

THE MAGIC RUNES

CHAPTER I

THE HERO-CHILD

A LONG cavalcade of travel-stained, weary-looking men, women and children were plodding slowly along through a rutty road or clearing, in a dense forest, one evening, near the end of the summer of 782. Sad and despairing looks were exchanged between the prisoners from time to time, but no one ventured to speak except the guards, who were conducting them from their native land of Saxony to another part of the great king Charlemagne's dominions.

CAVALCADE: *procession*

DOMINIONS: *kingdom*

They were not more harsh, perhaps, than soldiers usually were in those rough times, but to be kind to these Saxons they thought would seem as though they cared little for Christianity, for these prisoners were heathens, who again and again had defied the great Christian champion Charlemagne. After their supposed subjugation, they had murdered the missionaries who went to teach them, and returned to the old idolatry with its savage customs and cruel rites.

The Frankish king, who had united most of the Christian states of Europe under his rule, was determined to drive heathenism away, and so now he had ordered that many of the unconquerable Saxons should be taken to those parts of his kingdom where Christianity was well-established, and these were now on their way. They cared little for the rough guards or the flourishing of spears and battle-axes; but the more timid women

SUPPOSED SUBJUGATION: *supposed submission*

and children quickened their flagging footsteps at the sight of the gleaming weapons, and thus they were frightened onward for a little distance, until utter weariness overcame even the timidity of some, and they sank down helpless by the roadside.

“I told thee the distance was too great,” said one of the officers to his companion, as he saw two or three of the weakest fall out of the ranks. “Half the women and children will drop dead on the road if we go much further.”

The other muttered something as he looked down at the cut and bleeding feet of the woman before him. He saw it was impossible for her to go further, for two of her children had flung themselves upon her, and were even in a worse condition than their mother, while another and another dropped down at sight of them.

“Call a halt,” said one of the officers, with a groan.

FLAGGING: *failing*

But consternation rather than relief appeared in the faces of the Saxons, and one old man more bold than the rest ventured to remonstrate with the officers.

“Do you want the spirits to carry us off that you bring us here to their stronghold? Presently they will be abroad, and woe to any mortal found invading their kingdom. Be merciful, my masters, and put us to the sword, here, as we stand. We fear not death, but make us not the sport of these enemies of mankind.”

The officers looked at each other in silence and shivered visibly. They were brave men, the bravest and most reliable of Charlemagne’s army, and would not have shrunk from the face of mortal foe, though they had been ten times outnumbered; but they shared in a less degree the fears of their prisoners, and cursed their folly for entering the forest so late in the day.

Encouraged by their hesitation another

CONSTERNATION: *sudden alarm and dismay*

REMONSTRATE: *protest*

stepped forward. He was pale and wasted now from illness and recently-healed wounds, but there was the light of dauntless courage in his eyes as he said:

“Leave me behind with the woman. She is my wife, and I will share her fate, whatever it be. But journey forward with these. It may be their strength will hold out until the forest is passed.”

“Aye, aye, let us go forward,” shouted, or rather groaned, half-a-dozen Saxons in chorus.

The two officers held a whispered consultation upon this proposal, and at last it was decided to act in accordance with it. Several who had fallen down had struggled to their feet again, for the horrors of the march were as nothing to the terror that possessed them at the thought of being left behind in the realms of the forest spirits.

So the tramp, tramp, of the weary feet went on, and the little party of four were left

by themselves. The woman had mercifully escaped from the terror for the present, for she was insensible; and the children were too much overpowered with fatigue to think of anything but the blessed rest on their mother's bosom.

So the man sat and watched in grim silence the passing away of his companions, listening to their retreating footsteps until no sound was heard save the chirrup of the birds or the rustling of the leaves. But as the shadows lengthened, every woodland sound made the brave man start and shiver with undefined terror. More terrible than the battlefield to him was this silent watch in the gloaming, waiting for he knew not what, expecting each moment that the dreaded enemies of mankind would make themselves visible before him, or fly off perhaps with his children in different directions, while he would be powerless to raise a finger in their defense.

INSENSIBLE: *unconscious*

GLOAMING: *dusk*

Presently a strange sound fell upon his ear, like the voice of a child singing, but to Godrith it only brought fresh terror. Great drops stood on his brow as he glanced at his unconscious wife and children. Now his hour had come, and the forest spirits were about to wreak their vengeance on him for invading their territory. Here his gods were powerless, whatever they might be able to do for him on the battlefield. They could not aid him now, and so the man had nerved himself for the worst, when, through a narrow alley between the trees opposite came a little girl, peering under the bushes, and occasionally stooping to pick up something and put it into her lap, but still singing in a joyous, unconscious fashion.

So intent was she on her singing and nut-gathering that she did not see the little group of wayfarers, and when her eyes did at last fall upon them, it would be hard to decide which looked the most frightened.

WREAK THEIR VENGEANCE: *take their revenge*

She stood spellbound with fright, staring at the unwonted spectacle, while Godrith sat expecting this forest spirit to fall upon them in wrath and indignation for venturing to sit there. At length his Saxon spirit of daring returned sufficiently to enable him to say, "Come on, and do thy worst. We are in thy power now."

For a moment the child paused as if wishing to run away, then, gathering courage, she slowly came a little closer. "Are they asleep?" she asked, and then seeing the torn, blood-stained little feet, she forgot her terror in pity for them, and said, "Shall I fetch you some water and healing salve?"

These words put Godrith into a state of perplexity not easy to be comprehended. "Who art thou?" he demanded.

