

# *A Sea Queen's Sailing*

## Chapter I

### The Old Chief and the Young

**T**HE black smoke eddied and wavered as it rose over my father's burning hall, and then the little sea breeze took it and swept it inland over the heath-clad Caithness hills which I loved. Save for that black cloud, the June sky was bright and blue overhead, and in the sunshine one could not see the red tongues of flame that were licking up the last timbers of the house where I was born. Round the walls, beyond reach of smoke and heat, stood the foemen who had wrought the harm, and nearer the great door lay those of our men who had fallen at the first. There were foemen there also, for it had been a good fight.

At last the roof fell in with a mighty crash and uprush of smoke and sparks, while out of the smother reeled and staggered half a dozen men

EDDIED: *swirled*

HEATH-CLAD: *covered with heather, a small evergreen shrub*

FOEMEN: *enemies*

who had in some way escaped the falling timbers. I think they had been those who still guarded the doorway, being unwounded. But among them were not my father and brothers, and I knew that I was the last of my line by that absence.

It was not my fault that I was not lying with them under our roof yonder. I had headed a charge by a dozen of our best men, when it seemed that a charge might at least give time for the escape of the few women of the house to the glen. My father had bidden me, and we went, and did our best. We won the time we fought for, and that was all. Some of us got back to the hall, and the rest bided where they fell. As for me, I had been stunned by an axe blow, which my helm had turned, and came to myself to find that I was bound hand and foot, and set aside under the stable wall with two others of our men, captives also. Thence I must watch all that went on, helplessly, and after the roof fell I cared no more what should be done with me, for I was alone and desolate. Nor did I know who these foemen were, or why they had fallen on us. In the gray of the morning they had come from inland, and were round the hall while we broke our fast. We had snatched our weapons as best we might, and done what we could, but the numbers against us were too great from the first.

They had come from inland, but they were not Scots. We were at peace with all the Caithness folk, and had been so for years, though we had few

HELM: *helmet*

JARLS: *chieftains*

dealings with them. My father had won a place for himself and his men here on the Caithness shore in the days when Harald Harfager had set all Norway under him, for he was one of those jarls who would not bow to him, and left that old Norse land which I had never seen. Presently, he handselled peace for himself here by marriage with my mother, the daughter of a great Scots lord of the land, and thereafter had built the hall, and made the haven, and won a few fields from the once barren hillside. And now we had been well-to-do, till this foe came and ended all.

They were not Norsemen either. The Orkney jarls were our friends, and for us Harald cared not. Norsemen on the Viking path we knew and welcomed, and being of that brotherhood ourselves, we had nothing to fear from them. It is true that we owned no king or overlord, but if the Scots king asked for scatt we paid it, grumbling, for the sake of peace. My father was wont to call it rent for the hillsides we tilled.

Yet it would have been better to be swept out of the land by the Scots we won it from, than to be ruined thus for no reason but that of wanton savagery and lust of plunder, as it seemed. At least they could have given us fair warning that they meant to end our stay among them, and take the place we had made into their own hands.

Well, no doubt, I should find out more presently. Meanwhile, as I have said, I cared for naught, lying

HANSELLED: *purchased*

SCATT: *a tax for the use of public lands*

WONT: *accustomed*

still without a word. Then the men from out of the hall were brought and set with us; for, blinded as they were with the smoke, it had been easy to take them. That one who was set down next to me was black from head to foot and scorched with the burning, but he tried to laugh as his eyes met mine. It was Dalfin of Maghera, the Irish guest who was with us. He had taken a passage in a Norse ship from Belfast, meaning to see lands across the sea, and had bided here when he found that we could show him hunting such as he had never heard of. The mighty aurochs still fed on our hills, and we told tales in hall when guests wondered at the great heads that were on the walls, of how this one and that had been won. The ship had put in here to wait for wind, and of course we were glad to see her crew and hear what news they had of the greater world.

