

# THE INVADERS

HENRY TREECE

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# THE INVADERS

*Three stories by*  
HENRY TREECE

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# THE INVADERS

[Transcriber Note: The Introduction is not included in the ebook due to copyright considerations.]

## *I cannot go hunting tomorrow*

At sunset the young Roman captain galloped his black horse through the stockade, and made towards a cluster of beehive huts near the edge of the wood. He could not have been more than twenty-five, yet he already looked like a veteran. The thick curly black hair was grey over the temples and the dark aquiline face was lined. Although as any citizen knew, the British wars were over, the peace was infinitely harder to bear: and as Caius rode on, it came into his mind to apply to headquarters tomorrow for a transfer to a home-based Legion, even if that meant some loss of rank. While the fighting was on, one forgot the poor food and the shocking living conditions: but now one thought of little else. And there was always the stupid strife between the tribes, or between the secret societies, the Otters or the Wolves, the Bears or the Badgers. These Britons were a strange people, Goidels, Brythons, Belgians, red-haired, brown-haired; smiling at you today and hamstringing your horse as you rode past tomorrow.

Sometimes, as he sat in his tent, thinking before lights out, Caius got very depressed about the whole occupation. The Gauls had been a fairly simple military proposition; in spite of poor old Vercingetorix, who had had an unfair deal anyway. Yes, leave them their bright clothes and their wine, give them the chance to boast and sing once in a while, and for the rest of the time they would shoulder their responsibilities as Romans and come to heel nicely with their rates and taxes. With their exquisite metal-work and their good wine, they were certainly an acquisition to the Empire. But the Britons, they were a difficult lot. They would adopt Roman ways, have baths built, dress in Empire-style garments, talk Latin tolerably well, even make a show of respecting the Roman gods. Then, when everything seemed to be going well, houses would be burnt down, a garrison massacred out at a country station, the toga would be discarded and the tartan put on, and the woad-pot that had been hidden for months would be fetched out, and the tribesmen would forget their Roman names and go back to their unpronounceable gibberish and their meetings in the woods.

Less than a month ago Caius and his Company had surprised a party of fifty or more Brythons, armed and wearing war paint, carrying out a human sacrifice in the forest above Vricon. It was too late to save the victim, who had already been pinned to the ground with a wooden stake, but Caius had

apprehended the officiating Druid. Even so, the final victory was not his: the local Chief had sent up to the garrison Colonel a few days later, to say that the priest was his nephew and was curing him of a very painful affliction of the bladder. And that if he were not released forthwith, he would take the Roman action as a personal affront and ask to be relieved of his citizenship. The result was that Caius had been given the job of escorting the smiling Druid back to his village; and, although he was as always courteously treated by the Chief's household, a certain loss of pride was involved which might make his job as an administrator difficult in the future. It was not an easy life, especially when one got such little support from home. It would do the Senate a world of good to ship them out, every one of them, to do six months' service in Britain. They would understand then why one asked for reinforcements and equipment, and why one couldn't always dispatch revenues by the correct date . . .

At last Caius reined in his horse outside the central hut, the biggest of the group. An otter gnawed at the stout bars of his cage, suspended at the side of the door. This was the house of Gwyndoc, the Otter, chieftain for a radius of thirty miles, citizen of the Roman Empire, and an old friend of Caius. As the Roman approached the door, two shaggy-haired sheepdogs rushed out at him, baring their fangs. Caius was taking no chances; the native dogs were as uncertain as their masters, and one of his own sergeants had had to be invalided home only a few weeks before as the result of trying to stop a fight between two dogs in the village. He smacked his short sword on its brass scabbard loudly and threateningly, and the two dogs withdrew to a safe distance and began to bark at him, sitting between him and the hut door. The otter stopped biting at his bars, and ran round his cage in a paroxysm of terror. Caius felt annoyed at his reception. He had known these dogs since they were puppies and did not expect to be forgotten so soon.

"Ho, Gwyndoc," he called, "are you in? Call these wall-eyed brutes inside, if you please, and let me have a look at you!"

The answer was a sharp high whistle. The dogs stopped barking and immediately turned towards the door, rubbing and jostling each other playfully, as they pushed inside.

Then, bending to pass outside, Gwyndoc appeared: a massive man, whose yellow hair and moustaches hung in the manner of a Gallic chieftain, and whose blue eyes twinkled as they saw the young Roman.

"But, Caius," said the Chief, "how good it is to see you again, my boy. We had news that you were posted over to Mai Dun, to keep an eye on the

rebels there!”

“Hail, Gwyndoc,” said the soldier, giving a military salute. “It’s good to see you too, and I can assure you I’ll never garrison Mai Dun while I have breath in my body to protest!”

“Good for you, lad,” replied the Briton, “but come inside, we shall both catch our deaths of chill standing out here. You must come in and meet my new son. We haven’t thought of a name for him yet, and perhaps you can help us. He’s going to be a real Roman, I guarantee!” He stood back to let his visitor see. At first it was hard to see inside the great wattle hut: then, by the light of the rush-lamps, and the fire in the middle of the floor, Caius made out the rough oaken table, the weapons stacked against the wall, the floor covered with rushes and a profusion of sheepskins. As he strode in, two red-haired slaves shrank into the shadow and whispered to each other, and a tall slim girl, whose long hair was as bright as the gold torque round her throat, rose from a heap of skins to greet him. She was dressed in native cloth cut in the Roman style, her arms glistened with golden rings as she held her baby to her breast.

“Greeting, Ygerne,” said the young Roman, taking her hand. “It is very good to see you once more.”

“Greetings to you, Caius,” replied the girl in her slow Latin. “We have often talked of you, but didn’t expect you so soon.” She smiled at him softly. Then she turned to the whispering slaves and her voice became harsh. “Bring meat for the Lord, dogs! Don’t squat there like heathens making spells.” One of the slaves rose and made his way out. Caius had a curious feeling that the red-headed man put out his tongue at Ygerne as he passed. But he only saw this from the corner of his eye—and in the dim light he couldn’t be sure.

Gwyndoc towered over them. “Take off your belt and things, Caius,” he rumbled, “and make yourself at home. Sit on the skins by the fire and warm that thin Roman blood of yours! And tell me what we shall call our son.”

The young soldier unbuckled his sword-belt and sat by the fire. “Don’t forget you’re a Roman too, Gwyndoc—or should I call you by your Roman name, Gunducius—and so is your son! But let me have a good look at the lad.”

Ygerne came across the room and handed the child to the young soldier.

“By Claudius, but what a man he will be!” he said. “You must send him to Rome later and let us make him into a lawyer or a soldier. He’d have the

pick of our girls with that yellow hair and those big blue eyes of his!"

As he spoke he felt that his tongue had played him false. He had said the wrong thing. These islanders were touchy about going to Rome, not like the Gauls.

Ygerne, with her gentle native manner, relieved the situation. She came forward with a horn of mead. "Drink this, Caius," she said, smiling, "your tongue must be hanging out after your long ride."

Caius handed back the child and drank. One of the slaves picked up a native harp and strummed softly at the other side of the great fire. As he listened, Caius became aware of a face peering round the open door. Gwyndoc rose swiftly, excusing himself, and passed out through the door.

The slave played on quietly, looking at the ground, and then Ygerne began to sing: it was a lovely tune, melancholy and barbaric, but very sweet. Caius listened to the hypnotic rhythms of the sad cadences, and thought of the strange tales he had heard of the far Northern islands, of Ultima Thule, where the seals danced on the shore like princesses in the Northern Lights, and the wild geese carried away the souls of the dead warriors, to the Heaven of Ice . . . The baby was sleeping peacefully now and the song stopped. Ygerne smiled sadly at him. She laid the child down softly on a bed of sheepskins and heather.

"Lug, Tan, come here and guard your master," she called into the shadows. The two sheepdogs bustled out swiftly and lay, nose on great paws, one on either side of the cradle.

"Well, that beats everything!" laughed the Roman. "Only half an hour ago those two were ready to tear my throat out, and now they are lying down like lambs!"

Ygerne smiled. "They were only teasing you," she said. "They hold you as a friend and knew you were coming long before we did. I think you hurt their feelings when you took out your sword to them!"

"Well, one must be careful in Britain," said Caius, smiling. But he saw the smile die on Ygerne's lips, and he knew he had said the wrong thing again. Oh, damn these folk, he thought. Why must they be so sensitive. Why can't they laugh at themselves like soldiers? What they need is enforced residence in a Roman town: they'd have to have a sense of humour then, or they wouldn't get very far.

Gwyndoc broke the silence by entering the hut. He walked to the mead bowl and poured out two horns, for Caius and himself. Then he sat back and

stared into the fire, fingering the knife that hung from his gold-studded girdle. His brow was wrinkled.

“You look worried,” said Caius, “what is it? And tell me, why was your visitor wearing woad? Surely your people have given up that custom. Only savages wear war-paint now.”

Gwyndoc looked at him calmly and the young soldier’s eyes fell away from their blue stare.

“Caius, my boy,” said the Briton, “I am not able to answer your questions now. But I will perhaps another day. I must ask you to excuse me this time. And so that you shan’t be troubled, I’ve arranged for you to eat and sleep tonight in the guest-house at the other side of the village. I have a man outside ready to escort you there when you are ready to go.”

The soldier looked up at the chieftain, his expression changed now to one of determination. He allowed himself to smile. “Friend Gwyndoc,” he said evenly, “this is not like you. I am your guest, almost one of your household. I am godfather to your daughter and I have always come and gone as your friend. You cannot treat me as an unwanted visitor or a child.”

Gwyndoc frowned at the words and seemed about to make a sharp retort. Then he restrained himself and said quietly, “Yes, Caius, you are our friend and our brother. But I am master in my house and chief in my village, and tonight I say you shall not stay here.”

Caius jumped to his feet and began to buckle on his sword-belt.

“Very well, Gwyndoc, and I will say to you that I am a Roman, and I am responsible no less for your safety than for your good behaviour.”

Gwyndoc was already towering over him, his hand on his knife. The two dogs had risen to their feet and were waiting for the first blow to be struck. The child whimpered in his sleep—and Ygerne moved across to it. “Be quiet, you two,” she cried. “You talk like a pair of stupid boys instead of like grown men and soldiers. How do you think the child can sleep with this brawling going on around him?”

Gwyndoc touched the Roman on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, Caius,” he said, “I am a little overwrought.” He sat down again suddenly.

“I’m sorry too, Gwyndoc,” said the young man. “I am perhaps tired. But I must know.”

The Briton spoke once more: “I beg of you, Caius, by all your Gods and mine, do not question me further, but do as I say.” There was something in

the soldier's face that made Ygerne cross the room. She stood behind her husband, with her hand on his shoulder. "You must tell Caius," she said. "He is our friend."

