

Leofwine the Monk

Chapter I

The Thane's Household



T was a wild, wet day in the early autumn, and the gusts of east wind that swept occasionally over the marshes and fens from the sea barely lifted the brown, choking fog that rested like a pall on everything, from the great woods of the Bruneswald to the level fens that stretched away to the brown peat bogs and low marsh lands, and the sea itself. Dull, dreary, and deathlike looked all the Danelagh in

THANE: *a freeman who owes service to an Anglo-Saxon lord*

FENS: *swampy lowlands*

PALL: *a cloth for spreading over a coffin*

DANELAGH: *the area of England controlled by the Danes*

that dim, cheerless light, and men as well as the womenfolk were glad to cower under the shelter of barns and peat-stacks, or round the blazing fire burning in the great hall.

It was round such a fire that a motley company were gathered this autumn afternoon of the year 1052. Eric, the highest thane in the service of the great Earl Leofric of Mercia, had built his mansion near the house of Bourne, the favorite residence of the Countess Godiva, for Editha, his eldest daughter, was bower maiden to Godiva, and he, loving his children very tenderly, did not want to part with his child entirely. Here he could see her almost every day; and, moreover, Editha could come home sometimes, and teach her younger sisters something of what she learned from being in close attendance upon the great and sainted lady, her mistress.

The neighborhood of the earl's household had not proved an unmixed blessing to the thane's family, however, for his second son, whom his father had intended for a monk, had chosen to be a follower of the Lord Hereward, who had caused his mother so much grief by his lawless doings that he was at last outlawed, and fled from the Danelagh to Scotland. Little had been heard of him since, or of Alric Ericson, only that the latter had fled to Flanders instead of Scotland. In his stern, silent way, the thane had grieved bitterly over the loss of

BOWER MAIDEN: *lady's maid*

CADS: *younger sons*

SERFS: *peasants required to serve an Anglo-Saxon lord*

FURBISHING: *polishing*

his brave, daring son—for that he was both, none could deny—but that was past now, and everybody had been so strictly forbidden ever to mention his name, that even the thane might have thought he was forgotten by all save himself and his wife.

Had he entered his hall unawares this afternoon, however, he would have found that his cads and serfs, sitting now at the long oaken table drinking strong ale and furbishing their arms, were neither forgetful nor reticent concerning the prodigal; and that in spite of drunken brawls and fights, highway robbery and housebreaking, the lawless young Alric had made a place for himself in the heart of all his father's house-carls.

“He was a true viking,” whispered one in a tone of admiration, as his comrade concluded the recital of some deed of prowess in which Alric had rescued a hapless maiden from some band about as lawless as themselves, who were bearing her off to Bristol to be sold in the slave market there. She was now a nun in the convent of Crowland—for the convent was the only refuge for orphans in those days—and the house-carls were of opinion that Alric would yet return to his home, for the nun had promised, when she heard of his flight, to pray for the return of her deliverer. Perhaps it was this that kept the hope alive in so many hearts at his home, for certain it is that whenever two or three could get together, Alric was sure to be the

RETICENT: *quiet, reserved*

HOUSE-CARLS: *household men-servants*

PROWESS: *exceptional bravery or skill*

HAPLESS: *unfortunate*

subject of conversation before long, both among the serving-maids and the house-carls.

The mansion of Eric was as unlike any modern structure as can well be imagined, and to modern eyes would look like nothing but an irregular group of substantial barns with conical roofs, with here and there a lean-to, that had been added as the needs of the family increased. In the center of this group of buildings was the great hall, opening into the courtyard; on one side was the chapel, on the other side the "bower," or ladies' room. Grouped at the back of these, or stretching away on either side, were the kitchens and bedrooms for the family, the storerooms for all kinds of merchandise—with their lean-to additions—all built of stone below, and scarcely less solid timber above. Eric being a substantial well-to-do thane, standing high in his lord's favor, had just such a house as this, perfect in all its appointments, with oaken tables and settees in the great hall, and a good supply of rushes for the ladies' bower. Here there was also a couch supplied with straw cushions and pillows, which likewise served for a bed at night.

In this, the best room of the house, now sat Elswitha, the wife of Eric. She was a true Saxon matron, whose love to her Danish lord was mixed with no little fear; she consequently lavished on her children all the tenderness of her heart. Eric accused her of having spoiled their eldest son,

APPOINTMENTS: *furnishings*

SETTEES: *wooden couches*

who should now be his companion in arms, as he would by and by succeed to the family estates, and have to serve Alfgar, Earl Leofric's son; but, unfortunately for Eric's pride and ambition, Leofwine hated the stir and turmoil of such a life as his father had planned for him, and though his natural gentleness and obedience made him learn all that his father required of him in the use and furbishing of weapons, he never willingly handled one after the lesson was over, but in fine weather would plunge into the depths of the wood, or walk to some unfrequented part of the fen, where, by some shining river reach, or among the reed ponds and alder beds, would watch with deepest interest the ways of birds and insects—how they built their nests and reared their young, or changed their modes and forms of life as the seasons changed. "He was no viking, no Dane's son," the house-carls whispered as he returned with treasures from the woods and fen that Alric had more than once laughed at and trampled upon in contemptuous disdain, for he did not care for birds' nests except to tear them up, and a forsaken one he would have disdained to touch; whereas, Leofwine would peep at the old birds as they went in and out, but would not lay a finger on their nest until they had finally left it.

Leofwine rarely sat in the great hall. He soon learned to know that he and his treasures were despised by the roistering house-carls, and so he

REACH: *stretch of water*

ROISTERING: *noisy and unruly*

retreated to his mother's bower, where, seated on the rushes in one corner, he could, undisturbed, examine more closely what he had brought home. It was because of this quiet, studious habit that his mother had him taught to read and write by an old monk, and this enabled him to pass pleasantly the long, dull days of autumn and winter, when otherwise time would have passed heavily for lack of suitable employment; beyond this Elswitha did not look at present. If he learned this clerkly art, like the monks, he might write and illuminate a psalter by and by, perhaps, worthy to be presented to the Lady Godiva, and this was the mother's highest ambition for her son.

