

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

VIKING TALES

Jennie Hall

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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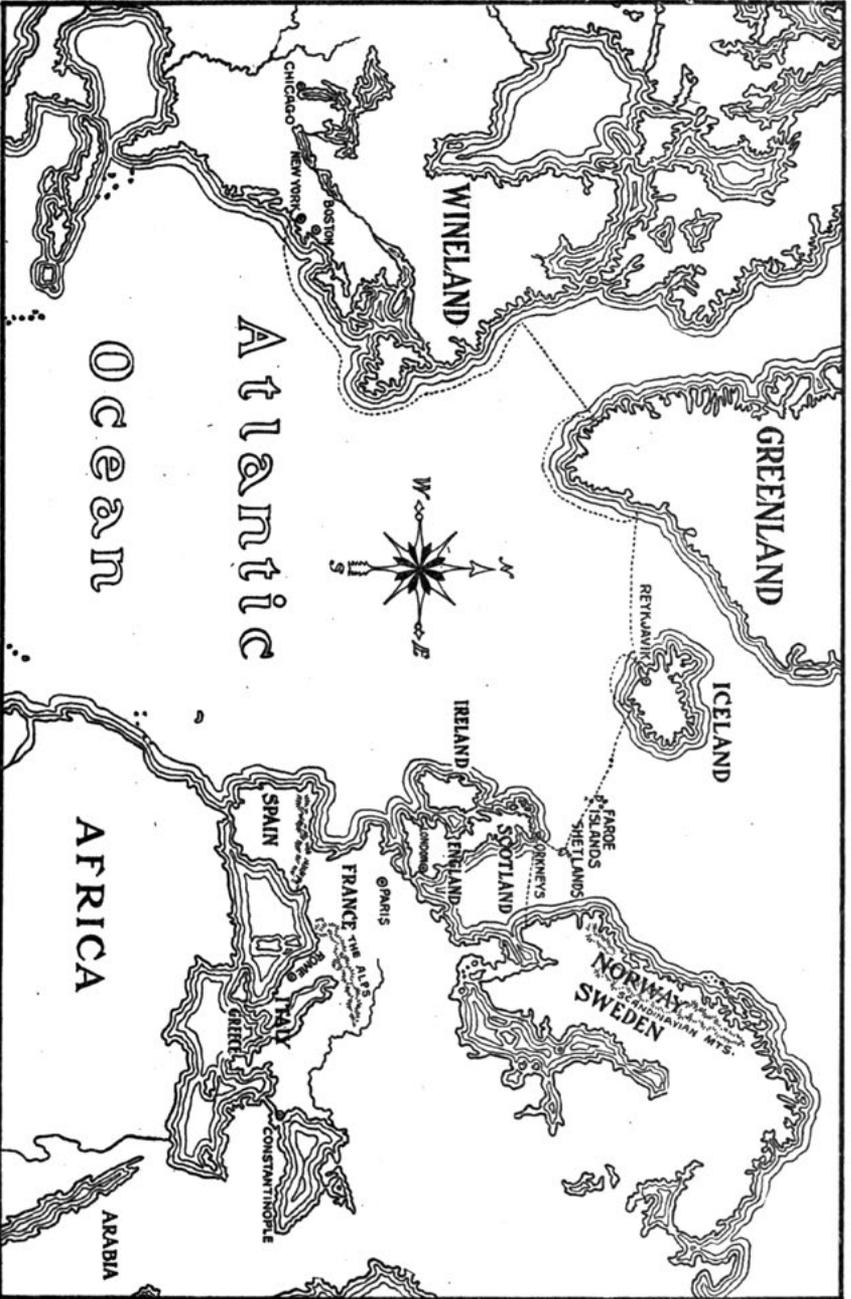
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A map showing the journeys of the Vikings

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What *the* Sagas Were

ICELAND is a little country far north in the cold sea. Men found it and went there to live more than a thousand years ago. During the warm season they used to fish and make fish-oil and hunt sea-birds and gather feathers and tend their sheep and make hay. But the winters were long and dark and cold. Men and women and children stayed in the house and carded and spun and wove and knit. A whole family sat for hours around the fire in the middle of the room. That fire gave the only light. Shadows flitted in the dark corners. Smoke curled along the high beams in the ceiling. The children sat on the dirt floor close by the fire. The grown people were on a long narrow bench that they had pulled up to the light and warmth. Everybody's hands were busy with wool. The work left their minds free to think and their lips to talk, what was there to talk about? The summer's fishing, the killing of a fox, a voyage to Norway. But the people grew tired of this little gossip. Fathers looked at their children and thought:

“They are not learning much. What will make them brave and wise? What will teach them to love their country and old Norway? Will not the stories of battles, of brave deeds, of mighty men, do this?”