"Be silent, woman," said the Chief. "You are speaking out of your turn. Go back to your child. That is your business." The young girl looked at him, astonished at his sharp tone. Then she turned to the young Roman. "Very well, Caius," she said, "I will tell you since you must know some time."

The Chief flung off the girl's hand and rose to his feet. "That you shall not," he said. "If he must know, he shall know from me and not from the foolish chatter of a meddling girl."

The slaves nudged each other and coughed, and for a moment the young soldier half wished he had not pressed the question.

"You can trust me, Gwyndoc," he said, "but as your military commissioner, I must know. After all, it is I who write the reports on your district for the Senate."

The Briton spat. "Reports! Senate! Nonsense!" he said. "What I have to tell you is of death and blood, not of pen and paper and old women sitting round a council table."

The Roman smiled grimly. "Speak on," he said quietly. Gwyndoc coughed and stared into the flames, then he rose and poured out mead into the horn cups. "I am in trouble," he said. "Bleddyn, one of my Otter men, has spoken of our rituals in another village. It is against the rules to mention such things outside."

The young man smiled. "Very well," he said. "You must report him to your Druids and have him fined. That is a small administrative matter, isn't it?"

Gwyndoc sighed deeply, as though he were called on to explain a simple story to a very backward child. "No, it is not a small matter," he replied gravely and slowly. "It is a matter of death. Bleddyn must be killed as his punishment. If I, his chief, allow him to go on living, I shall be punished myself. The Druids will take my first-born son to be burnt in the wicker-cage. In any case, I shall be fined for avoiding sacrifice by killing him myself. He should go before the court of Druids: but if he does, I shall be accused of negligence in disciplining him and shall lose all next year's crops."

The young Roman smiled grimly. "Always the same thing, month in, month out! So-and-so must be killed, such-and-such must be sacrificed, he

must be blinded, he must be fined . . . Why? Because the Druids say so.”

Gwyndoc leapt to his feet. “You forget yourself, Roman,” he shouted. “You shall not speak lightly of the Druids in this village.” His face suddenly turned crimson with rage.

“I offer them my apologies,” the young man answered quietly. “I am very sorry if I have offended them and their Gods and you. I will get my slave to sacrifice a black cock to them when I get back to camp.”

“Very well, and I will sacrifice three white cocks,” said Gwyndoc, sitting down again. “It may turn out all right then. Though one can never tell; the Gods have long memories.” He poked the embers thoughtfully with a spear-shaft.

There was silence for a few moments. Then Caius spoke again. “Gwyndoc,” he said, “all this is a matter of grave concern to me. For ever in this island there are feuds, divisions, murders and treachery. You are a disunited people, a family warring within itself, and that largely because of the separatist effects of your religious system or your secret societies. Where a family is fighting amongst itself, the thief may slip in unobserved; and that is what will happen to Britain one of these days. The Romans have brought you freedom from the enemy over the Eastern seas, they have given you roads and cities and security against want: and all at little profit to themselves. But one day, all that will end, and Britain must then look to her problems herself. How will she stand with the sea-raiders then, do you think?”

The Chief answered gravely, with a touch of pompousness in his voice, “The British will defend themselves. In the hour of need, they will band together and forget their rivalries. Who knows but that a great leader will rise amongst us and lead us to turn back any invader, even to conquer the world. It might be my very own little son there, sleeping on the sheepskins . . . Yes, even he may one day carry the banner of the red dragon and set our people free.”

Caius smiled quietly at the Briton’s words. “Yes,” he said, “that may be so, but in the meantime you are forced to rely on the thousands of Roman soldiery that the good folk of my country subsidise. We are responsible for your safety: and it is only natural that, in return, we should ask you to follow our law occasionally. And to kill Bleddyn tonight, or any other night, merely because he has opened his mouth, when in drink, and divulged a secret of what is, after all, an illegal society, is against that law. For all the great

friendship I owe you, I, as soldier and lawmaker, cannot be by and allow this deed to be done.”

“How may it be avoided then? What alternative can you offer me?” asked the Briton.

Caius rejoiced at his friend’s change of tone, at his own powers of persuasion. He felt very proud of his Roman citizenship as he spoke: “Gwyndoc, the answer is simple. Bleddyn goes with me tomorrow to Vricon. I will have him absorbed in the army and posted North to the Wall. I have no doubt that he will be willing to change his name and do this as an alternative to the fate which he expects.”

“But the Druids? What shall I tell them? Surely they will find out?” said the Chief.

Caius answered confidently, “How can they find out? Bleddyn will lose his identity, he will cease to exist. So far as the Druids are concerned, he will have disappeared without trace. Even the Druids will understand that they cannot punish a man that does not exist!”

Gwyndoc slapped his thigh and rocked in his stool. And then he laughed. “Caius, my good friend, you have eased my mind. I am an impetuous man, quicker to use the knife than the reason, but you must forgive me that. I shall learn in no time with a friend like you to guide me. Let us drink to our long friendship, to the success of our scheme, and to my son whom you have reprieved. And whatever may be his first name, his British name, his second shall certainly be Caius, and he shall be in your charge when he goes to Rome to study. Ygerne, my wife, you must drink too.”

The sleepy girl got up from her couch beside the child and filled up three horn cups. One of the red-haired slaves flung logs on to the fire so that the flames crackled and leapt towards the roof. The tension of the situation was relaxed and the three friends smiled at each other as they drank.

“Caius,” said the Briton, “we must celebrate your visit. Let us go out tomorrow and hunt the boar in the woods above Lis Pengwern, and I will send a runner on ahead to my friend Gradog, whose land we shall cross on the way, so that he may prepare food and drink for us in the evening. What do you say?”

“Yes, we will do that, Gwyndoc, if it is a fine day. But you will have to lend me suitable clothes. And I shall need a light boar spear: my wrist has hardly healed yet since that affair in Gwent, and I cannot use a heavy weapon.”

The Briton grinned. "You shall have anything you wish, Caius, all except Ygerne—and after another cup of this mead, I have no doubt I shall be giving her to you too!"

Caius seemed embarrassed for a moment, but looking across the hut he saw the girl's mouth twitch pleasantly, and he smiled too. These natives were like children, he thought, obstinate, spiteful, even very dangerous children: but children nevertheless. They laughed, wept, fought and loved, all in the space of five minutes. In battle they were individuals, each fighting bravely and recklessly, often, like their Gallic brothers, tearing off their clothes and rushing naked into the thick of the battle. Like the Armoricans, too, their mead-prompted boast was, "We fear but one thing—that the sky should fall on us! And even if that did happen we would push it back again with our spears!" Yet, despite their courage and their good-tempered boasting, despite their exquisite metal-work and their love of beautifully woven clothes, they were savage children; afraid of the dark, afraid of the moon, of the mistletoe, of the river; and, above all, afraid of the treemen, the Druids. Destroy the power of the Druids, Caius thought, and the country will start to become unified. But until that could be done, the straight Roman roads, the garrisons, the medical services, the improved methods of agriculture, were all the merest shams.

He looked out of the open doorway into the growing dusk and saw the foxgloves and hellebore growing at the wood's edge; he heard the owl call and the badger sniffing among the bracken. The delicate scent of wood smoke from a nearby hut came to his nostrils, and he knew that he would never want to leave this island, even when his military service was finished. If only the interminable vendettas between village and village, tribe and tribe, province and province, could be ended . . .

The young Roman was interrupted in his dreams by a sudden scuffling outside the hut, and then two woad-painted tribesmen entered, dragging a third man. Caius didn't need to be told that their prisoner was Bleddyn; his dark eyes stared in terror out of a shock of black hair, his red tunic was torn from neck to waist, and the leather lacings of his breeches dragged after him as he limped along. He had obviously put up a fight before being taken, for a great gash showed, black in the firelight, from temple to chin, where the axe had bitten in.

His terror on seeing Gwyndoc was pitiful. He flung himself from the hands of his escort to his Chief's feet and babbled incoherently. Caius watched his friend closely: he saw the full lips grow thin and the blue eyes become hard and cruel. He saw the two tribesmen watching like hawks, their

nervous hands twitching on their long swords. For a moment Caius expected Gwyndoc to take the grovelling prisoner by the throat and murder him there, before his own fire and in the presence of his household.

Suddenly the child whimpered in his sleep, and Gwyndoc's face relaxed. He spoke first to Caius. "My friend," he said, "this fool must be washed and clothed decently before I can allow you to take him among your civilised colleagues."

Bleddyn looked up, like a trapped wood creature, amazement in his wild eyes.

"Am I not to die, Lord?" he asked incredulously.

"No, my gap-mouthed barbarian," said Gwyndoc grimly, "unfortunately, you are not. In spite of your criminal stupidity, you are going to be allowed to live. In fact you are going to live much better than you ever have before. You are going to become Bledinius, put on a breastplate and become a Roman soldier, in fact. You are going to forget who you are, what you have done, everything of your past life; and you are going to live with the Romans a long way from here."

Bleddyn began to weep with relief: he knelt and kissed his chieftain's shoes, until Gwyndoc bent and raised him to his feet.

"Have the goodness to act like a Roman, since you are so soon to be one," he said. "Let us celebrate your renaming now."

One of the slaves came forward with horn cups and everyone in the hut stood round the overjoyed Bleddyn.

Gwyndoc raised his horn in toast: "Hail, Bledinius," he said, "and may he be a better Roman than he has been a Briton!"

"Hail," shouted everyone, even Caius.

Then Gwyndoc, in the highest spirits, flung the remainder of his mead over the still shivering prisoner. All except Caius did the same, laughing uproariously.

"That's an improvement on holy water, fool!" laughed Gwyndoc, and Bleddyn, dripping wet and shuddering, joined hysterically in the laughter, flinging the remainder of his drink over his own head.

Caius was amused. This was just like the barbarians, either one extreme or the other, sheer grovelling terror or wild horseplay. Then Gwyndoc became serious again, as he spoke to his guards: "Escort Bledinius to the

guest-house, having the regard to his forthcoming Roman citizenship, and see that he sleeps well.”

The guards looked at each other, and smiled.

Gwyndoc went on, “And tomorrow, while I am at the hunt, see that he is washed and clothed decently, as befits his new status. I shall expect him to be ready to travel to Vricon by sunrise the following day.”

Caius looked at Gwyndoc with a new admiration and his heart warmed to his friend. While there were men like this in power there was still hope for a great and strong Britain.

Bleddyn stood straight, looked his Chief in the eye and gave him the Roman salute. Then he turned smartly and went from the hut, followed by the two guards, walking like a proud man again, in spite of his sopping clothes and the dangling laces.

Caius watched him across the clearing into the dusk, and was about to sit down by the fire again, when his heart thumped in horror. A cloud moved away from the moon, and in the sudden white light, the Roman saw the two guards close in behind their charge, he saw two swords glisten in the dark and heard them fall. Bleddyn half-turned, screaming, as though to run back to the hut, then fell to the ground and lay writhing as the swords struck again and again.

