, given over to poverty-stricken masses, wandering dogs, numerous thieves. So flaunting was iniquity that it seemed if Constantinople surpassed all cities in riches, it did also in vice.

A city of filth and wealth! It had taken his dreams and given him nothing in their place. So he kept on gambling and carousing. Well, why not! Constantinople that had loomed so glorious before he saw her, was nothing but an empty golden lure. Ek-a! Maybe life was only an empty golden lure! Better take another drink, and cast another coin!

The Thord Firetooth that lounged against a wine table in the Portico of Praxedo was an elegant fop. Instead of sturdy leather jerkin and boots and brave sword belt of the old days, he was now swathed in a bright purple cloak hanging in ample folds from an exaggerated buckle of jewels on his left shoulder. Another buckle caught the cloak to his knee. Va, what an arrangement! How would a fellow ever walk or run or get to the rapier at his belt! Rakish cap with a feather in it, tunic and hose of saffron, silly shoes of red and black stripes and turned up in long pointed toes—what an outfit for a Norseman! This Thord no longer had a bronzed,

clear skin. His very face seemed to sag, and his eyes had drinkpuffs under them.

So looked Thord on this day as he slouched against a wine table on the Portico of Praxedo and watched the world pass by on the paved way of the Mese. He banged his goblet on the table top and an attendant came softly and poured more wine into it. Across from him lounged one Thyrtis, a gamester companion from the haunts of Cybele, drinking as usual on Thord's payment.

"Heigh-o! Let's be g-getting on to the H-H-Hippodrome," hiccoughed the gamester. "Great doings there, s-s-so folks say. Better come see—"

Thord had been to the Hippodrome before, had seen there many fetes and processions and the horse-races between the "Blues" and the "Greens," two political organizations of charioteers. He had heard there the made-to-order cheers for the Imperial Majesties—everything done by rule, so many cheers for the emperor, so many for each member of the party—nothing spontaneous. Ek—it was a weariness. He'd not go. But he did, for lack of something better to do.

On this visit, Thord Firetooth found the Hippodrome filled with a tenseness and a fulsome excitement that was anything but the usual cut-and-dried boredom that had oppressed him on other occasions there.

This Hippodrome was a veritable Circus Maximus, a vast pleasure house over 1300 feet long. Its race course was adorned with an Egyptian obelisk and priceless statues filched from ancient Greece.

The *Kathisma*, or imperial box,—actually a small palace in itself, with habitable apartments—rose above vast tiers of marble seats capable of holding tens of thousands of Constantinopolitans.

The curtains to the imperial box were drawn, none were occupying it today. But all other seats in the Hippodrome were thronged. Thord, from his place well down mid-way the tiers, turned and looked up behind him. On the ascending seats, back to the last one, was a multicolored, swaying mass, like bees swarmed thick. Only these were massed people, a huge body of spectators, men, women, children. Thousands, and thousands!

Below him stretched more massed heads, then the rail above the stone wall, and below that the enclosed oblong that served pleasure seekers as arena, race-course and place of processions on various occasions. Today, it was an arena, thickly strewn with wet sand, and cleared for action.

Laughter, hand-clapping for the show to start, a confused multiple murmur full of tenseness beat upon Thord's ears. He had picked up enough Greek in his sojourn here to catch the drift of the calls and cries—something about a criminal—punishment—judgment.

A trumpet blared loudly, once, twice. A hush of expectancy fell upon the crowd.

Beneath the marble seats, a set of tunnels had been built in regular order and with heavy gates giving into the long central place. One of these gates now opened. Out of the tunnel, attendants hauled a cage to the center of the arena. A man

stood within the cage. He was prodded out and left standing listless, unresistant, while the attendants made good time getting themselves and the cage clear of the arena and back within the safety of the walls and the gate.

The concourse swayed, a tremor ran through it, a few voices mouthed a word that soon began to spread like wild fire.

“Heretic! Heretic!” The ugly cry became a roar. “Heretic! He preached against all our established rituals—well, the brotherhoods united for once—sat in judgment on him—condemned him! Ek—he’ll pay for his loud talk with his life—Look! Look!”

The man down in the arena, black robed, hands bound behind, raised his head once, his hood falling back on his shoulders.

Nila—the young preacher! Thord’s dulled senses came to life with a great shiver. His heart seemed to turn over. That Nila, who had preached that the Way to God was through love, not ritual! And now warring sects had bound his hands, set him up as a victim—victim, to what?

From above the wall, men tugged at a mechanism of pulleys till it lifted a gate set in the stone facing below. Safe and high, they had opened another tunnel that led into the arena. Out of this dark runway, catapulted a huge, wide-horned bull, black, and his hind blackness splotched with red where spear points had jabbed maddeningly at him through bars to add to his brute temper. Red-eyed with rage, trumpeting, head lowered as he

paused to gore at the very arena sand, he stood a moment before the gate that had clanged down shut behind him.

A mad bull let in to gore a bound victim! How could silken-clad people shout in enjoyment at such a nithing, dastardly deed! Thord's heart went sick.

The victim stood firm, hands tied together, but no flinching on his face. Rather a glory. He was ready to die for what he preached and believed. He had faith anyway. That look—it was like the Saxon, like the beloved Father Elkorka. Something wonderful burst up in Thord's heart. There was a God, a One True God, if men like that were willing to die for faith. Of course, not all men had such faith. But to find one man in ten thousand—was not that enough? The doubts slipped from Thord. Sloth slipped from him too.

With one movement he was on his feet. He fought forward through the dense crowd, thrusting a way towards the rail. Voices shouted at him for obstructing the view, hands clutched to drag him down. His flamboyant purple cape was torn from him. So much the better—that left him with limbs and arms free.

Before his looks, his fists, a way parted somewhat. A shove, a wrench of his mighty arm—he had snatched away a soldier's javelin, and flung the fellow behind him.

A leap, and Thord was over the wall and into that dreadful arena. "Ehui—I come, to fight for you—fight for the White Christ!"

The bull, done with its pawing and bellowing,

stood quivering its ton of bulk into tenseness, ready for the trampling charge against that black object thrust up before him in the arena. But the leap of another object, this one a gaudy target in bright saffron, caught his mad gaze and swerved him into a charge after this new entrant into the field.

The grandstand swayed to its feet, burst into a long continuous roar. With some it was excitement, va, a contestant for the bull, a real show! With others it was a roar of moans, tardy shame that only one in this vast concourse should have showed pity backed by bravery.

Thord Firetooth heard nothing of the shouts, saw nothing save a black bulk rushing at him, death riding those scimitar horns.

At the first onrush, the Norseman leaped aside, and the dealer of death passed him by a fraction, wheeled with incredible speed for such bulk, and came on the charge again.

Thord was still panting from that rush through the crowds and his plunge over the wall. He had fought bulls before, up in the Nord plains. But then he had only lived clean, strong, and days full of muscular exercise. Now for months he had wallowed in wine, sat about in silks, eaten of softness, not of strength.

His muscles were not all gone, however. The hard living of plow-thrall and oar-slave had left him an iron frame beneath all recent softness. As he twisted and dodged, sometimes just a hairsbreadth ahead of slashing horns and hoof thunder, some of his breath came back to him. He was remembering to draw in easily, not in sobbing gasps to wrack the

chest. Other cunning came back to him—dodge to the left, to be on the heart side of the brute—feint with the weapon—make him turn—expose the chest—hui, time to thrust, now, before human strength wearied entirely!

With a high lift, and all his strength behind it, Thord plunged with the javelin. A sorry weapon—or tough bull hide—anyway, the spear haft broke in a rotten splintering! Only a puny slash had the weapon given, a prick that maddened an already mad beast.

Bellowing, it whirled, plunged, bore down upon the saffron-clad figure with a piece of broken wood in its hands to fend off bloody crushing death.

Thord's hands tore at the short knife sheathed in his sash. He had hardly gotten it out before the black ton of bellowing bull was upon him—a slash of horns, a hurtling skywards, a thud to earth! Red-rimmed eyes, ponderous head, cruel horns thrusting over him! He made one knife thrust, then blackness as of suffocation fell upon him.

Hours later, it seemed, Thord felt many hands dragging him forth in wrenching jerks from beneath a black bulk that was still warm—but dead, and stiffening. “A thrust—to the brain—never saw such a bull killing—” Words like these beat upon his senses, but he hardly comprehended them.

Shouts rolled above him. He knew not whether they were plaudits or curses. He only knew that soldiers were dragging him out of the arena—perhaps to finish killing him. He, an outlander and a stranger, had dared thrust himself, a clog, to hinder the workings of their law.

