# Splintered Sword

Henry Treece

*Title:* Splintered Sword
*Date of first publication:* 1965
*Author:* Henry Treece (1911-1966)
*Date first posted:* Nov. 17, 2021
*Date last updated:* Nov. 17, 2021
Faded Page eBook #20211135

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Lending Library.

# Splintered Sword

# Henry Treece

# Splintered Sword

*Illustrated by Charles Keeping*

Transcriber note: Illustrations omitted as not yet in public domain

FIRST PUBLISHED BY BROCKHAMPTON PRESS LTD., LEICESTER



FIRST U.S. EDITION

DUELL, SLOAN & PEARCE
AFFILIATE OF
MEREDITH PRESS

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 66-13483
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FOR MEREDITH PRESS
VAN REES PRESS • NEW YORK

# *CONTENTS*

# Splintered Sword


ORKNEY
1098 In the time of
King Magnus Barefoot
RINANS
SANDAY
STRONSAY
West Mainland
Kirkwall
East Mainland
HOY
SWONA
The Pictland Firth
STROMA (where Runolf started from)
CAITHNESS
Boyhood World

# *CALFSKIN BUNDLE*

RUNOLF sat with his back against the sun, watching its red glow fall over the glassy sea and pick out all the islands in dark-grey—Swona, East Mainland, Stronsay, Sanday, and far-distant misty Rinansey.

There was old magic in the sun and the islands; magic in the russet sea that glimmered like fairy gold; but no magic on Stroma, where Runolf watched his foster father's score of scrawny brown-fleeced sheep.

He said aloud, "To be fifteen! To be a man, yet to lead a thrall's life, watching sheep, stirring fish kettles, chopping wood! To be kicked from pillar to post by Kolbein, who calls himself my foster father! Oh, my real father, oh mother, why did you die in the burnt house?"

At first he did not see the long black shadow that fell beside him across the wiry turf. Stroma was crowded with shadows at sunset, and when a boy's eyes fill with tears one shadow is much like another.

He took up a handful of scree-stone and flung it as hard as he could towards the sea. One piece struck an old ewe called Freya, and she gazed at him most accusingly before she titupped away, shaking her fleece in annoyance, down the rattling slope.

Behind Runolf a voice said, "Well aimed, warrior! That should teach the daft old dame!"

Runolf turned his head and saw a strange man standing over him. Eyes like flint, features as brown and creased as old leather, hair thick and red, with grey strands in it and chopped square with a knife at the necknape. But, most strange of all, his gear—his round black leather helmet stiffened with iron; the long horsehide shirt that reached down to his knees, covered here and there with strips of rusty mail. And then, the long bundle under his left arm, a roll of calfskin, out of which poked a sword haft of yellow ivory. The man made no move either to hide it or to show it. He held it there, without thinking of it, as a scribe holds a quill in his fingers before setting out to write, whoever watches.

Runolf shielded his eyes from the sun and said, "Who are you?"

The man drew in a loud breath of sea air but did not answer. He stepped over the rock on which Runolf sat, and then eased himself down beside him. His mail creaked and the smell of sweaty leather came from his old war-shirt.

He stared across the red water towards Stronsay for a while, and said, "Boy, I have seen this Firth swarming with longships, like hayseeds on a pond! Now, it is as empty as my belly. All the men have gone. The real men."

Runolf had never met such a man as this before, among the fisherfolk and sheep pens of the islands. The sword drew his eyes. Only the earls of Orkney wore swords, but these blades were never seen by the common folk except on feast days, and then only at a distance, when Erland and Paul wore them to church at Kirkwall. Since the peace had been on Orkney, the worst weapons men had seen were hayforks and fodder knives.

Runolf stared hard at the yellow ivory haft and said, "Who are you, to bring edged tools on to Stroma? Are you an earl?"

The man shut his flint eyes and shook his red head. "Oh! oh! to be a brisk lad again," he said. "Aye, what a spring and summer it was! Aye, the barns burning and the churches flaring and the folk running with their hands over their ears! Aye, what a season!"

Then, all at once, he bent over forwards, grunting, and rolled sideways from the rock and lay with his knees drawn up. At first Runolf thought the man was drunk. Then he saw the foam at his mouth's corners and the new whiteness of his face.

He said, "What is wrong, stranger?"

The man did not answer him. Instead, he tried to unlace the front of his stiff leather shirt, but his fingers were too fumbling. Runolf kneeled above him and pulled open the thongs. Then he saw the dark gash over the man's right hip, with the blood dried round it.

"Hey, master!" he said. But the man did not answer. His eyes fluttered a while and his big teeth chattered, that was all. So Runolf tied up the wound as best he could, with a strip of cloth from his own shirt, and then poured barley beer from his goatskin into the man's open mouth.

After a while, when the sun had fallen below Hoy, the man roused again and some colour came back to his cheeks. He shook his head and struggled up. "Well, fellow," he said, hardly looking at the boy, "are you ready for off, then? Do you mean to keep the ship waiting forever, then?"

Runolf said boldly, “I see no ship. And by rights you should come down to the steading and see if my foster mother, Rannveig, will put salves on your wound. You should not be travelling with such a gash on you.”

The man said, “I bear no wound. True, I came away from York with a bodyful of them—but nothing like my shipmaster, the Hardrada. Boy, *he* left his head there! A trophy to be proud of, whoever got it.”

Runolf said, “But that was a lifetime past. None of them is left now, only the stories.”

The man laughed harshly, like a stallion snorting before a horse fight, and caused two sea-mews to break from a whin bush and scramble up to the greying sky on frightened wings. Then he plunged his hand into his deep pouch and held out his palm before Runolf’s eyes. Five small coins lay there, dull in the dying sun.

The man said, “You see the heads on them? These are Roman kings who sat in York when the world was a beardless lad.”

Runolf kept away from the coins in case a spell lay on them. “Where did you get these relics?” he said. “They should lie in the ground.”

The man rubbed his thick fingers over them, carelessly, and said, “They were above ground when I got them. In a minster near Humber River, where my master’s ship lay waiting for me. I forget the place. Too wound-weary I was for names. These coins and a hundred more I took as blood-payment, and sailed with Prince Olaf and the Orkney earl away from that death place. Ah, few enough ships hobbled back, though many had danced with us there.”

He walked a pace or two towards the sheer cliff edge, then half turned and said, “Here, boy, take the Roman gold. I am too tired to carry it about any longer. In clean young hands it might prosper.”

Runolf shook his head and put his hands behind his back.

He said, “No, stranger, I dare not touch it. Ghosts fly over such things.”

The man nodded. “Aye, mayhap,” he said. “Then we will send the ghosts on a voyage, flying!”

With a wide sweep of his arm, he flung the coins out over the cliff face. They fell glinting among a covey of black-backed gulls. The birds rose, swirling and crying in alarm.

The man watched them, laughing in his throat. “Aye, there’s pretty pickings for you, mates,” he called. “You don’t get gold for supper every day.”

Runolf said to him, shocked, “Wilful waste makes woeful want. To cast gold away, even church-gotten coin, is ill-boding.”

The man came towards him and said, “It was mine to give, my blood bought it. And it is no bad thing to make an offering off Stroma. The goddess here may smile on me when I come this way again.”

Runolf stood up and began to call for the dogs to gather in the sheep. Then sternly he said, “There is no goddess here, stranger. The White Christ is lord in the islands now.”

The man only winked and whistled into the salt wind. “Where is the steading?” he said. “I could drink a sheep broth now. And I’d pay good coin for white bread. My teeth have done no work for three days. They get lazy.”

As they went down the steep rock path, the man staggered and then leaned on a dead hawthorn bole, his hand to his side. Runolf said, “You are sick, master. Let me carry your sword.”

But the man glared at him so fiercely and troll-like. “Sword,” he said, “sword! I carry no sword. You must be blind, boy. This parcel of calfskin wraps only round a distaff I take to a cousin in Iceland. Lead on and chatter no more.”

He pushed Runolf so hard in the back that the boy nearly fell. And when they were near the farm stockade, the boy glanced round and saw that the ivory haft was now covered up.

Kolbein the foster father stood black-browed and glowering by the gate. When they were twenty paces off, he shouted, “What sort of homecoming is this, then? Another mouth to feed? Am I to nourish every lame dog on the island? Am I not punished enough, feeding a worthless foster son? What evil have I done to be tormented so, every hour of the day?”

Runolf stood still, ashamed and afraid, although he was as tall as Kolbein and nearly as strong. But the stranger only laughed, deep in his chest, and went on towards the gate, striding despite his limp.

And when he stood above Kolbein, he put out his right hand and stroked the farmer’s dark face, gently like a mother. “There, sweeting,” he said in a mocking voice, “no more tantrums, my pretty! Just go within and lay a table with sheep broth and white bread. You have a guest today.”

Runolf gasped, knowing Kolbein's name among the islands as a red-tempered man. Even the stark earls sent to him with courtesy for his land-dues. Before he knew what he was saying, he had called out, "This man is wounded, foster father. Deal kindly with him. He was with Hardrada at York."

Suddenly shaggy heads appeared over the stockade, and a dozen farm thralls were laughing like madmen. The stranger stood aghast among the din, like a bear hemmed round by hounds. For a breath's space he gazed towards Runolf, as though seeking help, but he did not open his mouth to ask for it.

Then black Kolbein waved his hand, and the slaves ran out to do his bidding. For a while, the leather-coated stranger stayed upright, like a gaunt rock column that stands against the pounding seas. Runolf was astounded that he made no effort to draw the ivory-hafted sword from the calfskin. Indeed, he stared about him with his flint-grey eyes, almost as though he was amused by this jostling. Then he was down and on the ground, and the thralls were beating at him, merciless with their staves.

Runolf ran forward, crying, "This man is hurt, you fools. Leave him alone. He is badly wounded."

Now the foster brothers, Bjorni and Thord, and their sister, Helga, decided to attack Runolf, pulling him away and punching at him. And soon black Kolbein joined them, and, taking off his heavy belt with the iron buckle, beat Runolf soundly, under the woollen wall of the byre.

Helga's yellow plaits were flying as she hung on to her foster brother's arms. "You ungrateful wretch," she kept saying, "to treat our father so!"

Runolf could not hit at her, though she was older than he was, because she was a girl. In a way, he was glad to be rid of all this quarrelling, when Kolbein's heavy buckle caught him on the temple and let him forget things for a space.

When he woke up, he was on the hay of the wall-bed in the steading-hall. It was dark now and his foster mother, Rannveig, was ladling out cabbage soup. She saw his eyes open and said in her hard voice, "Come on, now, no more of your pretending. Sit down at the board and be thankful for a good supper."

Runolf did as she said and obediently dipped the dry black barley crust into the thin broth. It hurt his jaws to eat, but he knew better than to

aggravate Rannveig. Though at last he dared to say, “Where is the stranger, foster mother?”

She sniffed and looked away from him. “Gone,” she said, “and good riddance to bad rubbish. You’ll be the death of your father, taking up with such ruffians.”

Runolf gazed at her in astonishment. “He was a gentle fellow, in his way, foster mother,” he said. “He spoke no harm of anyone.”

Rannveig stirred the black iron kettle viciously. “Spoke no harm!” she snorted. “If the earls could lay hands on him, they’d speak some harm, I’m telling you. They’d put his head on a pole, to show the people they had nothing more to fear, to show them that the old wicked days are gone forever.”

The boy put down his black bread. “But what had they to fear from him?” he said. “A poor stranger, seeking only shelter.”

The woman came to him, her apron screwed in her red hands. “Poor stranger!” she shouted. “Poor stranger! That plague of the islands! That bloody-handed heathen! We thought he had died by now—but no, he must come back from the ghosts after a generation, like a wolf snuffling round the sheep pens!”

Then all at once she stopped her shouting, and the rubbing of her hands. She leaned over the board and hissed at Runolf, “Are you blind, you great soft booby? Have you never listened to the tales the thralls tell, sitting round the Yule-fire? Can’t you recognize a baresark when you see one, you fool?”

Suddenly she took him by the hair and began to pull at it, tears flowing down her thin cheeks. “A baresark, a baresark!” she was saying. “We have always been a decent family. We have always paid our dues and worked hard. And you must bring a baresark right to our doors! Oh, God help us all! We have nourished a viper in rearing you.”

# *GUDRUN GORE*

AFTER YULETIDE, to every man's surprise, King Magnus Barefoot came from Norway with a score of warships and, making no bones about it, captured the Earls Paul and Erland and sent them back to Bergen with iron chains on their legs. Then he set up his young son, Sigurd, as earl in the islands, under the care of his kinsman, Hakon Paulson, and so sailed away, westerly to the Hebrides, with his war flags flying.

Runolf heard this from a thrall, so he asked Kolbein what it meant. His foster father gritted his teeth and answered, "It means that from now on we must work twice as hard. Once to pay our taxes to Earl Sigurd Magnusson, and twice to pay the kinsmen of the captured earls who are in Norway. They will still want their pickings sent over to them. Ah, life is a hard affair, and there is small joy to be had from it, especially with a family and thralls to feed. One day they will name me a saint at Kirkwall for all I have endured."

He sighed a while, worshipping himself, before he turned and flung Runolf outside, cursing him for a lazy dog and the cause of his family's ruin.

As Runolf trudged up the path to the sheep pasture, he wondered who got most joy out of life—a man like his foster father, or a man like the stranger with the calfskin bundle.

The next day, news came from Caithness on a sheep barge that Kolbein's half-brother, Gizur Nose, had died of a seizure while dragging a lame cow out of a well, and that his property and belongings were straightway to be shared out among his kinsfolk, since he had not thought to leave any named children behind him.

Kolbein called Runolf to him in the crowded hall and said aloud so that family and thralls should hear and bear witness, "I must go to Caithness to see that I receive my fair share. Since you are the eldest boy, though only a foster son, it is in your hands I must leave this steading until I return. See that you attend to all things properly, for many eyes will be watching all you do. And see that you present a true report to me when I return, for if you lie in a single word, I shall hear the truth from others and shall know of your wickedness."

Then he embraced his wife and his own children, and went down to the boat. He did not embrace Runolf, who was not sorry.

Gales and high seas came up through the Pictland Firth for a week afterwards, and no vessels dared venture across to Stroma from Caithness. Nor could the new earl's tax men travel from Kirkwall to bother the farmers, so all was quiet, apart from the black winds that seemed bent on biting all the soil from Stroma and spitting it back into the sea.

One ewe called Hallgard was late in lambing, so Runolf sat with her in a windbreak on the headland. He had a fire and a horn lantern, so he was happy enough to be away from the steading, where there was always bickering and harsh words from his foster family.

Hallgard had her lamb late that night and Runolf covered them both over with straw and bracken to keep the wind from chilling them. Then he warmed some barley ale in a pan over the fire and was about to drink it when a man came round the windbreak and said, "Save some for me. Live and let live!"

It was the man who had carried the calfskin bundle. But this time he was wearing the ivory-hafted sword, in a scabbard, in the proper place.

Runolf almost dropped the ale pan.

The baresark bent over the fire and took the black iron vessel from him. "Safe hands spill no ale," he said, and drank deeply. Then wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he sat beside Runolf and held the pan to the boy's mouth like a mother feeding a small child. "Your hands are shaking," he said. "It is this cold. Its fangs cannot nip my thick hide, for I live out of doors; but for you tender steading-folk, it must be torment up here on the hill."

Runolf nodded wide-eyed. The baresark glanced at him, then stirring the embers with his bare right hand, he said, "Listen to this, and tell me the answer:

*Sea succours me, waves wrap me warm.*
*Though footless, foam I tread, friendly with flood;*
*Careless of cover, yet man carves my corpse.*
*He, knave of the knife, scores through my skin.*
*Then, cruel as cormorant, eats me uncooked.*

What is it, lad?"

Runolf said, "Is it a baresark, master?" His lips trembled.

The man smiled, “Nay, son,” he answered. “It is an oyster. Do the men not ask riddles in your foster father’s hall to pass the long nights through?”

Runolf shook his head. “We go to our beds after the supper broth,” he said. “Kolbein cannot afford tallow rushes for night gossiping.”

The baresark said, “All the best jests are played in the dark—except for sword play and that needs good light.” His thought turned to his weapon then and he drew it slowly and laid it across his knees to let the firelight play on it. “Such a sword needs clear light to bite by, lad,” he said. “Aye, stare your fill; see, she glows with pride to be gazed at. This is Gudrun Gore, and twenty rovers have held her since Odin was a youth. See, her edge has never known the sharpening stone; and she carries but one hack in the blade. That was when my uncle, Iron-Grim, had her. But it was not his fault; the Bulgar king she nibbled at had a head made of stone. Iron-Grim told my father how this could be. In Bulgar lands there are deep caverns where the water always drips down, and there the kings go and hold their heads under the water until they become stone. This, they think, makes them deathless in battle. But Gudrun Gore put an end to that legend, though in leaving the king stark dead she took this wound.”

Runolf did not feel afraid now, though he did feel bewildered. He said, “Master, tell me, what is a baresark?”

The man spat on the black iron of his sword and then rubbed it bright again with his leather sleeve. He put his upper teeth over his reddish beard and drew some of it into his mouth and nibbled at it. Then he said, “A baresark? A baresark? This name has always teased my head. I hear men say it, and sometimes I see them point at me when they think I am not looking. A baresark—it is a name *my* lips do not speak, boy. If I am a baresark, then it is a man. Yes, a man with no enemies. All friends, to offer the ale cup, to offer a roof and a bed. To stand aside and leave the pathway open when the baresark comes. To think so highly of him.”

Runolf listened, but he also remembered how the thralls had beaten this man and thrown him out of the steading gate. He said at last, “With so many friends, a baresark must have great estate, great possessions.”

The man nodded in the firelight. “Yes, I have this sword,” he said. “But, there again, such great estate brings grief. Who, after me, shall put his hand about Gudrun Gore and adore her? I have no children, boy. There is a nephew of mine at Skagastrond, but you know the old saying; ‘Between friends a narrow creek; between kinsmen a wide fjord.’ And my nephew is

such a one as will sight a mangy fox and cry, ‘Ah, what a great wolf disturbs my stackyard.’ No sort of man to fondle Gudrun Gore.”

