

RAGNAR LODBROG

I

IN Viking days there dwelt in Gothland a mighty jarl who was called Hraud. No sons had he, and no child save one daughter, who was so beautiful that seldom was she called by her given name, Thora, but was known to all as Borgar-hjort, which means Hind of the Castle. By her noble birth and lovely face was she fitted to be chosen by Odin for one of his Valkyrja; but she would not, for her nature was gentle, and she feared and hated strife.

Then, since her father must be oft away on Viking raids, and since he was much disquieted at leaving her alone, did Jarl Hraud give to his daughter a magic box wherein lay much gold, and upon the heap of gold a small dragon.

And Thora, opening the box, cried out in wonder at the strange worm:

“Why should I keep this laidly thing, my father? Surely it were better away in its haunts on the far inland wastes?”

“Nay, daughter mine, this is a witch-worm, and I give it thee as a guard. Since I must leave thee for so long, it is meet that thou shouldst have a better ward than thy faithful servants. This dragon will grow to be the fear of all the lands

around us, so shalt thou dwell in peace until I come again."

So Jarl Hraud hied him forth in the long days of spring, and Thora dwelt alone in her castle. But daily grew the gold, and with it grew the dragon, until he became too great to bide longer within the castle; and Thora took counsel with her nurse and the overman of the jarl what she should do, and the overman said:

"Since the worm is here to guard thee, Lady Thora, he must not be driven forth, else will thy father be angered. Were it not well that he should bide without the castle, and so fright all that come with ill-intent?"

And the nurse said:

"Even so might it be, O nurseling; I will go speak to the worm."

Then she spake fair words to the dragon, and he saw the reason of her speech, and dragged his slow length without the castle, until his coils encompassed it on all sides. And so he lay that none could go out or in without his knowledge and sufferance, and Thora was well guarded. But as time went on the worm grew evil and would let none pass save those who brought in food; each day became he greater in strength and venom, and when the short days came, and the jarl returned to winter quarters, he was kept without his house, while Thora lay within, and might no more come forth to greet her father.

Then was Hraud in great straits, and he went unto other jarls, his friends, to take counsel what should be done. And all said one thing:

"Kill the dragon."

"Easy is it to say," quoth Hraud, "but who

shall do this deed? Too old am I to fight this monster; moreover, a witch-worm is he, and more to be feared than all worms save Fafnir, guard of Andvari's hoard."

"This do," said an aged jarl. "Cause it to be told throughout the north that whoso kills the dragon shall wed Borgar-hjort. So shall she have a worthy mate and be the fairest, best, and richest of the maidens of the land."

And all liked this counsel well, so Jarl Hraud sent abroad the word, and there was much talk and stir in many lands.

But most was there stir in the heart of Prince Ragnar, son of King Sigurd of Sweden. Oft had he heard of Thora, and his mind was filled with the thought of the fair maiden, dragon-warded. And he asked much of the messengers concerning the worm and his ways, and he caused to be made five cloaks of coarse wool and five pairs of breeches, and these he had boiled in pitch so that they were hard and like unto garments of thick leather, but some men say that they were but wild goat-skin. Be that as it may, from these breeches got he his name of Lodbrog, which means leathern breeches.

So Ragnar went up against the dragon, and after a mighty fight, wherein the great beast sought to poison him by biting through his clothes but was unable by reason of their thickness, he struck his spear so forcefully through the back of the dragon that he was unable to draw it forth, and the shaft broke off and remained in his hand. And the dragon cried aloud in its death-pain:

"Ah, that I, the terror of the nations, the warder of Borgar-hjort, should be done to death

by the guile of a stripling. Tell me, youth, how many winters hast thou?"

"But fifteen," answered Ragnar straightly.

"Thora! Thora!" cried the worm, "this fifteen years' boy hath ventured much for thee. Take him, love him well, for he will cherish thee greatly."

So died the dragon, and this is the true story, though some say that the dragon was but a chief named Orm, set over Thora's castle by Hraud, and who, on his return, would by no means give her up. But this is false, since no word is there at this time of a Jarl Orm in Gothland.

Then went Prince Ragnar unto the jarl, where he sat awaiting the issue of the fight.