Caius swung round to Gwyndoc and his tongue failed him. The Chieftain was sitting, his chin on his hand, looking at him through half-closed lids and smiling grimly.

Neither man spoke for a time, then at last Gwyndoc said, “Let us go to our beds, Caius. We must be fresh for our ride tomorrow.”

Caius stared at him in horror. Then he forced himself to speak. “No, Gwyndoc. I cannot go hunting tomorrow.”

“But my dear friend,” the Briton began. Caius pushed past him and buckled on his belt. He could not stay an hour longer in this house of treachery and death. Better the long ride back through the hills than a warm couch in this village where men said one thing and did another.

As the young Roman flung his cloak about him and climbed into the saddle, the moon was again obscured and a light rain began to fall.

## *The black longship*

It was in the bad time of the year. The sea howled like a hungry wolf and bit at the tarred sides of the staggering ship. Sleet struck slanting like arrow-hail against the fourteen men who tried to set the dragon prow towards the grey land. Their faces and arms and hands were red raw like new-killed meat. Hardly one of them could have handled axe or sword with such frozen fingers, even if the Hoard of Miklagard lay before them as battle-fee. It was dog's weather for men to be out in, the weather when sheep fell dead of cold in the dales, and war-stallions shuddered in the stalls and forgot their trade.

Steerboard had been carried away off Berwick, sail-pole had snapped in a sideways gust of wind less than an hour later. The black ship wallowed like a harpooned walrus now, flinging the Danes against gunwale or sea-chest, knocking the heart out of them.

There was a bent old man with a stained cloth round his head, holding to the prow and squinting his eyes towards the rocking land. His threadbare brown cloak blew out in rags behind him and the beard down one side of his face was brown with blood. His long sword was wrapped in a calf-skin to keep the salt from its iron. However the sea shook him, he held the bundle tightly to him, like a child that must not be let drown. Once when the wind lulled a while, he half-turned and shouted back, "We have overshot their Holy Island. We shall never get about in this tide now. He does not mean us to go there, Thor."

A squat red-haired man, on his knees with a leather bucket baling by the broken mast-stepping, shouted back, "He does not mean us to go anywhere, Sigvat, except to the sea floor. If I stood on the shore at Aarhus now, with the safe rock under my feet, it would take a sack of gold as big as a cow to fetch me out onto water like this."

The old man, Sigvat, turned from him and said, "If ever I take an Aarhus man aboard again, may Odin hang me on a tree for the crows to pick. I would sooner sail with Franks or Irish priests."

He grumbled for a time, then looked down at his feet where a boy lay wrapped in a canvas awning, his knees drawn up and his face as white as snow. "Hey, Narve," he called, "is the pain better yet, lad?"

The boy's eyes were dark-ringed. His cheeks were sunken and his lips cracked. But he looked up and nodded, trying to smile. Sigvat bent and patted him on the shoulder. "The first time a man goes a-viking, he must look for something to happen. He must make his offering to Thor. Then perhaps the Hammer-man forgets him for a while and lets him voyage half a lifetime before he comes again, asking his dues."

Narve gave a twisted smile and said, "I hope old Redbeard will be content with a cracked rib and an arm that will not do my bidding any longer. If he wants more than that, he had better ask someone else."

Sigvat said, "There was a man I knew from Roeskilde. His name was Aslak Unge, but we always called him Aslak Kettlehead. Without his ears his head was like a cooking-pot. You think you are luckless, boy, but this Aslak could have told you something. Every time out it was the same. I was with him down the big river when the Patzinaks took his ears for stealing their sheep. I was with him up in the White Sea when the Snow Folk had his left hand. After that we would not sail with him again. But at the market in Tunsberg, he was going on a crutch from a little ambush he had run into outside Bruges. And still he wanted to sail. Can you believe there would be such a man?"

The boy closed his eyes and groaned. Sigvat nodded and touched him gently on the shoulder again. "I only wanted to keep your thoughts from your trouble, Narve," he said. "Sleep if you can. We'll be safe in haven before the night comes down."

The red-haired man with the baling-bucket called out, "You do wrong to raise his hopes, old man. The best haven we can hope for is down with the fishes."

Sigvat turned and glowered at the man but said nothing. Then all at once the look-out by the broken steerboard shouted, "Hold fast, hold fast! We are swinging on to shoals!"

His words were carried away by the shrieking wind and few men braced themselves against the shock that came. Oars splintered, or were thrust in-board as though old Redbeard had put his great hand against them. Men fell about the lifting deck like corn-dolls. The one with the baling-bucket saw it all too late and went over the side in a rush of roaring black water, his mouth open but no sound coming from him.

For a time the black-tarred ship ground on its side against the high shoal with a horrible scouring howl; then all at once she righted herself and

danced sidelong into clear water like a skittish colt in a spring meadow among the daisies.

Old Sigvat lay by the gunwale, holding the boy Narve from going into the sea. Then when the roaring had died away Narve said with a wry mouth, "Thank you, foster-father, you can get off me now. To be saved by you is more painful than to drown."

The shipmaster said, "I swore to your father on his death straw that I'd care for you. Have courage, we may still get ashore in time for some yuletide feasting after all."

Then he stood up and counted the men. Two had gone from the black ship in that great lurching. He said to himself, "We are scarcely enough to rob a hen-roost, much less a village, now." But he did not say the words aloud for men to hear.

Instead, he took up his sword-bundle and began to beat time on the battered shields that hung along the rail:

*"In-out, the whales spout;  
In-out, the gulls shout;  
In-out, the shields ring;  
In-out, soon it's Spring.  
In-out, when Spring comes,  
In-out, we sound the horns,  
In-out, when horns roar,  
In-out, we're off once more!"*

The weary men pulled to the chant, and those whose oars had broken off helped by calling out with the old man. Then suddenly the sleet cleared and they saw the shore only a hundred paces off, with brown-grey cliffs beyond it, and the water running into a narrow creek half covered by alder and hawthorn.

It was not the easiest task they had ever had, but luck was with them and they came into haven. The worst thing that happened at that landfall was when an oarsman from Orkney, called Kari, stood up too soon in the ship and got his shirt ripped off his back by an overhanging thorn bush. He left some of his hide on that bush too, but he laughed with all the others, thinking it a small price to pay for a safe landing in such weather.

While there was still some light, the Danes chopped rushes and bracken, and made a canopy over their ship so that no one looking down into the

creek would see that they lay there. Sigvat said, "We are all shivering equally—except for Kari who has no shirt at all—so we cannot complain. But if we make a fire to warm ourselves the crafty folk here will shoot us full of arrows, and that would be a bad bargain after all our sufferings."

Two men went up the creek when the night came. The others huddled together in the ship and shared each other's warmth. Little enough that was. But before dawn the two men came back with a calf slung over an ash pole. They dragged it aboard and skinned it. It was not the best meat they had eaten, being unfired, but it was better than facing another day with an empty stomach.

Narve passed a bad night in the cold ship. His arm and his side filled his thoughts; and even when he fell into a shallow sleep it was full of dark dreams. He kept seeing the little church east of Eadwinesburh that they had tried to sack four nights before. On the altar stood two candlesticks of bright silver, and Narve had just put his sword under his left arm to reach out for them, when the red curtains at the end of the little church swept open and men came rushing at him. It was their leader who kept coming into Narve's dreams. He was the biggest man Narve had ever seen, and his black beard stretched right up to his eyelids. He wore an iron shirt and a great iron helmet on his head. His axe was so heavy that it needed two hands to swing it. The sound it made in the still air was terrible. Narve forgot the candlesticks and tried to get his sword from under his arm, but by that time the big man was almost on top of him. He felt a great shock along his arm and down his side. He heard his sword clatter on to the floor of the church. Then the next he knew was old Sigvat standing astride him and flailing with his own sword and shouting out words that Narve had never heard before. Then all the Danes were clustering round and the big man and his henchmen had gone. The Danes took the candlesticks, but did not keep them long. They went overboard into the sea the first night out from shore, when the storm rose, so that was a bad bargain, too. And left bad dreams behind it.

Sigvat put pieces of the calf-meat into Narve's mouth and told him to chew them well. It was hard to get them down, but he felt better when he had eaten something.

Now the storm had died away and though small flakes of snow began to eddy in the air, the sun came out for a while and half of the men cut themselves staffs of holly and ash and, wrapping their cloaks about them so that they looked like wandering men and not rovers, went inland to see what they could find.

They came back before nightfall and said that there was a village beside a river not much more than three miles away; but there was no church, and no horses in the fields to ride on. Sigvat heard this news, then said, "At this time I should not weep if I never saw another church or a horse, my friends. What is more important is simply to stay alive, and that we shall not do unless we can lay hands on good bread and cooked meat, and perhaps a keg or two of ale. I have more fancy for a goat's-milk cheese just now than I would have for a king's golden crown."

The men said that the village they had found looked prosperous enough, with smoke coming out of the chimney-holes and sheep grazing on the fells above the thatched houses.

Sigvat said, "My mind is made up. Ten of us will go there and fetch what we can get. Narve and one other will stay behind to guard the ship."

But when Narve heard this he began to shout so much that Sigvat gave in and said, "On your own head be it, you witless fellow. I promised your father that I would never refuse you a place in the warband. But I have the feeling now that Thor is laughing at me."

Then he made Narve stand up and hold on to the gunwales with his right hand, while two of the Danes wrapped the fresh hide of the calf round his left arm and side, binding it to his body with thongs. He could only move stiffly now, but some of the pain went and he felt better than he had done for days.

It was no easy journey, up along the creek, with the rocks high on either side, shutting out what light there was, and the snow now hissing down the gully into their faces, and the wet pebbles sliding beneath their feet. A rower called Gorm rested against a boulder and said, "You all know me. I have been roving since I was little taller than a longsword, and my father and his father before that. So no one would call me a coward. But this night I have a strange feeling that we are not doing the wisest thing we have ever done. We should go back to the ship."

Sigvat turned to him and said, "Where is this feeling, Gorm? Is it in your arms or your legs?"

Gorm tapped his forehead with numb fingers. "It is here, shipmaster," he said.

Sigvat went a pace nearer him and started to draw the sword out of the hide wrapping. "We can soon cure that, my friend," he said.

Then Gorm got up from the boulder and shrugged his shoulders. He said, "You are the master, Sigvat. But I call on all my mates to bear witness that I spoke a warning." Then he went on up the creek. The others followed him, strung out and silent now.

When they reached a place on the moorland where the stream came out of the snow-covered ground from between two flat rocks, Gorm stopped again and pointed. A black-faced ram was kneeling at the stream as though trying to drink. On his back sat three black crows, watching the Danes with glistening eyes but making no effort to flap away in fear.

Gorm said, "If you need more warning than that, Sigvat, then who is there to give it?"