CHAPTER XIV

~~~~~ THE WAY TO ROYALTY ~~~~~

THROUGH the ages, as Constantinople had grown in wealth and power, it had pleased the great city to flatter herself by piling ceremonial around the person of her emperor until he had grown to be in popular imagination almost a sacrosanct character. Like the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs—almost a god, and therefore compelled to pose as infallible and immutable.

So great was the sovereign of Constantinople that he was a slave to his own greatness!

In theory he was an autocrat, but in practical life he had to comply in every word and movement to a set order of "majesty." His whole existence was hedged by a solemn pageantry wherein he played a part, and all his officials and populace played their parts.

What his imperial majesty, Basil of Constantinople, wore, what he said, what was said to him, all must be done according to rule. When he went to bed at night, it was a state function attended by lords of this, and lords of that. When his knees hoisted the bed clothes of a morning, when his feet touched floor, when he stood ready to put on his garments—all, all were affairs of state.

The day before he must needs leave the palace reservation—perhaps to visit some out-lying church—heralds must go forth to warn the populace to sweep and perfume their streets and scatter flowers that naught might offend this “divine” sovereign of the Romaioi. Always men must prostrate before him, always he must wear garments heavy with jewels, always a diadem on his head.

Thord Firetooth, during the months in the great city, thought he had seen ultimate splendor. But all other splendors that he had seen paled in glory by comparison with the richness he passed through, as between two soldiers, he marched the palace length to appear before the royal tribunal.

The way to the royal presence was oppressive—it lay past chamberlains, past officers of the sword, officers of the court, officers of the robes. It lay through ten anterooms, each handsomer than the last. In various of these were messengers, ambassadors, gold-laced couriers, cooling their heels while they waited an audience with his majesty. Here stood a turbaned Turk, anxious to lay before Constantinople’s emperor a treaty concerning commerce in Moslem lands. Here fumed velvet-capped Genoese sea captains eager to settle matters of the spice trade. Here were grouped musicians from various courts of Europe, waiting to try their airs on ears that were set beneath the most magnificent crown on their continent.

Thord Firetooth, leaning on one soldier because of the weakness bred of a horn slash on his hip, cast but brief glances on the assembled groups.

That hooded musician, the one with the bandaged eyes and small harp on his back—he reminded the Norseman somewhat of the scalds of the North Country, only Norse scalds were pagan and wore no hoods and no cross on a monk-like gown. The sea captain in velvet caught the prisoner's eye a bit. He cast a small glance at the Turk. Another day all of these might have interested him, but today Thord Firetooth had the weight on his mind of what lay in store for him at the royal tribunal, whence he was going, a prisoner, a violater of a great city's public plan of punishment.

At last his guards clanked him into the final sacred recess of royalty, the throne room. Here the emperor sat upon a stately seat rich with gems and gold, flanked on each side by a golden lion couchant. Behind the throne shot up a tree of gold in whose branches were flowers and fruits and birds of jewels. By some secret mechanism the golden lions were made to rise and roar, the tree was made to quiver as in a breeze, and the jeweled birds pecked at jeweled fruits. It was all very splendid and amazing and artificial.

Thord Firetooth looked, and felt filled with a weary repletion of this and all the other golden artificialities of the vast city.

Then his eyes went to the face of the man upon the throne. And he shivered. He had expected that when he came face to face with the monarch swathed in such excessive gilt and glitter, he would find that monarch a weakling, mayhap a gentle one. Instead, this Basil II had a countenance strong

and hard, and graven with deep-bitten lines of decision.

Such a man had the look of being perfectly capable of dealing with the enemies of his laws, capable of throwing a prisoner back into that arena of the Hippodrome to face for himself a mad bull in the place of the one so summarily killed.

"I know the evidence in your case," the voice of the emperor was as decisive as his looks, "never fear, but already any number have legged it to me, bringing me many views of the matter. Some would have you sainted, some would have you freed, some would have you stoned to death.

"For myself, I can only say that your foolhardiness is at least equaled by your bravery." The emperor paused, turned over the hand-written pages of a document. "This reads that we have freed the monk Nila from any further persecutions from the brotherhoods of the White Cowl and the Gray Cowl. We take his sudden expeditious release from death in the arena as a sign from Heaven. Since yours, Thord Firetooth, was the strong arm that saved him, your freedom is yours also."

"Free!" The young Norseman straightened back shoulders, drew a deep breath.

"Yes, freedom certainly should be yours," went on the emperor, "for you and that one called Nila have of a surety shown us the free straight Way to God in the place of the wilderness of cant and dissention and schism in which our souls have been smothered. Nila the Preacher has been raised to a place of honor in the royal chapel.

“A king has need also of strong-armed courage near him. To you, Thord Firetooth, I would give a place of honor in our palace.”

“I—Sire—” The Firetooth stood stammering. His eyes saw now the kindness that was in the stern features of the emperor. His eyes saw also the golden glitter which seemed to touch every part of the life about him. And for the first time in all his stay in glittering, golden Constantinople, the Firetooth suddenly knew exactly what he desired to do.

“For your favor, I have thanks.” Thord knelt to kiss the hem of the royal garment, then stood. “But, Sire, I am a Norseman, born and bred in the North Country. My own land calls to me. I would go to that land.”

No soldier accompanied the Firetooth out of the “presence”—a free man, he now stepped forth.

At the threshold of the throne room, he passed the long line of musicians filing in to try their skill before royalty. How great was the power of music! A scald might wear rags, but had he talent, he had entrance into every royal court in the land. It was a strange, strong part that musicians played in the politics of the world in that age, when travel was slow and communication was small between various nations. Because a musician had access to every court, he brought with him all the latest news—and he was always welcome.

The songs of wandering scalds chanted of the beauty of women in various nations, and fired many

a war of invasion, where young bloods took battle as an excuse to have a look at feminine allure. In the next century, the songs of scalds were to spread through the courts of Europe the news that Holy Jerusalem was in the hands of the Infidel—and thus music was to fire four great wars of religion, the Crusades.

Right now, the group of musicians filing into the throne room of Basil, emperor of Constantinople, was as mixed a group of nationalities as ever the eye lit upon. A shaggy Russian in a fur mantle strode along gripping a crude harp made of a pair of elk horns still fastened to their bit of skull bone and strung across their tips with gut strings. Here came an Italian with his great gold-inlaid instrument of two-score strings borne before him by two porters. A Greek carried a zither, a Persian, a lute. Fifth in line was the tall gaunt fellow with the cross on his breast and the three-cornered Norse harp on his back.

Ek—ah! Thord stood staring, rooted, his eyes a-bulge. Like one in a sleep-walking, he turned back, trailed after the musicians. He could not believe what he saw. Yet it must be true. That face—of course he knew it, now the eye-bandage was off. Though that face had not held blind eyes when last he had seen it.

In silent amaze, the Firetooth stood like a man of stone while the blind harpist, who by right of age was the first to perform, swept hand across his harp strings.

Out across that elegant audience in the golden

throne room rolled a wild, weird song, a saga song of the Norseland, such a song as Thord had heard in his pagan childhood, but different, for this was a Christ song:

From the north have I come,
Come to tell this tale.
Christian is all
The land of Norway
Under mighty Olaf,
Olaf son of Tryggve.

Came the mighty Olaf,
From the Erin strand;
With him, priests,
With him, cross,
Yea, with him
Cross of Christ.

In that sign did
Olaf conquer.
Won again his
Grandsire's crown,
Won his people to the cross.

Now the old gods
Are forgotten.
Forsaken now
Are Frey and Freyja,
Strong Thor and the
Angry Grimnir.

Now, instead, we love
The Christ
Love the only God

The Father.
He is ruler of the earth.
He is ruler of the sea.

In his castle in the North,
Raud the Hawkeye
Kneels to Christ,
Kneels there Thora,
Lovely Thora,
Thora born of Sigurd.

I, a wanderer through the nations,
Seek now Thord,
Thord the Firetooth,
Seek Thord to worship
With us the Christ,
Thord the son of Sigurd.

“Hlodver! Hlodver, harper of Sigurd! ’Tis I whom you seek, Thord Firetooth, son of Jarl Sig—I stand before you!” screamed the Norseman, leaping forward and clasping his arms about the scald’s shoulders. “How traveled you this long, weary way—why—why—”

“Thord! Thord!” The blind man passed a loving hand over the other’s head, his features, “You ask me why—knowing what I bear here!” Hlodver touched his breast. “In the old days, my master’s son risked his life to save Hlodver’s child. On the castle wall I wrote the rune, ‘Thord saved Gisli,’ and I said that same rune was written more lastingly in my heart. The castle wall is ashes—but the writing in my heart lives—so I have sought—”

“What a seeking—and you blind—” Thord’s voice rose exultingly.

“Order!” shouted the chamberlains.

“Order! Order!” blared the officers of the court. “Quiet, sirrahs, defame not the emperor’s sacred presence with your shouts!”

“Peace! Let them be!” said His Majesty, lifting his scepter. Not often did the world-weary eyes of this monarch, hedged in as he was with all the hundred gilded pomposities of court, behold such a scene of love and dauntless faithfulness. A faithfulness that had sought a master’s son across all the nations of a continent.

So there in the golden throne room, Hlodver the harper of Sigurd, told much that Thord longed to know. How Raud the Hawkeye had found the little Thora and raised her as his own. How the beautiful maiden was now blooming like a northern flower and courted by many a young jarling. How Thord’s cousins, Gunna and Torfinn, had gone to colonize the new country of Greenland. How Norway was united, one peaceful kingdom under Olaf Tryggvason, of the blood of Harald Fairhair, and that this King Olaf had won his land to Christ.

And there in the emperor’s throne room was planned the ship that was to bear Thord Firetooth of the royal blood of Norway back to his homeland.

CHAPTER XV

BEYOND THE PILLARS OF HERCULES

TO thud of oars and with a strong wind which made the one great square sail a wing of speed, a ship swept through the narrow waters that lay between the Pillars of Hercules. Behind the ship stretched back the whole long length of the Mediterranean Sea. Before the ship, which had now passed between the stone crags that ancients had once thought held up the sky and marked the end of the world's bounds—before that ship now rolled the limitless gray-green of the Atlantic Ocean.

Wrapped in his leather cloak, Thord Firetooth stood upon the loftingen or elevated stern deck, filling his lungs with the salt-tanged air, and his happiness was so like a bursting song within him, that he had no words to say. Not silent was the tall old harper who stood beside Thord. Hlodver's fingers swept a soft whisper of melody from his harp strings, his voice, low, clear, spoke a rhythmic flow, expressing thought for the two of them.

Norway, O Norway,
Sworn to you
And to the Christ
Is the sword
We hold on high.

Norway, O Norway,
Sworn to you
And to the Christ
Is our banner
Of the Cross.

Norway, O Norway,
Sworn to you
And to the Christ
Our loved ones wait
On Nordland's shore.

Since that day in the golden throne room of the Greek emperor of Constantinople, when Hlodver the harper had sung of home and Thora and the Christ, an unquenchable longing had been fired in the breast of Thord Firetooth—a longing to see once more the Northland and his kin and to worship with them in the kingdom that King Olaf had brought to Christ.

Out of his remaining gold and jewels, he had bought this vessel, *Sig the Sea Bird*, and had manned it with seafarers, men who, like himself, felt the call of the North.

In the chests in the hold were gifts he was taking home with him. For Thora there were mantles of foreign silks embroidered in rich colors and edged in gold thread; there were little shoes pricked in silver; there was a lofty head-gear of plumes and jewels. He kept trying to vision Thora, tall and stately, with that head-gear of plumes bound about her brow. But ai, his memory played him tricks! He could only see a round little childish face,

mass of pale gold hair caught in a little girl's netted cap, a necklace of bangles about a small fair neck—and one bangle missing. Well, that was the way he had last seen Thora—and that was the picture his mind would hold till his own eyes saw her as the full grown maiden she must now be. That missing bangle! Thord's hand reached beneath his tunic, touched that same bit of broken gold threaded on a leather cord and hung about his neck. That broken bangle had gone with him out of the old life into the new, and now was going back to the Norse homeland with him.

In other chests were the gifts he was taking home to his uncle, the old Jarl Raud, gifts any Norseman would crave—robes of the famous Greek purple, golden arm-bands of Asiatic-make and cunningly carven, a golden door ring, and a something scarce ever seen in Norway before—a great blue bowl of glass glittering with inlaid figures and with a silver band about its top. A bowl of glass would be something new and precious in old Norway. Thord had packed this treasure in a chest to itself and with twenty sheepskins wrapped about it to ward off the plunge and batter of the sea journey.

The "loftingen" where Thord stood, was to his viking ship what the "poop royal" was to be to continental ships two hundred years later. From this high stern deck, the Firetooth could look down on the figures of his crew, brawny freemen, who pulled strong oars to the beat of the gavel in the hands of Dag-Halsing, the captain of oars.

This Dag-Halsing, a Norse rover, land-bound in