The question startled the little girl, and she stepped back a few paces as she timidly answered, "I am Adalinda, the daughter of Pepin the charcoal burner."

But the traveler shook his head as he muttered, "It is Scyld, the hero-child, come to aid us," for he could not get rid of his superstitious fears sufficiently to believe the girl was a mortal like themselves, and, as it was clear to him by this time that she had no evil intention towards them, then she must be one of the good spirits favorable to mankind; but he would have to obey her commands, whatever they might be.

The little girl knew nothing of what was passing in the strange traveler's mind, but she saw that he looked less fierce, and so she ventured a step nearer to make a closer inspection of the woman and children. "Do not move before I come back," she said, "I will fetch some water, and bring my father, if he has come home," saying which, the little girl ran back the way she came, leaving the man still in a maze of puzzled bewilderment.

"It must be brave Scyld, for no mere mortal child would dare to roam alone through

SCYLD: *a boy king in Danish mythology*

the terrible forest; singing, too, in the very stronghold of the spirits,” and he shivered at the bare thought of such temerity.

In a little while the girl returned, bearing in her hands a large drinking horn full of water, and a good-sized loaf of coarse bread, which she silently handed to the man, then drew forth a piece of white rag from her bosom, which she wetted, and laid a piece of on each of the bleeding feet.

Godrith watched her with eager eyes as she tenderly took out the thorns. “Who art thou?” he asked again.

“Only a little Christian maiden,” she said, still proceeding with her work.

“But—but we are not Christians,” said Godrith, “we are Saxons, followers of the mighty Woden.”

“It matters not,” said the little girl calmly, “the White Christ loves Saxons, and hath sent me to help you.”

“But I own Him not—I have never sworn fealty to Him,” exclaimed the man.

BARE: *plain*

TEMERITY: *boldness*

The little girl shook her head. "All that is because thou dost not know Him," she said.

By this time the woman began to stir and show signs of returning consciousness, and the girl lifted the children gently, and laid them beside their father, who seemed almost as powerless as they were. In point of fact, the girl's last statement, that she was a Christian maiden, and had been sent by the White Christ to help them, was far more perplexing than his former theory about her being the fabulous Scyld, the hero-child, celebrated in their songs, and his mind was in a state of amazement as he silently watched her raise his wife's head and give her some water.

"Where are we?" asked the woman faintly, as soon as she had recovered a little.

"Not far from shelter," said the girl, "my father will be here soon," and even as she spoke, footsteps were heard, and then the grimy figure of the charcoal burner was seen approaching.

WODEN: *a Saxon god*

FEALTY: *to be faithful*

“Peace be to thee, friend,” said the newcomer, speaking in the Saxon tongue like his daughter.

The sight of the man somewhat restored Godrith to his normal condition, for he looked like what he professed to be—a very commonplace charcoal burner, with nothing mysterious about him, except his choice of a dwelling place.

The children were rousing up now, and began crying for their mother, but their father instantly quelled their complaining, reminding them that at the Druids’ school they had learned to be brave, but that they were showing themselves cowards now.

“We will be brave, Father,” whispered the youngest, a boy of six, while the girl silently wiped her tears away, and looked at Adalinda, who appeared to be about her own age.

“My hut is close by,” said the charcoal burner, after surveying the group for a minute or two in silence. “We will carry thy

QUELLED: *silenced*

wife between us," he said, addressing the man, who instantly rose to his feet, thankful for this offer of shelter.

The woman was soon lifted from the ground, Pepin taking care that the greater part of the burden fell to him, for he could see that her husband was in no fit condition to carry her, although it would not do to tell him so.

In truth, by the time the hut was reached, Godrith was so exhausted, that Pepin easily persuaded him to stay by his wife, while he went back to fetch the children by himself.

The hut was firmly built of the tree trunks felled in the clearing, and was divided into an inner and outer room, the inner room being supplied with a bed of dried leaves and a chest. This was Adalinda's bedroom, but Godrith was directed to take his wife there, while his host went back for the children. Another sack of leaves was dropped from a recess, and laid on the floor of the outer

room for them, and then Adalinda helped her father to prepare a meal, for their guests were very hungry as well as footsore.

Fortunately, the little hut was not without provisions. Meal and dried boars' flesh had been bought in exchange for charcoal only a few days before, and a fire was soon lighted on some stones outside, and porridge made and meat cooked in a very short time.

Godrith looked at the food suspiciously at first, fearing lest some poisonous herb had been mixed with it, for it was hard to believe that a Christian would give such help and hospitality to a heathen Saxon. The Christians wanted all the world for themselves, and so were bent on exterminating all who differed from them.

This was the deduction the Saxons had drawn from the treatment they had received from the champion of Christianity, Charlemagne; and it was not surprising that they should think thus, for in his zeal the

Frankish king was continually forgetting the advice of the good English monk, Alcuin, and urged on by his fierce paladins and his own eager temper, he used fire and sword to convert his heathen subjects.

Some devoted missionaries from England—monks who held not their lives dear if only they could win these people to Christ, followed the conquering army, and were listened to for a time until the people had somewhat recovered from their defeat, and their old priests resumed their sway. Then the missionary and his few sincere converts were either murdered or driven away, and the whole district was in revolt and openly returned to paganism again.

This had been the story for years past, so it was not surprising that Godrith should receive his host's kindness with some suspicion at first.

PALADINS: *the twelve companions of Charlemagne*
SWAY: *influence*