"Friend," I said, "it is hard that you should be brought to this pass."

"It has been the best fight I ever knew," he answered. "The only pity is that it has gone the wrong way. But yonder is a grand funeral pile for the brave men who have fallen. Surely the smoke will bring down the whole countryside on these ruffians?"

I shook my head. What happened to us was the affair of no Scot. Rather they would be setting their own places in order in case their turn came next.

AUROCHS: *a now extinct species of large, black oxen*

"Well," said Dalfin, "whom are we fighting, then?"

One of our men answered him. He was a Norseman, named Sidroc.

"Red hand, wandering Vikings. Wastrels from every land, and no man's men. Most of them are Danes, but I have heard the tongues of Frisian and Finn and Northumbrian amongst them. We are in evil case, for slavery is the least we have to fear."

"Nay," said Dalfin; "death is a lesser evil than that."

"A man may make shift to escape from slavery," answered the other, and both were silent.

Then for a moment I had half a hope that help was at hand for us, if too late. Round the westward point crept two longships under their broad, brown sails, making for our haven. But a second glance told me that they were the ships belonging to this crew. Doubtless, they had landed the force somewhere along the coast beyond our ken, and now were coming to see how the raid had fared. The matter was plain enough to me now.

Half a dozen men came toward us at this time, leaving the rest to sort the piles of plunder they had brought from the village. I was glad, in a sort of dull way, that none of it came from the hall, for at least no one of them might boast that he wore my father's weapons and war-gear. The foremost of these men were a gray-haired old chief and a

WASTRELS: *idlers*

MAKE SHIFT: *make an attempt*

KEN: *sight*

young man of about my own age, who was plainly his son; and I thought it certain that these two were the leaders of the foe. They were well-armed at all points, and richly clad enough, and I could but think them of gentle birth. The men who followed them were hard-featured warriors, whose dress and weapons were strange to me.

We sat still and stared back at them, as they stood before us, wondering little and caring less, so far as I was concerned, for what they thought or would say. The old chief ran his eye down our wretched line, stroking his long beard as if noting our points, while the young man seemed to have a sort of pity for us written on his face.

“Well,” said the old chief at last, “you have made a good fight, if foolish. You shall have your chance. Which of you will join me?”

“Tell us who you are first,” said Dalfin; “that is only fair.”

“I am Heidrek the Seafarer, and this is Asbiorn, my son. Mayhap you have heard of us before.”

I had done so. One of the men in our group had fled to us from Banff a year ago, after just such a raid as this. I heard him groan as the name was spoken.

Heidrek heard also, and laughed shortly.

“It seems that I am known,” he said. “Well, make your choice. The other choice is death, of course. I can leave no one to say that I am collecting goods from this shore.”

“Kill me, then,” said Dalfin, while I made no answer.

Two of our men cried that they would join him, and their bonds were cut by Heidrek's followers. One of them set himself by my side and spoke to me at once.

“There are worse things than going on the Viking path, Malcolm, son of my jarl,” he said earnestly. “Blame me not.”

I turned my head from him. Maybe I was wrong, but it seemed like treachery. Yet, after all, save myself there was not one left of our line, and he was deserting no one. Both these two were single men.

Young Asbiorn heard the man name me, and he came a pace nearer.

“So you are the son of the chief here,” he said quietly. “What is your name and rank? Will anyone ransom you?”

“I am the youngest son—I am worth nothing to any man,” I said.

“He is Malcolm, the jarl's best-loved son,” said that man of ours who had asked my pardon. “Maybe his mother's folk will ransom him. His grandfather is Melbrigda, the Scots jarl over yonder.”

He pointed across the hills where the smoke hung among the heather, and at that old Heidrek laughed, while the men at his heels chuckled evilly. For some reason of their own, which, maybe, was not far to seek, they were certain that Melbrigda

could find ransom for no one at this time, if he would. Asbiorn turned to our guest, seeing, no doubt, that he was not of the house-carles. The great gold torque on his neck seemed to shine all the more brightly by reason of the blackened mail and cloak that half hid it.