So, as the family worked in the red fire-light, the father told of the kings of Norway, of long voyages to strange lands, of good fights. And in farmhouses all through Iceland these old tales were told over and over until everybody knew them and loved them. Some men could sing and play the harp. This made the stories all the more interesting. People called such men “skalds,” and they called their songs “sagas.”

Every midsummer there was a great meeting. Men from all over Iceland came to it and made laws. During the day there were rest times, when no business was going on. Then some skald would take his harp and walk to a large stone or a knoll and stand on it and begin a song of some brave deed of an old Norse hero. At the first sound of the harp and the voice, men came running from all directions, crying out:

“The skald! The skald! A saga!”

They stood about for hours and listened. They shouted applause. When the skald was tired, some other man would come up from the crowd and sing or tell a story. As the skald stepped down from his high position, some rich man would rush up to him and say:

“Come and spend next winter at my house. Our ears are thirsty for song.”

So the best skalds traveled much and visited many people. Their songs made them welcome everywhere. They were always honored with good

seats at a feast. They were given many rich gifts. Even the King of Norway would sometimes send across the water to Iceland, saying to some famous skald:

“Come and visit me. You shall not go away empty-handed. Men say that the sweetest songs are in Iceland. I wish to hear them.”

These tales were not written. Few men wrote or read in those days. Skalds learned songs from hearing them sung. At last people began to write more easily. Then they said:

“These stories are very precious. We must write them down to save them from being forgotten.”

After that many men in Iceland spent their winters in writing books. They wrote on sheep-skin; vellum, we call it. Many of these old vellum books have been saved for hundreds of years, and are now in museums in Norway. Some leaves are lost, some are torn, all are yellow and crumpled. But they are precious. They tell us all that we know about that olden time. There are the very words that the men of Iceland wrote so long ago—stories of kings and of battles and of ship-sailing. Some of those old stories I have told in this book.

PART I



IN NORWAY





The Baby

KING HALFDAN lived in Norway long ago. One morning his queen said to him:

“I had a strange dream last night. I thought that I stood in the grass before my bower.¹ I pulled a thorn from my dress. As I held it in my fingers, it grew into a tall tree. The trunk was thick and red as blood, but the lower limbs were fair and green, and the highest ones were white. I thought that the branches of this great tree spread so far that they covered all Norway and even more.”

“A strange dream,” said King Halfdan. “Dreams are the messengers of the gods. I wonder what they would tell us,” and he stroked his beard in thought.

Some time after that a serving-woman came into the feast hall where King Halfdan was. She carried a little white bundle in her arms.

“My lord,” she said, “a little son is just born to you.”

“Ha!” cried the king, and he jumped up from the high seat and hastened forward until he stood before the woman.

“Show him to me!” he shouted, and there was joy in his voice.

¹ See note about house on page 145.

The serving-woman put down her bundle on the ground and turned back the cloth. There was a little naked baby. The king looked at it carefully.

“It is a goodly youngster,” he said, and smiled. “Bring Ivar and Thorstein.”²

They were captains of the king’s soldiers. Soon they came.

“Stand as witnesses,” Halfdan said.

Then he lifted the baby in his arms, while the old serving-woman brought a silver bowl of water. The king dipped his hand into it and sprinkled the baby, saying:

“I own this baby for my son. He shall be called Harald. My naming gift to him is ten pounds of gold.”

Then the woman carried the baby back to the queen’s room.