Sigvat said, "I see only a dead beast and three birds whose wits have been frozen in their heads."

He went towards them, swinging his wrapped sword; but they did not move away. Then even Sigvat stopped and came back to the men. To Gorm he said, "You read the signs amiss, friend. Those birds are kinsmen to Odin's own ravens. It is clear to me now that we shall have good pickings in the village."

Then the men began to laugh at Gorm and tell him he would have done better to stay at his wash-tub in Hedeby with all the other old women.

They stopped once more before they went into the village. Sitting in a small hollow sheltered by gorse, Sigvat said to them, "No one saw us come into haven, so we shall not be expected. Besides, on such a night as this, all the men of this steading will have their minds set on keeping warm. They will be bent over the fire, too cold to draw a bow or hold an axe. So we shall have no need to rush screaming into this place. The snow will muffle our footsteps. We can walk quietly among them and they will not know we have been there until we have gone again."

A young rover called Onund who claimed kinship with the Ynglings and had one eye brown and the other blue, said gently, "Shipmaster, there is one thing I always like to ask: if the children come at us with sticks and stones, are we to . . ."

Sigvat smiled at him starkly and said, "Tonight I have the wish to be merciful, Onund. Allow them to strike at you three times before you do. Now, before we move again, does any other man feel that a question should be asked?"

Gorm spoke and said, "The women, may they also strike thrice, Sigvat?"

The old man shook his head and held up two fingers. "One blow less for them," he said. "But if they are young and pretty, try to put the flat of the blade to them so as not to rob them of a husband later. Let them live to pass on the word that we Danes are a kindly folk."

He got to his feet, groaning with aches and pains that the damp ground had brought on. Then he thought again and said, "But if the dogs come at us, that is another thing. I have lost too many good warmen from cattle-dogs. See to it."

As they came out of the hollow, the wind rushed to meet them, bearing on it such great flakes of bitter snow that for a while they could hardly see at all. Then Narve pointed with his right hand and said, "It lies over there, the village. I saw a torch flare up and then go out."

Sigvat nodded and slapped him on his sound shoulder. "You will make a master-raider yet, lad," he said. "I can see you being the best barn-burner to come out of the Skaw, once we get this night over. Aye, we shall light a few fires, you and me, before we've done, lad."

They walked like ghosts all smothered in white, with their breath whipped out behind them like smoke. Their feet made no sound. And when they sighted the huddled steading, with all the houses set round an open space, Sigvat signed to half of them to take the left path and half the right, so as to make a ring round the place and come in from all sides. They had done it so often before that no words were needed. Now each man had drawn his sword, or unslung his axe, and each walked with a quicker, livelier step, as though they went forward to a gay dance.

Suddenly Narve forgot his pains and his stiffness and felt quite warm. A pulse began to thump in his head, like a little drum, and he wanted to sing something but he didn't know what. He thought that when this raid was over he would get Sigvat to teach him the right song for such a trade. Sigvat knew a hundred songs, for rowing, fishing, wood-chopping, man-chopping, and even grave digging. There must be a good one for village-raiding, one that would make men's hair stand up when they heard it.

Then they were among the first of the huts, with the thatch brushing their shoulders. Narve glanced in through a window-hole as he passed and saw three old women kneeling by a small fire with their eyes closed and their hands together. An icy shiver passed down his neck and back, because these old ones were dressed in black and seemed much like the crows on the ram's back, except that their eyes were shut.

Sigvat was just in front of him and turned with his finger to his lips. Then he pointed to a tall barn-like house that stood above all others at the far side of the open space. It was black against the white snow, but its great doors were wide open and the amber light of torches shone brightly from every window-hole. Sigvat whispered, "That is our place. Their headman's house. The pickings will be there."

He began to run across the snow and the others followed him. They went silently like wolves, hardly breaking the white surface of the ground. In twenty paces all the Danes had reached that high-gabled house and were inside, with swords and axes ready.

Then they halted in wonder, for though torches burned along the walls and a fire glowed in the middle of the floor, the place was empty. Sigvat called out, "Back into the darkness. I do not like the smell of this place. Turn and run back."

But before the Danes could move they saw that a woman now stood in the wide doorway and behind her a throng of old men and women, all dressed in dark clothes and carrying no weapons.

The woman wore a brooch of dull gold set with a red garnet at her throat, but her robes were ragged at the hem and her feet were bare even on that bitter night. Her russet coloured hair hung down uncombed over her shoulders, and her face was pale and lined.

Sigvat gazed at her bewildered. She looked back at him without fear, her hands hanging by her sides. He said suddenly, "You should be afraid of us. Where is your gold-hoard? Where is your food-hoard? Where are your men-folk?"

The woman said in a Danish they could all understand, "Why should we be afraid of you? You are not wolves, you are only men. We have seen men before. We knew that you were coming, for we have had whirlwinds. We have seen great sheets of light rushing through the air. Fiery dragons have flown over our village. These signs could only mean one thing. So why should we be afraid of you? In this place there is a great famine. Each day it kills our old folk and our children. Are you more to be feared than God's famine? Are your swords more deadly than hunger?"

Now Gorm stepped forward and said roughly, "We have met you Christfolk before. You cannot trick us with your warlock words. Where is your food-hoard, woman? Where are your fighting men?"

The woman laughed now, a thin laugh that had no joy in it. "Our food-hoard lasted three days when this winter weather came," she said. "As for our men, they have gone scouring the land just as you are doing, to look for what they can find. They have taken their swords and axes, like you, and like you they will turn back empty-handed, no doubt."

Onund came forward then and said, "In my hand I have a little dagger called Whitetooth. Once he belonged to Odin and came out of the mouth of Fenrir Wolf. He has nipped many folk in his day and could nip you too. Then you would wish you had remembered where the food is hidden, woman."

The woman sighed and shrugged her thin shoulders. She said patiently, "When you get home again, ask your father to thrash some sense into you, boy. And also ask him to take your little knife away from you until you are man enough to use it properly."

Onund began to twitch, and flecks of foam came into the corners of his mouth. He shouted out, "I am of Yngling blood. My folk have been kings in their time."

The woman smiled again and said, "So much the worse for your people, to have such fools for kings."

Now Onund could stand it no longer. He leapt forward and shouted, "I'll show you what kings they were, woman. And I'll have that gold brooch first of all."

The woman stood quite still as he tore the brooch from her robe. He stood there then, the gold in his hand, his face working in fury. "And I'll have that hair you are so proud of," he yelled, grasping at it and slashing with his knife.

The woman stared at the long russet hair that had fallen at her feet. Then she said softly, "That will not fill your belly, Yngling. That will not drive away the hunger pangs." Then all at once Gorm swung sideways and struck Onund beside the jawbone with the pommel of his sword, knocking the youth sprawling on to the floor.

Sigvat looked at him calmly and said, "Why did you do that? Onund has sailed with you on five raids."

Gorm looked away and said humbly, "My sister has hair like that, master. I do not like to see men putting the knife to hair like that. Something told me to do it."

Sigvat said, "Then let me tell you to give the woman back her brooch. I would not want to hear it said on Sealand that out of this raid we brought back one small ornament from a woman's throat."

Onund was sitting up and shaking his head now. He did not know what had happened to him and handed back the brooch without a word. Gorm stepped forth and pinned it once more on the torn black cloth. The woman gazed at him all the time without speaking.

Then Sigvat said, "This is a strange raiding, with no gain to be got and no men to put the sword to. It would ill become us to kill these harmless folk and have the story of such a raid following us over the sea like a bad smell. We will go back to the ship and forage lower down the coast, if Thor will give us a wind to help us along."

The Danes stood round him, silent, their weapons by their sides now, all the heart gone out of them. Gorm said in shame, "I felt that this would not turn out well, master. But, you must believe me, I did not put a spell on this raid. I wished for good pickings as much as any man."

Sigvat was wrapping up his sword again. He said in a dull voice, "Who are we to say whether a thing will turn out well or ill? All lies in the hand of Redbeard. He holds our lives in his hand, not you, old Gorm. Come, let us wrap our cloaks about us again and go."

Now the woman stood aside, and the old folk in the doorway made room for the Danes to walk out of the empty barn. But just then Narve gave a low cry, then wheeled about and fell to the floor. His sword clattered as far as the hearth fire, then stopped against a stone.

Sigvat said, "His wound is worse than I thought. He has stood up to it well, coming over the moors in such trolls' weather. He should have stayed in the ship and waited for us."

But now the woman was kneeling over the boy. She held out her hand towards Onund and said, "Here, kingling, lend me that knife of yours and I will put it to a good use for the first time in its life."

Onund handed over the dagger without speaking and she cut away the thongs and the damp calf-skin that bound the boy's arm to his side. Then, with gentle fingers, she slit open his woollen shirt and looked down at him. And after a while she looked up at Sigvat and said, "You, the master of these men and you let this lad come on such a godless raid with his bones broken! You bawl in your feast-halls of what great heroes you are, yet you drag a poor lad over the moors on a night like this when he should be in bed and

cared for. Danes, oh Danes! How can men respect you when you do not respect God's handiwork yourselves? What sort of men are you, when you take children to their deaths?"

Sigvat stood over her, his scarred face stark, his jaws moving in silent anger. He said at last, "I could take your head off as you kneel, and with one knock, woman. I could put the torch to your whole village and leave your men nothing to come back to."

The woman stood up suddenly and brushed him aside. "You could do anything, man," she said, "except that which is of use. Look at you, an old man, and with no other thought in your sheep's head but to cut heads off and burn villages. Is that a man's trade, heathen? Is that what men are on the earth for, do you think? And, tell me, after all this head-chopping and burning, what have you gained in your life to leave to your children when death grips you? Tell me, before these witnesses, what have you gained from the life that God gave you? Come on, man, speak up, do not stand mumbling there like an old ram."

Sigvat swept his eyes over the Danes. They were looking down at their feet. He knew that he could not boast in front of them, because they all knew him too well for that. He said as calmly as he could, "I have a ship and a sword, woman. Is that not enough to leave to a son?"

Then he remembered that he had no son of his own, only Narve his foster-son who now lay on the ground with his mouth wide open and his eyes black with pain.

The woman saw what was in his mind and said, more gently now, "Ships go down into the sea and swords fall to rust, Dane. They are nothing when all comes to all. But one's children are everything. This boy is everything to you, for he is all you have. When death takes you this boy will remember you, so you will live on in a way. That will be your Valhalla, heathen."

Sigvat turned away and leaned by the wall, under a torch. It was in his mind to snatch the torch down and put fire to the barn with all in it. Yet it was also in his mind to go on his knees before this woman and to ask her what he should do with his life.

Then the words he was seeking came into his mouth and he spoke them. "Woman," he said, with as much manhood as would come off his tired tongue, "few have dared to speak to me as you have done. You are lucky to be standing there still, with the head on your shoulders. Yes, you are lucky."