"The worm is dead, O jarl," said Ragnar, "and in proof that I have slain him here is my spear shaft. The point is set in the worm's back where ye may find it. Now claim I thy Borgar-hjort for my bride, to love her ever for her goodness and her grace and her beauty."

"And blithely shalt thou have her," quoth the Jarl, and led the youth into the castle, where Thora straightway loved him and plighted him her troth.

So they loved and lived in happiness many years, and two sons were theirs, Ragnvald and Agnar, who went a-viking with their father, until it fell out that gentle Thora died and Ragnar thereafter could no longer suffer his home. Putting his realm into the hands of first one, then the other of his sons and of his wise counsellors, he, with the other son—each in turn—sailed a-raiding. It is told of him that he sailed east, even up the

Vistula, and southward by the great rivers of Gardar, unto Miklagard,¹ to visit the Norse Varanger guard of the ruler there; on the Danube slew he eight chiefs and gathered much spoil; and it is written that he returned by the Middle Sea. In all lands was he known and feared, yet could he not always conquer, for, as time went on, first Ragnvald and then Agnar fell in battle, and Ragnar was indeed alone.

Then went he no more to Sweden, but sailed, ever plundering. Throughout Iceland, the Isles of the West, and the Fleming's land was he known and dreaded in the summer-time, and the winters passed he in the warm havens of the Middle Sea. But his men grew hungry to see their homes, and would fain return northward.

"Seven years have we followed thee un murmuring, O Ragnar," they said, "now is it our turn that we should sight the shores of Sweden."

And Ragnar knew that they were right, and he said:

"Black were my locks when I came forth with ye all, grey are they now with my unending sorrow. But it is not mete that all should suffer for one, therefore, hoist thee the great sail and let us return to our own land. It may be that so I may find comfort."

Then was great joy through all the long-ships, and their beaks were speedily turned northwards so that, with fair winds, they swiftly sped towards their home. But ere they came into Sweden much befell, whereof the tale must be told.

¹ Byzantium.

II

NOW it is told that Heimar of Hlymdal, brother to Brynhild, the Valkyr, had, at fostering, a beautiful woman-child, named Aslaug. None knew her race, but most thought her to be the child of Sigurd and Brynhild. Be that as it may, at the death of Sigurd, fearing the vengeance of Gudrun for her slain son, Sigmund (whom Brynhild had killed and laid upon the bale of Sigurd), Heimar caused to be made a great harp, with a golden stem, wherein he hid the maid, with rich treasure of gold and jewels, and onions for her to eat, since these give strength and sustain life long. And he dight upon him the clothes of a wandering skald, and, the golden harp upon his back, fared forth to seek safety for Aslaug. Through many lands went he, letting the child out from her hiding-place to run when they were hidden from the eyes of men, and playing on the harp to comfort her when she sorrowed for her home.

Now, it befell that late at eventide on a dreary day of rain, Heimar came to a lonely place in Norway, that was called Spangarhede, but now is it called Krakebeck, or Guldvig, because of the king's daughter, who lay hidden in the golden harp.

There dwelt an old man Aki, with his wife Grima, and Heimar, being wet and weary, smote hard upon their door. Now Aki was absent, and Grima was long in opening, for she would first look well through a crack in her wall to know who this stranger might be.

And seeing this man of kingly height and noble

face, with the golden harp upon his back, she unlatched the door, and asked :

"What wouldst thou in our poor house at night?"

"Shelter would I have from the rain, good mother," answered Heimar, "mayhap, fire to dry my clothes, and food, for I am wet and weary."

"Shelter canst thou have," said Grima, "but neither fire nor food. Few peats have I, and what I have must wait for my man, who journeys far to-day."

"Nay, but if I pay thee well canst thou not give me aught?" asked the king.

"Take then," said Grima, "there are peats; kindle fire thyself."

And as Heimar busied himself with the fire, the wicked hag sat glowering, and she noticed that as he stretched forth his arms to the blaze, there glinted under the fringe of his harper's frock, the shine of a great gold arm-ring, and she thought :

"None know that this stranger is here. Good were it if we could take his gold, for weary am I of being poor."

Then came a knocking at the door, and old Aki entered, bearing peats upon his back. Him did Heimar greet in friendliness, and together they ate of the rye-bread that Grima set before them, and talked as they ate :

"Always poor have I been," said Aki, "and oft an hungered. Fain would I give over work and take mine ease."