Constantinople, wearied of a succession of slow choppy journeys on round-bottomed Mediterranean cargo boats, had welcomed a berth aboard Thord's swift long boat of the real viking type. He might once have been blond, but now was tanned to a good rich leather hue. A reckless courage showed in blue eyes squinted to the perpetual sea glint. He was long of body, long of limb, and his long fingers seemed equally apt at handling weapon, splicing leather tackle rope, or taking a pull at the oar.

On the bow deck, some helmeted warriors squatted idly, their shields hung on the bulwarks, but their spears laid close by. This *Sig the Sea Bird* was a peaceable ship with a golden cross on her prow and the cross sign set upon her great vadmál sail, but nevertheless, she must bear arms to guard herself against the swift murderous pirate barks that were prone to dart out of coves and rocky fastnesses in island-studded waters to raid and sink any unarmed vessel. There was nothing tame about sea travel in the year 1001. Standing among his soldiers, was Bratta, a big, heavily-built fellow all clad in leather, booted, red-bearded, stalwart, immense strength in his great body and long arms. The very Norse type to be a captain of soldiers. Thord had done well to enlist his services. Bratta was the kind that decided what was right to do, then did it. And he had a good roaring voice too, the sort to make his men step out.

Thord must have inherited a sense of leadership from that old leader of men, his father. For like Jarl Sigurd, when it came to picking carlsmen and

henchmen and companions at arms, he was not afraid of strong fierce blood. Some inner sense must have told him such blood made for staunch friendship in time of need.

Old Kalmar the pilot was the only officer aboard who was not Norse. He was black-eyed, black-haired, part Greek, part Cretan. And he knew the coastline. His long-nosed, long-chinned old face had been thrust into most of the ports around the edge of Europe. He traveled by a map of his own making—a bit of linen cloth much frayed by long usage, but still showing clearly in a brownish tracing many little conventional signs and curved lines and straight lines. All with no meaning to a landsman, but full easy for any real navigator of those days to follow.

The blood of generations of Norse sea rovers moved in Thord's veins. For long years, land-life, land-wandering, thralldom had held him. Now at last, he had come into his own, the sea! Exultation, happiness possessed him at crack of sail, thud of oar, waves sliding past. Hours each day, he spent at the high-curving stern where the pilot stood to the steering oar. In those hours old Kalmar taught him many things a man needs to know about the sea. It gave Thord a great thrill to study little twisting brown lines that stood for deep rivers emptying into the sea, marked thus upon a map made by the hand of man—then to watch his boat sail past the mouths of those rivers, precisely as they were marked upon the drawing.

Thord loved the ship itself as though it were

alive. In the shipyards at Constantinople, his gold had given him a choice of many types of vessels. He could have a stout bireme, with double row of oars to the side, and a superstructure deck centered by the mast. He could have had a two-sailed Egyptian craft, with red painted oars and a luxury of closed cabins.

But the Norse hardiness of the slim, open *Sea Bird* took Thord's heart. He would have no other. She had a fifty foot length, or rather say, she measured twenty-three and a third Norwegian ells. At the bow and stern she was decked, and these quarters were fairly raised. Amidships she was low and open, and pierced for forty oars, twenty to a side. The hold was divided into compartments—the "sax," or store-room; then the "wrap-room" where were kept the sail and tackle not in use; then the "chest-room" where stood the chests of armor and weapons, clothing, tents. Up on the loftingen deck rose the usual tilt-boards or framework upon which an awning could be stretched at night. But Thord stretched no awning. Like his mariners, he took the elements intrepidly. They labored, ate, slept with nothing but an oar-thwart beneath them and sky above them, and a leather bag apiece to crawl into if the wind bit too hard of a night.

At the port of Constantinople, Thord had taken on provisions of grain, dried figs, dates, skin bags of water. But he had started with no great supply. They could replenish along the way. At old Kalmar's experienced urging, he had stocked with a moderate supply of Constantinople cloth, metal

knives, bronze pots—they would be handy to trade for food supplies to out-of-the-way coastal folk whose primitiveness had little use for coin money.

Now when the *Sea Bird* passed through the Pillars of Hercules and into the Atlantic Ocean, the time of the year was April. It had been winter when the ship left Constantinople. For the two months past her mariners had pushed forward, now by oars, now by oars and sail combined when the wind was favorable. Already they had come much more than two thousand miles. A far journey, and yet one in which they had never at any time been any distance from shore. Under Kalmar's piloting, they had skimmed along the coasts, sometimes anchoring on the sea for the night, with the stone anchor-weight dropped overboard in smooth deep water. Most often, however, they stood in at dusk to some beach where was watering place of a stream emptying into the sea. Kalmar had eyes which detected dent of a river mouth here or color of sea that meant safe mooring there—when nobody else saw aught but a piece of land or a piece of sea.

Thord Firetooth would be long in forgetting those nights spent with his men on sandy beach-sloping havens, with the ship drawn to shore, camp made, a good cooking smell of roasting meat rising to the stars, then a watch set, and a sleeping out in the open.

All along that deeply indented Mediterranean coast, there had been many sights to stick in the mind. They had touched at country markets where

rough-clad upland peasants drove in their goats and pigs; had touched at city marts where on the flag stones were displayed jars and bowls and amphorae from far potteries, where were racks of magnificently-dyed purple cloth.

Out on the seas they had often passed slow heavy merchant ships convoyed by armed biremes, or sometimes triremes. The *Sea Bird's* own burnished shields on bulwarks had been a sign of arms aboard and ability to take care of one's self—so other ships passed them by peaceably.

It was on the coasts of Spain, I-spana the Greek pilot called that country, that a strange night-happening befell. As Thord's men landed by a river mouth for the night, a fearful shrieking and wailing suddenly filled the whole air. It began as something far off, but came steadily nearer—squawk, howl, sounds as of death and dying and of lost souls wailing after death. It was fearsome. Men held to their weapons, rooted to ground. Then out of the dusk lumbering forms came nearer—only oxen drawing great carts, each with two monstrous solid wheels. Ungreased, the wheel hubs shrieked at every turn. For all their death-howls, they were only peaceful carts hauling grain to shore for a trading on the morrow.

So had gone the Mediterranean trip—nights ashore, snug harbors, strong winds, but little of storms.

Now out on the broad Atlantic, sailing was different. Waves rolled mountain-high it seemed. It was dip and roll, and crawl out of one trough into another. Kalmar still hugged the coast, but seldom

came into beach for the night. For here was crag-lined shore and danger. The *Sea Bird* stood off, except to make a few ports for food and supplies. On many of the cliffs were frowning castles, with dart-throwing engines of war on their turrets. The *Sea Bird* sailed on with her shields up, but made no near approach that might tempt some castle catapult to hurl some hundreds of pounds of stone at her.

Out on the Atlantic seaboard and heading north, Thord felt that he was now in reality headed for home and Norway. Here were storm and cold and great waves. Here man-strength battled against nature-strength—and it was on to Norway.

First they headed due north, rarely beaching at night, for they were following a coast that was sheer and inhospitable. Then they turned to the rising sun for a several days' journey; then again, near a range of towering mountains, bent their course towards that small constant star which the Greek pilot called the Cynosura, the tail of the dog.

Onward they went, finding that they passed the mountains and rivers on this coast precisely as they were marked on the pilot's linen rag map. They found, too, that further up on the coast certain great rocks, which on the map were marked dangerous, were of a surety dangerous. These were strange rocks, honey-combed with caves through which winds and waves roared with sounds like trumpeting and teeth-gnashing of many huge monsters.

“The only way to pass here in safety, is seemingly to aim straight at death,” said the pilot. “Pull men,

pull oars, head straight at the great rock itself!”

Pull! Pull! The ship caught in eddying currents, hurled this way, hurled that way—and yet the oars and rudder bent on sending her straight against the grinding rock. Men paled beneath their leathery tan, fearful muscles slacked at the rowing. It was death—death—to row on thus.

“Row! Row straightly—” Thord was off the loftingen, among the oar thwarts, sword in hand to back the orders of the pilot. “Row! Row!—or die!” His officers, Dag and Bratta were with him, swords in hand. “Row! Row!”

Men rowed. Oars lifted, fell. The ship swung straight through waters that boiled and eddyed in fierce currents, swung straight at the great rock. Then the whirlpool on the left—as experienced old Kalmar knew it would—caught the ship just in the nick of time, sucked it to the left of the death rock into a narrow channel, spewing it forth into the open sea where was safety, save that the waves here ran mountain-high. Even as ship and exhausted men shot into safety, one last licking wave curled over the ship’s edge and swept Dag-Halsing, the oar-captain, out-board to drop him choking, strangling into the sea. Gone—except for a hand that shot out, seized his leathern tunic. Then the owner of the hand, Thord Firetooth, near went to his death in the sea, too, save only that Bratta and two sailors grabbed his legs, and finally hauled the two of them back from death.

After that, the ship’s rowers fell to pulling again and made it on to a calmer sea where the wind-

howlings of the sea-caves drifted fainter and fainter into the distance and were then lost all together.

On into the north went the voyage, endlessly, it seemed. The markings on the linen map continued though to tally with the indentures on the wild coast. And the markings showed too that they were nearing the end of the journey. Only a little more now, and they would have achieved it—this half a circle around Europe's coasts!

A few days before, as the map drawing had already noted for them, they had passed through a long stormy channel with a rocky line of cliffs on the right and a chain of jagged islands on the left. Thence they had steered boldly northward into open sea. Northward, ever northward, and the land on the right of them, and the sea air in the nose bringing to Thord Firetooth more and more a sense of coming into the homeland.

They were on the shores of Norway, but still going north and ever north. Thord Firetooth's heart seemed to beat into his very throat for excitement. His home country—not seen for years—the beauty of it! He felt witched, charmed, softened in his very manhood. Even in his heartsick dreams and longings through the years, he had not known how deeply his country's beauty could touch him. Majesty of towering mountain, in-cut of blue sea, woodlands, vales. The white spring mists like soft filmy veils floating over rock and fen and fjord. Tender green just lining the shore. Clouds like silky sails on high.

The ship went on to the north, past the long

indenture that was Nord Fjord, Thord's old home place where were ashes instead of a castle, on past cliffs where had once been temples to the sun god, on and on towards Oster Isle where were now all his kin, Jarl Raud and Thora and the castle home.

Then Oster Isle loomed ahead. Thord was on fire to sight the Hawkeye's castle on the heights, but the mists that had fluttered before, now closed down into a soft white blanket of fog.

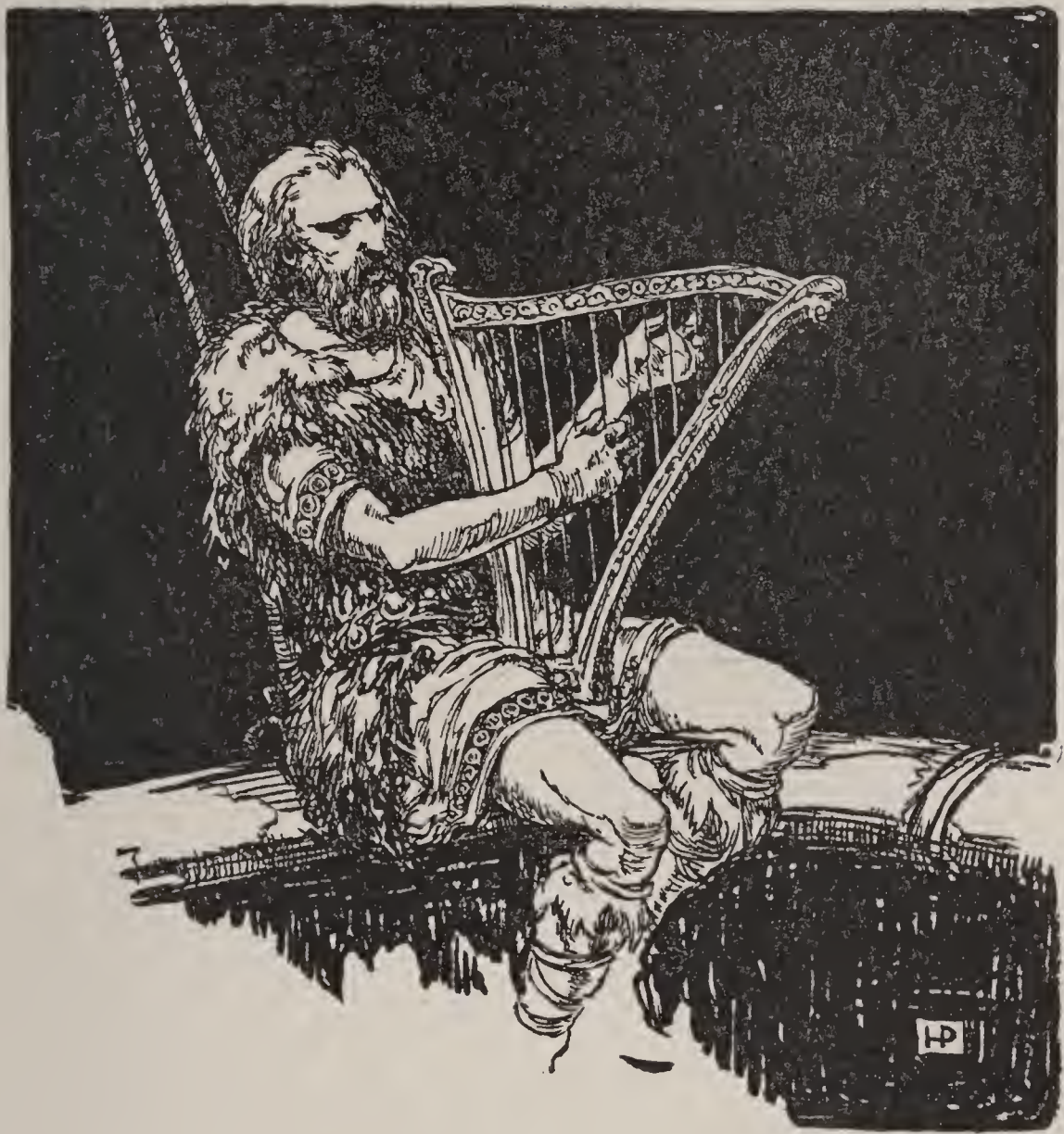
Slowly, carefully, the pilot eased the ship into the islet's harbor and on to the shore. Oarsmen laid their oars in the lockers. The pilot held the great steering paddle to rest. But the crew kept to their places, waiting, to let the young Norseman be first to set foot on his own shore.

Deep in Thord's heart was a great stirring. He had left homeland, a pagan. He was coming back to that land, a follower of the White Christ, entering now a homeland turned to Christ.

He leaped to land, his great crimson, cross-crowned banner in his hand. That banner had traveled with him this long way. He must first plant it here, then go on to seek his kindred.

"Norway, O Norway," came Hlodver's voice, chanting the last lines of the Wander Saga he had made throughout all this journey to the homeland.

Norway, O Norway,
Come we now
With humble hearts
Won to Christ
By His sign,
The Cross divine.



“Norway, O Norway,” came Hlodver’s voice, chanting the last lines of the Wander Saga.

Into Thord's ears poured the blind harper's chant, like a consecration on the sacred banner that now stood on Norway's soil.

Then to Thord came another sound, a screech of, "Oh, master, young master—" and with it an ancient creature came hobbling out of the underbrush above the shore.

"Hide it, hide it," babbled the old one. Thord knew her well. She was Tyra, one time a serving woman of Jarl Raud's household. "Hide it, ere they kill you for it, as they are killing all of us!" She tore at the cross-crowned banner, dragging it down, thrusting it beneath her rags.

Into Thord's ears, she poured her horror tale. Great Olaf, Norway's king of the White Christ, was dead, slain at the Battle of Svolder. In his stead now ruled the pagan jarls, Erik and Sweyn. Under them the land had gone back to the old bloody gods and the horse sacrifice, and Christian men, too, had had their throats slit on the sacrificial stone to bring good crops—so the jarls said—

"But Thora, my sister," Thord burst out. "Where—"

"Ai. Thora, gone—gone, like the rest of the Christians, like our master, Raud!" wept the old one, rocking back and forth in her misery. "Because of her white beauty, pagan Sweyn wanted her to wife. But she fled in the night, dressed coarsely, like some peasant wench. Gone she is, to that far new land, called Greenland, gone on the colonizing ship—gone—"

Thord Firetooth stood staring before him,

blankly, frozenly, the very life-blood seeming to drain from his heart.

What a home-coming for one who had traveled around all the shores of Europe—a home-coming to a Norway that killed the followers of the White Christ!

CHAPTER XVI