Runolf said, “There is another saying, master. ‘The wolf has made friends before now of fighting swine.’ Could you not go back to your nephew at Skagastrond and make the best of him?”

The baresark sat and stared into the fire. “You speak a sort of sense,” he said, “though you are still a boy. You see, lad, though I stand in Odin’s palm most days, there are some small hours before the cock crows when I lie below a whinbush in the wind and remember the saying, ‘Fear not raven at rest, nor ragged old men.’ And then I remember that my coat is ragged, and I weep in the wind that arms and legs, like the great oak, must shrink and fall at last.”

Then all at once Runolf saw the tears running down the man’s red-brown cheeks. He said, “If I had Gudrun Gore I would keep and honour her like the Hoard of Jerusalem.” He said this to stop the weeping; in truth he did not want the sword. A shepherd only needs a crook on Stroma, that and a head for heights.

But at his words, the baresark gazed at him with such soft eyes, such calm upon his bristling face, that Runolf felt he loved this stranger and his sword more than any other thing in life.

And then the baresark said, “She *shall* be yours, when my hand has slipped from the haft. Come now and keep a watch on her. A boat lies waiting for me under the headland. There is a place in it for you. I knew you were of my kind since that moment when they beat me, down at your foster father’s steading, and I saw the look in your eyes.”

Runolf halted then and said, “This puzzles me, master. They had but staves yet you had Gudrun Gore. You, a baresark, let the thralls lay about you without answering back. Why should this be?”

The man stood up and spoke into the wind. “In years gone by,” he whispered, “that would have been their end. Thralls, women, children, all, would have lain stark beneath the steading wall. But now I am older, lad. Now I have learned that even such a proper deed can follow a man about the land like a stench. I go now to ask a place in Earl Sigurd’s guard at Kirkwall, and what prince would care to take the allegiance of a thrall-slayer? Besides, even as they thrashed me, I knew that if I took their heads for it—as I well might have done—you would have been left behind to suffer for me. The

other fisher-farmers would have made you pay dearly, boy, after I had gone."

Runolf said, "Tell me, baresark, are you never afraid then, whatever men do to you?"

The man smiled, staring at the fire, and answered, "Afraid? No, lad. I never think of anything but the blade-work in hand." Then a drifting gull above him screamed out and the man's smile went away. He turned his head from Runolf and said in a different voice this time, "Afraid—yes, lad, a true man is always afraid. So he must go forward and kill what makes him afraid. The fear is so terrible, it must be put out of the way; there is nothing else for it. Odin, but my hands sweat even to hear that bird cry out in the dark so suddenly. If I could fly I would be up there and after it to quieten its voice."

Runolf wished he dared put his hand on the man's shaking arm to comfort him, but just then the snow started to come down like fierce white whips, stinging the face and blinding the eyes.

The baresark shook his head and said gently, "That sheep of yours, and her lamb . . . they must be got down to shelter or this night will be their last. A sad thing for the little lamb—his first night and his last. Come, let us carry them."

So they left the spluttering fire and started off. Runolf carried the small lamb, and the baresark hoisted up the ewe on to his back. It was hard going in that beating snowstorm, and halfway down the hill two young sheep, stung and frightened by the storm, slipped on the crumbling scree and plunged down into the darkness. There was no saving them, but Runolf knew that when his foster father came back from Caithness there would be a price to pay.

At last, weary and shivering, they reached the steading. Runolf said, "Come inside, stranger. I am master here now and I will set you by the fire and give you meat and drink."

But the baresark shook his head and smiled. "Nay, lad," he said, "I was turned from this door once. It shall not happen to me again. Instead, put down the sheep and the lamb and come with me to the boat. Come and sail out into the world. It is a fine place to visit."

Runolf dearly wished to go, but he had promised Kolbein to tend the steading until his return, and he must keep his word.

"Not this time, rover," he said, putting his hand in the baresark's. "But, I vow on my honour that when you come for me the third time, in rain or

shine, in frost or snow, I will go with you. Will you promise to come for me, master?"

The baresark gazed down at him a while, then nodded and smiled. "I vow I will come for you again, lad," he said. "Keep that thought warm in your heart whatever happens. I will come for you. Now go inside, for this snow is bitter enough to kill a man. It is no worse in Greenland."

There was a sudden flurry and Runolf had to close his eyes against the hail. When he opened them again, the man had gone. So he went into the steading to be greeted with cold grey stares. His foster mother said, "There, Kolbein trusted you to stay out with the flock, and at the first breath of cold, you come running indoors like a frightened deer. God knows, we did wrong in giving you our love and our lodging." She did not know about the two lost sheep, and Runolf did not think it was the right time to tell her.

But he had to tell Kolbein the next week, when his sheep barge came across from Caithness again; and Kolbein took down a hawthorn stick and did not let up until even Odd, the worst-tempered thrall, said, "Let him be now, master, or you will cripple the fellow."

After that, Runolf wished to heaven he had gone with the baresark and had not stood by his duty to Kolbein. Now, every night, he dreamed that the man had come back by night and was standing under his window, calling out, "Come away, son; come away, the ship rides at the anchor-stone, and we have the bright world before us to wander in. Let's off to Miklagard!"

But each time he woke with the dawn and found that it had been only a dream. So now he grew miserable and pale and thin, for his foster mother gave him a smaller share of food than she did to her own children, making him pay, one way or another, for the two lost sheep. She never called to mind the ewe and the young lamb he had saved; but that is the way of greedy folk—they only remember what they have lost, and never what they have gained.

# *WRECKED LONGSHIP*

WORD came up to Stroma that King Magnus was doing well in the South Hebrides. He fired the houses in Lewis and put so many islanders to the sword on Uist, Skye and Mull that men took to the curraghs in the wintry sea and set forth for Kintyre, or even distant Ireland.

There was a little peace for a while when Magnus rested on the holy island of Iona; but soon he was off again, plundering Islay and then Man.

King Lagmadr of the Islands stood against him as long as he could, which was not long. And then he too ran away into the hills, where he lived like a hunted hare, going from island to island, until the Norse king's searchers found him and put an end to him.

After that King Magnus thought he would drive the Norman earls out of Anglesey and then would pass across to Ireland and betroth his son Sigurd to the King of Connaught's pretty daughter, Biadmynia.

All this news was well chewed over in Kolbein's hall on Stroma. Rannveig clasped her hands and said, "What doings! What a great king we have, husband."

Kolbein said, "This Magnus will teach those Scotch redshanks their manners, wife. He is much like his grandfather, Hardrada. We should be proud of him."

By the hearth fire, Runolf said, "The thralls say Magnus has taken to wearing the kilt and his new name is Bareleg among the fishermen."

Rannveig glared at him. "So, fosterling," she said, "you now dare to speak against the king, do you?"

Kolbein thumped his knife haft hard on to the table. "To be sure," he said, "we are fortunate folk. To have a foster son who gossips with thralls and fishermen about our king, and then spreads slanders over the island . . . yes, we are fortunate, indeed."

Runolf felt all eyes upon him. He swallowed hard and answered, "I mean no harm, foster father. Yet I will say, in all honesty, that if any other

man burned and killed like King Magnus, we should call him a rogue and a manslayer and should be off after him as men hunt a wolf."

Kolbein's eyes started, his neck went blood-red. "What!" he said, rising slowly from the board.

"God have mercy on him," said Rannveig, shaking her head, "he has lost his wits. He'll end up hanging for treason and ourselves with him, for sheltering such a wild creature."

"We'll put a stop to that," said Kolbein, wrenching off his belt. "Aye, we'll soon cure that."

Runolf jumped up and turned to the door but his foster kin, Bjorni and Thord, stood with their backs against it. So he ran down the hall to the gable end and snatching up a stool said, "I beg you, foster father, leave me alone. I should have to defend myself and I wish you no harm."

Rannveig screamed out, "Hark, the young snake hisses at you, husband. Silence him!"

Kolbein snorted like a boar and began to swing his heavy buckle. "You dare to threaten me," he said. Then he rushed forward, flailing out.

Runolf could have struck him down, but did not. Instead, he dropped the stool and held out his hands. The iron buckle tongue tore his cheek open. Then it made a gash on his neck. "I beg you," he said, as Kolbein staggered and wheezed. "You will hurt yourself, foster father."

Just then the door burst open and Odd the thrall stood there, his red face shining with rain. "Hey, master," he called, "come quickly! There's a longship aground, with her back broken, off North Skerry."

Kolbein turned, the belt dangling, and said, "Are there pickings to be had?"

Odd said, "Judging by the gold leaf on the prow, it should be worth getting wet for."

Rannveig cried out, "Wait a while, husband, in case the rowers are still alive. Give the sea a chance to quieten them."

But Kolbein was putting on his belt again. "What, woman," he said, "wait and let someone else find her! Who do you think I am?"

Then he called out for all his family and the thralls to follow him and to bring ropes in case there were any iron treasure chests that needed hauling ashore.

Runolf went with the others, leaping from rock to rock, sometimes up to the waist in swirling water, feeling the cold salt bite into his wounds, feeling a dull hatred of the man who had given them.

And then, with the roar of the sea in his ears and the grey birds cackling above him, he suddenly forgot his foster father's unkindness because of what lay before him.

Twenty paces off, beyond the tide-race that rushed back and forth between the rock on which the steading folk stood and the dog-toothed skerry, a ship lay on her side, mast broken short, side stove in, and being rolled here and there helplessly with each surge of the black waters.

The farm folk shouted excitedly, but Runolf could have wept to see the brown weed hanging over the gunwales and the gilded prow splintering against the harsh grey rocks. Above the bitter wind, he called, "Are there men still aboard? Can we not save them?"

Kolbein stood chest-deep in the flood, a hide rope round his waist. He glared back and yelled, "It is the cargo we risk our lives for, not the fools who put to sea on such a night."

But when the steading band had waded and swum to the skerry, there was little enough cargo to salvage. A few broken oars and a rusty pot or two. Most of what the ship carried had slipped away, into ten fathoms off the skerry. A score of sheepskins floated, sodden with brine, twelve paces away on the tide; but no man would dare his life for such poor pickings.

Then Runolf gazed through the darkness and shouted, "Look, there are men aboard her, three of them, in the stern. If we can cast a noose about the prow, we can drag them ashore."

Odd the thrall snarled back at him, "They are dead men, you fool. What profit in bringing such ashore? Let the sea have them, as it has had their fellows. They are not our affair."

All at once, a great wave bigger than the rest picked up the shattered longship and heaved her on to the smaller rocks that edged the skerry, almost within reach; and there she lay for the space of five slow breaths. And Runolf saw, as clearly as by daylight, that one of the huddled men was alive, and that it was the baresark who had promised to come and fetch him away from Stroma. His hide shirt was almost ripped from him, and his arms and legs were lolling as helpless as bladder-wrack in the grey salt-swirl. Yet his eyes were still open and gazing, as though he could see all about him.

Runolf's heart thudded in his breast. "Hang on, friend," he shouted. "We will get to you." Then he turned to Kolbein and held out his hand for the hemp rope; but the foster father snatched it from him and said, "Come back, you fool. I will not lose a good rope for the sake of such carrion."

Yet Runolf still fared forward against the sea-rush. "He said he would come for me, and he has," the boy shouted. "Lie still, I am coming, comrade."

Now he was within an arm's length of the gunwales, but even as he put out his hands to grasp them, the baresark's lips drew away from his great teeth, and he said hoarsely, "Go back, boy. I have no arms to hold you with. Go back, don't try to save me. I am too weary to be saved."

For an instant, Runolf saw the sword, Gudrun Gore, held above the waters that surged over the longship, and it was in his head to gather up both the baresark and the sword. But even as he lunged forward, the suck of the next wave drew the ship away from the rocks with a great crashing, out into the darkness, leaving Runolf alone in the icy brine.

Kolbein and Odd were shouting now that they must escape along the rock ridge before the waves got stronger and covered them all. A thrall named Asmund took the boy by the belt and dragged him away from the sea. "Come, come, you fool," he said, "it has all gone out of our grasp now. The moment has passed."

Runolf struggled, but he could not overcome the man's tugging, though he fought and even wept with rage and pity. And when they were all back in the stackyard, Rannveig came out to meet them. "What," she cried, "all that labour, and for nothing!"

Kolbein scowled and said, "It is this boy. He casts ill luck on all he touches. But for him, we should have brought the gilded prow back with us. And now it has floated away, to waste under the waters."

Rannveig said, "He does not deserve our house and home. He is a blight on our kindness. From now on, he gets no love from me, I can tell you. He shall sleep in the byre with the thralls—and that's too good for him, the mischievous dog!"

They flung him into the cold hovel, where his bed was a heap of damp straw; but his heart was too full to let him brood on his own sorrows. In his head, he still saw the baresark, lying in the rolling wreck, like a man who had lost faith in the world and only wanted to be rid of it. Runolf now saw the baresark as an old man and not a brisk hero. The red in his hair had been

the sun’s glow, nothing else, for in the ship he was all grey, except where the weed had swept over him and left green tendrils hanging from his head. Only Gudrun Gore was still young; and it was of this sword that he dreamed, as he fell into a chill sleep in the draughty byre.

# *DAWN LAUNCHING*

TOWARDS dawn Runolf woke sharply as though the drowned man had called in his ear, reminding him of their sadly broken friendship. The boy sat up in the straw among the gentle sighing beasts, and knew that his cheeks were wet with tears.

Through the open doorway of the byre he saw the squat wooden steading where his foster father lay. This place was no longer his home. The folk in it were not his family. They were enemies, rather than friends; and he was little better than their slave.

Suddenly Runolf rose. “I cannot stay here,” he said to himself. It was as though the old baresark still called to him, hailed him down to the lonely wind-swept skerry where the longship had broken her back in the darkness.

Stepping quietly so as not to wake the farm dogs, he began to cross the stackyard, the felt hood of his tunic pulled up round his face. He was less than ten paces from the stockade gate when the shutters of a window clashed open and Kolbein stared down at him with angry dark eyes.

“Well,” he called, “what devilry are you up to now, fellow? Do you mean to steal my sheep, or to set fire to the house as we lie sleeping? Which is it, fosterling?”

Runolf halted and looked up to the low window of the sleeping chamber that was set above the hall beams. He said, “I mean you no harm, Kolbein. But now I know that my life here has ended and that I must go away.”

The man leaned out a little farther and gazed at him, the whites of his eyes showing, as though he was trying to frighten the lad, like a troll. “You mean no harm, hey?” he whispered. “Yet you would run away and leave us, forgetting that we gave you a home and fed you?”

Runolf was beyond fear of this man now and said, “I thank you for all you have given me, Kolbein, but do not forget that I always worked longer hours for you than your meanest thralls, and that I was out on the headland in foul weather while your own children sat by the hearth fire. I think my debt to you is paid fairly.”

Even as he spoke, he expected Kolbein to fly into one of his terrible rages, but the man only nodded and smiled. Runolf had never seen him smile quite like this before; it was almost worse than when he frowned.

But Kolbein said, quite gently, “Well, what is to be, must be. You are growing apace now, and who am I to keep you penned in like a sick ewe if your heart is set on roaming?”

Then, for a moment, the man glanced behind him into the room, as though searching for something. When he appeared again, he said, “Well, my boy, I’ll do right by you, though you have often thought ill of me, and I will send you away with a parting gift, so that if men ask you of your foster father, you will say that he was a generous man. Here, Runolf, reach up and take the gift.”

As the boy did as he was bidden, the man’s great red hand suddenly clutched his wrist and swung him off his feet. Then Runolf saw what Kolbein had been searching for—it was in his other hand, a stout blackthorn stick used for beating bullocks along the rocky paths.

Now Kolbein’s smile became a vengeful grin, and he said, “Aye, you shall have such a parting gift that you will never forget me, you rogue. The marks will stay with you a lifetime, I’ll warrant.”

Runolf saw the first blow coming and was just able to move his head aside to save it laying open his face. Instead, it struck him on the shoulder so sharply that he cried out. Then, full of sudden anger, the boy snatched up and caught the end of the staff, and so swung below the window.

Kolbein’s mouth flew open. “Loose the stick, you fool,” he said, “or you will have me on to the ground. Let go, Runolf, I cannot keep my footing. I meant you no harm. It was but a joke. You understand that, don’t you, lad?”

Runolf set his feet against the wall of the steading, and hung firm a moment, then he said, “Aye, I understand your joke, Kolbein. Now here is one of mine, and let us see if you understand it.”

As he finished, he gave a strong heave on the stick. The man flew out above him like a great black bird, so quickly that he struck the ground before Runolf did. But the boy was the first to rise, and now he had the staff in his hand as he went towards Kolbein.

“So, foster father,” he said grimly, “you are not laughing, I notice. If that jest did not amuse you, see if this one will.”

He was so angry that for an instant he had meant to let Kolbein feel what it was like to be at the forward end of a blackthorn staff; but as he stepped forth, his arm upraised, the man gave a deep groan and a shudder that seemed to pass the length of his body, and then his shaggy head fell, pale and still, upon the stackyard straw.

Runolf saw his eyes close, then spring open again, and this time they seemed to roll back in his head and only show their whites. As he stood above Kolbein, the staff still clasped in his hand, Rannveig screamed out above him from the window, "Haro! Haro! Up, thralls, and catch the manslayer! Take him red-handed, fellows! He has slain your master in his own yard!"

Runolf's limbs began to shake as though he had a fever. His heart jumped up right into his throat. He tried to shout out, but no words came.

Rannveig cried again, "Hark to him, thralls, he has the madness on him. He has gone baresark. Slay him! Cut him down before he does worse!"

Runolf still tried to cry out that he had meant no harm but only growls came from him. Then he had just sense enough to see that Odd was coming down from the far malthouse, where the beer was brewed, dragging on his breeches, and carrying a big wood-axe under his right arm.

Behind him, other sleepy thralls were trailing, with sticks and stones in their hands.

"Hurry, fellows," yelled Rannveig. "Settle him before he leaps up into the room and kills me and my innocent children in their beds."

Then all at once a great power came into Runolf, which he had never known before. He grinned up at the woman, snapped the blackthorn staff across his knee and flung it at her. And then, almost without thinking, he swung about and ran towards the stockade. It would be too late to undo the three great bolts that kept it fastened. So he leapt towards the top of the fence, touched it lightly with his fingertips, and then was on the other side. Behind him, he heard the thralls call out that he must be bedevilled to spring so high.