"My name?" said Dalfin, with a flash of pride in his gray eyes. "It is Dalfin, Prince of Maghera, in Ireland, of the line of the Ulster kings. Kill me, and boast that once you slew a prince. No need to say that I was bound when you did it." He spoke the Danish of Waterford and Dublin well enough.

Asbiorn flushed, with some sort of manly shame, as I believe, and even old Heidrek frowned uneasily. To have the deed they threatened set in all its shame before them was a new thing to them.

"Let the prince go, chief," I said, seeing this look. "He is a guest, and if this is some old feud with my father of which I have not heard, he does not come into it. He is a guest of the house."

"Faith," answered Heidrek savagely, "he has made it his own affair. He has been the bane of three of my best men. Aye, I have a feud here, and with all who dwell at ease. I am Heidrek the Seafarer."

He turned away, and left us with some sign to his men; but Asbiorn stood still and spoke again to us.

"You bear a Scottish name," he said. "Have you no Scottish kin besides Melbrigda?"

HOUSE-CARLES: *household men-servants*

TORQUE: *collar or necklace*

I shook my head, whereon Dalfin spoke for me.

"Here," he said, "if it is just a matter of ransom, let us both go; and come to Belfast in a year's time, or six months' time, as you will. Then my father will pay chief's ransom for the two of us. My word as a prince on it."

"It is a new thing with us to take ransom, or the word of any man," answered Asbiorn doubtfully, yet as if the plan seemed good to him.

One of the men who followed him broke in on that.

"No use, Asbiorn. We cannot put into any Irish port in safety. And over there princes are thick as blackberries—and as poor as the brambles that bear them."

"Aye, and as prickly," said Dalfin. "Have you learned that also?"

The men laughed. One of them said that the Irishman's Danish speech was not bad, and that it was a pity.

"So it is," Asbiorn put in hastily. "I will speak to my father."

The old chief was back with his crew, settling the sharing of the plunder. His son took him aside, and their talk was long; and, as it seemed, not altogether peaceful. Soon the men began to gather round them, and those with us went to hear what was going on. So we were left alone for a moment.

"Men," I said, "save your lives as this chief bids you. Join him now, and leave him when you may."

BANE: *destroyer*

AN YOU WILL: *if you please*

"Do you join him?" said one in answer.

"Not I."

"Neither do we. We live or die with you. What else should courtmen of the jarl's do?"

So said one of our Norsemen; but the eyes of the Scots were on the bleak hills, and for them the choice was harder, I think. They had no ties to us but those of common work and life together, and it was the old land that they must think of leaving. They said nothing, for until he has made up his mind a Scot will not answer.

They would have to decide directly, for now Heidrek was coming back to us. After him were a score or more of his men, and the rest were loading themselves with the plunder and starting one by one towards the haven, into which the two ships were just bearing up. They would be alongside the little wharf by the time the men reached it. Our own good longship lay there also, and I wondered what they would do with her. She was too good to burn.

Now Heidrek stood before me and looked at me, glowering, for a moment.

"Well," he said curtly, "do you join me? Mind you, I would not give every man the chance, but you and yours are men."

Before I could say aught, and it was on my mind to tell the pirate what I thought of him, if I spent my last breath in doing it, the courtman who had spoken with me just now answered for himself.

COURTMEN: *attendants*

"We do what the young jarl does," he said; "we follow him."

"The choice was whether you would follow me or not," answered Heidrek coldly; "I will have no leader but myself."

Some of his wilder followers cried out now that we were wasting time, and that an end should be made, while a sword or two were drawn among them. It was the way in which Heidrek's crew were wont to deal with captives when they had no hope of ransom from them. That I and my men should join such a crew was not to be thought of, if for a moment I had half-wondered if I ought to save the lives of these courtmen of ours by yielding. Both I and they would be shamed, even as Dalfin had said.