~~~~~ ACROSS THE SEA ~~~~~

IN mid-summer of the year 1001, a ship set forth from the shores of Norway, heading out across the dark cold waters of the North Atlantic. Upon her high-pillared stern deck stood a tall figure, clad in rough leather buskin and hose of skin, gazing sadly back at the dimming shores of Norway—Norway, his Norway, that he, Thord Firetooth, was leaving, perhaps forever!

The pull of blood kin was strong. It was drawing Thord Firetooth away from his homeland and on across an ocean to seek his sister and his father's brother among the colonists gone on to that strange, new-found land called Greenland. In that year many persecuted Christians had fled Norway, willing rather to face danger in far Iceland, and farther Greenland than to turn back to paganism. And now Thord the Firetooth was sailing on to cast in his lot with these persecuted ones.

Despite his urgency to be gone, Thord had been forced to spend weeks of the precious summer weather preparing for this journey. Preparations had been, of necessity, slow and dangerous in this Norway that was torn by civil strife, in this Nor-

way where pagan hunted down Christian. By patient secret labor, Thord finally filled the *Sea Bird* with food sacks and water skins. Close-sewn leather containers of barley meal were stored even beneath the very rowing thwarts, neatly, so that they did not hamper the men at the oars. All manner of north country food was packed into the hold—hard brown bread and hard goat's cheese, dried fish in bales, strips of cured reindeer meat. Also there were bales of cloth, bales of leather, extra ship's gear, fish spears, hunting spears—a hundred things that had not been needed on that long trip from Mediterranean shores to Norway.