The woman said softly, "You talk like an old fool, man. My name is Aasa and I am as good a Dane as you are. Sea-rovers brought me here when I was a child, and sea-rovers left me here. If that is lucky, then I am lucky. Now get out of my way while I look after this boy. He will not last the night out unless someone takes pity on him."

Sigvat helped her to lift Narve on to a heap of hay. He watched her for a time cutting away his clothes and then bathing his body with water that the villagers had brought in a pannikin. She touched his hurt body gently, and then tore strips from her own robe to make bandages for Narve.

Once she looked up at Sigvat and said, "We have herbs that will help to heal these wounds. I shall make poultices for him and with God's help he will have a life to live again. But he must not be moved now, or he will have no life."

Sigvat said grimly, "I shall come back for him. You hear that, don't you, Dane-woman? And when I come back I may take you too. You are too good a woman to stay here."

Aasa nodded and said, "I hear you. It is like the wind blowing under the door. What you say you will do, and what you will do, may be two different things."

Sigvat said then, "In my pouch I have two silver rings. I will leave them with you to pay for the boy's nursing, then I shall owe you nothing."

Aasa pushed his hand away and said, "If you have two silver rings, then they are ill-gotten and I do not wish to carry the burden of their guilt. Give them back to where you got them from."

Sigvat rose and said, "You are a hard-hearted woman, Aasa. There is small tenderness in you, I am afraid. I shall keep my rings for someone who is gentler than you are. And I shall think twice about taking you back to your folk when I come again. So be warned."

The woman looked up from her work and said, "And you be warned, too, old man. If you do not get back to the creek soon the snow will keep you here for ever. Be advised for once in your sheep-headed life and go while you still have time to go in. I will not wish you a lucky voyage because your end will come when it will come, and no words of mine can change what God has in store for you."

The Danes made their way from the barn. At the broad doorway Sigvat turned and said most gently now, "This Whitechrist of yours, I do not think he has much say when it comes to sea-faring, being a land-man himself, but

if you have a minute or two to spare after you have seen to the boy, I should not hold it against you if you were to speak a word on our behalf, woman. I have always followed the thought that a man should not neglect the gods of whatever place he may find himself in. A man never knows when he might need help, however poor that help might be.”

Aasa waved him away with a strange smile. She said, “I think you are too old in wickedness, Dane. You carry too many blood-burdens on your shoulders for such as me to be of much help. But I will try, if you will only rid this place of your raiders now and get about your business.”

Sigvat let himself smile, then he had to hurry to catch up with the rovers as they pushed on through the heavy snow towards the wild sea.

He thought that when the year turned and the snow went away he would come back again. When the green shoots came out of the ground and the buds burst on the apple trees. When the lambs were jumping in the fields. That would be the proper time. Narve would be quite healed by then and ready to come a-viking when the horn howled under his window. He thought also that he would pick Aasa up and put her over his shoulder and take her back to Hedeby, whether she liked it or not. And there he would build a fine wooden house for her, and even let her have a little altar with a candlestick on it, in some secret part of the house. And he would talk good Danish sense to her and persuade her to marry him and be a good wife to him. He began to picture what it would be like, with Aasa in the kitchen, wearing her gold brooch, and skelping the cooks round, and laying places at the board for the feasting. She looked the sort of woman who could run a house properly. He could not think of any woman in Hedeby who seemed more homely and yet more brave and comely. She was a sea-rover’s wife, if ever he had set eyes on one.

He was thinking all this when he almost fell over the dead ram at the head of the creek. He heard the black crows flapping away into the thick snowfall, but could not see them.

Then Onund cried out, “Look, there is a glow down there by the sea.”

Gorm came out of the swirling snow and shouted in his ear, “By Odin, there is a glow, and a man does not need two guesses to say what that glow is. Their men have put fire to the longship while we were up there in the barn talking to that woman. We should go back and chop her.”

Sigvat answered, “Nay, lad, nay! That woman is a true Dane, and I shall have her for my wife come the spring.” Then Gorm fell against him, coughing and plucking at his chest where a thick arrow-shaft stood out.

They both went down into the snow. Then Onund fell beside them, trying to reach for his back, his dagger, Whitetooth, now forgotten for what had happened to him.

Now the air was heavy with a whirring sound that snowflakes could not make, however driven by the wind.

It was long enough before old Sigvat could fetch his mind back from the house he meant to build for Aasa at Hedeby, and then it was too late.

He was furious, at the last, to see the man who stood over him with the axe in his hand. It was the one with the iron helmet, and the black beard that reached up to his eyelids. The one who had stopped Narve from getting those fine silver candlesticks.

## *The man on the hill*

All night long the man had lain on the hill. His face was pressed hard against the edge of a sharp rock, because other men lay upon him; but he felt no pain. A small spring of water washed gurgling over his legs, but this was of no account to him.

It was a cold October night, and nearby a wolf was snuffling and sometimes giving a short howl as the moon rode out from behind the dark, wind-driven clouds. When the wolf had gone, wild dogs came sniffing and scratching here and there, half-starved, and no longer afraid of such men as they saw.

Just before dawn, the first curlews rose from the dry sedges in the valley below and began to swing into the blustery air, crying out in their sad and timeless voices, as though they were the last creatures left to mourn the end of the world.

This was the first sound the man had heard for hours, and he stirred and tried to move. Although his face was stiff with cold, the sweat ran down it from the effort. Dimly, he knew that his arms and legs would not obey him, and that a great weight lay over him. In a hoarse whisper, he said to the ground near his mouth, "I am coming, Harold. My axe is here. Have no fear, lord, I shall be ready for the next charge."

Then all thought left him, and he lay on in the morning chill for another hour.

Two ragged men came, crouching so as not to be seen, and began to strip off the rusting mail shirts and leather coats of those still ones on the hill. They had a small hand-cart with them, piled with shields and swords and helmets. They even had torn linen shirts and tattered cloaks, for nothing was too poor for their collection. In their cart a broken-shafted axe that had once been swung by a fierce housecarle rested side by side with a ragged strip of leather, ripped from a Norman saddle. A use could be found for everything, they thought; nothing should be wasted.

"Hurry, Gyrrh!" said one of them, a man with a stubbly red beard. "The foreign swine are waking and lighting their fires in the valley. If they find us stripping the bodies, they will come up and put a lance into us."

The other man, who wore a patch over his right eye, nodded, grumbling, and said, “They want everything for themselves, these Normans. They never think that we honest English peasants have to live, too.”

They strained for a while, rolling bodies this way and that, dragging roughly at what they wanted. Then the bearded man said, “Hey! Is this the king, Gyrth? It looks like him; but I can’t tell, with all this over his face.”

The other man stared down, then snorted and laughed bitterly. “Nay, lad,” he said, “this one has had an arrow in his head. King Harold always wore that big helmet of his, with the Wessex dragon on its crest. Besides, look at the mess he’s in! Horses must have run up and down over him, and his mail shirt is slashed to ribbons . . . Why, no dealer would pay threepence for this gear. Take my word, it’s not Harold Godwinson.”

When they came to the man who lay beneath them all, Gyrth said, “Ah! But here’s one that will keep us in bread and meat and ale for a year! Look at his sword-belt, it’s stitched with silver! And, see, he wears a neck-ring set with garnets! To it, my friend! Get out the knife!”

The other paused and said, “Do you ever feel ashamed, Gyrth, to strip dead warriors like this after a battle?”

Gyrth gave a short grim laugh and answered, “Mate, if I let feelings like that trouble me, my family would starve. Nay, lad, a man’s first thought is for his kinsfolk. Come on, now, we shall have our work cut out to get this one’s armour off. There’s a nasty hole at the belly, and another over the shoulder, but nothing that a good smith can’t repair. Just a few iron links welded in, here and there, and this hauberk will be as good as new. Aye, it’s a fine shirt, this. The man who wears it must have been somebody; before the Normans got to him, that is!”

He began to laugh again and did not stop till his companion called out, “It’s too late, Gyrth! There’s a horseman coming up the hill with his sword out. He’ll see us. Come away!”

Gyrth said lazily, “You’ll never make a good body-picker, Edwin. You’re too nervous. Why, I’ve known the time when I’ve lain down *amongst them*, till the guard had passed! These guards don’t look too close, you know. Some of them don’t like to see what their swords and lances have done, it seems to me.”

But the other man would not be silenced. “If you won’t come, I shall leave you,” he said. “Throw the carle on to the cart, and let’s be off down the far side of the hill. The rocks will hide us.”

So, muttering and cursing, Gyrth took the man's legs, and together they bundled him in among the tattered cloth and the rusting mail shirts.

It was a rough journey down the hill, and the man came to, when a spear-point that lay among the rubbish pricked him in the neck. He said, "Are we going home, Harold? Is the battle over, then?"

The men pushing the cart heard this and laughed. Gyrth said, "I thought he was finished! It shows how hard these housecarles are. It's the training they have. They never give in, whatever wounds they carry. This one thinks King Harold won the day, poor fool."

Edwin said, "They never know when they're beaten, men like this. But he won't see the day out, poor fellow."

Gyrth spat and said, "That's his affair, not ours, friend. If these great ones go fighting, that's their affair. Our job is to put food in our children's mouths, and this is the easiest way I know. It's better than chopping wood, or digging in the fields. Look, there's a clump of alders down there, by the ditch. We can leave him there, when we've got the clothes off him. No one will see us at it. Then we can go home in time to break our fast, and none the wiser."

So they pushed the rude cart on, almost at the run now, and were behind the alders before the sun broke through the dawn clouds.

It was almost midday before the autumn sun was strong enough to bring any warmth back to the man in the ditch. And with the warmth came the pain. His body and shoulder hurt so much now that his own groans brought him back to consciousness.

Biting his lip till blood ran down into his yellow beard, he looked about him dimly and bewildered. His sword-arm wouldn't obey him, but with the other one he reached out and felt the sides of the ditch. Then he knew that he was not on the stark hill any longer, and he tried to rise and find out what had happened. But the great pain in his ribs flung him back again into the mud, and he lay there, quiet and puzzled, for a long time, until a sheep came to the edge of the ditch and gazed down on him with sad, amber eyes. The man rolled over, thinking that someone had come to help him. His movement startled the sheep, which gave a mournful bleat, then trotted away, its heavy grey fleece bobbing up and down on its sides.

And suddenly the man knew that he was alone, and badly hurt. Cautiously he felt with his left hand for his sword and his mail shirt—but he

found that he was wearing only his coarse linen tunic and his woollen stockings. Even the shoes had gone from his feet.

Now he knew. He had been a housecarle for too long not to know what happened after battles, to those who fell helplessly to the ground. He had seen the body-pickers at their gruesome work, and had often beaten them away with the flat of his sword.