“I own this baby for my son. He shall be called Harald”

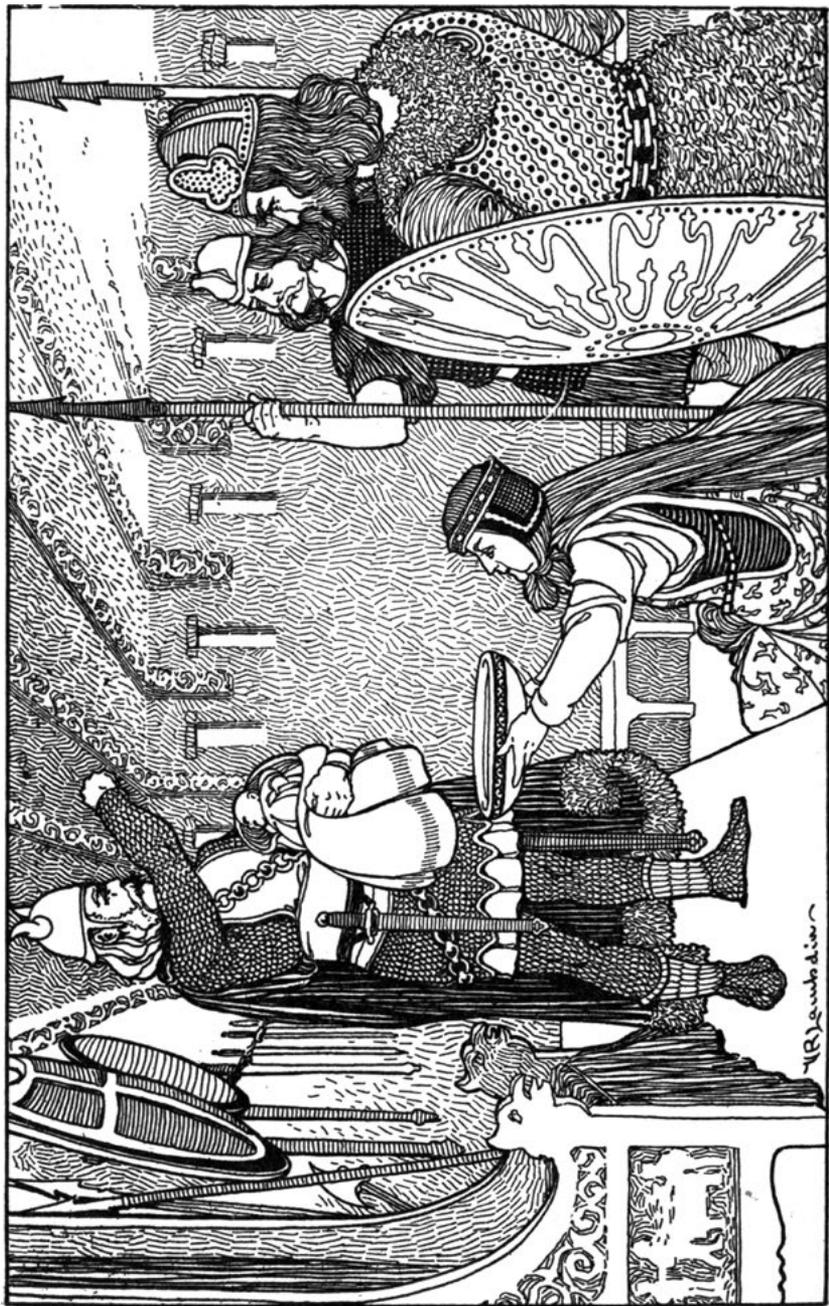
“My lord owns him for his son,” she said. “And no wonder! He is perfect in every limb.”

The queen looked at him and smiled and remembered her dream and thought:

“That great tree! Can it be this little baby of mine?”



2 See note about names on page 145.



"I own this baby for my son. He shall be called Harald"



The Tooth Thrall

WHEN Harald was seven months old he cut his first tooth. Then his father said:

“All the young of my herds, lambs and calves and colts, that have been born since this baby was born I this day give to him. I also give to him this thrall, Olaf. These are my tooth-gifts to my son.”

The boy grew fast, for as soon as he could walk about he was out of doors most of the time. He ran in the woods and climbed the hills and waded in the creek. He was much with his tooth thrall, for the king had said to Olaf:

“Be ever at his call.”

Now this Olaf was full of stories, and Harald liked to hear them.