This was a far different voyage the *Sea Bird* was now attempting. That other journey had been long, arduous, all of four thousand five hundred miles, but it had hugged coastlines, never far from land where food and water could be replenished.

Now they were undertaking to cross the whole ocean, with weeks, months, perhaps a year of travel before them ere they ever found that new country, Greenland. True, other ships had reached Greenland, had carried hardy settlers there. But each voyage across uncharted ocean, without maps or compass, must be in truth a voyage of discovery—for each ship must discover for itself the land that lay on the other side of the world.

Along with other preparations, Thord had had to pick anew almost a whole ship's force. His sailors who had come up the edges of Europe with him, were good men and brave, but they were bred to coast-sailing and chose rather to take ship with

traders heading back down south than to plunge forth on such an uncharted voyage. Even the ancient Kalmar said he was too used to piloting ships by his rag of linen map to try other sailings now in his late years. But there was wistfulness in Kalmar's long-nosed, long-chinned old face as he parted company with Norse Thord for whom he had a real friendship. Ai, a few years less of painfulness in his old bones, and he too might have joined an adventure across a whole ocean!

For Kalmar's place at the steer pole, Thord finally secured one Helgi, a red-bronze, hook-nosed Norse pilot, who already had made trips across the sea to the new world. This Helgi had no chart. How was one to chart an ocean! But he knew the one fixed beam of a star, that same star Cynosura, the tail of the dog, of the Greeks, but called North Star by Norse helmsmen. He knew only to keep the North Star on his right and to sail always into the west. Thus he had thrice crossed the North Atlantic, and thrice had miraculously come to Greenland.

Out of his old crew, Thord's two Norse officers, Bratta and Dag-Halsing, were still faithful. To them he added by degrees picked rowing men and soldiers, Ulf, Ulra, Inge, and other brawny, blond Norsemen who dared venture into the unknown—the sea was of a certainty in their blood—and who were willing to follow the Cross of the White Christ across an ocean.

What an undertaking that was! Fifty-eight men to cross the Atlantic in a Viking boat—oar power,

one sail, and most of the ship open to the weather! For all her stout beams of riveted oak, the *Sea Bird* seemed but as a cockle-shell tossed in the surging swell of the mighty waves. How she rolled! Men stood on their feet one minute and were down the next. Once in so often, green water swept over the between-decks drenching everything in sight.

Men rowed strongly, bend and pull, bend and pull, in time to the blind harper's stirring sweep of music from up on the boards of the loftingen. It was a brave start. All day long the steady thudding oars bore westward, hurling the ship through high-flung waves that broke into glittering spray on either side.

A calm sunset found them far out on an empty sea. A strange feeling that—night dropping down, and no land anywhere for men to beach a ship upon, nor for themselves to crawl upon for a sleep, as was familiar habit. That night the rowers slept huddled in their leather bags, restless with the mighty heave of waves against oak planking beneath them. Wind against the sail bore the ship on, cutting through black waves, leaving a phosphorescent foam path trailing back across the sea. Thord Firetooth, from close association with old Kalmar on the long up-coast journey, had gathered sufficient piloting lore to be able to rest Helgi at the steering oar. Ulf stood watch on the little raised platform of the forward deck. Upon the right of the voyagers, the small fixed gleam of their guide star shone bright amid a multitude of other stars.

The wind of the night increased, and by morning,

the ship was moving forward under a gray-black sky with tatters of cloud streaming across it. All that day the wind whipped the seas till the vessel could only wallow heavily from wave trough to wave trough. The third day brought rain, ferocious, blinding, a shrieking gale, with the clouds low-hung almost to the waters. It took two men to the steering oar, and between the rowing thwarts, men bailed desperately to keep clear of the water which came over the gunwale in sheets of spray. Two water jars broke. Some skins of food became loose and washed overboard. Wetness and gloom everywhere. Dank, salt-crusted leather garments clinging to men's weary bodies at every move.

Then sunshine again, dazzle of blue sea to lift the spirits! Naught but a breeze in the sail, but oars moved now to a vigorous chantey. So went the round of wind and weather. Days became weeks, and still the cockle-shell of oak planks riveted together crept on across the ocean.

Birds began to be sighted again, a multitude of gulls and even a black raven or so that perched cawing on the mast pole. The ship made a slight dip to the south and came to the Faroe Islands, as Helgi knew it should. Here was a chance to stretch limbs, take on water and add a bit of fresh fish to the ship's stores. There was little else which the few inhabitants of these narrow isles could offer.

After that it was to sea again. No more land now until they sighted the bottom of the great island of Iceland—which was as far from the Faroes, as the Faroes were from Norway—and after that, no

land at all till they reached their destination, Greenland in the New World.

But it came about that they never even sighted that Iceland, as Helgi had expected. With the Faroe Islands weeks behind them, the ship entered into a zone of early autumn storms. Tempest succeeded tempest, battering and buffeting. Then the king storm of them all descended, violent, terrible, the sea a ravening monster reaching wave-slashings over the very decks seeking to snatch off puny humans who dared ride a ship thus far from any land. Oars were as naught in that storm. The tall mast quivered in its wedge-tightened socket at the screaming wind fury that nigh tore the sail from its cross yard. Men fought at the whipping ropes, tautening, knotting, holding the very sail in place by main strength. It was their only hope, that sail, to keep them racing before the storm too fast for the over-leaping waves to swamp and sink the little ship. On they went, wallowing in this trough, crashing through that trough, four men at a time clinging to the steering oar to keep the vessel from broaching broadside to the sea. By day they raced across a sea which was a boiling whiteness of up-reared crests, and by night was a boiling blackness. Two nights and two days of smashing through a confused sea, with no longer any idea of their whereabouts. Then with the going down of the sun, the wind died and the wave heights gradually lowered into a calm sunset path that stretched before them.

As the heavens cleared, there shone the North

Star on their right hand, as it should be. But weeks of sailing never brought them to any land as was expected. The waters in which they rode were warm. They could see no white line to the northward that could mean the down-edging of the autumn ice-rim to which they were all accustomed. They were storm-blown so far to the south that who could tell where they were heading?

During the long voyage, the sameness of food had become a weariness. No more fresh fish like that taken aboard at the Faroes, no reindeer meat except that which was mouldy. Even the hard goat's cheese went sour and the bread was soggy.

But now provisions began to give out, shrunk to half-fare, grew less and less, and down to one scant meal a day. And men looked back with longing hunger toward that erstwhile sour cheese and soggy bread. Then water began to run low. In a fear of thirst, madness broke out among the mariners. Their Christ religion slipped from them, for they were very new Christians. There on the deeps the old heathen beliefs came back. Men whispered that during the storm they had seen angry Ran, himself, the old sea god, monstrous, black, his hair the gray mists, his beard the spume—the god himself driving his white sea coursers over the storm. This ship now—it had come too far into Ran's water kingdom, the sea god was luring them on, waiting to drag them all down into the under-sea where Ran's daughters made sailors' bones into sea shell and their hair into sea weed.

Other frightened mutterings went the rounds of

the oar-benches. The ship had come so far, that to keep on meant to drop off the edge of the world. See now, they had already passed beyond the chains of the winds. For not even a breeze lifted their limp vadmál sail. At the end of the drinking water, the madness of mutiny broke into full storm. The oarsmen rose, surged towards the loftingen and the steer-pole that stood behind it, shouting hoarse, croaking threats toward this Thord who had lured them out on the edge of shoreless oceans to die. "Home—Norway—turn about—or we'll turn about that rudder for you—"

And Thord Firetooth, as gauntly hunger-wracked as any, had leaped from the loftin, unarmed, save for his fist, and had thrust them back, knocking the spokesman down among the empty barley bags, standing forward, daring any other to make steps towards the steering gear. Muttering, men went back to their oars.

Then Thord was among them, his arm about Rowman Inge whom he had had to knock down, and Thord's words had a calm saneness to them.

"Rather give thanks to the One God who has brought you through such storm as no man yet ever triumphed over before, and rather say prayers to the One God to bring us on yet to land." He waved a hand behind him, "See, the months of ocean stretch behind us. We could never turn back and live to cover that again. To go forward is all we can do—to go forward, and pray."

And what a going forward it was! Faithful Bratta and Halsing took their turn with Thord to

watch the weapon chest and to stand guard over Helgi at the steer pole to save him from violence, should the hunger madness strike the crew again.

On over a glassy sea of vivid blue, with no wind to help, men rowing feebly, their tongues black and swollen in dry mouths! The last water had been drunk two days gone. Every man on board took his feeble turn at the oars, even blind Hlodver helping on the bench before Thord, bending when Thord's croak said, "Bend!"

Pull the oar, pull the oar, and the horrible fear of thirst-death squeezing men's hearts dry and drier!

So it went through a windless day of striving, with parched throats too dry even for moaning. Then Halsing from the prow, let out wild unearthly croakings, waving his lank arms about, pointing on ahead. There on the horizon was a dark irregular blur that meant land!

Somewhere from beneath their exhaustion, men got strength. Oars dipped, not fast, but with a regularity. Thord Firetooth's gaunt arms set a pace. Old Hlodver in an oddly cracked voice, held men to that pace with the heartening of a rowing song, and the brave clash of music rolling out from his harp, like waves rolling happily to land.

Through the windless, mid-day heat, the ship crept nearer and nearer to land. On the right a towering headland thrust itself out in front of a yellow-beached, curving bay. Thord's ship slowly skirted the cliffs, entered the bay, went on into the mouth of a great river that emptied here, then drew

to shore among reeds where wild fowl whirred upward.

Land! Earth underfoot! Water!