Then he was clear for a while, sniffing the air like a wolf when the hounds are on his tail. To turn right would only take him on to the headland, where they would catch him or fling him over the cliff top. To turn left along the winding shore path led only to the far skerry where the longship had wallowed.

But this was the way he felt drawn, though there might be drowning at the end of it. This was where he would have kept his tryst with the baresark, if all had gone well.

As he ran, his eyes flooded with tears when he recalled that he did not even know the dead man's name—yet this man, though nameless, meant more to him than anyone still alive. Then Runolf suddenly felt the emptiness, the loneliness of the world. A stone flung by Odd struck him sharply in the back, but the boy scarcely noticed it.

Once he glanced behind him, over his shoulder, and saw the thralls strung out along the rocky path beside the seashore, shaking sticks and axes and shouting at him to stop. With the breath whistling in his throat and his legs giving under him, he almost did stop and take the consequences—but just then a wave bigger than the rest thundered against the weed-strewn rocks at his side and dashed spray all over him. Its cold shock brought him sharply back to his senses and he struggled on.

Now the barefooted thralls fell behind, crying angrily, and Runolf plunged headlong into the first water-runnel that led to the skerries. The tide had gone down, yet all the same the bitter black water reached his chin and, half-floundering, half-swimming, he had to fight to reach the heaped pyramid of rocks which stood just above the water.

There he halted a moment to regain his breath, then fought on again to the next skerry, and then the next.

Only once did Odd's harsh voice reach his ears. The head thrall shouted, "Come back, manslayer; there is no hiding place in the world for you now, outlaw. They will hang you at Kirkwall, come back!"

So Runolf knew that there was no going back. Better to die in the sea he had known all his life, he thought, than in the market place at Kirkwall, among grim-faced strangers who thought no more of him than they did of an old ox or a tottering sheep.

Half-blind with weariness and salt spray, he faced the last stretch of water that led to North Skerry; but as he breasted the wild current, his heart failed him, for the wrecked longship had gone. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he had thought of the wreck as a refuge, a place where he might have made his last stand, with the dead baresark beside him.

As he dragged himself out of the sucking waves, over the sharp pebbles, he saw the runnels dug into the foreshore by the keel of the longship when the night tides had drawn her back into the sea, her dead crew still in her.

For a moment he staggered, alone and close to defeat; then all at once his sight cleared and he saw lodged between two brown rocks a heavy oak plank, torn from the ship's side, and beside it the sword which he had once seen, wrapped in calfskin, when the baresark first came to him, and seen fully on the baresark's second visit.

Then Runolf recalled how the man had said that one day Gudrun Gore would be his to hold. He went forward and took up the sword, accepting the gift from his dead friend.

But it was not the Gudrun Gore he had known before. Like all else in the world, the sword had changed. A hand's length of her bright blade had been snapped off, and one keen edge had been cruelly hacked as though the dying baresark had struck out at the rocks again and again in fury, before giving up the ghost and letting the sea have him.

The boy could have wept to see what had been done, but just then, glancing up, he saw Odd and two stout thralls less than a stone's throw away, already calling out in triumph like hounds when they run the fox to earth.

For a breath's space Runolf glared at them, wondering whether to run and meet them on the foreshore and slash them back into the water.

Then a voice seemed to come to him out of the salt air, saying, "Fare forth, voyager! Fare forth, and let such byre cattle be."

Runolf shook his tangled head. "Yes, baresark," he whispered. "Yes, I will do as you say."

And, pushing the precious splintered sword into his hide-thong belt, he took the broad oak plank and dragged it to the farther side of the skerry; then, launching it as the tide swept out again, he held on to it, pressing his face to the rough wood and praying silently for a Viking's deliverance.

# *MIST MONSTER*

THE sun came up across the sea like glowing copper. The half-sodden oak strake bellied the grey waves towards the south. Gulls screamed above it, circling for food. Once Runolf's bewildered senses told him that, just below the sea's dark surface, a great fish was heaving up against the plank, a sea monster shouldering it, only a hand's length away.

He forgot all, only remembering to clutch the weed-slimed oak with stiff fingers. He forgot Kolbein and the baresark and the splintered sword, and only remembered the angry grey waves that broke over him and, swirling back when he least expected them, dragged at him hissing, trying to take him down into the sea's darkness.

At last he was so dazed and cold that he closed his eyes, forgot his own name, just straddled the plank, half-sleeping, half-waking, careless of disaster. His life had been short, but where lies the virtue in a life long in misery?

When he opened his eyes again, all was dim, and blue-grey like wood smoke. He thought he had been asleep and had gone down into the sea's depths to drowned death. He was surprised how easy the passing had been, not at all like the agony that battle poets sang of.

Then a gull came out of the greyness and perched on the bobbing end of the plank with red feet and a clacking bill. And then Runolf knew that he was sailing through a heavy sea mist and was not on the ocean bed after all.

He raised his head and the gull, seeing that he was not yet dead, squawked out in anger and flew away on rattling, black wings.

A grey seal nosed up through the mist and scratched its shiny back on the plank, then paddled alongside for a while, staring with great mild and blue-filmed eyes, before the mood took it to plunge away out of sight into the deep kingdom below.

Runolf was sorry to see the seal go. It was the only kindly creature in all that grey wilderness of mist. For a moment, his senses upended, he almost let himself slip from the plank so that he could follow the seal.

Then, suddenly, the boy almost shouted in terror. Through the swirling greyness, somewhere to his right, came a distant and mournful crying. Runolf could not put a name to it, but to his fear-sharpened ears it sounded like the sad voices of all dead voyagers, singing through the chill grey dawn to welcome him to their number. He even thought that he could hear the voice of the dead baresark, calling deeply and waveringly, "Runolf . . . Runolf . . . Where? . . . Where?"

Fisher-folk had often gathered about the fires at the steading when they had brought their catch to barter at Kolbein's, and often they had yarned, the warmed ale in them, of strange things that a seafarer sees and which land folk know nothing of. Wide-eyed, young Runolf had heard them whisper of sea-calves and sea-cows, and even sea-wolves, but all different from the creatures of the land; all of them scaly and not hairy and with great grey fins instead of tails. One rover named Ubbi had even set eyes on a sea-farmer, scaly like the rest, with webbed hands and feet and weed for hair, who had rolled under the bow of his boat, glaring with fish eyes and never uttering a word from his wide-open mouth when they called down a greeting.

Runolf remembered all this and was afraid. Then the dirgelike sound became louder and he knew that he was drifting through the sea-fret, nearer and nearer to whatever it might be.

For a little while, he thought of sliding from the plank and of trying to swim away from this place and its troll-like folk. He was still trying to unhook his frozen fingers and move his tight-gripped knees when his heart almost stopped beating, for out of the grey blanket of mist loomed a long dark shape, bobbing low and clumsy in the water and running almost alongside him.

To his eyes, it seemed like a whale now, and he knew that the swirl which carried him onwards would surely dash him against the great beast's side. His terror rose, to think what the Water King would do to him; how he would open his great jaws and munch him up, or dive over him, dragging him down in a roaring whirlpool, into the sea's dark belly.

He thought: So this is to be my punishment for killing my foster father. This is what the Sea-Thingmen have judged for me. Yet I cannot say that life has done well by me. I have lived so few years, and they have not been happy ones since my parents died—except when the poor baresark came to talk to me.

He was trying to remember a Christian prayer that should be said when in sea danger, but none would come to him. All he could think of was the

baresark's old heathen riddle:

*Sea succours me, waves wrap me warm.*
*Though footless, foam I tread, friendly with flood . . .*

And while he was still trying to recall any proper prayer at all, he heard a man's voice, small and clear as the iron bell of Kirkwall, sounding through the mist. It said, "Hold fast to the steering oar, Gilli. If this current stays, we may yet eat a sheep broth in Caithness before midday."

# *NEW FRIEND*

WHEN RUNOLF saw that the monster was a flat sheep barge of black oak, wallowing in the dawn water under a heavy load, his first joy was changed to a feeling of fear. The rough men on board would know his father without doubt, and if they took him aboard, it would only be to return him to the steading where life had become unbearable to him.

So he made a great effort to turn about in the surging water and make what way he could from this danger. But just then a sudden swell drove him against his wish right under the timbers of the barge.

Resigned now that this was the will of the God, Runolf lay staring at the low stern, which bobbed up and down only a foot out of the water. In the mist he even tried to count the thick cluster of woolly legs before him, but the effort was too great, and every moment he half expected to feel a sharp thump in the middle of the back when someone reached out clumsily with a boat hook to drag him aboard.

Then, just before him and among the dark brown legs of the sheep, he saw a pair of wind-whipped red ones, and a ragged fringe of green and yellow kilt above them. The feet belonging to these legs were covered by a pair of worn deerskin shoes, tied about the ankle with a thong, and shiny with use.

He was still gazing at these shoes when a light voice above him whispered out of the sea-fret, “Ah, by the blessed Saint Columba, but this is no way for a boy to be travelling, now! Creep aboard, my lad, and duck down among these silly sheep. Here, take my hand and be quick, or the barge master will be seeing you—and then we shall both be in sore trouble.”

Runolf looked up with a great effort and saw a red face, fringed with a dark beard, out of which stood a pair of startled blue-grey eyes.

In a moment, with the man’s hands under his arms, Runolf was slithering into the flat-bottomed boat. The tight-packed sheep took little notice of him and hardly moved to let him come amongst them. All the while they kept up

their constant bleating which sounded as sad as though they had all the cares and suffering of the wicked world upon them.

Then, as Runolf rolled into damp safety, a loud harsh voice from the prow called back, “Now then, Gilli. What are you about, up there? When we get to Caithness I’ll sell you for the price of a new crook. I’ll have no more of you lazy Hebridean rascals, spending all your time talking to the sheep. I’ll buy an English byre-slave; one who will keep his mind on his work.”

Gilli winked down at the boy and grinned. “That is the master, Hedin. A beef-brained fellow from Iceland with no more sense than would fit into my sporran. Take no heed of the fool. He bellows like a yearling calf whenever the wind twitches his tongue. Just lie close and keep yourself out of his sight.”

Then Gilli looked up and spoke aloud in a wheezy sing-song voice.

“I’m sorry, master. I was just keeping this old ewe from pushing one of the young ones into the water. What were you saying, then?”

After a time, surly Hedin growled back, “Nothing, you Scotch fool, nothing. Only keep your eyes about you in the future and see that all is well.”

“Aye, I will that, master,” said Gilli, pushing the sheep farther round the boy to hide him.

That sea journey was no pleasant one. Many times the tottering sheep fell across Runolf as the barge shuddered from the swing of the tides. And once, when Hedin ordered the square hide sail to be raised, the clumsy flat vessel nearly lifted on to its side as wind pushed fiercely at the bellying skins. Runolf found an old ewe standing on his chest and almost yelled out with pain and anger; but suddenly Gilli was there, on his knees, pulling her away.

“Tell me, lad,” he whispered, “why are you making this crossing in such dog’s weather? Why is a fine fellow like you leaving the islands to put your head in the wolf’s mouth on the mainland? Have you no kin to look after you?”

Runolf said, “I think I have killed my foster father, Kolbein. That is why I am running away.”

Gilli pretended to busy himself with a sheep’s fleece, gazing into it as though he would find the Treasure of Novgorod. Then he whispered, “It was a black-hearted man, that Kolbein. I could name a score of men among the

islands who would say that you did the world a favour in killing him. All the same, lad, a hue and cry will follow you over the water, and by tomorrow or the next day, the reeves will be naming you an outlaw all along the Caithness coast, from Wick to Thurso and beyond. Especially as I see with my own eyes that you are carrying a sword under your shirt. Now, take my advice, lad, and let me slip that bad old thing over the side, into the water where no one will ever find it. For if they run you to ground with a sticker in your belt, there'll be no mercy. Let them find you empty-handed and maybe they'll feel a pity for you, and let you off with a hundred lashes."

Runolf gritted his teeth and glowered up at the slave. "No one shall have this sword," he said. "Too great a price has been paid for it, one way and another. Where I go, the sword goes; and while I hold it, no man shall lay hands on me and come away scot-free. I am free-born, Gilli, and have a right to bear arms."

The slave looked down on him with a sad smile. "Aye, aye," he said, nodding, "I've heard it all before. In fact, I've even said it myself. There was a time when I called myself free-born—and the blood of kings, lad. Though you wouldn't think it now, with these ragged clouts wrapped round me! Aye, there was a time when I had a right to bear arms—and a fine thing it turned out to be, as you can see!"

From the blunt bow of the barge, Hedin called out above the wind, "What are you gabbing about now, you heathen? Come forward and give a hand with this sail-rope, or I'll have the hide off your ragged back when we strike land."

Gilli called out, "I'm coming, master, I'm coming!"

Then, leaning over Runolf for the last time, he whispered, "I'm fourth cousin to King Lagmadr of the Islands, lad, and half-brother to the Prince Nial. The king is in no state to help me, now that the Northmen have hunted him down like a poor seal and put an end to him. But if you can find Nial, my half-brother, tell him where I am and beg him to send my freedom money to this iron-hearted man, Hedin. Tell him I can be bought for ten marks or five fat heifers."

Runolf said, "Where shall I find Prince Nial?"

Gilli whispered back over his shoulder, "The good Lord knows! He could be in Islay, or even down in Kintyre. But when you find him, you'll know him, for he has been given a sign from God—he has one blue eye and one green eye, and his hair is the colour of a fox's back!"

Then Gilli had gone. Runolf heard Hedin striking out at him with a stick and the slave giving a few half-hearted cries, as though to satisfy his master's anger. After that the wind came up behind the barge and blew away all sounds, pushing the wallowing shell nearer and nearer the mainland cliffs, which showed through the twilight, beacons burning on them here and there for the benefit of all who crossed the stormy Firth.

# *IRON HOOKS*

THE haven they drove into was called Dunruath, or Red Town, by the Gaels who had once lived there because in the old days it had had a fortress-tower of red sandstone on the hill that overlooked the small harbour. The Northmen who came later pulled down the ruined tower and used its stones to make sheep pens: but they still kept the old name, though, in their rough way, they called it Dunred, and at last just Red.

But as Runolf gazed about him in the growing dusk, there was little enough of red to be seen in the clustered houses under the low cliff and the hooked arm of the breakwater that kept the waves off incoming craft. Everything was either a dirty brown or a dull grey, and all was covered with a pall of eddying smoke from chimney holes and sea-weed fires, which seemed to ooze round and round above the settlement, unable to rise freely into the upper air because of the cutting breeze which came across it, over the hill that crouched above the fishing village.

Hedin and Gilli had gone off with the bleating sheep, and Runolf had slipped away behind a rock until the coast was clear. Now, all alone and feeling sick and weary after a long and foodless day, Runolf groped his way to the edge of the village and, finding a little hollow hedged round with wattle hurdles, climbed inside and in five minutes was fast asleep.

He woke with the bright sun in his eyes, and harsh cries in his ears. A crowd of ragged children, of all ages, were dancing round him, pointing and shouting in mockery, led by a tall lad of Runolf's age who carried a hawthorn stick in his red hands and wore a cap of untanned catskin on his shaggy head.

"Get up and dance for us, cattle thief," yelled this boy, striking out at Runolf's legs with the stick. "Get up, stranger, and dance in return for your night's shelter!"

At first Runolf thought to ignore this loud-mouthed fellow, imagining that he was lacking in wits; but the blows of the stick were so sharp, and the laughter of the children so taunting, that Runolf felt that he must teach his tormentor a lesson. And so he began to rise, but before he could get up, a

heavy blow from the hawthorn caused his head to spin and he stumbled forward on hands and knees in the dust of the sheep pen.

And as he stayed there, suddenly humbled and half-stunned, he felt the catskin cap being pulled down over his head and heard the big lad shout out, "There now, you are the fool of the village, so let us see your antics! Come, fool, and make us laugh."

With the yells of the children filling his ears, Runolf felt his temper rising at this insult and, before he could prevent himself, he had suddenly reached up and grasped the stick, just as he had done that dawntime outside Kolbein's steading. In his anger, he wrenched forward and saw the tall boy fall beside him, mocking face suddenly twisted with fear.

Now the children were silent, but still Runolf's fury had not worn itself out. He was up in an instant and had his left foot square on the neck of his fallen enemy. It was all like a bad dream of the ancient days, for Runolf found that his hand had gone inside his jerkin and had dragged out the splintered sword, Gudrun Gore.

Suddenly a girl's shrill voice screamed out, "He is a baresark! He is a troll! Look, he will kill Inge unless someone stops him!"

And it was true enough, what this girl said, for Runolf now felt a strange tingling, an urging like a command, a warmth that came from no fire made by man, passing from the splintered blade along the ivory hilt and into his hand. It was as though Gudrun Gore was whispering, "Come, lad, slash down with me and see the work I can do! Let me show you how I can rid you of your enemies!"

Runolf gasped with the effort of fighting the sword. His mouth was open, but his eyes were shut. He did not know whether he truly wished to kill the sprawling boy or not. He felt the many children pulling at his ragged clothes, beating on his back, shouting in his ear that he was a wild wolf, a baresark who must be put out of the way. And he wondered if he was truly a baresark, if this was what it was like to be a baresark. . . . If it was, then it was a fearful thing, with no glory to it, only a great struggle of the heart and the limbs; and a praying for someone to come quickly and solve the problem for him one way or the other.

It did not seem to matter which way. If Inge, the tumbled mocker, had made a move to bite at Runolf's ankle, the sword would have fallen; but he just lay there in the dust, gibbering with terror.

In his head, silently, Runolf prayed to the old baresark who had rolled on the dark tide in the broken longship, “Oh, master, hear me and help me. Tell me what I am to do.”

But before he had finished, four men ran into the sheep pen carrying long ash poles with blunt iron hooks at the end, such as the Caithness farmers used for fetching in unruly bullocks. Runolf felt a blow on the shoulder, which almost made him drop the sword. Then one of the iron hooks curled round his leg and toppled him over.