“Come out to Aegir’s Rock, Olaf, and tell me stories,” he said almost every day.

So they started off across the hills. The man wore a long, loose coat of white wool, belted at the waist with a strap. He had on coarse shoes and leather leggings. Around his neck was an iron collar welded together so that it could not come off. On it were strange marks, called runes, that said:

“Olaf, thrall of Halfdan.”

But Harald’s clothes were gay. A cape of gray

velvet hung from his shoulders. It was fastened over his breast with great gold buckles. When it waved in the wind, a scarlet lining flashed out, and the bottom of a little scarlet jacket showed. His feet and legs were covered with gray woolen tights. Gold lacings wound around his legs from his shoes to his knees. A band of gold held down his long, yellow hair.

It was a wild country that these two were walking over. They were climbing steep, rough hills. Some of them seemed made all of rock, with a little earth lying in spots. Great rocks hung out from them, with trees growing in their cracks. Some big pieces had broken off and rolled down the hill.

“Thor broke them,” Olaf said. “He rides through the sky and hurls his hammer at clouds and at mountains. That makes the thunder and the lightning and cracks the hills. His hammer never misses its aim, and it always comes back to his hand and is eager to go again.”

When they reached the top of the hill they looked back. Far below was a soft, green valley. In front of it the sea came up into the land and made a fiord. On each side of the fiord high walls of rock stood up and made the water black with shadow. All around the valley were high hills with dark pines on them. Far off were the mountains. In the valley were Halfdan’s houses around their square yard.

“How little our houses look down there!” Harald

said. "But I can almost—yes, I can see the red dragon on the roof of the feast hall. Do you remember when I climbed up and sat on his head, Olaf?"

He laughed and kicked his heels and ran on.

At last they came to Aegir's Rock and walked up on its flat top. Harald went to the edge and looked over. A ragged wall of rock reached down, and two hundred feet below was the black water of the fiord. Olaf watched him for a while, then he said:

"No whitening of your cheek, Harald? Good! A boy that can face the fall of Aegir's Rock will not be afraid to face the war flash when he is a man."

"Ho, I am not afraid of the war flash now," cried Harald.

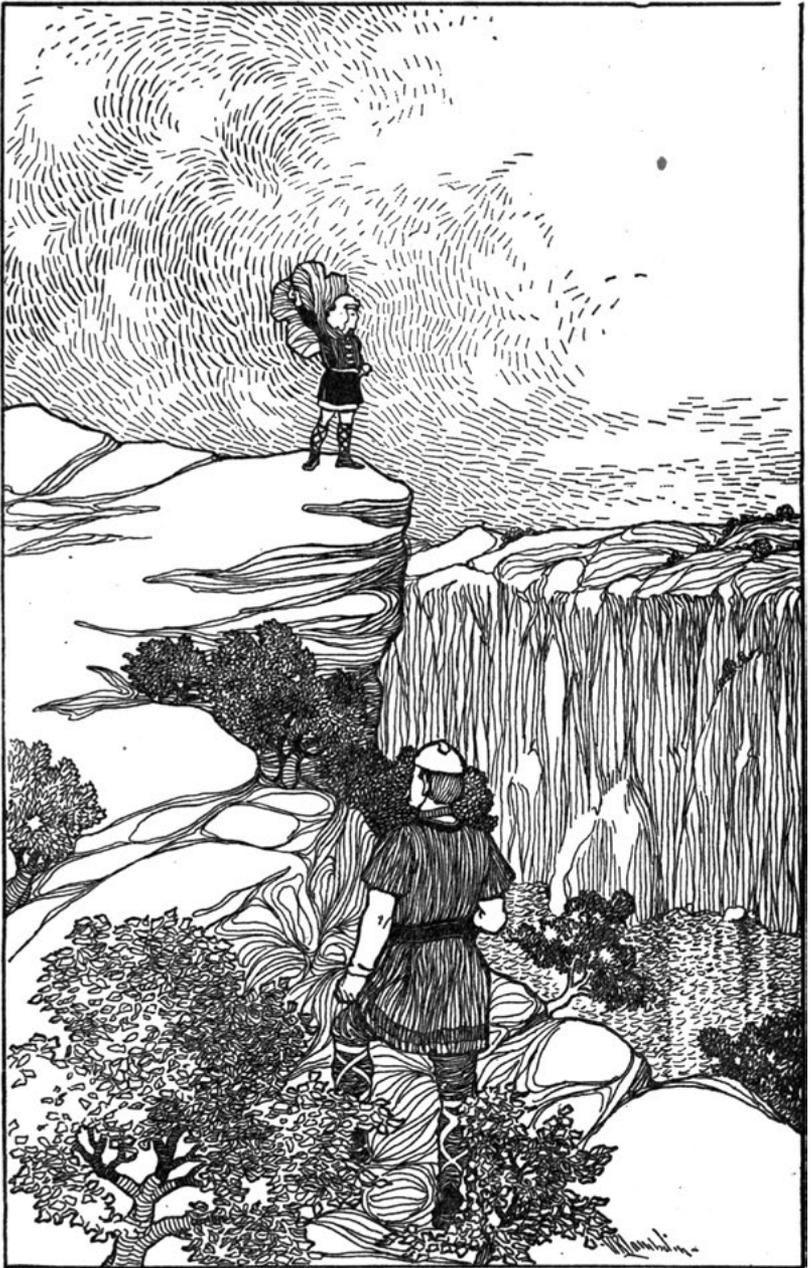
He threw back his cape and drew a little dagger from his belt.