So I made no answer, and Heidrek was turning away with a shrug of his broad shoulders, while the men were only waiting his word to end the affair. Then Asbiorn, whose face was white and pitying as he looked at us, gripped his father by the arm and faced him.

"I will not have it thus," he said hoarsely. "The men are brave men, and it were shame to slay them. Give them to me."

Heidrek laughed at him in a strange way, but the men yelled and made a rush at us, sword in hand. Whereon Asbiorn swung his round shield into place from off his shoulder, and gripped his light axe and faced them. It was the lightness of

that axe which had spared me; but the men knew, and feared it and the skill of the wielder, and they shrank back.

"What, again?" said Heidrek. "I thought we had settled that question. What would you with them?"

"That is to be seen. Let me have them."

"Pay for them, then," shouted one of the men. "They are over and above your share of plunder."

"Aye," said Asbiorn at once, "I claim them for my share. Have them down to the new ship, and set them in the forepeak till I need them."

Then old Heidrek laughed harshly.

"Faith, I thought the lad a fool," he said. "Now I know that he will not be so short-handed as I thought. Some of you who are his crew will have an easier time at the oar with these slaves to pull for you."

The men laughed at that, and I knew that the danger was past. I minded what our man had said at first, how that one might escape from slavery. And I think that the nearness of death—though, in truth, not one of us would have shrunk from the steel that was so ready—had taught me how good a thing life might be even yet.

Most of the men went away, the matter being settled. Heidrek went also, without another word to his son, and we were left to Asbiorn and a few men of his own crew. The young chief smiled a little as he looked again at us, but even Dalfin could not smile back again.

FOREPEAK: *the front part of a ship*

MINDED: *remembered*

"Now," said Asbiorn, "cast off the lashings from their feet, and let them walk to the ship. See that they all get there, and set a watch over the place where they are stowed."

"Are we sailing at once?" a man asked.

"Yes, as usual. The chief has some new plan on foot already."

The end of it was that in a short time we were on board our own ship, and safely stowed forward, still bound. Heidrek had added her to his force, and manned her from the other two vessels; but before we reached the ship I saw that Heidrek's men had piled their slain into an outbuilding, set the fagot stack round it, and fired it to windward. There was no more honour for their fallen comrades than that.

So I saw the last of my home in Caithness, and before me was the life of a slave. They had stripped us of our mail and weapons, of course, and had handled us roughly, but that might be borne. The low door of the cramped sail-room under the foredeck closed, and we were in darkness, and then Dalfin set into words the thought of us all, with a sort of dull groan, "This morning I woke and thought it good to be alive!"

Almost at once the ship was warped out of the haven, and went to sea. The last hope I had that the Scots might yet gather and fall on these pirates left me at that time, and a sort of despair fell on me. I think I swooned, or slept at that time, for

FAGOT STACK: *a stack formed with bundles of sticks*

WARPED: *pulled with ropes*

thereafter I can remember no more until the day was almost spent, and a man came and opened the low door that he might bring us food—oaten loaves, and ale in a great jug. Asbiorn stood outside.

“You may as well loose the men,” he said carelessly; “we can mind them well enough.”

“More likely to have them out on us in some sort of berserk rage,” said the man, growling. “I ken what I would do in their place well enough.”

Asbiorn stooped and looked in on us. The light was behind him, and I could not see his face; but he spoke evenly, and not unkindly.

“Will your men bide quiet if I unbind you all?” he said.

“Aye,” I answered. “Why not?”

“Good reason enough why you should,” he said. “Let them loose.”

One by one we were unbound, some more men coming forward and watching us, with their weapons ready, in case we tried to fall on them. I dare say some old happening of the sort had taught them caution.