He was up again in an instant, striking out with Gudrun Gore to keep the men from braining him, but taking many blows on arms and body. Now all the children were screaming with delight and calling out for the farmers to kill the wolf. Through a mist of fear and anger, Runolf suddenly saw that two of his attackers were Hedin and Gilli. But he had sense enough to see, also, that Gilli’s hook never came within a foot of him, and that the Hebridean’s face was wrinkled not in anger but with a queer little smile that seemed to be encouraging the boy, not frightening him.

Then, all at once, Gilli rushed in, as though to grapple with Runolf. At first, the boy almost thrust out at him, but drew back at the last second. Close to his ear, the slave whispered, “Run for it, lad! Over the wall and away! And send my ransom back! Now fling me down!”

In all the scuffling and the clashing of pole on pole, these whispers were heard by no one else. Runolf suddenly twisted round, put his foot behind Gilli’s legs, and heaved. The slave fell down, crying out, “Murderer! Stop him!”

Then Runolf had leapt over the slave’s ash pole and, dodging the hooks that swept down to catch him, ran like the wind towards the sheep-pen hurdles.

They were too fragile to vault over, so he crashed through them and felt them fall about him as he plunged on. A stone, flung by a child, struck him in the back, but he did not stop.

Before him, grey on the skyline, were the great hills and mountains which led at last to the islands. Like a wolf escaping from a trap, Runolf set his face towards these hills, and ran and ran.

The high peaks did not seem to get any closer to him, but nor did his angry pursuers. At last the furious voices behind him died away, and when Runolf’s mad rush slowed down to a breathless walk, he was alone, with the fishing village far behind him now.

Then, out of weakness and hunger, he sat down on a stone for a while and began to weep.

# *GRIM GREETING*

THE mocking cry of a sea bird above him brought Runolf back to his senses. He rose and, wiping his face grimly on his sleeve, set forth again over the springy heathland and away from the winding road.

Long before midday, hunger halted him. Falling into a hollow shielded on all sides by gorse, he slept a while, his brief dreams full of food and happy smiles. When he awoke, he saw a stupid-faced hare gazing down on him curiously. Gently Runolf drew Gudrun Gore and, still on his back, flung the sword at the watching creature. The blade sketched a bright arc in the sunshine, hit upon a hawthorn bough, and fell back to the stony ground. The hare, startled from its innocent trance, gathered its slow wits, then wheeled and sprang away.

Runolf got up and kicked at the sword in famished fury. “You!” he cried. “You have led me into this, and now you are incapable of putting food into my belly. You who could kill a savage king cannot even wound a feckless hare.”

He bent, took up the sword, and in his hot rage flung it from him into the billowing mass of purple heather. Then he scrambled from the hollow and shambled towards the next hillside.

But his anger soon wore itself away, and at last, when the first of the chill winds came up from the distant seashore, he stopped, thought a while, then turned, grim-faced, back towards the heather where he had cast away the only friend he now had left in the world.

It was dusk before he found the sword again, and now its blade was cold, as though Gudrun Gore were somehow disappointed, too.

Runolf was putting the sword back into his belt, asking its forgiveness, vowing to be a better master in the future, when he heard men’s voices calling loudly, “Come, fellows, he cannot be so far away. Hold your torches high so that he will not escape us in the heather. And, you two at the front, keep your spears at the ready in case the baresark tries to ambush us.”

Runolf’s heart thudded so hard, he almost fainted away. Then enough sense came back to him to let him slither down into the gorse-hung hollow

he had left so long before.

He was hardly down there, and lying clutched to the earth, when above him the red light of many torches flared. Daring to glance up between the tussocky grasses, he saw the dark shapes of men pass by, saw the russet glint of a dozen spearheads.

This frightened him so much, that twelve men should think him fierce enough to hunt, he almost jumped up and ran towards them, shouting, “You have made a mistake, friends! I am not a fierce baresark. I am only Runolf of Stroma, foster son of Kolbein. Listen to me, friends!”

But already he realized that these men were not his friends; that, if he had leapt up in friendship to greet them, they would have turned on him and hacked him to pieces in their terror.

So he lay quite still, fresh tears upon his cheek, and the hunters passed by without seeing him. An hour later they returned, grumbling and cursing their ill luck in not finding him.

Then Gilli’s high-pitched voice rose above all and said, “Maybe it is just as well we did not come upon him, my lords. Down in the village everyone agrees that he is a monstrous man, come to his full prime of thirty years, nigh on seven feet tall, and with arms thick enough to throttle a Greenland bear!”

As the searchers passed away, thanking their stars they had not cornered him after all, Runolf began to laugh quietly, in spite of his hunger and his great sadness.

Then, when all was still again, he rose and made his way once more through the night, round a shoulder of the mountain. His feet were dragging so heavily now that, pushing up through a clump of thickset pines, he stumbled into the blaze of a campfire before he knew it. He had only time to see the logs flaring merrily, and a low skin tent slung behind them; and then a harsh voice called out, “Stand where you are, stranger, or I shall clap an arrow into a place where you will not drag it out again.”

At any other time, Runolf would have fallen to his knees in fright at such a fierce greeting. But now he was so tired, so sad and so hungry that his common sense seemed to leave him and, with his hands hanging down helplessly, he staggered towards the bright fire, beyond fear, unable any longer to defend himself.

In a way, he was glad that it had come to this at last, for he was tired of running away from folk, and now a swift arrow might end all his troubles.

He felt that the world had grown too cruel to bear; that distances were too far to travel; that, indeed, there was little sense in going on at all.

Smiling as best he could, he tottered on towards the blaze saying, “Strike sure and end it all.”

Then, as a tall dark figure rose from the shadows before him, he toppled forward almost on to the fire.

# *EARL'S DOOM*

WHEN his senses returned, Runolf found that he was lying inside the skin tent, with a thick frieze blanket wrapped round him. In the fire's bright glow, he saw an elderly woman sitting beside him, holding a wooden bowl and a horn spoon. She was dressed in a ragged gown of dark wool and had a black shawl over her white hair. Her face was pallid and wrinkled, but still strong. Her grey eyes were steady and searching, but distant, as though she had looked across many mountains and many seas in her time; as though she had seen many men lying on the ground, as Runolf now lay, pale and helpless.

For a while the boy stared at her, then said, "Where is the man with the arrow?"

She answered unsmiling, "There is no man, nor is there an arrow, boy. There is only old Hrodny of Iceland who must fend for herself the best way she can. Now open your mouth and let me put this warm broth inside you or you will not live the night out, on the cold mountain. Odin only knows what you have suffered, to be carrying such a fever with you."

Runolf said, "I was in the sea, lady, and I have not eaten for two days."

Hrodny said, "You northfolk tempt the gods too far. You think you are fishes, to wallow in the cold waves. You think you are immortal, to wander round the world on an empty stomach. Do you expect the ravens to feed you, then? No, you baresark fools, it is you who will feed the ravens."

Runolf swallowed some of the thick meat broth she offered him, then said, "What do you mean, lady, calling me a baresark? I am only a shepherd lad off Stroma."

Hrodny laughed suddenly, harshly and lightly, as though she had heard it all said before.

"I know your kind, boy," she answered. "I have seen too many of them. My husband was one, and so were my three sons. And where are they now? In what seas do they roll? Beside which rivers and in which lands? I know the face of a baresark when I see it. I know the sort of sword they carry in

their belt—though they wear only rags upon their poor punished bodies. I have seen your sword."

Vainly Runolf tried to tell her his story, but she pushed the bowl against his mouth and made him eat. She said, "Oh, you poor fool, lad! Have they not told you that the old days are over and done with? Have they not told you that the glory has gone forever, that a baresark is no more now than a wild wolf, for any fat-jowled farmer to put a spear into?"

Now the bowl was empty and the old woman moved away, to put more wood upon the fire. Runolf tried to call after her, but, warm and fed now, he sank back upon his bed of bracken and fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning when he woke, the old woman was sitting on a stone in the first sunshine, burnishing the blade of Gudrun Gore with a handful of fine sand. She turned toward Runolf and said, "In the wicked wild old days, before men came to be quiet sheep, such a sword as this could have gained a man a kingdom and a golden chair to sit on. But now it is as worthless as a keg of last year's voyage ale. There are no more kingdoms to be got, or treasures to be found, and the world is drawing to its close. If you do right, you will drop this sword down into a hole in the ground, or into a deep lake where no one will ever itch to hold it again. It is a beautiful sword, but now all its purpose has gone from it."

Runolf sat up, suddenly angry, but before he could speak, old Hrodny said, "I tell you, I have been looking at this sword. It is so hacked, you must have got it from a dead man. Do you not know that among our people since the earliest times it must be a woman who gives the sword to the man, if he is to prosper? Did Grettir prosper from the sword of old King Karr? Did Gunnar prosper from the dead Viking's halberd? Only for a little while, then their enemies ringed them round and put an end to them. Throw this sword away."

Runolf came to her meekly then and said, "Can you not put this sword into my hands, lady, and so start it off on its journeying afresh?"

Hrodny laughed in the pale sunlight. "What," she said, mocking, "old Hrodny give a sword? I have given many, boy, and no one ever came back to thank me. My sword-giving days are long done. I am Hrodny the soothsayer, Hrodny the midwife, Hrodny the old witch now—according to the folk of Dunrod—but not Hrodny Sword-giver! No, throw it away, and have done with the dream that harries you. Go down to the village again and let them set you to work on the fishing smacks, or herding the sheep. That is where your trade should be."

Runolf thought a while, then said, “I cannot do as you say, lady. I have vowed to find the Prince of the Islands, Nial the Red.”

The old woman nodded and smiled sadly. “I know,” she answered. “And from this red-shanked Nial you are to get ten marks, or five fat heifers, to buy the freedom of the thrall, Gilli Loudmouth!”

Runolf stared amazed. “You know!” he said.

Hrodny smiled again. “Who does not?” she asked. “Gilli sends all travellers who pass this way on that hopeless quest, and has done for five years. Yet, if any man found Nial Redshanks, that so-called Prince would not have a mark or a heifer to spare. And if Gilli Loudmouth had his freedom, the poor fool would not know what to do with it. He has been a slave so long, he would run to the first man who would set him on to work, and call him ‘master,’ even if it was only the village idiot.”

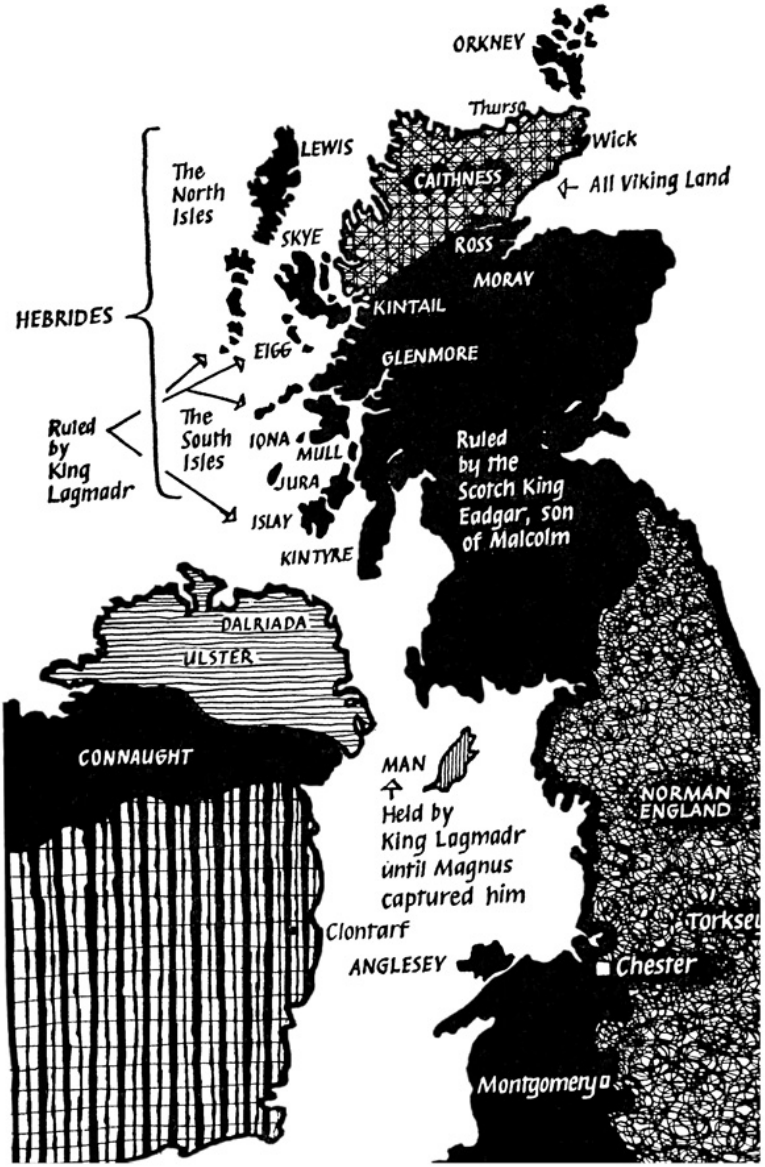
Runolf took the sword from the ground, where Hrodny had laid it, and gazing firmly down on her said, “Lady, a promise is a promise. Come what may, I shall find Red Nial and shall then set Gilli free, as I have vowed.”

The old woman looked away from him and said, “It is as I thought, you are beyond wisdom. You have not yet learned that things do not turn out as men plan, but as the gods desire. I will tell you this. Many years ago, in the time of Harald Fairhair, Vikings were fighting Scots in all the islands hereabouts. Now it was foretold that Earl Sigurd of Orkney should die from a wound given him by a dead man. ‘Hoho!’ laughed the Orkney earl, ‘I, who hold Caithness and Sutherland, Ross and Moray, am not so easily frightened! There is only one man living who dares even stand against me, much less kill me, and that is the Scotch Earl Melbrigdi. I will show what I think of such prophesies by putting an end to *him*!’ And so Earl Sigurd rode against Melbrigdi, flung him down and hacked off his head. Then, boasting in the saddle, he galloped home with his red trophy hanging from his horse’s neck.”

Runolf yawned now, thinking that the old woman had lost the drift of what she had started out to say. “Shall I get sticks for the fire, lady?” he said. But Hrodny gazed beyond him towards the sea. Then she went on, “Now the Scotch earl had great teeth like a boar’s, that stuck out from his gaping mouth. And as Sigurd Braggart jumped the last fence outside his steading, the head jolted up and struck him on the leg, so that one of Melbrigdi’s teeth broke the skin. Inside three days, Sigurd’s wound festered and he died of the poison, howling in his bed.”

As Runolf stared down at her, aghast, she smiled and answered him. “Yes, gather sticks for the fire,” she said, “and I will make you a breakfast of oatmeal porridge to see you on your way.”

When the boy walked from the hide tent later, he was still thinking of the old woman’s words. He turned back, from higher up the hillside, to wave farewell to her, but she sat by the fire, still and black as a stone, as though she did not wish to wave him on towards his doom.


ORKNEY
Thurso
Wick
All Viking Land
LEWIS
The North Isles
CAITHNESS
SKYE
ROSS
MORAY
HEBRIDES
KINTAIL
EIGG
GLENMORE
Ruled by King Lagmadr
The South Isles
IONA
MULL
JURA
ISLAY
KINTYRE
Ruled by the Scotch King Eadgar, son of Malcolm
DALRIADA
ULSTER
CONNAUGHT
MAN
Held by King Lagmadr until Magnus captured him
NORMAN ENGLAND
Clontarf
ANGLESEY
Chester
Montgomery

# *BITTER JOURNEY*

TIME passed and now the mountaintops were hidden with sudden flurries of snow. Pine trees bowed down beneath its weight, their branches cracking in the night like wagon whips. In the low valleys, oak trees shed their leaves and waited grimly for another spring.

Sometimes, crofters in the valleys, seeing the dark figure of a traveller on the skyline, shuddered and went indoors, remembering the Swede, Glam, who had started as a shock-headed shepherd, obedient to his master, but had become a huge troll with glaring eyes and a black face after being long on the mountain. One of the men said, "Mark my words, wife, it will not be many hours before we hear that sheep have been slaughtered in the next valley, and house roofs trampled on."

The woman, an Angle who had been carried up from Northumbria during a raid, shook her ashen head and said, "Nay, husband, the creature we have just seen passing by is a thing of moors and fen-fastnesses if I ever saw one. Doubtless, he lives with his green mother in some mere-pool over the hill. It needs another hero in these parts to take a sword to such monsters, if honest folk like us are to go untroubled."

Her husband answered, "Hero! Hero! The days of heroes have gone, wife. Yes, there is this Magnus Barefoot from Oversea, but he is too busy filling his coffers to think of poor folk like us. And there is this Scotch Malcolm—but he is too busy running away from Magnus! I tell you, there has not been a real man in the north since the Hardrada—and little profit he gained by his manhood in the end."

So it was, all across the Caithness mountains, but little did Runolf know of the gossiping tongues that wagged over him; and little would he have cared had he known, for the stark, high desert had chilled all the caring out of him, and now all he wanted was a roof above him by night, and food in his belly by day. And little enough he found of either.

Sometimes, it is true, he stumbled on the nests of winter-white ptarmigan, deep in the snowdrifts, and made a meal of their half-grown chicks. And once when a tawny beast shot away from him, snarling and

spitting in the dusk, he found a dead lamb left behind, which fed him for two days. He thanked God for wildcats then.

But there were other beasts he was not thankful for. By night under the icy moon, he felt no love for the black wolves who raced below him in the dales, turning the night hideous with their harsh hunting din, seeking some feckless old sheep that had strayed from the fold; or a wayfarer too weak to defend himself.

In all ways Runolf was thankful when, at last, he saw the distant grey sea down below him, knowing that where there was sea there would be fisherfolk, and scraps to be begged outside the gutting sheds, whatever the language these men spoke or the king they kneeled to.

And it was as well that he came to the sea when he did, for another week in the Caithness desert would have put an end to him. His cheeks were hollow and his eyes dull and staring from the snow. His ribs showed like those of a priest at the end of a long penance for gluttony. His feet were swollen and raw, and the deer-hide wrappings about them stiff with blood from the endless scrambling over harsh granite and the pitiless winter-sticks of the heather.

Just before midday Runolf came down to the seashore, but the village he hobbled through held no greeting for him. Its turf walls had largely fallen down, and its driftwood rafters were blackened with fire. No boats bobbed on the tide at the little haven. It was a deserted place, where hearthstones were full of white ashes and no blue smoke curled up through the chimney holes.