"See!" he cried; "does this not flash like a sword? And I am not afraid. But after all, this is a baby thing! When I am eight years old I will have a sword, a sharp tooth of war."

He swung his dagger as though it were a long sword. Then he ran and sat on a rock by Olaf.

"Why is this Aegir's Rock?" he asked.

"You know that Asgard is up in the sky," Olaf said. "It is a wonderful city where the golden houses of the gods are in the golden grove. A high wall runs all around it. In the house of Odin, the All-father, there is a great feast hall larger than the whole earth. Its name is Valhalla. It has five hundred doors. The rafters are spears. The roof is thatched



“He threw back his cape and drew a little dagger from his belt”

with shields. Armor lies on the benches. In the high seat sits Odin, a golden helmet on his head, a spear in his hand. Two wolves lie at his feet. At his right hand and his left sit all the gods and goddesses, and around the hall sit thousands and thousands of men, all the brave ones that have ever died.

“Now it is good to be in Valhalla; for there is mead there better than men can brew, and it never runs out. And there are skalds that sing wonderful songs that men never heard. And before the doors of Valhalla is a great meadow where the warriors fight every day and get glorious and sweet wounds and give many. And all night they feast, and their wounds heal. But none may go to Valhalla except warriors that have died bravely in battle. Men who die from sickness go with women and children and cowards to Niflheim. There Hela, who is queen, always sneers at them, and a terrible cold takes hold of their bones, and they sit down and freeze.

“Years ago Aegir was a great warrior. Aegir the Big-handed, they called him. In many a battle his sword had sung, and he had sent many warriors to Valhalla. Many swords had bit into his flesh and left marks there, but never a one had struck him to death. So his hair grew white and his arms thin. There was peace in that country then, and Aegir sorrowed, saying:

“I am old. Battles are still. Must I die in bed like a woman? Shall I not see Valhalla?”

“Now thus did Odin say long ago:

“If a man is old and is come near death and cannot die in fight, let him find death in some brave way and he shall feast with me in Valhalla.’

“So one day Aegir came to this rock.

“‘A deed to win Valhalla!’ he cried.

“Then he drew his sword and flashed it over his head and held his shield high above him, and leaped out into the air and died in the water of the fiord.”

“Ho!” cried Harald, jumping to his feet. “I think that Odin stood up before his high seat and welcomed that man gladly when he walked through the door of Valhalla.”

“So the songs say,” replied Olaf, “for skalds still sing of that deed all over Norway.”





O l a f ' s F a r m

AT another time Harald asked:
“What is your country, Olaf? Have you always been a thrall?”

The thrall's eyes flashed.

“When you are a man,” he said, “and go a-viking to Denmark, ask men whether they ever heard of Olaf the Crafty. There, far off, is my country, across the water. My father was Gudbrand the Big. Two hundred warriors feasted in his hall and followed him to battle. Ten sons sat at meat with him, and I was the youngest. One day he said:

“You are all grown to be men. There is not elbow-room here for so many chiefs. The eldest of you shall have my farm when I die. The rest of you, off a-viking!”