Suddenly, he began to weep. "Harold, my king," he cried, "why did you leave me? I have never left you, in all our years together, either in the Welsh hills, or up along the rivers of the north."

This fit of weeping wore him out, and it was twilight before he saw things clearly again. The mud under his back was very cold now, and his whole body was shaking like an aspen tree in a spring gale. He screwed painfully round and began the hard work of crawling from the ditch.

Many times he fell, and each time the pain was so bad that he had to lie for a long while to get his courage back. By now, he had dared look at his wounds. As a soldier, he had seen the sort of hurt that men got in battle, many times, and he did not need to be told that his right arm was broken just above the elbow. As for the ache in his chest, he thought: "I remember that now. It was the knight on the black horse. He swept my axe from my hand, then rode over me. My ribs are cracked. That's what it is, my ribs are cracked."

He felt carefully about the rest of his body with his left hand. There was no further pain, except from his jaw. He rolled his dry tongue round his mouth and found that teeth were missing from one side. He remembered the blow with the butt-end of the lance which had first felled him, and knew where his teeth had gone. He smiled grimly then, recalling how proud he had been once of those white teeth.

To himself he said slowly, "Well, I am not blind, and that is something to be thankful for."

He had hardly finished this muttering when he heard slow footsteps coming towards him. At first, he thought of shouting for help; then, in the first glint of moonlight, he saw that the man who was coming along the top of the ditch wore a helmet and carried a long kite-shaped shield. The housecarle drew in his breath to stop his teeth from chattering, and rolled as far as he could among the reeds that grew in the mud.

He was only just in time. A long-pointed lance passed beside his head, digging deeply into the earth. Then it prodded again and again, the whole

length of his body, but always missing him by an inch or so. The Norman was searching for any survivors from the battle, probing the reeds and the gorse bushes for any poor wretch who sheltered there.

At last he strolled on, whistling and pushing down his lance, as though to beat time to the tune.

The man in the ditch waited until he could no longer hear those shuffling feet or that whistling. Then he said to himself, "I am an axeman, a King's Carle, not a ditch-otter. I am Bersi Thordson, whose grandfather sailed as far as Miklagard and sat beside the Emperor there. In my mother's family, there have been three berserks. If they saw me now, they would laugh at me, lying in the mud because of a scratch or two!"

In a little while he mused, "My uncle Olaf killed a bear with his hands. My second cousin Einar was King of Orkney before he was fourteen. And I am content to lie in a ditch and weep like a girl who has torn her new dress. Up, up, Bersi Thordson! Let us have no more weeping! On your feet, man, and let us be away from this stinking mud."

Still, try as he might, he could not stand, because of the pain in his body. But once he had scrabbled his way from the ditch, it was not such hard going, over the ploughed fields, and down across the grazing meadows.

He had to stop and rest many times, and often cows or sheep came to look at him as he sprawled, groaning in the moonlight. But when the second dawn came up, he saw a little thatched house with a stockade round it, and some long byres and pens. Smoke was rising, light blue in the grey air, from a chimney-hole in the roof of the house.

Bersi Thordson was so glad that he lay against a hawthorn tree and was almost sick with joy.

Then a rough-haired black and white dog came scampering out from the stockade, barking and sniffing. Bersi took up a pebble and flung it at the dog. It turned tail and ran back to the farm, whimpering. Painfully, Bersi laughed and said, "A fine watch-dog, that! If he lets a scarecrow like me frighten him away, he isn't worth the bones he eats!"

But his pain came on him again, and that stopped his laughing. He even began to feel sorry for the dog then.

After a time his strength came back, and suddenly he was very hungry. Before, his wounds had made him forget food and drink. Now he was ravenous and remembered that it was two days since he had eaten. He remembered sitting beside Leofwine Godwinson, under the dragon-banner

of Wessex, and breaking white bread with him. There was also a wine-skin that Leofwine had passed round for all the chief carles to wet their lips from, before the Normans began their first charge up the hill.

It was good red wine, strong and rough on the throat, the sort of wine for a warrior.

Bersi hoisted himself up and licked his dry lips. He told himself that there would be no wine at the farmhouse, but there might be some October ale. Perhaps there might be a chicken-leg and some bread—even if it was black bread, peasant's bread.

He sat upright and prepared to crawl the fifty paces from the hawthorn bush to the stockade, clenching his jaws so as not to cry out.

But just as he began to move, a burst of harsh laughter came from the farmyard, and three horsemen clattered through the wooden gate, heavy sacks across their saddles, and their helmets slung from their bridles, as though they were not expecting to fight anyone now.

Bersi Thordson sat still and stared at them. His whole body was trembling and he felt sick to see their lances and long swords. Each of the men wore his hair shaven close, as high as the ears, leaving only a ring of stubble at the crown of the head, to prevent the helmet from chafing.

Bersi knew only too well that these horsemen were Normans. Only Normans wore their hair in such a manner, as though they were monks.

He swallowed hard and waited, his mouth now as dry as a crust of baked bread. One of the horsemen suddenly saw him and reined in his horse.

"Look, brothers," he said, pointing, "there is a lazy Saxon serf, sitting under a bush in the sunshine, while we work our fingers to the bone foraging for a few sacks of corn!"

They sat quite still and stared at Bersi Thordson, who was now shuddering with helpless rage.

Then one of the Normans called out roughly, "Come here, fellow. Let us look at you. We need a groom to tend to our horses. Come on, don't be afraid, we shan't hurt you if you step briskly."

Bersi looked from one to another, wondering what would happen to him. He could not stand up; he could not even crawl away from them. They would trot their horses over to him before he could move five yards, and the three of them carried those terrible, long-headed lances.

All at once, as the horsemen gazed at him, Bersi began to laugh. It struck him that life was so mad, so stupid, that all a man *could* do was to laugh.

One of the Normans, a thin man with a darkly-bearded chin, shouted out, "Come on, you fool, and stop this laughing. Do you want me to bring the whip to you?"

Bersi lay down now and laughed more than ever. There was nothing he could do to help himself, so he closed his eyes and tried to think of the days when he was a young carle, practising quarter-staff with other well-born youths who wished to serve Harold Godwinson. They were good days, in spite of the hard blows they gave one another. There was always food and drink, except on fast days, and a warm bed to lie in.

Then Bersi heard the horses' hooves again, and wondered if they would all come at him at once. But, no, they were going away, these Normans. The man with the dark beard half-turned in the saddle and shouted out, "You lazy hound! We'll put a stop to all this after we have crowned the Duke. You shall learn what it is like to obey your new masters! Take warning, while you can."

Bersi stopped laughing and watched them ride away among the oak trees, out of sight. Then he began to punch at the hard turf with his fist, wishing he had died on the hill.

At last, his anger passed and his hunger came back. Then he crawled slowly down the slope and into the farmyard. In an open-sided barn, among the yellow straw, a little girl was sitting, rocking a wooden doll. Her hair was so fair that it looked almost white in the sunshine. It was done into two thick plaits, bound round with braid.

Bersi, on his hands and knees, looked at her and saw that she had been crying. Her face was dusty and marked with tears, and she was telling her doll how sad she was.

Painfully, he crawled into the shadow of the barn, and had reached the heap of straw before the girl turned round and saw him, she was so occupied with her sadness.

As gently as he could, Bersi said, "Do not be frightened, mistress. I will not hurt you."

The girl wiped her large blue eyes and stared at him. Then she said, "Why are you crawling about? Are you playing at some game?"

Bersi gritted his teeth and made himself smile at her. Then he shook his head and whispered, “No game, lady. I was up on the hill and I am not feeling very well. I would feel better if I had ale to drink and bread to eat.”

The girl said, “My name is Gytha and I am six. What is your name?”

The man sank down until his face rested on the straw. He turned his head to one side and said, with great effort, “I am Bersi Thordson, lady. I am a housecarle, sworn to the king. I am hurt, lady. I beg you . . .”

Then he couldn’t say any more, but just lay gasping and coughing because of the dust that came up from the dried corn-stalks on the barn floor.

Gytha put down her wooden doll and came over the straw towards him. She sat beside him, smiling now, and said, “Housecarles wear mail and fine helmets, not old linen shirts and ragged wool breeches. And where is your great axe? You are teasing me, Bersi Thordson, because I am only a little girl. You are like my brother, Elfgar. He always teases me and says he is a great fighter—but all he has is a stone tied to the end of a staff for an axe, and an old horsehide for a breastplate.”

Then she bent over him and said suddenly, “But look, you *are* hurt! There is blood all over the front of you. What have you been doing to get like that?”

Bersi Thordson clenched his good hand and beat down at the earth. “Gytha,” he said, “in all mercy, listen to me, my dear. I am a hurt man and I have not eaten for two days. Can you go into the house and fetch me food, even if it is only a crust and a cup of water?”

Then, from behind him, a weary voice answered, “The Normans have left us little enough to feed ourselves, man. But you shall have what we can spare, if only for the sake of our silly son, Elfgar, who died up there on the hill beside the king, and only a stone in his hand to fight with.”

Bersi made a great effort and rolled over to see who had spoken. It was an elderly woman who wore a black shawl over her straggling grey hair. Her thin face was lined and sad, but her eyes were honest and kind.

“Lie still,” she said. “I will get my husband to come and carry you inside. Poor lad, you deserve shelter, for they have treated you cruelly. Look after him, Gytha, till we come back. See that he does not hurt himself any further, beating his fist on the ground.”

Gytha picked up her wooden doll and held it over the man.

“Look, Edith,” she said. “This is a carle. You have never seen a carle before. See, he is wounded in the chest and his arm is hurt. Now you see what happens to warriors. Aren’t you glad you are not a warrior, Edith? Soon, they will take the carle into the house and feed him and bind up his wounds. You shall watch it all, Edith.”

Bersi tried to smile, but it was all too much for him. As the child’s voice babbled on, he began to lose consciousness again. And as the peasants began to lift him from the ground, his pain was so sharp that he fell, shouting, into a deep pit of blackness.

When he knew anything again, he felt much better, but very hungry, far hungrier than he had ever felt in his life before, he thought.

He was lying on a pallet of hay, and his body and arm were bound tightly with strong strips of linen. He tried to move, but found that broad thongs of hide held him down to the rough bed. Even his good arm and both his legs were tied down.

At first, in the dusk of the room, he began to struggle in a sudden terror. Then his sight cleared and he saw the woman bending over him.

“Lie quiet,” she said. “It has been a hard time for you, these last days. We thought we should lose you. But we put spiders’ webs over the wounds and they are closing well. As for the broken bones, the priest has been in by night to see you, and he says that you are as strong as a horse and with God’s help the bones will join again. He has put a splint on your arm.”

Bersi said, “I am a housecarle, lady.”