There was only one old man, who sat on the ground outside a broken hanging door, scratching the earth with a stick. When he raised his head at Runolf's coming, the boy saw that he was blind. It was not only the flint-grey eyes which told him this, but also the way the man held his head, on one side, as though he were listening all the while.

Runolf said, "Greetings, old man. Where are the folk of this place?"

The old man took long to understand him. Then he said slowly, "You speak the tongue of the North Isles. I speak the old language; but as you can hear, I can manage your tongue, too, after my fashion."

Runolf stood beside him and said, "You speak well, old man. Now tell me, where are the folk?"

The old man shook his white head. "Gone, all gone," he said. "They have been gone six days and more, ever since the bad king they call Magnus

came through, riding on a keel. The folk have gone south into Kintail or Moray, or, like as not, down to Glenmore where life is kinder. I was on the hill grubbing for roots when they left, and they did not wait."

Runolf said, "You tell me the King of Norway came through on a keel. You must mean that he passed along the coast in his ships. Is that it?"

The old man shook his head again. "No," he said, "his warband dragged him up through the land in his skiff, the king holding the tiller. Do not ask me why. Kings do many things that would be madness for a common man even to dream of. I was told this by a kind priest who came this way, one of my own folk from the South Isles, so it must be God's truth."

Runolf said, "If you can tell me so much, then perhaps you can tell me where the Prince, Nial, could be found."

The old man put back his head on its thin neck and laughed up into the cold sky. "The Prince, Nial!" he said. "Yes, yes, the Prince, to be sure! And what a Prince he is, what a saviour of the people! What a brave hero! How well he stood against the Norsefolk when they came through here! Aye, to be sure, he will live in our songs, this Nial!"

Runolf was impatient with weariness and said, "No more, old man. Tell me where I can find him, for I have a message he will want to hear and I have carried it a long way over the mountains."

The old man let his head sink, and began to chuckle. "Aye, Fox Nial will surely want to hear the message," he said, "if a bag of gold goes with it. And you will find him with his priest and his ragged-kilted scavengers beyond the headland, in the old church there—unless he has gone away in the night to rake over the ashes of some other village the Norsefolk have gutted. Aye, go, lad, and bend your knee to the Prince. But if you have a purse on your belt, hide it first, for the great hero will have it from you, one way or the other, before you leave him. Now leave me, I have prayers to say and old thoughts to remember before I creep inside and lay me down."

It was hard going, along the shore to the headland, for the winding road was full of sharp stones. And the old church itself was a poor place to look for rest and comfort. Its wooden roof had largely rotted away and two of its walls had toppled down, to be replaced with rough-hacked turf. But smoke came up through the rafters, and that meant a hearth fire and warmth at least.

Runolf staggered to the open door and called out, "I come with a message for Prince Nial of the Islands. May I enter?"

A thin little man, wrapped round with a tattered length of dyed wool bound by a thong, looked out warily. His face was nut-brown and his shaggy hair as black as the crow's wing. His red-rimmed eyes were light blue and always shifting. In his hand he carried a long flint, lashed to a blackthorn staff. Seeing how tall Runolf stood, the man said, "Ah, the Prince Nial, is it? Ah, well, the Prince is busy with his affairs, young man, and when the great ones are at their talking, it is a brave man who interrupts them. But it could be done; aye, it could be done. And no doubt you have some small offering that could be made, to such as me, who would go and risk the Prince's anger for hindering him? No doubt you have a bit of silver, or a half-loaf of bread, or some small token of gratitude for the man who puts his neck in the noose for you?"

All the time the man was talking, his tongue ran round his thin lips, and his pale eyes measured the visitor from head to toe. Among the Norsefolk Runolf had always known, such a man would have been marked straightway as a rogue, and a thief. No Stroma housewife would have let him near her kitchen door; no farmer would have employed him, even as a thrall.

Runolf said, "And who are you, man, who holds this door and says who may and who may not see the Prince?"

The man tensed his thin legs and took a harder grip on the blackthorn, though his face still smiled and his blue eyes still wandered over the boy.

"Ah, you may well ask," he said in his light whining voice. "There have been many who wanted to know, for one reason or another. But I'll tell you, for I think that you are an honest fellow, and honest fellows are as hard as gold to find these days. I am Thiolve of Eigg and an earl in my own right, if justice was only done in this crow-picked land. That is who I am, boy. So, out with your piece of silver, or I'll hardly be willing to take you to the Prince, will I?"

Runolf was tired to the bone and as hungry as a hound; but as this ragged scarecrow talked on, he could not help laughing. And as he did, the man Thiolve screwed up his wizened face and began to hiss like a wildcat with fury. "Ah," he mouthed, "so yet another beef-faced Outlander comes begging from noble blood, like a tinker at the byre door! I will teach you, beggarman, and it is an honour I'll be doing you, even to touch you!"

He had taken a step towards Runolf when the boy drew out Gudrun Gore and stood waiting for him, a smile on his face, though smiling was the last thing he felt like doing then.

Earl Thiolve stopped suddenly, his faded eyes fixed on the sharp blade. Then, without warning, his face lost its fury and he smiled like one who has been given a ring of gold, or a place at the lord's high table. "Ah, lad," he said, "so that's the way to test you, then! That's the way to find who's friend and who's foe! And I see that you're as stout-hearted a fellow as has come to serve the Prince for many a long day. Come in, come in, my brave lad! Prince Nial will be glad of the likes of you."

Inside the smoke-laden church were a dozen men, all as ragged and ill-armed as the one who called himself Earl Thiolve. They lay about on straw and bracken, talking endlessly and gesturing with their thin arms. Runolf thought he had scarcely seen such a set of starved rascals in his life before. Kolbein's poorest thralls would have seemed rich and well-fed beside them.

Then his eyes lit on two men near the tumbled stone altar at the far end of the ruined church. One was a stoutly made middle-aged man in a gown grey with dirt, and beardless. His hair was roughly shaven in a form of tonsure and he wore a knotted rope about his waist. The other was a man of perhaps twenty-five, with three black feathers stuck into his wolfskin cap, and broad copper rings on each of his thin brown arms. In his hide belt he bore a sword so hacked and bent that no Northman would have dared let it be seen, but would have had the smith beat it into a hedge knife for the field thralls to use.

It was this man who glared down the room at Runolf and called in a high sneering voice, "Whose dog are you, stranger? Why do you come to Nial the Prince for your bones? Why does not your own master feed you?"

The men lying in the straw laughed at this as though the Prince was the wittiest man on earth. Runolf felt his anger rising, but still kept a rein on it. He walked on until he was within three paces of Nial, then said calmly, "I have come far, over the mountains, to bring you a message from your kinsman, Gilli."

The Prince laughed harshly and said, "And no doubt you look for a reward, hey? No doubt, you expect great things in return for your little walk over the hills, hey? Like the rest of you folk, you expect a Prince to pay you well for nothing but a word, a rumour?"

Runolf was tottering now with weariness and the priest by the altar said gently, "He is in need of rest, Nial. He has come far."

Nial the Prince put on a stern look and said, "They all stagger about like that, these carrion-messengers. They think it makes their tidings worth more.

Well, fellow, out with your news, and then on your way again. If you think a Prince is easy pickings, then this time you have tried to sell your wares in the wrong market. Come, let's hear of the fool, Gilli."

Now Runolf's anger would hardly stay in. Coldly, he said, "Your kinsman is a slave in the North Isles, and his master, Hedin Sheepbarge, asks ten marks or five fat heifers for his release. Gilli sends me to beg you to set him free. That is my message."

When he had spoken, Runolf sat down on the floor without bidding, for by now his legs would hold him up no longer. Prince Nial stood above him, his eyes staring and his face blackening. "What," he said, "ten marks! Five heifers! What robbery is this? I suppose that you are to take back the ten marks, hey? And precious little of Gilli we'd ever see again! The ten good marks would go into your own purse, or your master's, hey? Up on your feet, Outlander! What you will get is not ten marks, but ten cuts across the back with a hazel switch, and think yourself lucky!"

The man who called himself Earl Thiolve came running with a stick in his hand for the Prince. But Runolf was already on his feet again, and once more he had drawn Gudrun Gore from inside his jerkin. Now all voices were silent in that place.

Only the priest spoke and said, "Nial, Nial, my son, you *must* learn wisdom. A Prince must learn wisdom. This lad means well, I am certain, but if you treat him like a dog, then he is bound to stand up for himself. He is not one of our folk, remember, who have bent the knee to you and your kin. He is of that stubborn, stiff-necked breed from the Islands."

"Then I will do something to take the stiffness out of his neck," shouted Nial, suddenly lunging forward.

Runolf was no swordsman, but he had not wasted his days, swinging a crook on Stroma to catch headstrong rams. And as Nial's old sword drove at him, the lad swung out with Gudrun Gore as though she were such a crook, and to his amazement, caught the Prince's weapon just by the crosspiece, sending it flying from his hand, to thump against the stone wall.

It was so easily done that Runolf could have laughed at the whole thing. But Nial backed against the altar, his eyes wide, his lips open. "Oh, God," he said, "he means to kill me! He means to kill your Prince, men. Run at him, some of you. Drag him down. He is only one against many."

But Runolf pushed the sword into his belt and shook his head. "I do not wish to kill you," he said. "It was you who attacked me."

No one in that place had run to Nial's aid; even the priest seemed to draw back from him.

The Prince was still shouting, "He raised his hand against me. He would have shed my blood. Drag him down, you cowards!"

Then the priest suddenly turned on Nial and without warning slapped him hard across the face. "Is this a way for a Prince to act?" he said loudly. "Is this the son your father would have been proud of? Is this the man who has sworn to lead his folk to freedom once again? I am ashamed of you. Before God, you make me ashamed."

Suddenly Nial was on his knees, his hands over his face. Runolf saw the tears come from between his thin fingers and splash down on the stones of the old chancel. Only Earl Thiolve seemed to pay much attention to this; he kneeled beside the Prince and patted his shoulders. "There, there, my lord," he said, "the world does not end because a rough fellow comes out of the hills and bests you once. He is strong and well-fed, but you are worn with fighting for your folk and have not touched a bite of bread for days. It is no dishonour for a weary man to be tricked by one whose belly is full of good fare. Up, up, my Prince, and put a good face on it."

The priest said sternly, "Get back to the door, Thiolve, and guard your post, you crawling dog. As for being well-fed, it is my guess that this lad is as hungry as any of us, and has come much farther on his Christian errand. And you, Nial, up on your feet, or I vow that this is the last you will see of me."

Then as the Prince rose, wiping his face, the priest went to Runolf and said quietly, "You must think no less of Nial for this. He has suffered much, seeing his father killed and his house burned down. All about him, his folk are either dead or starving. And all who have tongues still left in their heads call on him for succour. It is no light thing to be a Prince in the South Isles at this time. A man would need to be a saint or a hero not to weep, my boy, at the things which King Magnus Barefoot has done to us."

Runolf set his face and said, "I am no judge of what any man should do, Father. I am an outlaw myself, and could expect small mercy from King Magnus or any of his officers. I am only the messenger from Gilli to the Prince, and I ask for no reward. Gilli himself saved me from the sea, and I owe him a journey across the hills for that. So if the Prince will forget what has happened, I will do the same."

From where he stood, near the altar, Prince Nial said in a loud voice, “He will do the same! As if it could be the same—he, some wandering outlaw, and I of the blood of Lagmadr! *He* will forgive *me*! Oh, by the Saints, but the world runs backwards when an outlaw will pardon a Prince!”

Then the gentle priest turned and took Nial by the arm, gripping hard, and brought him before Runolf. “Like it or not,” he said, “you two shall shake hands on the bargain. Or, as God is my judge, I will put a Prince over this altar and beat sense into him with my rope girdle.”

As Runolf heard these words and saw the priest’s strong firm face, he thought: Now, here is a true man. Here is the second man I have ever seen; one fit to walk beside the baresark! Yet, how can this be, that one is a man of God, and the other a dire mankiller?

While he was still trying to decide, he felt Nial’s thin hand in his, and saw the Prince making all efforts to smile and take things as a man should.

# *BLACK BARGAIN*

THAT evening, when a hunter had come in with a thin-ribbed buck and the Hebrideans were making what feast of it they could, Runolf said to Nial, "Your kinsman, Gilli, could be with you now, if his master held ten marks in his hand."

Nial turned on him sharply and answered, "Ten marks! You speak as though marks grew like crabapples on a tree. Who are you, to tell me my duty?"

Runolf said quietly, "Prince Nial, Gilli works on the sheep barges between the Islands and Caithness coast. All he has to look forward to is Hedin's sharp tongue, and the sea's sharper salt lash. I do not tell you your duty—but if Gilli were my kin, I would try with all my might to free him from such a life."

Nial thought a while, the ale cup at his lips, then said, "You owe Gilli your life, my friend. Why should *you* not pay his freedom charge? Why should you not sell that fine sword of yours, and set Gilli free? Look, I am in merry mood, this good meat in me and the cup at my lips; I will make you an offer. From the coffer I have, I will pay you ten marks for your sword, and my priest will take the money up to the coast and buy back my dear kinsman. Is that not a Christian bargain?"

Runolf sat back in the bracken and said, "If you have ten marks, Fox Nial, they should be spent not on my sword, which is my own thing, but on your kinsman. Think on that, my friend, and let us have no more of your Island bartering."

Nial got up from the altar feastboard and strode away, biting his knuckles. The priest said, smiling, "We have long needed one like you to hammer sense into this young man's head. You are far younger than the Prince, but far wiser. Press him to the limit for the money, and I will take it northward and do what you say. You are in the right, my son. Keep at it!"

Runolf followed Nial behind the altar and said, "Look you, Nial, come fair or foul, I would not give my worn shoestring for your title and blood. I speak to you as a man—whether Norse or Celt, it matters nothing. And I say

to you that if you do not forget your pride and your foxy meanness, you will live to be sorry that you did not free your kinsman. Now that I have spoken, weep if you will; strike at me if you wish. But I am in the right, and you are in the wrong. And there are no two ways about it."

As he spoke, Runolf expected the Prince to beat his hands against his head; or beat his head against the stone walls. But this did not happen. Suddenly Nial swung round and, smiling, came with his hands held out. "Northman," he said, "why did I not have a counsellor like you before? Why was I kept always with shag-haired loons? By the White Christ, as you folk call Him, but you shall be my brother! And I will do as you say. I will send the priest to set poor Gilli free again." Then he paused for a moment and said in a softer voice, "But on this condition—that from this time forward, you shall go with me, bearing that sword. That you shall go with me, come sun or rain, against your blood and my blood, to get me back the crown I have lost."

To Runolf, whose feet were hurting him and whose stomach still cried out for more of the venison, these were words of surrender. He said, "Nial, if I am to serve you let what you say be done. Free Gilli, and I will go with you. My sword shall guard you; my arm shall shield you; for who am I to be fickle about anything? Runolf the Outlaw will go with Nial of the South Isles; and may Gilli enjoy his freedom as much as he has dreamt he would."

Then the two embraced, and went back in front of the crumbling altar, to the din, as though they had come from a rich anteroom into a feast hall.

# *TO IRELAND*

AT dawn the next day the priest set out on a north-going barge that they had hailed from the shore. Nial's ragged company stood and wished him godspeed, with the ten marks that Nial had tormented out of them. Then they turned to the south themselves, and before noon had fallen on a cockle-fishing village they had overlooked earlier, and there they took four tarry boats from the red-haired peasants, promising them a seat beside the throne-chair one day, when the Prince came into his own again.

It was getting towards early springtime now, and the waters, though steely-grey, were not so menacing as they had been before. Sometimes a faint goldish light came into the low scudding clouds and gave men hope. It was a light like the sheen on ripening barley, and men thought well of it. So Nial's company sailed down among the islands of Skye and Rum and Coll and Mull and Jura. And it was bright sunshine when they reached the knuckle of Kintyre.

And Nial said to Runolf, "Well, Norseman, where next? I have come to rely on you, in place of the priest and these ragged-backed Celts."

Runolf answered, "That much should not be said of one's kindred, Nial. Take all as it comes, I am little but a boy yet, and all my days have been on Stroma, among sheep and thralls—which is saying the same thing. So, why should you set my advice above that of your high-born company?"

They were coming ashore at the time, watching the boat bottoms in case a flint should rip the tender tarred hide. And Nial said behind his thin brown hand, "By God's body, Runolf, to tell the truth, I have never rightly trusted these good fellows of mine. It comes to me that I could trust the northern likes of you far better. It is in me that I would stand fast if I knew your sword, Gudrun Gore, was at my back, fending me; but that I would run like a hare if I thought my dear Scotch fellows were guarding me with their stone axes!"

They landed and jumped on to the hard sand. Runolf said, "Nial, among my people a king must be the biggest and the strongest. His spear must go through three men—when a common fellow's spear just scratches one. A

king's stallion must knock down two stallions, where a common man's need only draw level in his butting and lashing. My folk have always held to big men, and big gods, and harsh winds, and cold seas. So, if you find me slow in answering you, you must put it down to the fact that always I am trying to understand before I answer."

Nial smiled and said, "Dear brother, you will never know how much I understand. All my life I have waited for one like you, a hero of the ancient times, the ancient seafaring race, to come to me and raise me to my kingdom."

Runolf said, smiling a little sourly, "Yes, brother, but in that smacked-down church I got small shrift."

And Nial replied, "Ach, man, but who can see further than his nose, and mine is a longish one at that! I took you as you seemed, another ragged hanger-on. Another Scotchman with a worm-eaten sword to barter. But, credit where it is due, I saw my error and clasped you to my bosom like a royal brother. Did I not?"

And Runolf was forced to admit that this was roughly so. And when they had robbed a poor steading, under Nial's command, and had got their tarry boats afloat again, Runolf said, "Nial, I must say that it is not easy for me to live this way. I never stole in my life before, and even to do this for a prince is hard on my soul. Can we not be about men's business now, and fight where there are more than dogs and old women to fend us off?"

Nial gazed at him in a cool way, out of his uneven eyes, then said, "Yes, my brother, we can do that. We can hoist the little sail and ride on the wind down to Ireland."

Runolf said in doubt, "This Ireland has been known to test a man. The folk there are strange."