“He had three ships. These he gave to three of my brothers. But I stayed that spring and built me a boat. I made her for only twenty oars because I thought few men would follow me; for I was young, fifteen years old. I made her in the likeness of a dragon. At the prow I carved the head with open mouth and forked tongue thrust out. I painted the eyes red for anger.

“‘There, stand so!’ I said, ‘and glare and hiss at

my foes.’

“In the stern I curved the tail up almost as high as the head. There I put the pilot’s seat and a strong tiller for the rudder. On the breast and sides I carved the dragon’s scales. Then I painted it all black and on the tip of every scale I put gold. I called her ‘Waverunner.’ There she sat on the rollers, as fair a ship as I ever saw.

“The night that it was finished I went to my father’s feast. After the meats were eaten and the mead-horns came round, I stood up from my bench and raised my drinking-horn³ high and spoke with a great voice:

“‘This is my vow: I will sail to Norway and I will harry the coast and fill my boat with riches. Then I will get me a farm and will winter in that land. Now who will follow me?’

“‘He is but a boy,’ the men said. ‘He has opened his mouth wider than he can do.’

“But others jumped to their feet with their mead-horns in their hands. Thirty men, one after another, raised their horns and said:

“‘I will follow this lad, and I will not turn back so long as he and I live!’

“On the next morning we got into my dragon and started. I sat high in the pilot’s seat. As our boat flashed down the rollers into the water I made this song and sang it:

3 See note about drinking-horns on page 146.

“The dragon runs.
Where will she steer?
Where swords will sing,
Where spears will bite,
Where I shall laugh.’

“So we harried the coast of Norway. We ate at many men’s tables uninvited. Many men we found overburdened with gold. Then I said:

“‘My dragon’s belly is never full,’ and on board went the gold.

“Oh! it is better to live on the sea and let other men raise your crops and cook your meals. A house smells of smoke, a ship smells of frolic. From a house you see a sooty roof, from a ship you see Valhalla.

“Up and down the water we went to get much wealth and much frolic. After a while my men said:

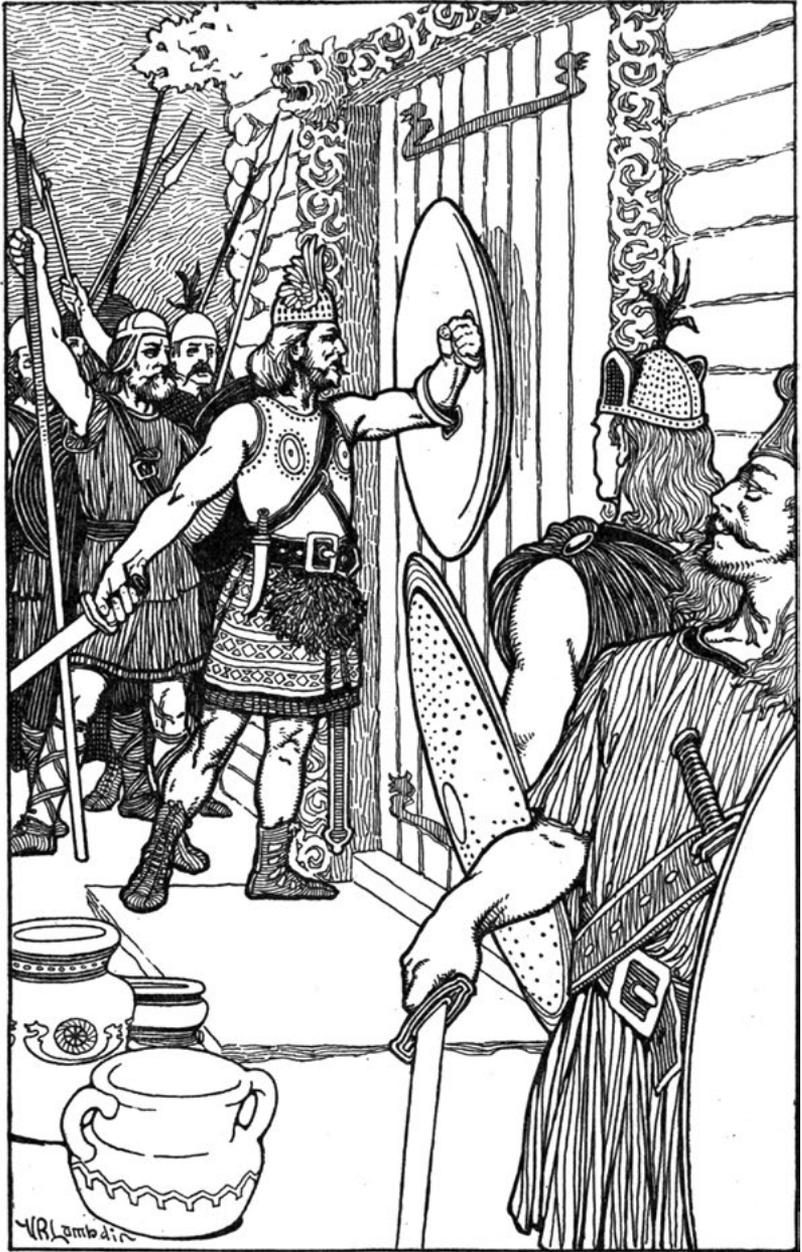
“‘What of the farm, Olaf?’