“There are thirty of us on board, mind you,” the man who set us free said, as he gathered the loose cords and went his way. “Better join us off-hand, and make the best of the business.”

“Good advice that, maybe,” said Dalfin, stretching himself. “Pass along yon ale-pot. I have a mighty thirst on me.”

“That is better,” said the man, and laughed. I heard him tell another that the Irishman would

come round first; but Dalfin's foot had warned me that he spoke in no earnest. Whether my friend had any plan in his mind I could not say, but at all events there was no use in making our bondage worse than it might be by sullenness.

It was good to be free from the lashings that had galled us so sorely, even if we were still captives indeed, and had no mind to pass from the cramped cabin, if one may call the forepeak so much, to the deck where the foemen sat and made merry with the stores they had taken from us. The wind was steady and light, and they had naught to do but rest and eat their supper. Asbiorn steered, and was alone on the afterdeck. The two other ships were not to be seen, and I suppose that they outsailed ours, for she had never been of the swiftest, though staunch and seaworthy in any weather. We were heading due north as if we would make the Faroe Islands, leaving the Orkneys to the starboard. I wondered if Heidrek had his lair in that far-off spot, whence we should have not the slightest chance of escape in the days to come; but I could say nothing to my comrades. Men of the crew sat just outside the low doorway, with their backs against the bulkhead, as if set there to overhear what we might say.

I looked among them for those two men of ours who had been ready to join Heidrek as their one chance of life, but I could not see them. Perhaps this was no wonder, as it is likely that they were drafted to the other ships in order to keep them



apart from us. It was certainly the safest thing to do.

Asbiorn himself seemed to have some thought of this sort with regard to us seven presently. Before sunset, he called some of the men and bade them bring Dalfin and myself and shut us into the after-cabin, under his own feet, as he sat at the steering-oar. Two of my men were to be left in the forepeak, for they were unhurt and could be shut in safely, while the other three were set amidships, with men of the crew round them. These three had some slight hurts, and a man set about caring for them, roughly but skilfully enough. But what I chiefly noticed as we were led aft, was that the ale was passing freely, and, as I should have thought, too often for good seamanship. That, however, was not my business, if it did seem to explain why Asbiorn separated us. Seven desperate men might do much among a helpless crowd, once they had snatched the arms they could reach from those who had forgotten to guard them.

The young chief paid no heed to us as we passed into the darkness of the low cabin. The door was closed and barred after us, and we were left to our own devices, though in a few minutes some man on the after-deck took off the little square hatch cover which let the light into the place. It was half-full of plunder of all sorts, and there was barely room, if soft stowage, for us.

"Well," I said to Dalfin, "if we can sleep, let us do so. I know that every word we speak can be heard on deck."

Whereon he answered me in Erse, and I could understand him well, for the old tongues of Scot of Ireland and Scot of Caithness are the same, if ages have wrought some changes in the way of speaking them here and there.

"Let these Danes make what they can of that," he said. "It will take a man born to the Gaelic to catch aught of it through yon hole, if he thinks he understands it in the open."

So in the Erse we spoke for a little while, and it was a hopeless talk at best. Only we agreed that we would stand by one another through whatever might come, and that the first chance of escape was to be taken, be it what it might.

All the while that we talked thus the noise of the men who drank grew wilder and more foolish. It was a cask of our old heather ale which they had broached, and that is potent, if to the unwary it seems harmless enough. Once or twice Asbiorn called to the noisiest to be still, but they heeded him little.

Soon, however, the noise ceased, and we thought that most of the men slept. After that was no sound but the wash of the waves, and the hum of the sail, and the creak of the great steering-oar as Asbiorn met the luff of the ship across the long, smooth sweep of the waves.

BROACHED: *opened*

MET THE LUFF OF THE SHIP: *steered the ship*

We, too, grew drowsy, for the cabin was close and warm beneath the sunny decks. All that could be said was said, and so we slept, if it were but uneasily.