Nial said, "Ireland is my own folk—give or take a word. Who speaks ill of Ireland is not my dearest friend. Do you wish to quarrel with me?"

Runolf said, "Men quarrel too easily over words. Look you, Scotchman, in this little tarry boat, with the others riding the salt waves a spear-cast off, I could put my sword into you before you could speak five words. Yes, five words! No more words than there are fingers on my hand. And so many words are a poor sort of epitaph for a whole man gone to worms. So, why do we go at each other with silly words, when we might be doing?"

Then Nial smiled and said, "Yes, let us be *doing*. Let us go boldly into Ireland and get us something worth having."

So he shouted to the rowers to pull their hardest and draw the curraghs into the south-driving breeze that would get him a kingdom and a pretty Queen, and them more gold than ten horses could carry.

And so, a three-day-pulling onward, they scraped their tarred-hide shells on Dalriada's pebbly shore.

# *KILWICK OF ULSTER*

THERE was a chieftain near Dalriada in Ulster who called himself Moriartaksson, though his true name was Kilwick, and King Moriartak of Connaught had never heard of him. This Kilwick was in all ways an ambitious man who claimed to have dreamed that, one day, he would ride on a stallion shod with gold and would eat meat three times a week. He was forever on the lookout for wandering fighting men who would come into his service for nothing, and gain him the fame he ached for. So he put it about that, somewhere in his hall, he had a great treasure hidden, from which he would pay those who helped him get a crown.

Yet, in truth, this treasure consisted of nothing more than two battered silver church cups, and an old wooden bowl bound with bronze. And his great hall was no more than a stone tower stuck on to the far end of a cow byre.

All the same, among Islanders and Irishmen of those days, many men lived on dreams, there being so little in daily life to bring them comfort; many there were to whom Deirdre and Cuchulain seemed more real than their own wife or brother, as they sat in the peat-reek listening to the harp.

So, when Prince Nial's curraghs beached, these apple-cheeked black-eyed dreamers ran down and dragged the boats up under the cliff out of the tide and said, "Welcome, seafarers. The chieftain has board and bread for you waiting." Prince Nial expected to be given first place at Kilwick's board, but the chieftain had already seen Runolf's fine sword, and this attracted him more than Nial's haughtiness and high-nosed bearing.

The rest of the voyagers cared little, one way or the other, since Kilwick's steading was the first hard shelter from wind and rain they had enjoyed since they left Rathin Island at the finger end of Kintyre.

But Earl Thiolve was not so pleased. As the ale cup passed, he whispered behind his hand, "This Runolf is getting above himself, lord. I think you did badly to make a friend of him, when there are men like myself whom you have known a lifetime."

But Nial waved him away and said, “Have patience, Thiolve. We shall see what we shall see. For the time being, his friendship suits me well enough. If ever I have no more use for him, you and I together could arrange something, could we not?”

Thiolve said, frowning, “Better sooner than later, Nial. Look how friendly this Kilwick has already become with him, offering him his own cup to drink from. He has not offered it to us.”

And truly enough Kilwick was doing his best to gain Runolf’s good will, guessing him to be a hardy fighter because of Gudrun Gore. But Runolf had the measure of this smiling Irishman, and though he smiled and nodded when the chieftain slapped him on the back, he had no intention of deserting Nial now that his promise had been given.

Much later, when most men in the hall were drowsy or sleeping, Kilwick touched Runolf on the arm and said, “Follow me into my counting house, Northman. There is something I wish to say to you.”

So the two passed through the smoke and went into a little turf shed that was built off the main byre. And, when he had drawn the thick cowskin curtain, Kilwick said quietly, “Now, look you, lad, in this life a man must fend for himself, and with a good friend at his side he can go far towards fame and riches.”

Runolf put on a stupid face and said, “How do you mean, chieftain? I serve the Prince Nial, and together we are doing well enough.”

Kilwick said, “Tut, man, what can that ragged fellow do for you? But think what I could do for you—what with my treasure, and my only daughter, who would be the wife of that hero who helped me to my throne.”

Now Runolf had already seen Kilwick’s daughter, Ellida, and she had not struck him as the prettiest of rewards. Her teeth stuck from her mouth so far that she could have sucked a ripe plum dry without opening her lips. Her hair, which was the shade of sun-brittle hay, though it fell down to her knees, was so dry that it seemed a draught of wind would break it short and blow it away. Besides, she sniffed between every other breath and bit her fingernails to the quick.

Runolf said, still stupidly, “I am not one for girls. I do not know how to talk to them, chieftain.”

Kilwick laughed and said, “You need have no fear, my boy; Ellida has been well brought up, and never talks. Her only desire is to ride horses all

day and teach her seven coloured linnets to sing all night. She has all the makings of a good Irish queen."

Runolf shuffled his foot in the straw and said, his eyes downcast, "She is too far above me, chieftain. I would like to see your treasure, though."

Kilwick said, "And so you shall, if that will persuade you."

Then he bent and scraped straw and dust away, and exposed a plank of wood in the floor. This he lifted, and then drew out his silver cups and bronze-bound bowl, handling them as though they were the precious hoard of Miklagard. "So," he said, looking into Runolf's eyes, "will these tempt you to leave that barelegged thrall, Nial?"

Now Runolf felt that the game had gone far enough, so he said, "My lord, in this short life, it seems wasteful of a man's effort that he should lose his dear sleep by worrying about two cups and a bowl. So, I shall ease you of your cares now, which seems to me a friendly thing to do."

And as he spoke, he gently drew Gudrun Gore and let her keen blade slide along his thumb to leave a thin line of red.

Kilwick's eyes bulged like shield-bosses. Then he let fall the treasure and pulled his blanket cloak around his middle as though it would protect him. It was suddenly most clear to him that there were more important things in his life than his treasure. He said, finding it hard to form the words through his shaking lips, "You must be kin of Odin, young man. I have never met such a hero before, one who makes his point so plain! For God's sake, Northman, take the cups and the bowl. I have hated them for seven years. Even cleaning them was a penance. I beg you, take them."

Runolf smiled at him like a wintry breeze and said, "Thank you, lord. Such generosity is not often met with these days. It has been a pleasure to speak with you."

Then he went back to the hall and woke Nial and Thiolve, showing them the treasure. Thiolve said, "You understand, Runolf, that in our company we share and share alike?"

Nial said, "Since I am your prince and am older than you, my boy, I shall take charge of the treasure."

Runolf smiled and said, "I give it to you freely, Nial. I have no use for it. Our friendship means more to me."

Thiolve whispered to himself, "Baubles! The lad is a fool!"

Then, while Kilwick's thralls still slept, and while their chieftain was still trying to stop shaking, Nial's company left the hall and took to their tarry boats again, although night lay thick as felt over the bottle-green sea. They set a course towards Clontarf for the swinging tide was with them; and Nial nursed the treasure of Dalriada between his knees, thinking how clever a fellow he had been to let this Runolf sail with them.

# *BRAND OF CLONTARF*

DOWN at Clontarf they found that men still remembered the story of the fifteen Iceland Burners who came southwards and died in the red heather that Good Friday, fighting with Brian Boru, though it was a man's long lifetime ago. And because Runolf was of such northern blood, the Clontarf-Irish looked at him with respect, although they paid little heed to Nial, strut and brag as he might about his kinship with kings.

Thiolve shook his head and grumbled, "Here we go again! This Runolf will get treasures—but we must starve."

Nial nodded, as though this was true; yet in fact he had all the treasure they had come across in a hide bag on his back, at that moment.

There was an earl at Clontarf called Brand, a stout straight man with a family of five daughters, who liked the looks of Runolf, being half-Norse himself. This earl saw to it that young Runolf was given fine worsted clothes, dyed green with plant juice; a long blue cloak against the spring winds; two beaten-silver thumb rings; and a yellow cowhide pouch to keep his money in, if ever he should have any.

To Nial, Earl Brand gave a short leather jerkin, a pair of horsehide shoes, and three jet beads that his grandfather had got from Whitby long ago and which were thought to drive away toothache.

Thiolve was not slow to point out that Runolf had been given more gifts by Earl Brand. The two were sitting on a mounting stone by the sheep market at Clontarf, and Thiolve said, "The good lord knows, my prince, but why you put up with it, I shall never know. This Runolf is bent on making a fool of you, wherever we go. Yet a man like you, by choosing his friends and his moment aright, could have been Pope in Jerusalem."

Nial worried over this, and got to wondering if indeed he would like to be Pope in Jerusalem. He then began to wonder where he had heard of this Jerusalem before. It seemed a rich place to harry.

He said to Earl Thiolve, "This Jerusalem . . . how might a man prosper there, then?"

And Earl Thiolve said, “My prince, you see that in the end you have to come back to your dear friend, Thiolve, for advice. That is something which no unbearded lad from the sheep islands can give you. So, I will tell you. The days of gaining treasure at Miklagard are now over. That place has been drained dry. And now men fare towards Jerusalem for their crow pickings. Already, I hear tell, countless thousands of Crossmen have travelled from France and Germany and Italy at the Pope’s bidding, and have set up their kingdoms where they have wished. Godfrey Bouillon sits in Jerusalem; Bohemond the Norman has got Antioch. Why should you not have a cut off the same roast? Are you less noble than they are? Given a horse and a mail shirt, could you not drive these drum-beating Turks before you as well as these fellows?”

Nial said, “You make my head spin, friend. How should I afford a horse and mail shirt, and pay a thousand cavalry when, to tell the truth, I hardly know where my next meal is coming from?”

Now as he said this, Earl Brand was walking behind the sheep pen, and heard what the prince was saying. So he looked over the wattle fence and said, “Hoho! my friend! You are still hankering after riches, are you? Well, it so happens that I can tell you where there are such riches that a man might go mad even to look on them. And since you fellows are already crazed with your lost glory, you would have nothing to lose—except, perhaps, your lives.”

Thiolve said doubtfully, “What sort of bargain is that, to gain riches and lose your life?”

Earl Brand said smiling, “A price has to be paid for everything in this world, scarecrow. It is only you Islanders, whose brains have been turned by a diet of sea-weed and gulls’ eggs, who hope to get something for nothing.”

Earl Brand gained pleasure from teasing all Hebrideans so, and the barb was sharper coming from him, since his own mother had lived on Jura until his Viking father had carried her off to Clontarf.

So Nial the Prince, not to be outfaced, said, “I would dare risk my life to get my hands on a great hoard, Earl Brand. Say where it is, and I will show you what a man can do.”

Earl Brand said slyly, “More likely, you will show me what young Runolf can do. You will send him down the hole for you, while you wait on top, with your grasping hands held out.”

Thiolve said, “So, this treasure must lie down in an old burial chamber, from what you say? Have I guessed right?”

Earl Brand nodded, and said, “Aye, you have guessed right. But it would take better men than you two are to disturb the hoard after all these years. I have met no man who dares put a finger on it, and I have seen some hardy fellows along this coast in my time.”

Nial said, “Well, if you consider it so safe from robbers, you dare tell us what this place is called, and where it is.”

Earl Brand said, “Certainly, my friend. The country folk about here call it Arthur’s Barrow, and it lies hardly more than a mile from where we stand, in a curl of the hills. But I warn you of one thing—if you decide to seek it out, do it alone, as brave men should. Do not entice young Runolf to go with you. I have another plan for that lad’s future.”

Then he walked away, letting the morning breeze flap his red cloak out, and looking a very fine man indeed.

And when he had gone out of earshot, Nial said, “I know what plan he has for Runolf. He wants to marry him to one of his daughters. Then, in due course, this Runolf, who is nothing but a peasant, will become Earl in Clontarf. What a world it is, when a beggar from the ice-bound north can come to wear an earl’s belt simply by walking into a town!”

Thiolve said, “This Runolf owes it all to you, master. Without you, he would still be wandering the hills, trying to get some fool to ransom a witless slave. So, if Runolf owes you his good fortune, then he owes it to you to help find this treasure. Is that not so?”

Prince Nial nodded and said, “If all goes well, I will not be ungenerous with him. He shall have a share of it.”

Thiolve frowned and said, “Aye, maybe . . . but a very small share. It does not do these peasant lads any good to get their rascally hands on too much gold. They are not like us noblemen, master; they do not know how to behave, once they have their dirty hands on good money.”

# *KINGLY HOARD*

UP towards sunset a wind blew out of the east, across the salt green sea, like a blacksmith striking on an anvil. Earl Brand was riding with Runolf on a shaggy brown cob, when he turned in his saddle and said, "This is no time to be out of doors, young man. When the wind comes from Wales, trees fall and horses bolt. I have known the black cattle run blind along the streets, this wind in their nostrils, treading all down before them. Let us be home and by the fire. My daughters made me promise to bring you back to their bower for an hour of voyage-chatter."

As they turned their horses' heads, Runolf thought: Daughters! Always daughters! A man would think I was a great earl, to be entertained so!

Gudrun Gore seemed to burn at his side. He thought: Aye, and it is all because of you, old sword. But for you, I should still be doing an honest day's work up on the island, and not drifting about the world, hobnobbing with my betters.

By now he remembered only the warm bed and the regular meals on Stroma, and forgot the price he had paid, living under Kolbein's roof.

Then, while he was in the guest chamber combing his hair before going to the girls, Earl Thiolve looked round the door curtain, his finger on his lips, and said softly, "Ach, so you *have* got here at last. The Prince and I thought you would never come. This is no way to treat your lord, my boy, keeping him waiting."

"What do you want?" asked Runolf, arranging his new cloak so as to fall better from the right shoulder.

Thiolve's eyes grew big and their whites showed like snow round pebbles. "Ask no questions," he said, "but follow me silently. Tonight, we shall all be as rich as kings."

Runolf was not sorry to be away from the bower and the need to listen to women's laughter. He passed from the steading with Thiolve and at the edge of a small wood, sheltering from the wind, found Prince Nial and upwards of thirty men with hide ropes, bullock hooks, torches and an oxcart.

The Prince frowned at him and said, “A good hound comes when his master whistles but once. I have been whistling for an hour.”

Runolf said, “This wind got into my ears and I heard nothing.”

Thiolve said grimly, “It was the sound of the Earl’s daughters singing that kept you from your duty.”

Runolf was amazed to see how serious all the men were, as though they had forgotten how to laugh. And once they had set off through the wind and the dusk it seemed that they had forgotten how to talk, too. They hurried like silent ghosts, leaning forward, anxious to be where they were going.

Only one man broke the silence, a discontented thrall from Earl Brand’s stackyard. He said, “This is no night for barrow robbing. That old place will be shuddering under this wind. I’d as soon be back in my master’s straw as ferreting among rotten timbers on such a night.”

Earl Thiolve touched the thrall on the arm with his axe and said, “A promise is a promise, slave. If you try to turn back now, you will never put horn spoon to your lips again.”

It was more than an hour before they stumbled down into the hill-ringed hollow where Arthur’s Barrow lay. And when they saw it, by the moon’s first pale light, it seemed little to praise in a poem. It was nothing but a roundish hummock, hardly higher than a man, with wind-swept gorse and rough brown grasses all over it. On its summit stood one fire-blackened stone that leaned over as though it had felt the brush of many winds in its time, and pointed up at the moon like a dead giant’s finger.

The men crouched on the lee side of the barrow, away from the wind. Prince Nial said, “Well then, we are here. And on the far side of that mound lies our fortune, fellows. Who will be the first to go inside and lay his fingers about some good red gold?”

The thralls who had come from Earl Brand’s steading mumbled together, but did not answer. So Earl Thiolve said, shaking his axe, “So, this is your Irish courage, hey? This is how you treat a visiting prince, hey?”

The stackyard thrall upped and spoke, “Masters, six good men have never come back from going into this dark place. And they went down on a clear night, with no wind blowing. But on a night like this who would hear the warning voice of the rotten timbers? Who would know if the earth was shaking under his feet, making ready to throw him down into the pit?”

Prince Nial said coldly, “It comes to me that you fellows are all talk and no doing. Give me one who is ready to back his words with action, and jump down into the dark if a man as much as *questions* his bravery. What do you say, Runolf, my brother?”

But Runolf did not answer. He liked the look of that barrow no more than any of them.

Then the stackyard thrall said, “That’s all very well, Prince Nial; but what do we poor fellows get if we go down there? We are not lords and warriors who need to prove our manhood. We are poor folk, who only want a shelter over us and food inside us. What profit do we get, putting ourselves in such peril?”

Nial said, “You will get my friendship, fellow. And if that means nothing to you, then what a sorry place this world must be in these cowardly days.”

Another thrall, with red hair and one eye missing, said then, “Nay, lord, but friendship’ll not clothe a bairn nor crop wood, when you are out on the foam with your curraghs loaded with this treasure. We poor folk will still be what we were, though we may boast that a Prince once called us his friend.”

Runolf was getting tired of this argument, and was even wishing that he had gone to the women’s bower after all. Drawing his cloak round his ears to keep the bitter wind away, he said, “Let us have done with this, Nial. Look, I will go inside, just to put an end to the matter.”

Nial smiled at him haughtily and said, “I am pleased your pride has been touched at last, my boy. I wondered how long I should have to demean myself, talking to thralls, before you got your courage up.”

Runolf just shrugged his shoulders, then gathered together a band of thralls who knew the barrow, and set them to work with levers and bullock hooks, wrenching down earth and stones, to make an entrance into the hummock. And at last he heard stones falling down into the dark hole they had made, echoing as in a hollow well, and he said to Nial, “Well, we have made the first step.”

Stackyard Thrall said, “And that one is the easiest, master. Now you will need the ropes, for it is a far jump down to the floor of this haunted place.”

Runolf turned to Nial and Thiolve and said, “Which of you two want to be the first to lay your hands on the good red gold, then?”

Thiolve turned away, as though he did not hear; but Nial said, “When have I put myself before you, brother? Since we have been friends, when

have I kept you away from good pickings? The clothes you wear on your back, did I stand in your way of getting them?"

Runolf laughed back at him, then said to the thralls, "Right, fellows, tie the ropes round me and lower me down. I will carry a torch in my right hand and a bullock hook in my left, to steady me if I start to swing."

Stackyard Thrall said, "Better to carry the torch in your left, and that sword of yours in your right, in case the old kings rise up and come at you."

But Runolf only laughed again and said, "If the old kings come at me, I will call up for the Prince to swing down to my aid."