"That perchance may come to thee soon, friend," said Heimar cheerily, as he laid him on the settle to sleep, and he thought to himself :

Univ "Perchance when the old pair are quiet in the

byre, may I draw forth Aslaug to sleep here by me."

But Aki and Grima slept not, and so long did they keep moving that Heimarr fell into that sleep that was his last.

For Aki, set on by the wicked Grima, stole in and killed him as he lay. So died the noble Heimarr for the sake of his sister's child.

Then through the mirk dark night they bore the body forth, and buried it deep in the sand-dunes, and set stones atop, and, as the late dawn came, crept back to the lonely hut.

There Grima laid hold upon the harp, and the strings wailed mournfully, so that she pushed it from her in haste. In falling the pillar burst open, and there lay Aslaug, the maiden, smiling with the wondrous steel-blue eyes of Sigurd, the Volsung. In terror the two fell upon the ground, and Grima, shuddering, cried:

"Kill her! kill her! O Aki! lest through her words our doom come upon us."

"No more killing will I do," said Aki gloomily. "Our doom is here and our own guilt will never die, since I slew a man by stealth and not in fair fight."

But Aslaug spoke never a word. She busied herself in gathering up the gold and jewels that were scattered over the ground, and in folding the golden stuffs and laying them again within the harp pillar.

"Tell me thy name," said Grima at last.

But Aslaug shook her golden head and smiled once more; and still she said no word, so that the two believed her dumb.

Now it had fallen out in this wise: *Microsoft®*

When Heimar went forth from Hlymdal he feared greatly lest the child should babble and tell her name and parentage, therefore had he straightly bidden her to speak to none but himself, and that only when they were alone.

Now Heimar being gone, Aslaug spoke no more to any living being.

Then, since Aki would by no means kill the child, Grima took her and darkened her white skin with juices of the bracken, and hid her golden hair under a rude cap of wadmál, so that none might know in her the princess in silken garments, and sent her forth to tend swine in the forest and goats upon the sea-shore. These they had bought with a part of Heimar's treasure; the rest they hid in safe places, and the golden harp they destroyed. No longer Aslaug was she called, but Krake.

Dreary was her life and strange were the thoughts that came to her as she sat alone among the pine trees, whispering all the words she knew lest she should forget the speech of men. So many and far-reaching were these thoughts that she grew wiser than others of her kind, seeing that she—like Sigurd, her father—knew even the speech of birds.

At whiles, when storms raged on the sea, she would sit upon the sand-dunes and sing. And so strong and beautiful was her voice that the sailors far out from shore said:

“Hearken, how the Valkyrja ride the storm.”

One strange thing did she, nor ever knew the reason for the doing, since the birds told her not.

Upon the shore, among the dunes, was a lonely barrow with a few stones thereon, and Aslaug said to herself:

“Perchance a dead man lies here; a viking who

should have been sent to sea in his burning ship. Be that as it may, a mighty barrow shall he have. Some man of power and might must it be, since by night the flame flickers ever thereon."

And daily went she to the shore, bearing ten stones that she set upon the barrow.

And the old people, watching her, trembled and said one to the other:

"She knows that the harper lies therein."

But Aslaug never knew; and, as years went by, the barrow grew until it overtopped the sand-dunes. So went the time until fifteen winters had passed over her.

III

Ragnar and Aslaug

NOW it fell one day that Ragnar, in his sailing, came nigh to Spangarhede, and, seeing there a sandy fjord with pine trees and a spring of fresh water, he sent men ashore to get the water and to bake bread. Then made they an oven of heated stones, and, having drawn forth the fire and set the dough in the oven to bake, they went into the forest. And as they went there came to them the sound of singing; so, treading warily, they followed the sound and reached at last a sunlit pool, where sat Aslaug. As she sang she combed her long hair, shaken loose from the wadmál cap; and, washed clean from stains, her skin shone white as silver in the sun.

Then came they forward and greeted her. And then, the first time since Heimar went, Aslaug spoke with men.

“Who are ye?” she asked, in no wise afear’d.
 “Whence come ye, and of what people?”

“We are the men of Ragnar of Sweden, and we go a-viking,” they answered.