The woman smiled sadly and nodded. “Yes, yes,” she whispered, “we know that. We saw the Wessex dragon pricked in blue on your forearm and we know what you are. My poor son, Elfgar, always wanted to be a carle, ever since he was a little lad; but we are not high-born folk. He had to content himself following the carles with a stone axe that he made himself, behind the barn. Why, he wasn’t even strong enough to be chosen for the fyrd, the militia. It was his chest, you know. The cough never left him. It is the same with many of us who live down here in the valley, among the marshes. But, at least, he had the honour of dying beside his king, and that is more than some great lords can say—folk such as Earl Morcar, who are loud enough in the feast-hall, but slow enough when the swords fall and the arrows begin to whine in the air.”

Bersi listened to her with dread. At last he said, “You say the king is dead?”

She nodded. "They say an arrow went into his eye. Then the Normans came up and finished him. He died under his banner of the Fighting Man, that his own dear mother stitched for him. It was a brave end. But now the Norman duke has ordered him to be buried in unconsecrated ground, among the rocks that look over the sea. That is a poor end for Godwinson. He was ever a brave man and William would not have dared stand up to him, face to face, and tell him where he should lie buried."

Then Bersi ground his teeth so wildly that the woman went out of the room and brought her husband back with her to quieten him. But Bersi would only say, "I swear, by all the relics, that I will do to William what he did to my lord! I will be the death of him! If I must wait a hundred years, I will bury Duke William in unholy ground! He shall join my lord and they can fight it out in the shadows, man to man!"

He raved so much that they sent little Gytha away to tend the goats; then they poured a sleeping-draught down his throat through a cow's-horn funnel. His fury was so great that he bit off the end of the horn. But at last he was quiet again.

"Poor lad," said old Edmund, the herdsman. "He knows nothing but fighting. There were many like him in the king's company. But now there are hardly any left. They will find it a poor threadbare world to live in, with their pride and their axe-oaths, now. Aye, a poor, poor world for a hero. They'll be hunted high and low, like wolves and foxes. Poor lads, with the winter coming on and no one daring to shelter them."

Suddenly, the old woman looked down at Bersi and said, "Husband, I think God has spoken to us. I think He has sent us another son, in place of poor Elfgar. They are about the same age. If we tell the folk in the village to keep their mouths shut, we can shelter this carle and he can live on here as our own son, without fear."

Edmund thought for a while, then said doubtfully, "Mayhap . . . mayhap; but it is like taking a war dog into the house. They sometimes break out and run wild. You can never be sure about them."

The old woman smiled and stroked Bersi's white hand. "*I am sure*," she said. "This one will come to know who helped him. *He* will not run wild. He will be like a son to us, and the Normans will never know, husband."

And she was right. As October turned into November, Bersi was up and about again. He answered to the name of Elfgar, and learned to milk cows

and stack wood for winter fuelling. When no one was looking, he would take Gytha on to his back and gallop with her so wildly that she clung to his hair and pretended to be terrified.

“That’s what it’s like to ride a war stallion,” he said, letting her gently to the ground again. “So now you know.”

Gytha pretended to be very cross. “You are a naughty bad horse, and you shall be whipped and have no hay,” she said. Then all at once she flung her arms round his neck as he kneeled and said, “Oh, horse, I am so glad you came. I never had games like this before. One day I shall marry you, then we can play for ever! Would you like that?”

Bersi smiled and nodded his shaggy head. Then he said, “But there’s no haste, Gytha, my dear. We can play and play like this for years—every morning after the cows have been milked.”

She began to look so disappointed, that Bersi opened his wool shirt and rolled back his sleeves. “Look,” he said, “you’d be marrying a very ugly husband. I’ve got old sword scars all over me!”

Gytha nodded and said, “As long as there are no coward’s scars on your back, I like them, horse! And I love that Wessex dragon on your arm. No one else would have a husband with one of those!”

Bersi rolled down his sleeve sadly. “You are right, Gytha,” he said. “I think that this is the only one left. But you must always remember to call me Elfgar; then, one day, when you are older, I will speak to your father about what you say.”

Gytha began to laugh again, the winter sun in her blue eyes and on her straw-gold hair. “Come, horse,” she shouted, “let us gallop back to the steading and drink a bowl of warm fresh milk together.”

The days went by like that and soon the nightmare on the bleak hill faded from Bersi’s mind. He had never known such peacefulness, such quiet home life. Sometimes he wondered why he had ever wanted to be a warrior when there was such a gentle, friendly life to be lived as a farmer. Each day was a golden one now. Only in his sleep did Bersi still sweat, and shout out that the horses were coming up the hill, and yell out for Harold to put up his shield and protect himself.

But, though he wakened the house at these times, no one reminded him of them in the morning. The old woman, in the darkness, whispered to her husband, “Lie still. It will pass. One day he will forget all this and be well in his mind again. Such things take time, husband. It is like training a hawk.”

Then, one morning, as December broke, Edmund and Bersi were pushing a load of chopped wood to the thegn's house in the village, when they saw a crowd of cottars and villeins round the church door. The two men set down their cart and walked over to find out what was happening.

A big soldier was shouting, "Oyez! Oyez! Listen, to what I say! Stand still and listen! Oyez!"

He was as bulky and round as a barrel. His pointed iron helmet was covered with dents and the criss-cross marks of sword blows. The soiled leather hood below it fitted so tightly that, though it was a keen frosty day, the man's red face glistened. His drooping russet moustache had tiny beads of ice on it from his breath. His long mail hauberk hung round him like a tent, drawn in at the waist by an untanned horsehide sword-belt. His sword-point touched the ground and scraped in the snow.

Bersi had seen men like this before, proud, leather-lunged men, who dared to stand in the middle of a crowd, and speak their mind, and laugh. He pulled down his own sleeve to cover the Wessex dragon.

The man began again, pushing peasants away from him good-humouredly, so as to have more room. "Oyez! Listen to what I say, and pass it on to all your fellows, for I shall only speak once. Two weeks from now, at midday, and in the forecourt of Dover castle, you must assemble, all of you, so that a list may be made of your names, and so that Duke William's brother, the great Bishop of Bayeux, can speak to you all. Is that clear?"

An old cottar called out, "Why should Odo speak to us, master? We have a priest of our own who can preach us a sermon when we need one."

The red-faced soldier laughed and said, "Well said, grandad! But this is no sermon. Bishop Odo is to be your new Earl of Kent, and, like a good father, he wants to tell his children how they must behave. So bring all your children and womenfolk, and try to remember what your names are, because there will be scribes present who will want to write them down on the lists. And, don't forget, bring warm clothes with you, and enough bread and cheese and ale to last the day. No doubt it will be a long reckoning, and these lazy scribes often take their time with their little quill pens!"

When he had finished, he pushed his way through the crowd, mounted a big grey horse, and cantered down the street.

Bersi watched him go, then said to Edmund, "We may hate them, but they are *men*! They fear nothing."

Edmund nodded and answered, “I fear they have come to stay, these Normans. But as long as they treat us no worse than this, mayhap we can’t complain. We peasants have had generations of house burning and cattle stealing, while the earls were at each other’s throats. Mayhap things will settle down a bit now.”

Bersi was not listening. Almost to himself, he said, “I noticed a place in his mail, just under the ribs, where the iron links were bent. That would be the place to strike . . .”

But Edmund gave him a push and said, “Forget that, my son. All that is over. We must deliver the wood to the thegn and then get ready for Dover. It is a cold time of the year, and we must go prepared.”

Bersi nodded and said distantly, “Yes, father. I obey.” Then he bent, and raised the cart once more, as though he had been a woodman all his life.

Dover was a chilly place that year. Flurries of wind came in off the sea, bringing heavy flakes of snow with them. The castle hill was ankle deep by the time the peasants got there. But Bishop Odo was warm enough, on his platform with an awning over it and braziers burning round him. He wore a cloak and hood of black bearskin brought from a German forest, and below this everyone saw the dully glinting mail.

Little Gytha said, “He looks less like a priest than any I have ever seen, father.” But old Edmund put his hand over her mouth and whispered, “Hush, my dove! He is speaking as our earl now, not as a bishop. And, don’t forget, Bersi is your brother and his name is Elfgar. Have you got that?”

Gytha nodded, and clambered on to Bersi’s shoulder to see the men-at-arms better.

It was at this moment that a rough fellow, wearing a patch over his right eye, paused in front of them and said to Bersi, “Well, man! Wonders will never cease!” They stared at him for a moment, puzzled, but he only laughed and then pushed on into the crowd, saying, “I never thought to see *him* again!”

Gytha said, “Who was that funny man, brother?”

But Bersi shook his head. “I have never seen him before in my life,” he said. “Now listen to Bishop Odo. He may say something to make us laugh! And we need it, this bitter day!”

But Odo was in no joking mood. His voice came loud and clear across to them, and as grey as the waves they could all see, down below, beyond the sweeping headland of the harbour.

“We Normans are reasonable men,” he was saying. “We wish no man’s harm. We are Christians and bear the banner of the Pope himself. Listen well, and obey what you hear, my friends. My brother, William, is no tyrant; but neither is he a fool. Deal fairly with him, and he will deal fairly with you. Fight against his word, and he will fight back. Know this, that all who accept his guidance shall find peace; but that all who stand against him shall feel the sharp edge of his wrath.”

Bishop Odo paused a moment, then, while a serving man offered him a cup of wine, mulled over a glowing brazier. In the snow, the peasants waited, shivering. Then Odo wiped his lips and went on, “All rebels shall know the hangman’s rope, my friends. And that is for the good of the whole realm. A family should not be divided within itself. So, if any of you are rebels, bow the knee now and swear to mend your ways.” He waited a while; then, with a strange smile, said in a high voice, “And if any of you, here present, know of any rebels to the Duke, deliver them to me, here and now, and I will tame them!”

He had scarcely finished when, near the platform, the man with the black patch got up on to a mounting-stone and began to shout out, pointing to the spot where Bersi stood with the little girl on his shoulder.

“My lord!” he yelled. “My lord, over there you will find a rebel. A man who fought on the hill beside the usurper, Godwinson! He is a housecarle! You will recognise him by the dragon on his arm, my lord! Capture him, and don’t forget to reward the man who told you!”

Odo’s face stiffened and became a mask. He nodded to soldiers, who began to push through the crowd. Bersi felt his heart begin to thump and his legs to quiver.

Roughly he let Gytha down to the snowy ground. “Forgive me, sweetheart,” he said, “but I must go.”

The peasants parted, to let him pass, but closed their ranks again as the soldiers came elbowing towards them.

The last Bersi heard was of Normans shouting and ordering the folk to make way, and then he was running down the hill and along the narrow lanes of the town as fast as he could go. Soon, no footsteps clattered behind him and he sank down in a sheltered archway to get his breath back.

As dusk came down over Dover, Bersi felt all his old bitterness again. This time he hated the Normans for driving him away from his new family and the peace he had come to love, on the little farm. As he thought of it, his jaws clenched, and the old warrior feeling swelled in his heart again. He forgot the quiet months and became a wolf once more.