“‘Not yet,’ I answered. ‘Viking is better for summer. When the ice comes, and our dragon cannot play, then we will get our farm and sit down.’

“At last the winter came, and I said to my men:

“‘Now for the farm. I have my eye on one up the coast a way in King Halfdan’s country.’

“So we set off for it. We landed late at night and pulled our boat up on shore and walked quietly to the house. It was rather a wealthy farm, for there were tables and a storehouse and a smithy at the sides of the house. There was but one door to the house. We went to it, and I struck it with my spear.



"I struck my shield against the door so that it made a great clanging"

“‘Hello! Ho! Hello!’ I shouted, and my men made a great din.

“At last some one from inside said:

“‘Who calls?’

“‘I call,’ I answered. ‘Open! or you will think it Thor who calls,’ and I struck my shield against the door so that it made a great clanging.

“The door opened only a little, but I pushed it wide and leaped into the room. It was so dark that I could see nothing but a few sparks on the hearth. I stood with my back to the wall; for I wanted no sword reaching out of the dark for me.

“‘Now start up the fire,’ I said.

“‘Come, come!’ I called, when no one obeyed. ‘A fire! This is cold welcome for your guests.’

“My men laughed.

“‘Yes, a stingy host! He acts as though he had not expected us.’

“But now the farmer was blowing on the coals and putting on fresh wood. Soon it blazed up, and we could see about us. We were in a little feast hall,⁴ with its fire down in the middle of it. There were benches for twenty men along each side. The farmer crouched by the fire, afraid to move. On a bench in a far corner were a dozen people huddled together.

“‘Ho, thralls!’ I called to them. ‘Bring in the table. We are hungry.’

“Off they ran through a door at the back of the

4 See note about feast hall on page 146.

hall. My men came in and lay down by the fire and warmed themselves, but I set two of them as guards at the door.

“Well, friend farmer,’ laughed one, ‘why such a long face? Do you not think we shall be merry company?’

“We came only to cheer you,’ said another. ‘What man wants to spend the winter with no guests?’

“Ah!’ another then cried out, sitting up. ‘Here comes something that will be a welcome guest to my stomach.’

“The thralls were bringing in a great pot of meat. They set up a crane over the fire and hung the pot upon it, and we sat and watched it boil while we joked. At last the supper began. The farmer sat gloomily on the bench and would not eat, and you cannot wonder; for he saw us putting potfuls of his good beef and basket-loads of bread into our big mouths. When the tables were taken out and the mead-horns came round, I stood up and raised my horn and said to the farmer:

“You would not eat with us. You cannot say no to half of my ale. I drink this to your health.’

“Then I drank half of the hornful and sent the rest across the fire to the farmer. He took it and smiled, saying:

“Since it is to my health, I will drink it. I thought that all this night’s work would be my death.’