When her husband heard of this, however—and he regarded it as little less than treason against his authority—he was in a dreadful rage. “Whoever heard of a thane, a Dane's son, learning such monkish ways!” he exclaimed. And if he could he would have taken the knowledge from Leofwine at almost any cost. But the mischief was done, and the boy was not likely to forget what he had learned, for every scrap of paper on which there was any writing was added to his store of treasures, and a very odd collection it was.

Despite his father's anger, however, Leofwine had written out the psalter, and was now engaged in illuminating it; and the absence of Eric just now afforded him an excellent opportunity for prosecuting this work. And so this dull

CLERKLY ART: *reading and writing*

ILLUMINATE: *decorate with gold, silver or brilliant colors*

PSALTER: *a book containing a collection of psalms*

afternoon Leofwine was sitting before a reading stand, with his work spread out before him, as near the window as possible; while his mother and sisters, often pausing in their work of embroidering the altar cloth on which they were engaged, listened to the sougning of the wind as it swept round the house.

"It was just such a day as this that Sister Editha went away to Coventry to attend upon the Lady Godiva," said the eldest of the three girls, who sat at their mother's feet.

"Is Coventry as far as Constantinople, Mother?" asked little Edburgha, the youngest; for beyond their little world of the Bruneswald the girls had never been, and London, and Coventry, and Rome, and Constantinople were all equally distant and equally famous, according to their belief.

Leofwine suddenly lifted his head from his work of coloring a saint's dress in bright vermilion and exclaimed, "Mother, it was just such a day as this that Gurth, the swineherd, came to tell us Alric had gone to Flanders!"

Elswitha sighed as she answered, "True, my son;" and then a silence fell upon all, until Edburgha startled them by asking,

"Will he be back soon now, Mother?"

"Be back soon!" slowly repeated the lady.

"Yes;" and the little girl crept closer to her mother's knee as she whispered, "Yes, Mother. I heard the werewolves driven by the witches last

PROSECUTING: *continuing*

SOUGHING: *murmuring*

VERMILION: *red*

night, and they came closer, closer, almost to the stockade, and then I knew something must happen; and what could it be but Brother Alric coming home?"

The maids had stopped their work with the distaff to listen to the child, and now crowded closer to the bed on which their mistress reclined, dumb with a nameless terror that had suddenly seized them at the mention of werewolves and witches. The stoutest hearted of the house-carls in the great hall would have been equally terrified had they heard it, for these descendants of the old sea kings, who feared not the face of mortal man or the edge of sword or ax, lived in daily terror of pucks and ghosts, will-o'-the-wisps, and spirits of the woods and waters. The old superstition was not left so far behind that Christianity could break their belief in these things yet, only Odin being exchanged for the White Christ now; and having declared themselves His men, they would cross themselves on brow and breast as a magical charm against the spells of these powers of darkness, and thus the region of superstition was changed and modified a little, but far from conquered.

Leofwine crossed himself, too, as he looked up from his work by the window; but it was with more reverence than the maids or his sisters had made this sign, and he came slowly across to his mother's side to question little Edburgha more closely. He was a tall, slight-built lad, now

PUCKS: *fairies*

ODIN: *a Norse god*

nearly eighteen, but looking younger from the profusion of fair golden hair that fell upon his neck and shoulders, and now half-veiled his pale, serious face, as he leaned forward to question his sister.

"Who told thee they were wolves that thou heardst?" asked Leofwine.

"I know they were," replied the little girl confidently. "I have heard wolves—common wolves, such as the house-carls hunt and kill sometimes, but those I heard last night were not like them."

"How dost thou know? thou didst not see them!" exclaimed Leofwine, anxious to allay his mother's fears by convincing her that it was all a trick of Edburgha's imagination.

"No one could see them, of course, but the witches who were driving them. Leofwine, I heard them, too," added the child, with a shudder, while all the maids again crossed themselves, and Elswitha laid her face in her hands.

But it seemed that Leofwine would not be convinced. "Nay, if thou heardst these things thou wouldst have screamed, and have run to someone to tell what thou heardst," he said.

"Leofwine, they would not let me. Something held me back all day when I wanted to tell my mother, and, of course, it must be the witches," replied Edburgha, still in the same serious tone.

"It could be nothing else!" exclaimed her mother at this point. "Leofwine, it is of no use trying to

fight against spirits; the child hath heard the witches of the wood, and something will surely happen, for they have not been heard by any in this house since Alric went away,” and the lady sighed deeply as she spoke. The terror-stricken maids crowded closer round their mistress, each wondering what disaster these witches would cause, but none daring, at present, to speak. A gloomy silence seemed to have fallen upon all of them but little Edburgha, and she again asked, “Will not Alric come home again, Mother? If these were the witches who took him away, perhaps they want to tell us that he is coming home again—home ‘over the swan bath,’ that nurse sings of in the *saga*,” added the child.

But no one seemed inclined to answer this question of Edburgha’s, and at length her mother bade her be quiet, and not talk about Alric again.

“Thy father will be home from his service with the carls ere night-fall,” added the lady, turning to her son; “see to it that the fire be replenished, and the mead and ale placed ready; also, if any of those witless house-carls have drunk their senses away, let them be carried to the barn, and clean straw be shook down upon them.”

Leofwine went out to do his mother’s bidding, smiling as he went, at her care for her drunken servants’ comfort. Men might well say she spoiled her sons when she thus pampered her house-carls.