Then he pushed out into the darkness and went down and down, through the dust and the stifling air.

When the rope had paid out three men's lengths, Runolf's feet touched the stony floor. In his torchlight, he saw the place was far bigger than it had seemed from above, and arched above him like a great bowl made of timbers, below which the roots of plants hung down and down, like a giant witch's hair, all white and bleached in the darkness.

And before him, on the dust-heaped floor, he saw men's bones lying here and there, some of them scattered, some of them still as they had been in life, held together by the clothes these men had worn. They were mostly the clothes of thralls, or poor men who sought an easy fortune. None of these men had ever carried weapons, but only wooden spades, or deer-antler picks.

But of treasure, Runolf saw nothing, though he swung his pine torch round in a wide circle to spread the light. Then, suddenly, away in the middle of the great floor, he saw what he first thought to be a black shadow, but then realized was a hole or pit in the floor. As he shuffled towards it carefully, he saw that across this hole lay a fallen beam, riddled with worm holes. Kneeling at the pit's lip, he looked down, and what he saw almost stopped his heart from striking another beat.

A dozen feet below, in that pit where twenty men could have stood in comfort, lay such a treasure as Runolf could not have dreamed of, dreamed he so wildly that men had called him mad. Gold cups lay in heaps, glinting in his torchlight; church crosses of silver set with green and red stones lay tumbled against one another; shield upon shield, of bronze inlaid with gold, leaned on ivory-hilted swords, whose scabbards were bound about with strands of gold and silver intertwined. By the far wall of the pit, a tall image of a man was propped, his hands outspread, his gentle face smiling down at

the hoard beneath his feet. Runolf gasped to see that this man's eyes were great pearls set in garnets, his hair of fine-spun silver threads, and every part of his body of beaten gold. About his legs still hung the tatters of once-fine garments, of scarlet samite and web-thin blue wool.

Breathless, Runolf said to himself, "This then is Arthur the King. My eyes have seen the King!"

And as he spoke, the roots which hung down seemed to stir as though the Welsh wind had blown in among them; then the heavy timbers began to whisper, and from above came down a shower of fine dry dust, which fell into Runolf's eyes and mouth as he looked up in alarm.

And as he stayed still, frozen with fear, Earl Thiolve's voice called, "What have you found, fellow? Do you mean to keep us waiting all night? The Prince is freezing up here; must he die of cold while you lie snug below, out of the wind?"

Even the echo of the man's voice from above set the timbers whispering again, and a hissing of dry dust fell once more, on to the silver head of the figure in the pit, dulling the metal's bright sheen.

Then Runolf called back, as gently as he could, "Take care, my friends, this place is hardly safe. But there is such a treasure down here that no king in the world can have set eyes on so rich a glory."

For a while, there was silence above; and then the hole through which Runolf had come was bright with torchlight. He heard Nial say loudly, "Stand away, thralls, and let me down to my rightful reward. Handle me carefully now, for the time is near when I shall be among the great ones of this earth."

Runolf called up to him, "Gently, Nial, gently. Do not kick against the wall sides or you will have me smothered. This place is as tender as a pheasant egg. Come easily, and do not swing that staff about."

But all he got in reply was a loud laugh, and the Prince's excited thumping of the wall as he descended. New showers of dust now fell, and then, above them, there was a rumbling which flung down more solid clods of earth and broken pieces of rotten wood.

Then Nial ran coughing towards the place where Runolf knelt and shouted out, "Where is it? Where is my hoard?"

Runolf pointed, and as the Prince leaned over sighing with astonishment, Thiolve yelled down to them, "And may I not come down, too? Am I to be

kept from such a sight? Am I a slave, then? Am I less than this shepherd fellow Runolf?"

In the red torchlight, Nial put his face close to Runolf's and said coldly now, "That Thiolve is a dolt and a rogue, brother. It is against all the sense of mankind for me to let that ragged rascal set his thieving hands on this bright hoard. No, brother, I am resolved. You and I found this gold, and you and I shall share it. No one else in the world, my friend. Oh, you will live to thank your stars that you met me, for when the time comes for sharing this out, you shall not be forgotten, I vow to you. You shall be given something for your trouble. Only a little, perhaps, but something. Now, take hold of the rope round my waist and let me down to the lovely hoard. Look, I will stand in the middle of this beam, and then I shall land in a clear space among the treasures."

Now Runolf's heart beat wildly. He could not speak. He put out his hand to stop the Prince from jumping on to the worm-eaten plank, but he was too late. There was a splintering of wood, a sharp cry of fear, and then a crash.

From the entrance hole above, Thiolve shouted out, "He is killing the Prince! The baresark is killing our Prince for the miserable treasure!"

But Runolf was too busy with his own affairs to pay heed to the man's wild yelling. Down below Nial lay among the gold and silver, his torch flaring on the floor of the pit, his legs threshing in terror, half of the heavy beam lying across him. Then he looked up, white-faced in the torch glow, and said, "For the love of God, do you mean to kill me, Runolf? Is this your friendship, brother?"

Now earth and roots and fragments of stone rattled down in an endless stream on to the floor of the barrow, so that it became harder and harder even to breathe, much less talk. But Runolf called out, "Lie still, you fool. I am coming down to you."

Then he jumped, and treading upon gold cups and silver crosses in his frenzy, heaved at the broken timber until he had got Nial free. And as the two stood together, gasping, half of the roof above them came down, at first creaking, then groaning, then thundering. Much of the earth and timber fell outside the pit, but enough slid into it to cover up the treasure. Only the smiling golden face with its pearl eyes was still uncovered. Nial turned towards the image and struck it with an angry fist. "For you!" he said. "We came down for you! You traitor!"

Runolf dragged him away to the far side of the pit and whispered, “Lie still, I beg you, Nial, if another fall comes we shall be like that image, buried to the neck.”

Now all was silence at the entrance hole. Thiolve and the others had run fifty paces from the burial mound, and lay gasping in the safety of the rocky ridge. Already Thiolve was turning in his mind the idea of going down to the shore and putting off in the curraghs. All that halted him was the fear that the others might not obey him, and he wondered by what means he could elect himself their new leader, and perhaps take on the title of Prince. This thought grasped hold of him so fiercely that he worried at his knuckles with his teeth, like a starving dog at a bone.

Fifty paces away, down in the half-darkness, the two trapped men had closer worries, for it now seemed that death was determined to wrap them round with earth. Runolf said, half in grim jest, “I was near to drowning in salt sea, once, when your kinsman Gilli saved me. I would give much if he could be here now, to save me from drowning in dust.”

But Nial the Prince was not listening. Beside himself with fear, he fell to his knees and clasped his hands, trying to remember his prayers. Runolf said his standing, and all the while trying to pierce the darkness with his eyes, wondering if by chance he could fling a rope across one of the overhanging beams of the roof, and so drag the two of them to safety.

At last, he thought he could see how it might be done, and tying a heavy stone to one end of the hide rope, he flung it upwards with all his force. He heard the stone strike heavily on wood, then it thudded down again, landing beside him in the pit.

Nial was still mumbling his prayers when Runolf tried again. But this time, in answer to his cast, there was no sound of stone against wood, but a gigantic roaring of the earth, and Runolf glanced up to see that his efforts had done no more than bring all down upon them.

For a short while, he saw the bright moon shining into the barrow; then there was a sliding sound, like a giant troll slithering down a scree-slope. Before the two torches went out, Runolf saw the entire roof slip sideways and then plunge, slanting like arrow-hail, towards him, heavy and all-engulfing. In his head, he thought: I have done this, by throwing up the stone. I have brought death upon Nial, who was my friend.

And he flung himself like a shield over the kneeling Prince. Then, with the rushing of earth in his ears, he sank down, knocked senseless by a

scudding flake of ironstone as big as a sheep’s head.

# *QUARREL AND VOYAGE*

THEN, as suddenly as it had gone, sense came back to Runolf with a faint sound like the suck of the tide along a sandy beach. And he saw that someone's prayers had truly been answered, for the greater part of that terrible earthfall had gone beyond them. Nial was hardly touched; Runolf stood knee-deep in dust and, apart from a cut beside the head, was as whole as a new-forged nail.

But most amazing, the dust and earth and timber, in falling, had built up like a ramp which let the two walk out of the pit and then from the barrow shaft, without ropes or men's aid.

So they came up out of the dark, when they had expected to be dead. But as they looked back in the moonlight, they saw no sign of the hoard that had tempted them to that place. The earth and heavy timber-baulks now covered it so deeply and solidly that it might never have existed.

Nial's face was streaming with tears and he was striking out at the air with every other step. "To think we came so near to great fortune!" he kept saying. "To think that I might have been a King, with such a throne price, and now am nothing again. It is your fault, sheep-herder! But for your bungling, we should have had it all up and above ground by now."

Thiolve crept out of hiding and watched them, the Hebrideans and thralls at his back. At first he looked half-afraid, as though Nial and Runolf were two ghosts, but when he heard the Prince talking, he plucked up courage and took Nial's hand.

"Ah, my lord, you are delivered safely from the tomb," he said. "I ran to get help for you, but in this wilderness where is there help to be got? Yet it seems that my prayers for you were answered."

He glanced with malice at Runolf and said, "If it were left to some, you would lie dead."

Then, waiting a while, he said, "And you lost the whole hoard? You brought nothing up, nothing at all?"

Nial shook his head and began to mourn again. Runolf said shortly, “We have brought ourselves up, Thiolve, and that seems to me a good bargain.”

Thiolve drew his ragged shawl about him like a cloak and said, “Good bargain? To put your master in danger, and then, after he has suffered torments under the ground, to come crawling up again without as much as a bone arm ring to your credit?”

Runolf stood a pace nearer to him and said, “At least, to my credit, I did not run away like a hare as soon as danger threatened. I may be a fool, but I am not a coward, Thiolve.”

The Islanders and thralls drew round them in a ring, scenting the anger that lay between the two men. Thiolve glanced about him looking for support. Then he said proudly, “When my fathers were in their chariots fighting the Romans, yours were grubbing for acorns in the woods.”

Runolf did not try to outdo the Celt in this sort of word-battle, but took another pace to bring him within reach, then, without warning, lashed out with the back of his hand so strongly that the blow thumped like a mallet on an oaken board. The Hebridean fell sideways, spitting like a wildcat, and making great motions as though he were drawing out his axe.

Runolf stood firm, his hand upon Gudrun Gore. He said for all to hear, “You have at last pushed me beyond the edge of patience, Islander. I have suffered your taunts without a word for long enough. Now it is for you to decide. Get up and face me if you wish; I am waiting for you.”

From the ground, Earl Thiolve glared round at his followers, but no one moved. He looked at Nial, but the Prince was sitting in the grass, his face in his hands, weeping once again.

“Well,” said Runolf, “have you got your breath back yet?”

Suddenly Thiolve rose to his knees, but instead of drawing the flint axe, spread out his arms widely like a man appealing for justice. The fury had gone from his face, and it was white now, except for the place where Runolf’s fist had landed.

“Comrades,” Thiolve said in his high voice, “you saw that blow? You saw who gave it? And you have seen, in these weeks, how I have nourished Runolf like one of my own kin. Speak now, and say if I have been fairly repaid.”

But the Islanders and thralls stared at the kneeling man silently, their teeth showing white in the dusk.

Thiolve said again, “If I have done wrong, then tell me so, my comrades. You know me, I am man enough to bear your blame. Tell me.”

But the men stayed silent and grinning.

At last Runolf shrugged his shoulders and said with pity, “Get up, man, and save your kneeling for the first church we come to. But from now on, whenever you feel your earldom coming on you, remember this moment and who put a blush on your cheek for you.”

Thiolve was about to make such a reply as might have used all his breath, when a man on a blown pony galloped out of the darkness and, seeing them, pulled so hard on his rein that the weary beast almost fell in a shower of earth.

This man wore the rough frieze cloak and hood of a seafarer, and his face in the torchlight had the glow of one who had been out in all weathers, fair and foul. Seeing the Prince, he ran to him and fell before him. “My lord,” he said, “I come with greetings from your kinsman, Gilli, who is a free man once again by your generosity.”

Nial gazed past the man without interest. “Gilli,” he said. “Ah, poor Gilli.”

The seafarer laughed and said, “No longer poor Gilli, my lord, but Gilli the Great. His thrall days are over.”

Nial’s eyes awakened a little and he said slowly, “How is he great, poor Gilli Sheephead?”

The messenger got to his feet and said proudly, “My lord, your kinsman Gilli has more luck in his hand today than the Miklagard Emperor has jewels. All the way south, landless men have followed him, both Scots and Northmen, and now he lies with his warband off the Isle of Man in two borrowed longships.”

Thiolve came forward now, his humbleness forgotten. “His warband!” he said. “And what would Gilli Sheephead do with a warband?”

The man in the frieze hood glanced at him sharply and said, “He plans to sail on Anglesey, my friend, and there get a kingdom for himself. That is what Gilli plans to do, and we who follow him think that this is a good plan. Do you think otherwise?”

He stared so fiercely at Thiolve as he spoke that the Earl drew back and shook his head. “No, no,” he answered, “do not mistake me, my friend. I only mean that Anglesey is held by the Norman lords, Avranches and

Montgomery. Now Gilli and his men may be fine fighters, but all the world knows that not even the leopard will bare his fangs at the lion—and these Normans are lions, friend."

The seaman clapped his hands against his sides to warm them, then said almost gaily, "Ha, but out here in Ireland the news limps on weary feet. So you have not heard that King Magnus of Norway has smoked these Normans out of their stone nest, has killed the lord of Montgomery and frightened the wits out of Avranches! You have not heard that Anglesey is now a desert place, with not more than two score Normans still left on it, and they half-crazed that Magnus will call back and eat them up!"

Prince Nial pushed forward and said coldly, "And so my kinsman Gilli sends to me for help? Is that it?"

The seafarer glanced round at the band of ragged followers, then smiled strangely and said, "Aye, if you like to put it that way, Nial. But I would rather say that Gilli, being a good-hearted man, wishes to repay his debt, inviting you to share his kingdom with him, when he gets it."

Nial's eyes started at this and he said sharply, "Do you know what you are saying? Do you know who I am? Do you think I would share with anyone?"

The seaman walked across slowly to his horse again and took it by the bridle. Then he turned and said, "Aye, I know what I am saying, Nial; I rehearsed it for three days, coming across in a cattle boat from Man. And I know who you are—a landless lad like the others, but with a head full of empty dreams. And as for sharing with anyone, that is up to you. My message is to tell you that in three days from now, Gilli's longships will lie off the north shore of Anglesey. If you are there to join him, you shall have your carving off the joint. And if you are not there, that will be your ill fortune, for Gilli is in no mood to wait, now that his luck has turned."

Then the man jumped into the saddle and swung the horse about. Nial made the motion of drawing his sword, then thought better of it and called out, "If you are going back, tell Gilli that his Prince will come to his aid, as he has always done. Do not forget those words."

The man laughed into the darkness and then was gone.

Runolf went to Nial and said, "Are you mad? The sea from here to Anglesey is a wild beast. How can we cross it in such frail cockleshells as we have?"

But Nial was gazing beyond him, his face set, as though he saw things that no ordinary man could see. All he said was, “It is times like these which show a man to be noble or peasant-born. I go to gain my kingdom. You may go back to your sheep pen if you lack the stomach to fare forward.”

# *BARESARK RUN*

TWENTY men lay in the sand dunes, shielding their eyes from the blown grey grit and from time to time looking across at the low squat hulk of blackened stone that had been the stronghold of Avranches and Montgomery.

Nial said bitterly, “To think of our days and nights on the water, and now Gilli is not here to meet us. He should have stayed in the north. He is fit only to be another man’s slave.”

Runolf hunched closer under the bending grasses and said, “Storms may have kept him. The same storms which sank two of our boats, Nial, and drowned your friend, Earl Thiolve.”

Nial said from a twisted mouth, “Thiolve! Another thieving rogue. He even stole his title from a dead cousin. He was no more an earl than this ruinous fort is a palace. I am well rid of him.”

Runolf said thoughtfully, “I regret that I struck him at Clontarf. Such a bitter blow humbled him before the men. My temper ran away with me.”

But Nial only snorted, as though he were out of sorts with the whole world. Then an Islander crept nearer and said, “Master, we have been watching who comes in and goes out of the fortress, and we have counted no more than seven men and two serving women. It might be no hard work to take this place on our own, if we could once get inside it.”

Nial nodded. In a low voice he said, “That was in my mind. We do not need Gilli and his borrowed longships. We do not need to share with that thrall. Come, Runolf, and we will spy out the land ourselves.”

Under cover of the wind-scoured dunes, the two circled the place on hands and knees, until at last they came to a clump of alders behind which they stood and surveyed the front of the fortress, on the side away from the sea. Though King Magnus had mauled it, the place was still a sharp weapon, if held in strong hands. The facing-wall was two storeys high, and full of arrow-loops. Square towers stood at either end, their parapets hardly damaged. The double door in the centre, though charred with fire, still hung firmly from its iron hinges.

Nial bit his fingers and said, “It is like an old bear. It may be wounded, but its claws and teeth could put an end to more men than we have.”

Runolf answered, “I am not a trained war-man, Nial. I only see that this place has a gate that must come down—and then we are twenty against seven. That seems good odds to me.”

Nial sat on the ground and pulled at grass stems. He said, “You have never seen these Normans. In their long mail coats, with their long swords and their long shields . . . they are not like men at all. They have the stubbornness of stallions.”

Runolf laughed and said, “Aye, maybe, but King Magnus knew how to break them.”

Then Nial flared up again. “Break them!” he said. “I, too, could break them, if I had as many in my host as the Viking had. He can claim small credit for that, I can tell you. And if that traitor, Gilli, had kept to his bargain, we too could have done what this Magnus did. Oh, what a fool I was to be ruled by you, to send his freedom money as I did! All it has led to is that here we skulk like dogs, with a kingdom lying in our grasp that we are afraid to reach out and take.”

After a while, Runolf said, “In my mind there is no problem, Nial. Suppose that by night we stacked brushwood against that door and fired it . . . Suppose we set flaming torches in every nook and cranny, in the woods, along the dunes, to make it look as though we were a great host. . . . Then, suppose when the door fell down we rushed in shouting. . . . Suppose that . . .”