“Oh, do not fear that,!’ I laughed, ‘for a dead man sets no tables.’

“So we drank and all grew merrier. At last I stood up and said:

“I like this little taste of your hospitality, friend farmer. I have decided to accept more of it.’

“My men roared with laughter.

“‘Come,’ they cried, ‘thank him for that, farmer. Did you ever have such a lordly guest before?’

“I went on:

“‘Now there is no fun in having guests unless they keep you company and make you merry. So I will give out this law: that my men shall never leave you alone. Hakon there shall be your constant companion, friend farmer. He shall not leave you day or night, whether you are working or playing or sleeping. Leif and Grim shall be the same kind of friends to your two sons.’

“I named nine others and said:

“‘And these shall follow your thralls in the same way. Now, am I not careful to make your time go merrily?’

“So I set guards over every one in that house. Not once all that winter did they stir out of sight of some of us. So no tales got out to the neighbors. Besides, it was a lonely place, and by good luck no one came that way. Oh! that was fat and easy living.

“Well, after we had been there for a long time, Hakon came in to the feast one night and said:

“‘I heard a cuckoo to-day!’

“‘It is the call to go a-viking,’ I said.

“All my men put their hands to their mouths and

shouted. Their eyes danced. Big Thorleif stood up and stretched himself.

“‘I am stiff with long sitting,’ he said. ‘I itch for a fight.’

“I turned to the farmer.

“‘This is our last feast with you,’ I said.

“‘Well,’ he laughed, ‘this has been the busiest winter I ever spent, and the merriest. May good luck go with you!’

“‘By the beard of Odin!’ I cried; ‘you have taken our joke like a man.’

“My men pounded the table with their fists.

“‘By the hammer of Thor!’ shouted Grim. ‘Here is no stingy coward. He is a man fit to carry my drinking-horn, the horn of a sea-rover and a sword-swinger. Here, friend, take it,’ and he thrust it into the farmer’s hand. ‘May you drink heart’s-ease from it for may years. And with it I leave you a name. Sif the Friendly. I shall hope to drink with you sometime in Valhalla.’

“Then all my men poured around that farmer and clapped him on the shoulder and piled things upon him, saying:

“‘Here is a ring for Sif the Friendly.’

“‘And here is a bracelet.’

“‘A sword would not be ashamed to hang at your side.’

“I took five great bracelets of gold from our treasure chest and gave them to him.

“The old man’s eyes opened wide at all these

things, and at the same time he laughed.

“‘May Odin send me such guests every winter!’ he said.

“Early next morning we shook hands with our host and boarded the ‘Waverunner’ and sailed off.

“‘Where shall we go?’ my men asked.

“‘Let the gods decide,’ I said, and tossed up my spear.

“When it fell on the deck it pointed up-shore, so I steered in that direction. That is the best way to decide, for the spear will always point somewhere, and one thing is as good as another. That time it pointed us into your father’s ships. They closed in battle with us and killed my men and sunk my ship and dragged me off a prisoner. They were three against one, or they might have tasted something more bitter at our hands. They took me before King Halfdan.

“‘Here,’ they said, ‘is a rascal who has been harrying our coasts. We sunk his ship and men, but him we brought to you.’

“‘A robber viking?’ said the king, and scowled at me.

“I threw back my head and laughed.

“‘Yes. And with all your fingers it took you a year to catch me.’

“The king frowned more angrily.

“‘Saucy, too?’ he said. ‘Well, thieves must die. Take him out, Thorkel, and let him taste your sword.’

“Your mother, the queen, was standing by. Now

she put her hand on his arm and smiled and said:

“He is only a lad. Let him live. And would he not be a good gift for our baby?”

“Your father thought a moment, then looked at your mother and smiled.

“Soft heart!’ he said gently to her; then to Thorkel, ‘Well, let him go, Thorkel!’

“Then he turned to me again, frowning.

“But, young sharp-tongue, now that we have caught you we will put you into a trap that you cannot get out of. Weld an iron collar on his neck.’

“So I lived and now am your tooth thrall. Well, it is the luck of war. But by the chair of Odin, I kept my vow!”

“Yes!” cried Harald, jumping to his feet. “And had a joke into the bargain. Ah! sometime I will make a brave vow like that.”