Men flung themselves face downwards in the mud of the banks of a stream that wound through the reeds to empty into the river. They drank, choking and gasping with the urgency of their thirst. Some slept from exhaustion there where they had first dropped at the blessed damp edge of fresh water. Some rolled in the shade of great trees, rested, came back to drink again their fill of water.

The ship, *Sea Bird*, had come to shore, but not to the shore of Greenland. Helgi, who had thrice visited the long coast of Greenland with its rock mountains and ice rivers and frost-stunted forests no taller than the height of a man, knew full well that this verdantly wooded country was not the land for which they had steered across an ocean. Here were no sturdy towns of Norse colonists, here was no traffic of Norse long-boats up and down the coast.

No, 'twas not Greenland, but 'twas a good land. It offered foods of many kinds—leaping salmon in the river waters, spicy-tanged grapes growing black and luscious on forest vines, a new kind of grain growing wild among the river edges.

Here the *Sea Bird* was drawn to shore for repairs. Here an encampment was made. And at nights, by their fires, the Norsemen pondered where it could be that they had landed.

“By my arm band,” said the hooked-nose, red-haired Helgi, “I know this is not Greenland! And 'tis not the land just to the west of Greenland—Hel-

luland—the Place of Flat Stones—that is called. I voyaged there once with our fleet seeking timber. Nor can this be Bear Island down to the south of Greenland, for I have been there too. This, of a truth, must be Bjarni's land—”

“Hola, yes,” burst from Thord Firetooth, as he leaped up to tramp excitedly back and forth before the camp fire. “This must be the land of great trees and great rivers glimpsed once by Bjarni, son of Herjulf! That was back in the days of my own childhood. This Bjarni glimpsed a great fair land once, then never in all his sailings could find it again.”

This land of Bjarni's glimpsing, this land that Thord and his Norseman had now come into, was America. Here on American soil in the year 1001, Thord the Firetooth planted his crimson banner crowned with the cross, and around that banner a little settlement grew up.

After new timbers had been set into the storm-wracked framing of the *Sea Bird*, and after sail and oars had all been put in order, the Norsemen, twice in that autumn, tried to sail North where they believed the Greenland Colony to be. But each time the ice drift in the northern sea path sent them back to the south.

So the new land claimed Thord and his shipmates for a winter. The huts they built were rough affairs, mere fenced places made by driving sharpened posts into the ground and setting cross-pieces above, whereon were laid boughs, then a covering of grass and earth. But in spite of their crudity, they

were homes. And with the building of them an aspect of civilization settled upon this corner of the land.

Sound of grinding filled the air. Then men used their empty barley bags to bring in great loads of the wild grain growing ripe and yellow along the river bottoms. This grain they pounded between stones and baked into the hard round cakes of the North Country.

Thord and his spearmen brought in meat of deer, and occasionally bear meat. Salt from the rock crevices where the ocean water evaporated, herbs, dried grapes—these made a pleasant contrast to the monotonous diet endured through the months of crossing the ocean.

When the winter was nearly over, the Norse settlement had a visit from a savage horde that swarmed down forest waterways in skin boats and camped in skin tents along the shore. They were a coppery-hued people, clad in the pelts of the beaver and the fox, and bearing for weapons, slings and stone hatchets. But for all their ferocious aspect of ugly hair and paint-daubed features and broad cheek bones, they seemed peaceful enough, and chiefly desired to trade peltries and gray furs for the curiosities of the white man.

Bratta traded one of his spears and a cloth tunic for a great shaggy robe made all of the skin of one animal. It was from a bison, and had a hide such as had never been seen by any Norseman. Thord's trading was for a store of rich beaver skins—he had a robe for his sister in mind. Knives of stone,

hatchets of stone, grain in great gourds, all manner of dried meat, and a quantity of peltries, these the copper-colored people traded to the Norsemen for lengths of cloth and pieces of metal which seemed very precious to the savages.

In the early spring, the savages came for another trading, then they came no more. They had been passing north at the time, and had evidently gone on to their hunting grounds.

A little later that spring, the white men themselves went north. A wild looking crew were Thord's Norsemen, with their worn tunics patched with wild animal skins and about their shoulders shaggy mantles of bear hide and wolf hide. But their ship was well conditioned, and had a wealth of food and furs stored in her hold.

In the mild spring weather, the land where they had wintered had stretched out many lures to hold their interest—the lure of deeper penetration back into the wonder strand of great rivers, great forests, wild-growing vines and grain. But blood-ties and the longing to find their kin in the Greenland Colony drew Thord and his men on to voyage into the north as soon as the ice line cleared from the sea.

To go north was all they knew to do. After a week of sailing, a turn of the coast sent them eastward for many days, following the land curve. Then they were free of land and with naught but water above them as far as the eye could see.

A wonderful voyage that was! Sailing always to the north, past many islands—one was Great Bear Island, Helgi was sure—past a long coast that

slanted west, by north-west, the flat stone land of Hellu. From spring till into summer, they sailed north. Then far away in the mists a great blur showed on the horizon. That must be the Greenland they sought. But between them and it, a current laden with masses of broken ice now swept down from the north and turned west.

That ice pack on the sea meant a late summer for Greenland, so Helgi said. He had seen it thus once before in another year. Instead of sailing on towards the southernmost point of the land before them, the pilot turned the ship towards the west and moved north on the edge of the ice-laden current. From experience, Helgi knew a deal about that drift ice—knew that for most of the year it swept down on the east coast and across the south coast of Greenland, only to melt in a strangely warmer current that was on the west coast. For this reason, all the colonies were set upon the deeply indented west shores of Greenland.

Greenland! What a name! Thord shivered. As the ship approached the land mass, all one saw was the white glare on mountains sheathed in ice and snow.

Then drawing in closer, one did see green land, a low coast stretching back in meadows, now faintly touched with early summer green against the brown earth. Darker green showed in patches. Trees—little alders and birches and pines, not five feet tall. A forest here was not higher than a man could look over.

Helgi was bringing the ship towards land in a

little *vik*, or inlet, where houses were built round the shore, houses stretching back inland. A whole town. There must be near half a hundred buildings. Brattalid! They were sailing into Brattalid where Thora awaited them and Jarl Raud! A tower lifted a little above other buildings on the shore. On the harbor waters showed some ship masts. Then mists came drifting in between the watchers on board the *Sea Bird*, cutting off the view.

“Remember, young master, our plan—the plan we spoke of back yonder by the camp fires in the land of great trees!” Old Hlodver, his harp on his back, stood by Thord on the forward deck, touching him on the arm.

Thord remembered that plan. During the long winter nights when Brattalid seemed far away, he had laughingly agreed to a whimsey of the harper that had to do with making himself known to his kin after all these years of separation.

Now with these kin so near at hand, Thord’s chief desire was to rush into port, rush through the town seeking out those dear ones. But the old harper’s touch was pleading. With a little sigh, the young wanderer agreed that matters should be as the old one had planned.

So in the harbor mists, the *Sea Bird* did not come up to the landing alongside other ships, but instead edged down the bay and drew up to shore behind the promontory. Sheltered here, Thord and the blind harper left the ship, only these two taking to shore and on foot heading off across the intervening heights into town. They were both muffled, brow

and chin, in hooded mantles with the sign of the cross on their breasts. The one bore his harp on his back, the other was burdened with a pack bag.

This Brattalid Town into which they came tramping stirred Thord with the Norse look of its low-built comfortable stone houses, snug stone walls of cattle byres, stone walls of a spreading building with a cross on its sturdy square tower. On the shore front were the usual array of Norse fish racks—but no fish were drying upon them—spread here were only some shreds of withered kelp and sea weeds.

A neat town this, but so silent. No lowing of cattle in the byres; no cackle and cluck of fowl; so little of life and movement anywhere. A few pinched-face men in furs moved slowly down the street. A couple of thin, shrewish-looking children fighting over a strip of leather, which the stronger one snatched away to thrust into his mouth to go to chewing upon.

“Sir, tell us the way to the house of Jarl Raud?” asked Thord of the next man they met.

The fellow’s mouth drew down sourly as he bent his gaze upon this pair of cross-signed strangers. “Second house, there,” he jerked a thumb to the left. “The one with the ivory on the door post.”

Before that ivory-set entrance, Thord Firetooth stood, heart beating high, excitement making his hand tremble till he could hardly thud the door ring against the wooden slab. He heard slow footsteps within, the lift of the door-bar—then the heavy door swung in.

Excitement was in Thord's limbs now. He could scarce step over the threshold into his uncle's home. He felt Hlodver pressing against him, shoving him forward.

Now—he stood in the house of Jarl Raud Hawk-eye! Low walls of stone it had, like all the houses in this land of stone and no timber. Low walled, but what a richness here! Wall hangings and rugs of thick furs. Everywhere, carved ivory pieces for decoration. No hearth, but a strange low vessel of hollowed stone holding a little oil and having lighted wicks of twisted moss laid along its edges. These wicks gave forth a soft yellow glow that lighted a tall old man, bearded, gaunt of frame in loose fur robes, lighted the face of a girl with great blue eyes and the delicate fairness of the north rose,—but such a wan paleness. She had been turning the wheel of her spindle, making thread out of a twist of dark fur.

She stood now, as also stood the old man, courteous, giving strangers the high seat, the best seat, next to the warmth of the fire-bowl.

“Brothers of the Cross, welcome,” spoke the old Jarl. “You have come to a sad place, but whatever we have, we divide with you.”

He was so like Jarl Sigurd, tall, stately, with a strong level gaze to his blue eyes.

Thord felt a great rush of happiness surging up within him. Here, at last, he was with his own kin! His uncle, his sister! It was Thora, herself, who was handing him the silver platter with food upon it—but such a tiny morsel of food, and strange

tasting, like some sea plants kneaded into a bread. Why such food—why such paleness on every face one met here—why—?