But Nial would not let him go on. The Prince’s eyes were shining with excitement again. “My friend,” he said, “oh, my dear friend! You say you are not practiced in war, yet you are more of a warrior than most men I have met. I promise you, when I have come to my kingdom, you shall be its general. You shall be my sword-bearer and sit at my right hand.”

Runolf was amazed at the Prince’s joy, for what he had said seemed a simple enough thing. All the same, he followed Nial back to their hiding place and listened while the Prince explained the plan to the Islanders. And when they had all gone off to search for firewood and torch-wood, Nial slapped Runolf on the shoulder in high good humour and said, “I have another thing to add to our plan. Look, all the world is afraid of baresarks, and I do not think that these Normans will be any less afraid. Now you, of all men I have had, are most like the old fear-raisers. You are of their race

and land. With you leading the charge, your shirt stripped off and your face and body daubed with mud, we could strike terror into these seven soldiers, who are no doubt shivering in their shoes each time the sun goes down, in case the Vikings come down for them again!"

Runolf said in doubt, "You mean that I must leave behind my best clothes, given to me by Earl Brand? I have never owned such clothes before."

The Prince hugged himself with laughter. "What!" he said. "You think of a paltry tunic and cloak when you are being given the chance to earn a generalship? Oh, you Northmen, I shall never understand you!"

So Runolf gave in, and agreed to do as Nial said, though he did it with a heavy heart. And that night, an hour after the sun had gone down under the sea towards Ireland, he sat shivering in the breeze that came off the water, holding Gudrun Gore to him, but feeling less like a baresark than any man had done.

Nial was beside himself with ecstasy, but this did not stop him from managing the Islanders as though he had been in charge of siege warfare all his life. At his whispered bidding, they went like dark spirits back and forth, laying their brushwood as silently as they would have stalked the deer in their own mountain places. And when this was done, each man stationed himself where he could race from torch to torch and set them ablaze when Nial whistled.

All went so gently, so much to plan, that Runolf felt a strange uneasiness. He whispered to Nial, "I do not feel right in my stomach, friend. Battles should not be as quiet as this."

Nial slapped him on the bare back and said, "It is hunger and cold talking to you, nothing more. All that will pass, once you begin your run, brother. You will have other things to think about, I promise you!"

As he said this, an owl shrieked out three times in the trees above their heads. Nial's mood changed straightway. "That is a voice from somewhere," he said. "It is an omen, for good or evil, I do not know. But it is a sign."

Runolf said, shivering, "It was an owl, startled by our whispering. I have heard them before."

Nial said, "Do not tell me what you have heard. I know what I hear, and that is enough for me." Then he seemed sorry for his ill temper and put his hand on Runolf's shoulder. "Have courage," he said, "and you will live to bless me every night of your life. Now I must leave you, to give the signal to

my poor simple fellows. First they will fire the gate, and then light the torches. You must keep your eyes open, and as soon as the gate falls, run through it shouting. We shall come in behind you on both sides, right at your heels. So have no fear—and may we drink a toast of brotherhood this night, of their Norman wine!"

He clasped Runolf by the arm, held it tightly for a moment, then slid away into the darkness. Runolf had time to count the fingers on both hands three times, then suddenly the brushwood heap before the high gate began to flare. And almost at the same time, here and there along the shore, pine torches sent their wavering glow into the night.

Once more the owl in the wood behind him gave its mournful cry, and then the light of a horn lantern showed for an instant on the parapet above the gate, but faded away almost as soon as it had shone.

Runolf's teeth were chattering now, so loudly that he thought every man in the fortress must hear them. He grasped the hilt of Gudrun Gore, and for a strange moment could not feel that he held anything in his hand. He leaned forward and pinched his toes. They had no feeling in them, either. And for a second he wondered if the old baresark had felt like this, in the ancient days, along the Derwent at Stamfordbridge.

And then from either side of him he heard whistles and low calls. He thought he heard Nial's high voice cry out, "Be ready, the gate is moving! Look, it is coming down! Now run, run, run!"

Runolf scrambled to his feet and, setting his face towards the brushwood blaze, began his charge. He was shouting, though what the words he shouted were, he did not know. The great blaze blinded him for a while, and he did not see that lights now burned behind the arrow slits in the wall. Nor did he see that the gate was not falling down, but was being pushed open, to sweep the smoking brushwood away.

His feet raced across the rough grass; Gudrun Gore whistled in the chill night air as he swung his right arm high; his ears were full of a sound like the rushing winds of winter, over Stroma-tops. He did not hear that no footsteps followed him. He did not even hear the voice of one running thrall which said, "Stop, Runolf, stop! The plan is changed now. Gilli has put in to shore and we are going with him down the coast for plunder. Stop, Runolf!"

So he ran alone to capture the castle, a baresark at last. And there before him lay the wide-open gate, and a torch-lit passageway beyond it, with no

Normans in sight to guard their precious stronghold. He laughed aloud to himself and cried, “Bite, Gudrun, bite!” though there was nothing to bite.

And then he was over the threshold and into the long stone-flagged corridor. He rejoiced that all had been so easy. He even thought how much easier it was being a warrior than tending sheep on the high hilltop. Oh, if folk only knew how easy it was!

And then, in his plunging forward, he hit the trip-rope stretched across the passageway and fell heavily to the stone flags. Gudrun Gore sprang from his grasp and clattered on and on, skittering along like a flat stone skimmed across water.

But Runolf did not see his sword go, for his head hit the floor and darkness came over him like a cloak.

# *EPILOGUE*

HE woke in a small cell of unplastered stone. Above his head was a dark, heavy-timbered roof. Beside the bracken bed on which he lay, a pine fire set within a small hearth sent up whorls of thick blue smoke which slanted across the little room and made their way through a narrow slit in the upper wall.

Runolf rubbed his tired eyes, and then saw that a man was standing over him, staring down at him grim-faced. He was the tallest man the boy had ever seen, and his body was made even more bulky by the clothes he wore: a long thick leather coat, down to his middle calf, overlaid with a heavy mesh of iron mail rusted by the weather; a broad, iron-bound belt from which swung an immense sword, its scabbard tip scraping the floor; leg wrappings of dark yellow linen, bound with rawhide thongs.

A mail hood lay back across his wide shoulders and exposed his head. Runolf saw the close-cropped dark hair through which the shiny scalp shone in the torchlight; he saw the broad and ruddy face, the keen grey eyes, the shaven cheeks. And looking down a little lower, he saw the strong square hands and their bitten fingernails . . . The hands of a hard, nervous man, a fighting man, not a dreamer like Nial. But now these hands were resting lightly at the man's waist, his thick thumbs pushed into the great belt.

This man said suddenly in slow Norwegian, "Well, Runolf of Stroma, what have you to say for yourself?"

The boy answered weakly, "You know my name and where I come from . . ."

The man nodded sternly. "You talk in your sleep," he said. "It was not a pleasant sleep for you. It was full of stuff about food and drink, and wind and sea, and running away, and losing treasure and friends. Aye, mostly about losing friends. What have you to say?"

Runolf struggled to sit up, then answered, "It is true, I have lost all my friends. They seemed to disappear in the night after I began my run."

The man clumped across the floor and sat down heavily on a low stool of unvarnished oak. His sword scraped and rattled as he sat. It was a very

big sword, Runolf thought; the sword of a man who would turn back from nothing. If all Normans carried such swords, he thought, then who could stand against them?

The man said, “The friends you lost were no friends, Runolf. They deserted you. All the fight has gone out of such folk. They are dreamers now, and of no more consequence than hares in the heather, or blackbirds singing on an apple bough. Even their kings and princes are little more than broken-spirited peasants, who would betray their nearest blood to get themselves twenty acres that they would call a kingdom.”

Runolf suddenly felt very young, very small and almost helpless, looking at this big man. But he was driven to make a protest and said, “The Prince Nial was a good enough fellow. A man fallen on evil times cannot always behave like a well-fed lord in his feast hall with a full treasure chest to sit on.”

But the big man did not seem to hear him, and went on, “You are well rid of such friends, as you call them. Such cattle, as we call them. From what I can see, they have done little but lead you into bad ways, when a stout fellow like you should be learning good ones. What ever possessed you to run like a savage baresark against such as we are? Has no one told you that those days are over? All that is finished, these three generations past. Only crack-brained old dreamers in the northern isles still think of such antics without a smile. And that sword you carried—where, by God’s Splendour, did you find such an old hacked hedge tool! On some midden heap in Iceland?”

Runolf felt the tears starting in his eyes. He said as firmly as he could, “Where is my sword? Where is Gudrun Gore?”

The man pursed his thin lips and snorted. “I do not know what you call such a piece of iron,” he said, “but it has been thrown down the well, to be rid of it. It has gone out of sight, where it belongs, to rust away and be forgotten forever.”

Runolf twisted a bracken strand in his fingers. “I shall never forget it, or the man from whom it came,” he said.

The Norman stamped his iron-shod feet on the floor, like a battle horse growing restive. He said, “You will have other things to think about, boy. You are good stuff to work on. So you shall stay with us and learn how a soldier should behave. For it’s a soldier you must be, boy, since you are not

cut out for anything else. You are too strong to be a good churchman, and too stupid to learn a village trade."

Runolf stared back at him as hard as he could, but felt that his eyes wavered under the big man's gaze. He said, "I am of King Magnus's folk and you are a Norman. We two can never come together."

The man said almost gently, "My poor lad, what foolishness still rattles round in your silly head! My own great-grandfather came down from Bergen to sell his axe for a holding of land in Normandy; and my grandmother came from Torksey in the old Danelaw. Are you a better Northman than that, boy?"

Runolf looked down at the floor and said, "I had rather go back to my trade as shepherd in the north isles than serve a foreign king."

The big man suddenly rose from his stool and kneeled on the stone floor to blow at the pine logs. He seemed even more like a great bear kneeling than standing. Then he looked up, red-faced and smiling quietly, and said, "We will not talk about serving kings at the moment, since the king we have is not like to receive your oath, or any man's, much longer, being so set in his godless ways. Nay, you shall serve me, and take my hand instead. You shall follow me, Hugh of Avranches, Earl of Chester. Does that suit you?"

He looked at the boy with such a twinkling smile now, that for a moment Runolf saw him not as an enemy, but almost as a close friend, the sort of father he would have loved to have. This thought so muddled his head that he stammered out, "Up in the north we breed good sheep, and brave men. We are not all fools up there, my lord."

The Earl of Chester nodded. He said very seriously, "I am aware of that, Runolf. But shepherding is no calling for such as you. It is something that a farmer sets his children to, when they are not busy in the dairy or at their books."

Runolf said stubbornly, "Well, that may be so, but there is more skill to it than some lordly folk may think."

The Earl of Chester smiled and poked at the fire with the end of his long scabbard. "Aye," he said, as though he were talking to an equal, "women have told me that about cooking eggs before now—but I still think you would do better as a soldier, and in my chosen Company. I may be one of those lordly folk you scorn, but I can still pick a good horse and a good man, when I see one."

Now Runolf's old pride came back again. He sat at the edge of his bed and said, "Would I have a helmet and a mail shirt, like the others, my lord?"

The Earl of Chester slapped his hands together and laughed. "Oh, you Northmen can still drive a hard bargain," he said. "Yes, you shall have these things, in time—all in good time. When you have learned to hold a sword steadily as the horses come at you, and when the beard has properly begun to sprout on your chin."

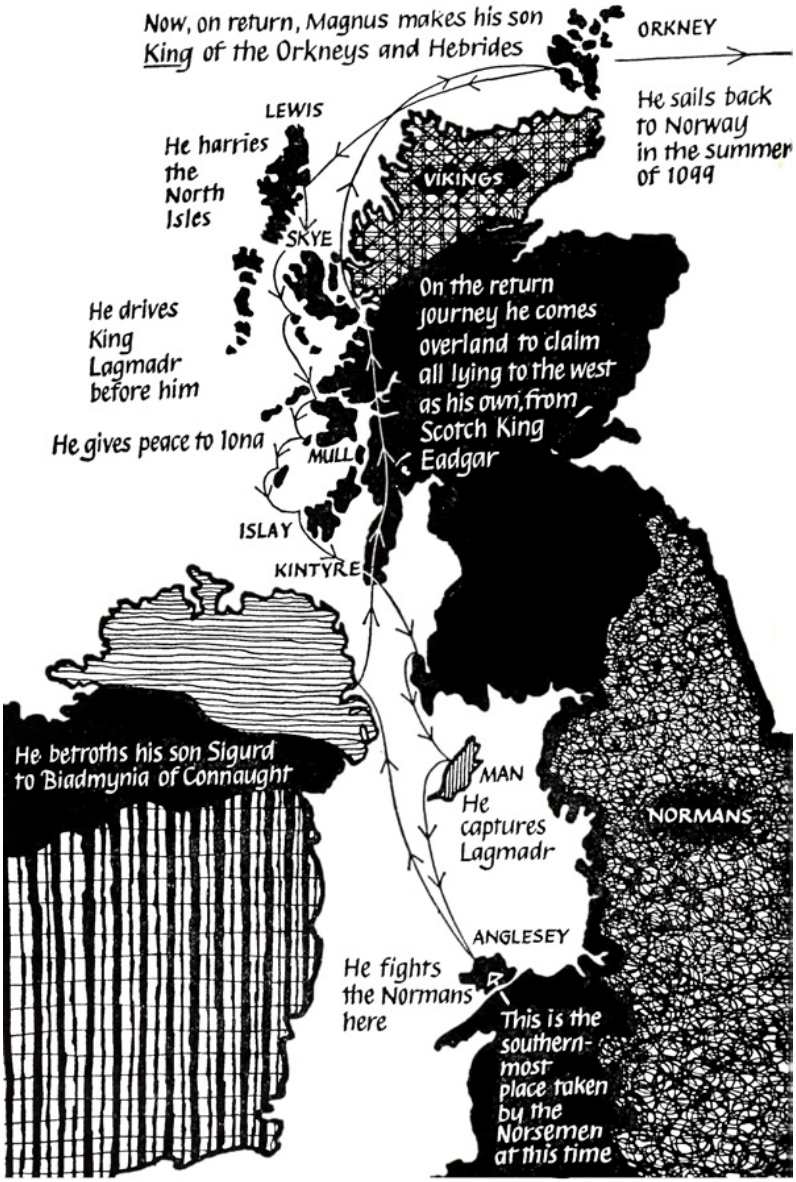
Runolf stood up, sadly now, and said, "That will be a long time."

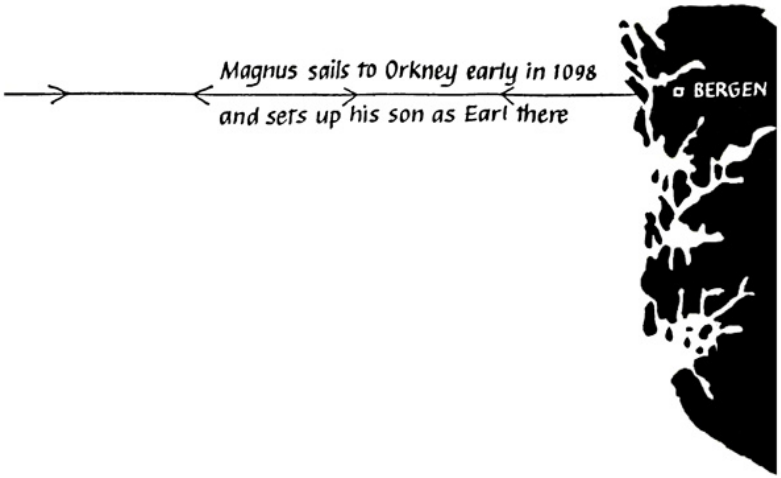
But Earl Hugh put his arm about him to steady his stumbling footsteps and said gently, "Perhaps not so long as you think, lad. Time passes before you know it, these days, with so much changing about us. Now down to the kitchen with you and put something into that empty stomach."

Runolf smiled up at the stern face. "At first I thought you were going to set me to work among the cooks, my lord."

Earl Hugh nodded gravely. "I am," he said, "for then the scullions will knock all the old nonsense out of you. And, besides, it is no bad thing for a soldier to learn how to feed himself and others. So, off with you, and find out how we Normans cook that mutton which you poor fellows still call sheep!"

So the two went down the stone steps together, to where a merry-faced man stirred a good-smelling meat broth in an iron pot, and two girls ran backwards and forwards, singing, with fresh-baked bread for the small garrison above on the wind-swept parapet.


Now, on return, Magnus makes his son King of the Orkneys and Hebrides
ORKNEY
He sails back to Norway in the summer of 1099
LEWIS
He harries the North Isles
VIKINGS
SKYE
He drives King Lagmadr before him
On the return journey he comes overland to claim all lying to the west as his own, from Scotch King Eadgar
He gives peace to Iona
MULL
ISLAY
KINTYRE
He betroths his son Sigurd to Biadmynia of Connaught
MAN
He captures Lagmadr
NORMANS
ANGLESEY
He fights the Normans here
This is the southern-most place taken by the Norsemen at this time


Magnus sails to Orkney early in 1098
and sets up his son as Earl there
BERGEN

# *THE VOYAGE OF KING MAGNUS BAREFOOT*

FOR those who are interested this map shows some of the historical events that were going on at the time of the story. They are not necessary to an understanding of the story, and of course it must be remembered that Runolf would have had little or no idea himself of any of them.

The voyage represents a plain case of a late Viking expedition of aggrandizement—in which King Magnus spends eighteen months acquiring territory and titles on behalf of his young son, Sigurd. In the course of it he terrorizes the independent Orkney Earls, the Hebridean King Lagmadr, the Norman Earls (both named Hugh), conducts a marriage alliance with the Irish King of Connaught, tricks the King of Scotland, makes Sigurd a King—then goes home to Norway.

Henry Treece is extremely popular both in America and in England for his distinguished historical novels of medieval life. He is also the author of several volumes of verse, criticism, and short stories, and he has edited many literary anthologies. He has been a schoolteacher, and during World War II he was an RAF flight lieutenant.

Mr. Treece is married and the father of two children. He and his family live in England, "in a Georgian house with an immense wooded garden—so that I can never find my family when I want them."

THE END

# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Splintered Sword* by Henry Treece]