Then bade she them sit near to her while she questioned them of the far lands they had seen; merry was she withal, so that mighty was the sound of laughter in the forest; and it was not until towards eventide that they bethought them of their bread.

So they bade farewell to Aslaug and betook them back to their oven, and behold! the bread was burnt black.

Then looked they upon one another, and one said:

“This comes of woman’s wiles. Ever will there be trouble where woman is.”

And another laughed and said:

“Herein is no blame to the woman, but to the foolish men who had no sense to remember duty when a woman spoke. Still, naught can we do now but bear back burnt bread to the ship.”

So they shouldered the bread and bore it seawards to where Ragnar sat on the deck looking at the sunset.

“Where is the bread?” quoth the fore-castle man, “and why bear ye stones upon your shoulders?”

And shamefast they cast down the loaves and said:

“These be bread.”

Then did the fore-castle man rate them sorely so that Ragnar came up to see what was to do.

“No man could think on bread with that maiden by,” the men repeated; and so much did they tell



As she sang she combed her long hair.



Univ Calif - Digitized by Microsoft®

of her wondrous fairness and wit, that Ragnar said :

“At morn shall ye go and fetch me this maid ; and that I may know whether she hath such wit as ye say, bid her come unto me not alone nor yet in company ; not clad nor yet unclothed ; not fasting yet having eaten naught.”

And the men went and finding Aslaug waiting by the pool, gave the message of the king.

But Aslaug laughed and shook her head :

“How know I thy king’s mind ?” she asked, “mayhap he might take me and carry me overseas, an I would not. Go ye back and say that I trust no man, and go no whither unless he pledge me by the eye of Odin that I come back scatheless as I go.”

Then took they this word unto Ragnar, and first he was wroth that a herd-maiden should doubt him ; but in the end, since she would not come without, he sent his gold arm-ring as a pledge for his word.

Then, at red dawn, came a strange sight down the fjord to the long-ship.

Krake, since by this name did the men know her, had bathed in the pool until her skin was white as the winter moonlight ; no clothes had she, but a red-brown fishing net was wrapped many times around her and over it, to her knees, showered her golden hair. Naught had she eaten but she had set her white teeth in an onion, so fasted not. No person came with her, save her dog, so she was not alone.

And when Ragnar beheld her he said :

“Surely no woman had ever wit like unto this

maiden's, even as none had ever beauty like unto hers."

And the more he talked with her, the more did he marvel, so that ere evening came he bade her sail away with him and be his wife. But she would not.

"Herd-maidens wed not with kings," she said.

"But here is Thora's robe," he answered; then he sang:

"Take thou O sweet, this silver-wrought kirtle,
Borgar-hjort owned it, and she would rejoice,
Fain would she, living, have called thee sister,
Fain would she, dying, have known me in peace.
Faithful was she till the Nornir divided us
Faithful wilt thou be until my life's end."

And Aslaug sang back:

"Ne'er may I take the silver-wrought kirtle,
Owned long years since by Thora thy queen;
Never can eagles mate with the ravens,
Krake my name is, and coal-black I go,
Ever in wadmal, herding the cattle,
Hard must I ever live, far from all wealth."

Since he might not prevail on her at that time to go with him, the king bound her by an oath that, when he had been ten months a-viking, if his mind should still be set upon her, he might return and she would wed him. Loth was the king to let her go, but, being bound by his word, he led her back to the forest and sailed away from Norway.

"In truth," quoth he, "never have I had so bright a day since Thora died."

IV

Ragnar's Sons

NOW, when the ten months were overpast, came Ragnar, full of thoughts of Krake, to hold her to her word.

And as the long-ship's sails, striped blue and white, fell upon the deck, and the ship brought-to in the fiord, there on the bank stood Aslaug, fair and white and golden, in the sunlight to welcome them. So she sailed away to Ragnar's land, and there he wedded her, and they lived happily, so that he went no more a-viking.

Four sons had they and two daughters. Of the sons, Ivar, the first born, was strangely made, in that there was no bone in his legs, but only gristle; so that he must ever be borne to war upon a litter of spears. Yet was he wise above all other folks, save only his mother. Next came Bjorn, and he was a baresark; then Hvirtserk, and young Ragnvald, so called after Ragnar's other son, who had been killed long years before.