But Hlodver had begun to touch the harp, softly, questioningly, letting the strings ask for him the harper's immemorial right to tell in song what other men had to speak out about themselves in plain words.

“That is right, bard, speak to us in music and tell us the tale of yourself and your companion,” said the old Jarl.

Hlodver again touched the strings of his instrument. This was the consummation of the plan that had been in his heart throughout all these wanderings across an ocean and up a continent—the plan which he in his harp-song should reveal to Thord's kindred that this was their wanderer come home to them.

Softly the harp twanged, softly rolled out Hlodver's rich mellow voice, telling in strong, rude verse his saga song that had been growing through the years. He sang the story of a young Norse wanderer, battle, pirates, the selling into slavery, thralldom in Germany, wild life with the Huns, wealth, the touch of the Christ in the wanderer's heart, golden Constantinople; sang of a Norseman that risked his life for Christ in the arena; sang of a Norseman that brought the cross banner across an ocean; sang of a bit of broken rune bangle that had gone through life with this Norseman—

That bangle! But even as Thord was drawing the bit of gold on its cord from under his tunic, the

girl leaped to her feet, ran to a chest against the wall, drew out of silken wrappings a childish necklace of rune bangles, with one bangle missing.

“Is it—can it be—the lost Thord, you chant of—”

Thord tore off his mantle, flung back his hood, stood holding out the little missing bangle in his hand. It fitted the space in the broken necklace.

“Thord!”

“Thora!”

It was all they could say at the first. A brother and a sister, their lives separated by years, separated by half the lands and waters of the world, and now those lives joined again! Later would come the many words, the telling of all.

Thord, Thora, Jarl Raud, old Hlodver softly touching his harp strings—these four out of all the crowded splendid days of the life in old Norway—these four brought together in this far land, with the sign of the Christ in their hearts!

“My uncle!” Thord stretched out his hands. “My sister, what tales you yourselves have to tell—”

But it was a telling left untold.

The door of Raud Hawkeye’s house crashed open. A mob of haggard-faced men poured into the low-walled room.

“Kark Lakka!” The two words burst from Thora, as she stood away from the fierce-eyed man in the lead.

Kark Lakka began to speak in a loud hoarse voice. “The Old Gods have sent us the famine-sign

—the sign of their anger against men turning from them. The Old Gods must be appeased, or we all die of hunger sickness! Be done with this White Christ! Come back to the old strong gods of blood and war—”

“No—no!” It was a four-fold answer rolling as one sound from the lips of the four grouped back against the high-seat.

“Ehui! The ropes! Bind them, men! If they cannot pray to the Old Gods, they can die as sacrifice to them!” Kark’s hoarse shouts rose above the turmoil of the mob closing in on its victims. “Blood! The Old Gods cry for blood! Blood shall pour on the altar stone!”

Terrible famine stalked the length and breadth of the colony. No birds had come to Greenland in this year of the great cold. No fish in the seas, no seal and walrus on the shore ice! No food left anywhere now, only the hunger horror creeping, creeping over the land—the hunger madness that made beasts of men, turning them back to bloody pagans!

Down in a dark little underground room, the four bound prisoners lay waiting the hour of their sacrifice. Voices sounded chill and unreal. Silence cut each prisoner off to himself.

Thoughts clashed through the Firetooth’s mind. He had sailed for glory—had landed to a shame death! So easy—he could save himself—a call to the jailer tramping out there—just some words, “I’ll pray to Odin—hola—let me out!” Christ help

him be strong! Oh, but those few easy words—only to say them—and hold to life!

Darkness—bonds cutting into flesh!

What meant that turmoil? Was it already day—the day of death! Tramping feet! Tramping feet!

“They come!” Each prisoner gasped it.

Thord writhed against his bonds, beat his head against cold stone. His whole life seemed to flash before him in the moment of his doom. It had seemed easy to have fought the mad bull for Christ and to save Nila. Easy to have said after Elkorka, “I believe in the One God!” But now—

Grind—crash—tramp! They were coming to take him as a sacrifice.

To stand passive—to die a shame death, hewn down on the stone—“Strength, God give me strength!” Even in that instant, the meaning of faith stood out in glory before him. As Elkorka’s blood had converted him, Thord, so might his blood convert another. Glory and a white light uplifted him. He was strong now unto death!

The wall above the Firetooth quivered to a great impact, burst open, pieces of rock falling everywhere.

Hands dragged at Thord, hauling him through a jagged breach, something fell against his head, blackness went over him.

CHAPTER XVII

GLORY

OARS were moving. Wind slithered against the sail. Thord Firetooth lifted his head. He was on a ship—this was the *Sea Bird* he was aboard, on his own loftingen, with a fur robe pulled over him.

What pain! He pressed a hand against skull top where was a clotted gash. He was full sore everywhere. What had happened? He lifted his head above the cover, thrust his body to sitting position, stared about him. The ship was setting out to sea. That curving shore back there was Brattalid.

Leather-clad figures moved up to him—a group of his own men and mariners crowding together on the little deck. Broad smiles were on all faces.

“Young chief, we got you out in a good time—eh, didn’t we, Bratta!” Dag-Halsing pounded jubilantly on his companion’s heavy-set shoulders.

To the creak of sail in the wind, the story of rescue came out. Thord’s men had brought the ship into the main harbor and come ashore in the dusk, as the plan was. Instead of a peaceful welcome, the strangers had found the town in an up-

roar, pagans setting on Christians, street battles, houses turned into barricaded fortresses against all comers.

In the night, Thord's men had fought their way to the place of his imprisonment, had battered through walls, and had dragged him forth to the safety of the ship. Many a sailor bore a cracked head out of the battle. It had been a heavy fight to drag forth even one prisoner, their own leader.

"Whither shall it be, Thord the Firetooth—back to Norway, or back to the wonder strand where we wintered?" Leather coats pressed about him.

Thord got to his feet. Oh, that pain in his head! He tried to clear away the red mists before his eyes with a hand passed across his brow. The sea breeze helped him, blowing cold in the dim early dawn light. Now, at last he could think, see things clear.

"Turn about the ship!" Thord's voice, once he got a hold upon it, came roaring out, commandingly, "Turn about, head back for the port—all speed! The lur horns, don't you hear them—"

That wild bray of horns "Tu-tu-tu-tua!"

The wailing lur horns, the death horns, "Tu-tu-tu-tu!" It came again rolling over the water from land, a sound all too reminiscent of the ancient bloody human sacrifices of old Norway.

"My sister, my uncle, the old harper—they'll be killing them on the Odin stone! On to shore, men! If I cannot save them—I—I can die with them!"

"Nay, you mean we'd all die with them!" An ugly mutter ran through the pack of leather-clad

men. "A fool's errand, that,—not for us—we've had our taste of Greenland weapons over the head—"

"Take the ship—set to sea—but first, you shall put me on land. I only need to go ashore—but now, while I am on ship, my order shall be law. Obey—or die! Get you down! To your places!" Like a madman, Thord Firetooth snatched up long bow and his arrow bag, drove men before him down from the loftin, down to the hold and to the oar thwarts.

In his fiery fury he was dominant. Under that spell, men bent to oar and to steer pole. Too many times had they seen the power of Thord's bow string—had seen his second arrow split his first arrow, and both flung aloft from the same bow. None wished to be the first to get an arrow in his midrift. There were ten arrows in the Firetooth's bag. Ten men would fall before they could overpower him.

Because of her sharp prow, the *Sea Bird* could make a quick turning. Steady plunge of oars—deep blue of water paling in the shallows—land, and scrape of ship to wharf!

But when the Firetooth leaped ashore, he went not alone. A score of men were with him—old Helgi, Bratta and six soldiers, Halsing and a part of the oarsmen. Why? Ek—not a one of them could have put it into words, but—courage, it draws courage.

Tramp, tramp, their hurrying footsteps echoed hollowly through this place of empty houses. A

breathless horror urged them faster, faster toward the wail of the lurs.

“Tu-tu-tu!”—that brazen triumph of the death horns, so close now!

Thord and his little body of faithful ones ran till their breath-heaves were sobbing gasps. They topped the last ridge, swayed to a standstill. In the white air one could see so far, so clear—oh, God, they could never get there in time!

In one swift motion Thord Firetooth swung forward his long bow, set an arrow to the taut gut cord.

There, below in the valley, a girl lay bound across the stone at the foot of a towering wooden idol. The blood bowl was at her throat. Kark Lakka, priest of Odin, was plunging down the dagger-knife.

“Thora! Thora!” The Firetooth’s shout followed the twang of his bowstring, mingled with the pain-maddened howl of him who had held the knife. That bronze implement fell to the ground. Thord’s arrow had shot it from the priest’s now useless hand.

A rumble of fury rose from the throng in the valley. In great strides, Thord and his few men rushed forward into the midst of this mob-anger.

These Odin-worshipers—they would kill him! Let them. But first he must do what his heart had told him to do.

Then came a brief respite, born of amazement at the audacity of this downward rush. Then the mob surged violently against Thord’s handful of

men who had closed protectingly about Thora and the other bound ones.

“Kill them! More offerings for the Old Gods!” rose a fierce shout. “More blood for the sacrifice!”

“Look—look, all men!” Thord leaped to the mound where stood the stone of sacrifice beneath the hideous leering of the ancient wooden idol. “Look! Look!” pealed Thord, dragging up the great stone with all his strength, poising it a moment, then risking all in one mighty blow. Down he flung the stone, full against the idol, shattering into splintered fragments this thing that men had worshiped.

Screams of men and women filled the air, the crowd fell back all of a tremble, lifting scared eyes to witness the Old Gods’ thunderbolts descend upon this sacrilege—but their gaze saw a strange thing. Out of the broken idol poured vermin, insects, crawling worms—foul things that had battened on the food offerings man had thrust down into the wooden god’s maw.

“Look!” shouted Thord. “This god of yours sends no thunder crash against me! This god of yours was a wooden thing. Like as our old heathen religion was full of murders and lusts and blood offerings, so was this wooden thing you called a god, full of foulness!