As the church bell tolled the curfew, when all townsfolk must be off the streets, and all fires be put out, a Norman soldier came strolling along the alleyway, prodding into the shadows with the butt of his spear.

Bersi stood behind a buttress until the man had just passed, then struck him at the nape of the neck with a fist as hard as a stone.

In a short while the carle walked out of the dark passageway, his mail hood down, his spear shaft rattling against walls, as though he had worn Norman armour all his life.

At the edge of the town, a group of soldiers sat round a fire-bucket in a space cleared of snow, clapping their hands together and passing a can of warm ale from one to the other.

Bersi went boldly forward and took the can from a soldier who was about to drink. "Don't be so greedy, my friend," he said. "Think of us poor fellows who have been on duty all day at the castle."

The man looked up at him and said, "You are no Norman. I can tell that by your speech."

For a moment, Bersi's heart seemed to stop. Then he went cold all over and prepared to draw his dagger. His foot was already itching to kick over the brazier and so start the fight. But another man laughed and said, "It is not fair to tease these Bretons because they don't speak like us, Jean. Drink up, *mon ami*, you fellows gave as good an account as anyone, up there on the hill at Hastings."

Bersi's heart began to beat again, and he tossed the empty can on to the ground. "Thank you, my friend," he said. "Now, can you tell me the best way to London? It is my duty to be there by tomorrow."

The first man rose to his feet, smiling, and said, "Another one to act as a guard when William is crowned at the Minster! I might have known it. You Bretons get all the easy duties, while we men of Normandy get left down here on the coast, with a wind coming off the sea fit to freeze a bear!"

Bersi laughed and clapped the man so hard on the shoulder that he almost fell down.

Then all the soldiers began to slap their thighs and to say what good fellows the Bretons were. For an instant, Bersi was so overwhelmed with pride, he thought of drawing his sword and showing them what a housecarle could do.

But just then, the sound of a rumbling wagon came up the hill, and the man who still rubbed his shoulder said wryly, "There's the supply cart. The wagoner will give you a lift to London—and a good riddance to you, Breton! Your friendship is harder to bear than most men's enmity!"

They were still laughing when Bersi climbed into the wagon: but now, though his face smiled, his heart raged like a fire. He was going to London and there, he had learned, Duke William was to be crowned, in the Minster that old Edward Confessor had built, and in which Harold Godwinson, the true king, had been anointed less than a year before.

As the wagon jolted on over the uneven roads, Bersi, sitting in the darkness among bales of wool and tubs of butter, said to himself, "God is guiding me to him! I *am* the sword of vengeance, after all! Harold, my king, rest in peace; it will not be long before this wild boar, William, joins you!"

Two days later, Bersi stood outside the Minster, and though it was Christmas Day, there was little merriment in London. A band of ragged children tried to haul a Yule log past the great church, but stern-faced Normans rode their tall horses at them and sent them scampering. The log lay, snow-covered and forgotten, where they dropped it.

Bersi, leaning on his spear among the crowds, ground his teeth and glared at the cavalrymen. Then he looked away, determined not to let his hot temper spoil the great chance that had come to him.

Everywhere, people crowded, standing as quietly as they could, so as to hear something of what was going on in the Minster. The great doors were open, and from time to time there would be singing, followed by the high intoning of voices.

A red-cheeked woman close to Bersi said to her companion, "Did you hear the like of it! He's got *two* bishops to crown him. One of them is that foreigner, the Bishop of Coutances; and the other is our own Bishop Ealdred. I suppose the Norman thinks we shall all be agreeable, if one of our own bishops puts that bauble on his fat head!"

Bersi half-turned and gave her a mock-stern look. "Watch your tongue, my good woman," he said.

She glanced up at his helmet and mail, then said aloud to her friend, "See what I mean, Meg? These Normans think God made the world for them to rule! Why, my man, John, could knock this young puppy flat, with one blow!"

Bersi smiled at her and said, "If he's half as fat as you are, that could well be true!"

The woman began to cluck like an angry hen, and pushed her way into another part of the crowd, saying what ignorant fellows these Normans were, and that she would send her John up to London and put them in their place. Townsfolk round about her laughed and cheered at this. One of them called out, "That's right, Emma; and tell him to bring his pitchfork! The Normans will turn tail when they see that!"

But Bersi was in no mood for laughter now. His head was beginning to whirl with excitement, and his right hand was clenching and unclenching on the haft of his dagger.

Inside the thronged and guarded Minster was the one man he wanted to kill; but, even in this moment of berserk excitement, the carle knew in his heart that he would be cut down by horsemen before he could get through the high, arched doors. Now that he was almost within reach of his enemy, a great chill came over him and his teeth began to chatter.

At this moment, another thing happened to disturb him. An old blind man, stooping and dressed in black rags, tapped over the cobbles towards him and stopped, nodding his head almost as though he could see Bersi. But instead of holding out his hands for alms, he clasped them about his staff and said hoarsely, "Things are not what they seem, master. I cannot see, but I know. There are many who are alive now, who will be dead before the bell rings again. Do not go in there, master!"

Bersi stared at the blind beggar, amazed, but before he could speak to him, the man was tapping his way to where the crowds were thinner.

Then, suddenly, as though a great whirlwind had swept into the Minster square, everything seemed to happen at once. Through the open doors of the church, the high voices of Ealdred, archbishop of York, and Geoffrey, bishop of Coutances, were heard to ask, "Do you now take this William of Normandy to be your lawful king?"

There was a short silence, then such a great shouting started up in the Minster that the place seemed to shake. Horsemen and footsoldiers outside glanced at each other with meaning, and then a bearded captain drew out his

long sword and yelled, "Death to all traitors! They are killing the king inside the church!"

As Bersi flung himself into the shelter of a buttress, the Norman cavalry began to charge among the crowds outside. Horses reared and plunged, swords rose and fell, men and women scattered or were trampled underfoot. Then, as the snow came down like a white curtain, a company of Norman footsoldiers stationed round glowing braziers, lit torches and began to fling them on to the thatched roofs of the nearby houses.

Almost before a man could count to ten, the square was blazing and the snow-covered streets were littered with bodies. Bersi found his arms and legs trembling so violently now that he could hardly control himself. He staggered backwards against the stone wall, as the crowds in the Minster began to stream outside, like a thick black flood, to find out what was happening. Fighting was going on everywhere, and the Normans, on their terrified horses, looked like men being swept along by a torrent, helplessly.

And, all at once, Bersi saw that he was alone before the open doors of the Minster. Inside, there was a vast, echoing silence. Wax tapers guttered in iron holders along the walls, scarcely piercing the gloom with their faint light.

Bersi ground his teeth together. "This is the hand of God!" he shouted and, drawing his sword, ran inside, towards the great altar.

Duke William of Normandy sat alone in a chair, his fur-tipped robe drawn back to expose his body for the anointing. On either side of him, the bishops stood, uncertain what to do now in the empty Minster.

Bersi saw his enemy, unarmed, his breast bared, as for the sword, and plunged towards him shouting, "Death to the Norman! Harold for ever!" But even as he ran, he saw that the Duke was not afraid. It was as though a great and superhuman power rested over him like a canopy. His dark eyes gazed brightly and steadily at Bersi, and he said in his deep voice, "Put up your sword, man. This is no place for such things."

Bersi hardly heard him. With a wide sweep, he struck down at the Duke, shouting the old war cry of the carles; but even as his blow started out, Bersi's feet slipped on a ridge of snow that had flurried through the open doors on to the paving-stones.

With a clatter, he fell sideways before William's chair, and lay there, dazed with hunger and shock. As in a dream, he saw the Duke put his foot firmly on the fallen sword. Then he felt the Duke's hand pushing back his

mail sleeve, and heard his voice say, “By this mark I see who you are. So you were with *him*, on the hill?”

Bersi could have wept at his failure. Ashamed, he gazed beyond Duke William’s searching eyes and saw the two bishops. Ealdred of York was smiling, as though trying to give him courage to rise and strike again. But Geoffrey of Coutances glowered down, his pale face set, his eyes blazing with fury. He said, “Shall I call the guard, my lord? This hound must be muzzled for ever!”

But Duke William waved his hand for silence, then said to Bersi, “I loved him, too, in my way, although he betrayed me with false oaths. Godwinson was lucky to have such men as you to serve him. It comes to few of us kings. Will you now serve me as faithfully, carle?”

Bersi gazed thunderstruck up at this big quiet man whose robe had fallen about him, and whose dark-stubbed chin gave him the look of an ancient warrior, rather than a king. Not even Harold Godwinson had ever looked like this, so manly and so great.

Then, all at once, the commotion outside died down, and dark-faced guards began to pour back into the Minster, their swords still out. Bishop Geoffrey of Coutances turned to them and shouted, “Help! Help! Protect your king from this madman!”

Still on his knees and helpless, Bersi heard mailed feet thudding up the steps towards him. Then he heard something else, Duke William’s great laugh and bull-like bellowing. “What, my lord Bishop, have you taken leave of your senses? This man and I are not enemies, we are friends. See, he has laid his sword under my foot in homage and is kneeling before me to take his oath.”

Bersi felt strong hands under his elbows, raising him, and in the new silence of the Minster, heard William shout out, “I will not have him touched! Let him stand close beside me, so that you shall see my trust in him.”

After the crowning was over and all was quiet again, Bersi stood before the new king in a house at Smithfield. A fire was blazing and cups of mulled wine stood steaming on the table. The two men were alone.

King William drew his fur robe about him and said, “Life is not easy for any of us, Bersi Thordson; but, with a little thought, we can soften its blows.

I know a good man when I meet one, which is rarely enough. Will you put your hands in mine now, and swear to serve me always?"

Bersi looked away from the king and kicked at a log which had fallen from the fire, but did not answer.

King William smiled and reached for his wine cup. "I understand," he said. "It is hard for a soldier to serve another leader."

Bersi turned to him and said, "It is not that, my lord. At last I know that Harold has gone and will never come back. I know that, if I were to serve any other man, it would be you. But suddenly all the taste has gone out of fighting, for me. I am content to hang up my sword and let it rust. On a farmstead near Hastings live good honest folk who once brought me back to life, and gave me peace. They are the folk I wish to serve now, not kings and captains."

King William took long in answering. At last he pushed the wine cup towards Bersi and, with a gentle smile, said, "So be it, housecarle. Go back to your good folk and live with them in peace. I shall bother you no more. Yet, if the need arises, there is always a place for you with me. Come, lad, let's see you smile, and we'll drink to the bargain."

So king and housecarle raised their wine cups and smiled at one another. Outside, the snow still flurried down over London as the bells of the Minster stopped pealing. Then all the city was silent again, as though peace had truly come to England.

THE END

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[The end of *The Invaders*, by Henry Treece.]