Wiser each day grew Aslaug in runes and magic, and it was in her mind that some day might Ragnar, though now aged, wish again to go a-viking, since this had ever been his life's work. Therefore called she her daughters and said:

"Let us make for Ragnar a shirt, wherein I will weave magic and runes so that, old though he be, no steel nor venom shall ever hurt him."

And she took silk from the South lands, the fibres of herbs that she alone knew, and some of her hair and that of her daughters, and she taught them magic songs, so, as they wove, they sang,

and the spells were worked back and forth through the shirt until they filled it throughout. Then did Aslaug lay it by until it should be needed.

Then did the daughters make a banner also, and sang runes over it; and upon it was worked a raven with great wings that should flap when it was carried to battle.

Now there came one day the King of Upsala to visit Ragnar, and in his mind was a certain plan. This was that Ragnar should put away Aslaug, and take to wife Osten, the king's child; for greatly did he desire a bond between himself and Ragnar, who was first and richest of the Northern kings. And it chanced that they sat together in the court-yard, beneath Aslaug's window, so that she heard all that passed, and how that the king taunted her as a peasant's daughter and no fit mate for the great Ragnar.

But Ragnar put him off with fair words, since he might not flout a guest, and said him neither yea nor nay.

Then was the heart of Aslaug bitter within her, and there came upon her the spirit of Brynhild, her mother, and she spoke no more to the King of Upsala, nor went into the high-hall until he had gone home.

And Ragnar asked :

"Fair wife, what is amiss?"

"Canst thou call her 'fair wife,' who is no jarl's daughter, but a low-born peasant from the forest?"

Then the king knew that she had heard somewhat and told her all; and also how he had put the king's word aside unanswered.

And Aslaug, being blithe that he had hidden nothing from her, told him her story.

"No Krake am I," said she, "but the child of

Sigurd Fafnir's Bane, and Brynhild. The last of the Volsung race am I also, since Swanhild is dead."

And she told all the story of Heimar, as it is here set forth, save that she knew not, even by her runes, how Heimar died, and she ended :

"For myself hast thou loved me, and for thy love ought I to have told thee this before. But I treasured the thought that thy love was given to Krake, and not to the last daughter of the Volsungs. Forgive ! "

And Ragnar kissed her joyfully ; and word of Aslaug's birth was spread abroad in the land, so that no more did the King of Upsala put forth his daughter, since none could vie with the Volsung race.

Now, during these years had the sons of Ragnar gone a-viking, and many were the deeds they did, and worthy of their sire.

It had befallen, during the life-time of Thora, that Ragnar had made prisoner the King of Northumbria, and forced him to pay scatt¹ yearly unto him. But when this king died, Ella, his son, being young and foolhardy, refused the scatt to Ragnar's jarl ; and bade him tell the King of Sweden to come and gather it at point of sword.

"Bring forth thy magic coat, good wife," cried Ragnar ; "once more must I go fight."

And clad in the silken shirt, with the raven-banner floating overhead, did Ragnar Lodbrog sail westward to return no more.

For there were witch-wives in Northumbria, and they, hearing of his cunning, raised a great storm, so that the long-ships were broken in pieces on the rocks, and the king and his men came to shore with naught but their arms.

Then came up Ella with his soldiers against them, and bade them stand and fight; so did they, until all were killed, save the old king who stood alone unhurt amid the ring of dead.

Then said Ella:

“Who art thou that thou comest with warships against me?”

But Ragnar answered not.

“Nameless canst thou not be,” said Ella. “Tell me thy name lest ill befall thee.”

Still Ragnar spoke not.

“The worse shall it be for thee if thou wilt not speak,” said Ella; but uneasy was he for he knew that if this were Ragnar, great would be the vengeance of Ragnar’s sons, should he be killed.

Yet, since days passed and still Ragnar made no sign, Ella gave word that he should be cast into the orme-gaard, which was a pit full of venomous snakes. “The serpents,” said he, “will make him speak. Then if he be Ragnar draw him quickly forth.”

But the snakes shrank back from the king’s magic shirt, and would in no wise touch him, and, seeing this, the watchers took from him his shirt so that he was bitten on all sides.

Then did Ragnar sing that Death Song, that has made his name famous throughout the ages. He told of his battles—fifty-one; of his dead sons; of the kings he had conquered; and he ended:

“We fought with swords!