“Turn now,” thundered Thord the Firetooth, “turn now from heathendom, turn to the One True God. Pray—pray to the one high God of Love—the White Christ! Pray!”

That fearless courage broke the spell of paganism. Instead of dying for his faith, it was given to Thord the Firetooth to live for his faith. A tall, powerful figure, dazzling in the sun glint, he snatched up the broken dagger, bound it cross-wise to his sword blade, held the whole aloft to catch the light of the sun.

“Before this—the Sign of the Cross of Christ—pray!”

And there among the forever broken symbols of paganism shattered on the ground, the Norsemen of Greenland fell upon repentant knees and lifted up eyes to the Cross, the Sign of the One True God.

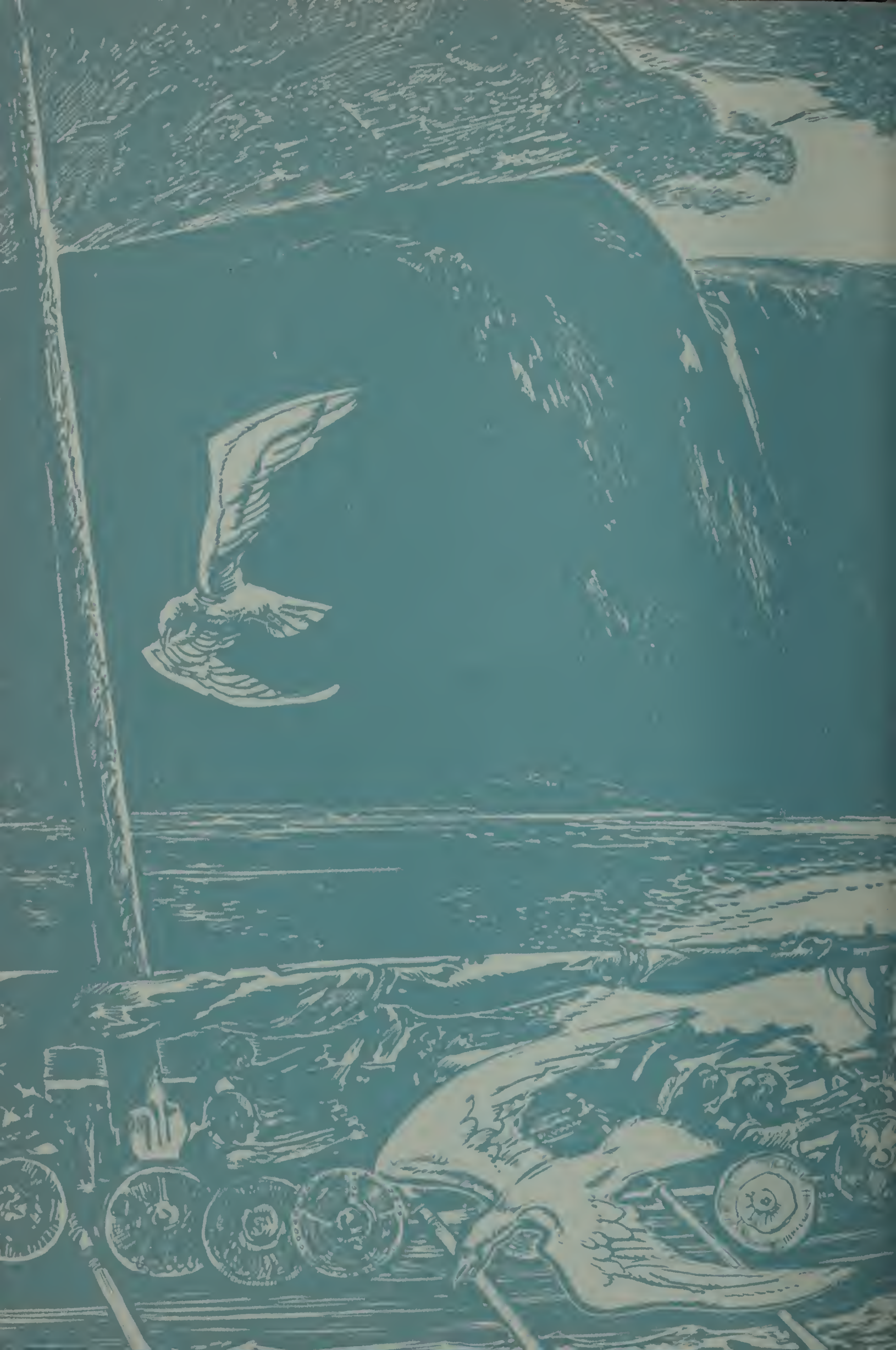
By Thord Firetooth, the famine was ended. He divided his shipload of supplies among the starving settlers. Then within the week, like an answer to prayer, the birds came, massed wedges flying north; the waters silvered with leaping fish; seals swept shorewards in black herds. Greenland became again a land of plenty. Thord and his men settled there. He and Halsing and Bratta and Helgi became pilots on a fleet of ships that many times sailed far south to the land where they had first wintered, the land of the great trees. From here they brought back huge precious timber, some of which was for Greenland trade, and some was sent on across the ocean to Old Norway.

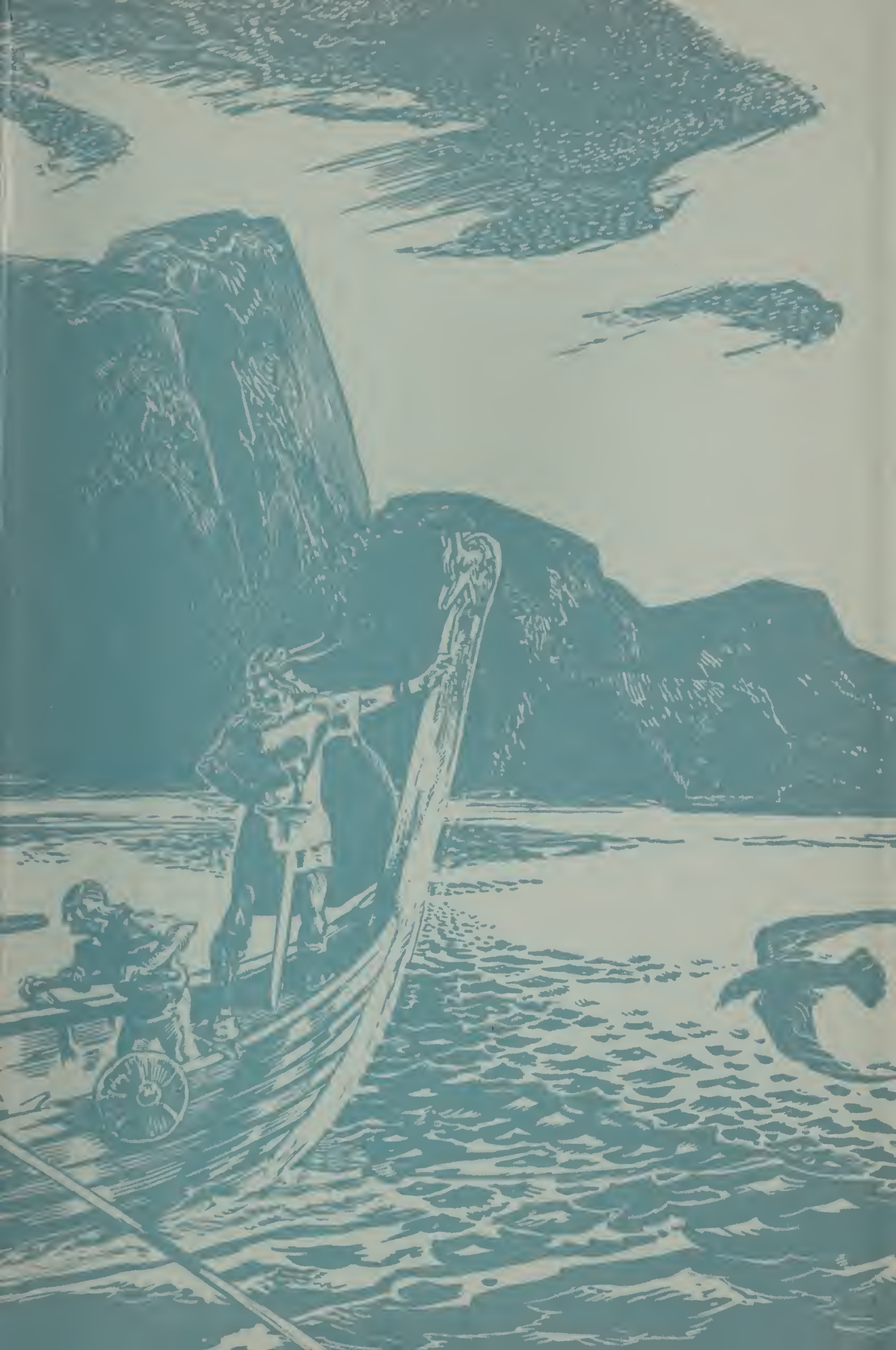
Never again in the four hundred and fifty years' annals of the Norse colonization in the New World do we hear of a return to heathenism. To this day,

in the Vatican records kept for nearly ten centuries at Rome, are listed the faithful tithings of the Greenland Church, paid in Greenland's own peculiar style of wealth—sealskins and ivory and rich furs.

In after years, Thord, grown wealthy in the New World, took Thora and all the rest of his household back to Nord Fjord forever. In those days Thord the Firetooth not only fought valiantly to win back Norway to the White Christ, but he also introduced into his homeland many peaceful arts of the Christian countries he had visited; candles with rush tapers; the hour glass; bridges and harbors and roads like unto those of Greek Constantinople.

So after all, perhaps it was fated by the grace of God that Thord Firetooth should have been sold a slave into far lands that he might bring back much of good to his people.





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00021892245