O, that Aslaug’s sons

Knew of their parent’s death!

Valiant is the heart they got

From their mother, daughter of Sigurd.

We fought with swords!
Now fades the world away.
Now comes the call of the gods;
To one who welcomes it
Death is a glorious time.

We fought with swords!
With joy I make an end.
Fast ride the Valkyrja
Bearing me to Odin,
To the halls of Valhalla.

With joy I make an end,
Soon shall I drink with gods.
Past are the hours of my life
Laughing do I die."

So died Ragnar Lodbrog, greatest of vikings, first even before Rolf the Ganger; and mighty was the vengeance for his death.

Now, when Ella heard of the Death Song he feared greatly, and he sent messengers to the sons of Ragnar, charging them straightly that they should mark well what each son said and did when the news was told, and bring the word to him with all speed.

V

The Vengeance of Ivar

NOW it chanced that the four brethren were together in the castle hall when there came a warder, running, to say that the messengers of Ella were without.

Then Bjorn, who stood fixing a spearhead to its handle, laughed:

"It is the scatt," cried he, "Ella hath heard of the setting forth of our father and is afeared."

“Not that, but something worse,” said Ivar gravely, from his couch.

Hvirtserk and Sigurd, his foster-brother, were playing draughts; only Ragnvald was not there.

And when the messengers were brought in, Ivar spoke them fair, and asked their news; and the men told it bravely and without fear, and by no word did the brethren stay them. But when they told of the Death Song and the vengeance that the sons should take, Ivar became by turns pale and red, and his lips were blue; Bjorn gripped so hard his spear-shaft that his finger-marks were in the wood as long as it lasted; Hvirtserk pressed the draught-piece he held so tightly that blood spirted from his finger-ends; and Sigurd, who had taken up a knife to carve a stick, cut his finger to the bone and knew it not. And for a long space did no one speak when the tale was told.

Then, with an evil laugh, said Hvirtserk:

“Brethren, best were it to kill these men that Ella may know our will.”

“Nay,” said Ivar, “these men have borne themselves well in a perilous errand, and scatheless shall they return, the more so that I bid them carry this word:

“King of Northumbria, the death words of Ragnar sink deep into the heart of Ragnar’s sons, but they bide their time.”

So went the men forth with all honour, and carried the message unto Ella. And the king was troubled when he heard it, and said:

“From all Ragnar’s sons fear I naught, save only from the still Ivar.”

And he made haste to prepare his fighting men, and banded himself with the Kings of England,

that he might withstand the onslaught of Lodbrog's sons.

The brethren also made ready ships to go over against Ella, although against the will of Ivar.

"Let be for awhile," said he, "until we know the strength of Ella," and he sent forth messengers to bring word of the doings in Northumbria.

But Aslaug, their mother, brooding fiercely over the death of Ragnar, gave them no peace. Ever sang she the Death Song in their ears as she span, and never passed a day that she did not taunt them, in that their father's death was unavenged.

Then saw Ivar that his brethren were set to go forth, therefore did he give but one warning more:

"Ye know naught of the power of the king," he said, "stay your hand until we gather more news of him, for, I hear, that with him are the Kings of Mercia and Wessex, and, if this be so, we shall but suffer defeat for naught. Prepare well, ere ye go."

"Doth this mean that thou goest not with us?" asked Bjorn hotly.

"Nay, brother, Ragnar's sons have ever one cause. My men and treasure are yours, and with you I will sail, but I take no part in the fight since I know that ye will fail."

"That is fair speech, brother," said Bjorn, "with thee there will all go well."

"All will go ill, I tell thee, Bjorn; yet, if I be there, I may yet remedy it somewhat."

So they set forth in many ships, but as they landed, there came up Ella with a mighty host, and routed them, so that they must go back to their ships, yet not so sorely that they need feel aught but shame at being beaten by the English.

Now Ivar went not back but stayed on land, and sent two jarls unto Ella with this word :

“Were-gild must we have for our father’s death, and since I cannot go a-viking with my brethren, I will that thou give me land on this thy shore, that I may dwell in peace.”

“That were a fool’s trick,” quoth Ella, “to set Ragnar’s son in the midst of my kingdom.”

“Nay,” said Ivar, “carry my word to Ella, that never will I bear arms against him, and with the word of Ivar Ragnarsson must he be content.”

“And what will Ivar Ragnarsson and his brethren take for were-gild?” asked Ella; “since with Ivar’s word, in sooth, I am content.”

“Even as much land as he can enclose within an oxhide,” the jarls replied.

Then Ella laughed, well-pleased, for he thought :

“This Ivar, of whom we hear great things, is a fool, and can in nowise harm me.”

And he granted the were-gild.

But when Bjorn and his brethren heard of Ivar’s doings they were sore angered, and went to Ivar to reproach him. But Ivar would say naught in his own defence.

“Leave me to my own way,” he said, “is not our father as much to me as to you? Take from my store at home, each your share of the were-gild and send to me the rest, and”—here he looked narrowly upon each brother in turn—“*when ye get the crossed twig, banded with red, come ye, and your following, with all speed.*”

Then the brethren bade him farewell, knowing some crafty plan must be in Ivar’s mind; and sailed away until he should have need of them.

But Ivar bid his men take an oxhide, the

largest they could find, and steep it well until it grew lithe ; then did he set them to cut it into fine strips, and sew these strips end to end, so that their length was very great. When this was done he sent unto Ella, saying :

“ Ivar Ragnarsson desires that thou shouldst be present at the measuring of his land.”

So the king came, and greatly was he pleased with the well-favoured face and courteous speech of Ivar, for he had a silvern tongue. And they went forth until they came to a great plain with a fair hill set in the midst ; and there Ivar bade them set down his litter.

“ This hill would I fain have, O king ! ”

“ Have it and welcome,” laughed the king ; “ as much as thy oxhide will enclose.”

Then the thralls brought forth the hide, and the king grew grave when he knew how Ivar had bested him. Yet he made no sign when the whole fair hill, and much land therewith, was compassed round about, for he said to himself :

“ Even this is poor pay for the death of such a man as Ragnar Lodbrog.”

So Ivar built him a stronghold on the hilltop, which was afterwards called Lincoln, and by reason of his wisdom and justice, there came many to dwell under its shelter, even his countrymen from the Norselands ; and his fame as a man of peace went abroad throughout all England. Yet knew no man that Ivar, by his craft, had set the other kings, who were banded with Ella, at odds with him, so that in time the King of Northumbria could depend on none to take his side, save only his own people.

Then came a day when Ivar called the trustiest of his men to him and said :

“Take this, hand it to my brother, Bjorn, and say unto him, ‘Ivar greets thee and his brethren.’”

“Naught but this?” said the man, in wonder, for Ivar had given him but a small stick marked with red.

“Naught but that,” he answered, and the man went forth.

Then was great stir in the seaboard of Sweden and Norway, for the brethren had spent these years in making ready, since they trusted Ivar and they never forgot. And word of it came to Ella and troubled him greatly, so that he sent to Ivar, saying:

“An oath didst thou swear unto me, never to bear arms against me. What is this that I hear of thy brethren and their fighting men? If they come up against me, since thou hast thy part in my kingdom, thou must fight on my side.”

“Against thee have I sworn not to fight, but against the children of Ragnar and Aslaug, my brethren, neither will I lift an hand.”

Then the sons of Ragnar sailed ahead of their ships and came in secret to Ivar. And he told them of the trouble he had made between the kings; of the number of Ella’s men; and of where they could best meet him for the furthering of their own ends.

So when their men were come ashore there was a sore fight that lasted throughout the day, and always, when the need was greatest, was Ivar found, borne in his litter, among the Norsemen; yet he held no weapon in his hand, naught but a small white staff.

And at eventide the men of Northumbria were

all dead, or fled away, and only Ella remained, a prisoner in the hands of Ragnar's sons.

Then, remembering their father's cruel end, they took him forth next day and slew him, nor did Ivar say a word to stay their hands.

And this should not have been, and is a shame unto Ivar's name, since he had asked and had been granted were-gild for his father's life.

Yet, in that his deeds were good, and his rule merciful and just, soon did folks forget the death of Ella, and Ivar lived to a great old age within his lands; nor did he ever return to his own country. But his brethren went a-viking, gathering thereby wealth, that Aslaug and their wives warded for them in Sweden, until all perished; but still were left their children to keep alive the name of Ragnar Lodbrog through all days to come.