

OUR LITTLE
SAXON
COUSIN OF LONG AGO



JULIA DARROW COWLES

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by

JULIA DARROW COWLES





“TURGAR LAID HIS HAND WITH A GESTURE
OF AFFECTION UPON HIS BRACELET.”

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CHAPTER I
TURGAR'S HOME

It was a rude sort of home, yet strongly built. The stones which formed its walls had been torn away from the ruined turrets of an old Roman watch tower. The thralls of Wulstan had laid them.

The walls of the house were solid and heavy. All the light that made its way into the rooms came through narrow spaces left for the purpose between some of the stones. But rude though it was, it was a home of unusual comfort and refinement for the time. The ends of the wooden benches about the fireplace were carved with the figures and heads of animals; skins were thrown across the benches and upon the floor; and pieces of fine embroidery covered the cushions.

The home was in Saxon England, in the year 868, when Ethelred was King, and the young Prince Alfred had yet to earn his title of Alfred the Great.

Upon one of the skins spread upon the floor a boy lay stretched at full length, his chin propped in his hands,

and his eyes gazing dreamily into the glowing fire. It was plainly to be seen that his thoughts were far away.

Presently he brought himself to a sitting posture, and, swaying his strong lithe body in time to the cadence of the music, he began to sing:

Once on a time it happened that we,
on our vessel,
Ventured to ride o'er the billows,
the high dashing surges.

As the notes of the stirring song rang out, the great dog, which had been lying beside him, stirred, stretched himself, then sat upon his haunches as though ready to bound forth at a word.

The boy gave a sympathetic nod to the dog and continued his song:

Full of danger to us were the paths of the ocean—

But just as he finished the third line a gust of wind came through the hole in the roof above the fireplace, carrying with it a swirling cloud of smoke, which, for the moment, filled the room and threatened to choke both boy and dog.

“Ugh, what a way for the wind to treat us,” spluttered the boy. “It must be a wild night outside.”

As he spoke, a hand drew aside the heavy tapestry

in the doorway, and a stately, graceful woman entered the room. She was tall, and her gown of rich blue was embroidered with threads of gold, while a wide mantle was drawn about her waist and over her left shoulder, its ends falling almost to the hem of her dress. Upon her shoulder a jeweled clasp held the mantle in place.

“Mother,” said the boy, jumping to his feet as she entered, “sit on this side of the fire-place, where the smoke is not so bad. It is a wild night, and father will have a hard ride to the castle.”

“You are right, Turgar,” replied Gyneth. “I wish he might have put off going till the morning; but it was the King’s business, and that brooks no delay.”

“The Danes are not fighting, are they?” questioned Turgar anxiously.

“No,” answered his mother, “the Danes are quiet and in their camps; but the young Prince Alfred is soon to wed, and King Ethelred has matters to bring before his thanes.”

“And are you not going to the wedding of the Prince?” asked Turgar.

“Yes,” was the reply, “your father and I are asked, and so is your brother Withgar, but the wedding will not take place for a number of days. Your father will return for me.”



TURGAR JUMPED TO HIS FEET WITH CLENCHED FISTS.

“Oh, I wish I could see the wedding of the Prince!” exclaimed Turgar, with sparkling eyes. And then he added more quietly, and, with a slight flush, “He is my hero, mother! Did you know that he was my hero?”

“He may well be,” answered Gyneth, laying her hand lovingly upon Turgar's head. “Your father thinks him a wonderful youth. He is both honorable in his dealings and wise in counsel. I am glad he is your hero.”

Turgar dropped upon his knee before his mother and was about to ask for a story of his hero, when there was a sudden commotion outside.

The dogs in the yard began barking; the servants cried, “Hi, hi, who comes?”

Gyneth's face grew pale. Turgar jumped to his feet with clenched fists, and the great dog beside him, though he made no sound, drew back his lips in an ugly snarl, while the hair along his spine stood erect with bristling fierceness.

“The Danes!” This was the thought which shot through every mind—even the dogs seemed to know the word—for a band of these pirates and free-booters from the north was encamped in the country to the south, near the coast, where they proposed to spend the winter. They had promised to leave the Saxons in peace,

but the promise of a Dane was easily broken, and the people were in constant dread of a sudden raid.

But as the little group in the home of Wulstan stood with suspended breath, waiting to know the cause of the sudden outcry, they heard a shout of welcome, a friendly calling and answering, and their tense attitudes relaxed. It proved to be a belated band of hunters returning from the chase. Among them was Withgar, Turgar's older brother. He had killed a wild boar in the forest and was dragging it home.

Turgar dashed out to meet him, and a few moments later the two brothers entered the room where Gyneth sat.

"Oh, Withgar, do tell us of the hunt," cried Turgar. "I shall be so glad when I am old enough to go with you!"

Withgar smiled at the boy's eagerness as he said, "We had rare sport, though for a time I was not sure whether I was to get the boar, or the boar was to get me.

"I came upon it suddenly, and the horse that I was riding was not used to the hunt. Then my spear broke when I thrust at the boar and he turned and charged me. But luckily Acca was near, and a better thrall it would be hard to find. I shouted for his spear, when mine broke, and, balancing it well, he threw it to me and I caught it, though my horse was plunging badly. In a trice I gave the boar another thrust and made an end of him. And

now," he added lightly, "we shall have plenty of meat, and you will be glad of that, Turgar, I know."

Turgar's eyes shone like twin stars when Withgar finished, and it was clear that he was not thinking then of the boar's meat.

"Good! Good!" he cried.

To himself he said, "Oh, I do hope that I, too, may have great adventures, when I grow up.

And Turgar's wish was to be fulfilled in generous measure.

CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF A WONDERFUL JOURNEY

The Saxons were a restless people, and the men of the leading families seldom stayed long at home. The craftsmen, and those who tilled the fields, worked steadily enough, but the men of large estates, who had received their lands in return for services rendered the King, were constantly moving about.

Wulstan was a thane, a counselor of the King, and Withgar was a soldier, so Turgar and his mother were often left alone with the servants.

There was plenty going on about the place to entertain a young boy, and Turgar often occupied himself by going from one group of workmen to another. He watched the smith as he fashioned the implements for tilling the soil, or made knives for the use of Withgar in his hunting, or spear heads and swords for the soldiers.

At other times he watched the women gathering honey from the hives, for honey was the only sweetening of those days, and the keeping of bees was an important part of the farm industries.

Turgar was always eager to do something, and sometimes the smith would let him try his hand at beating the metal, or polishing the implements that had not too sharp an edge. Then they would talk together about Prince Alfred, or the Danes, or the old tales of early history and legend.

These old stories had a fascination for Turgar, and he often wished that he had some one to talk with who knew more about the true history of the country than the smith knew. When he asked, "Who built the old stone towers, such as our house is made from?" or "Why cannot we Saxons make splendid roads like the bit of road that lies to the west of us?" the smith would answer, "They say that the Romans built the towers and the roads, and they must have been master workmen, but who they were or where they came from I do not know."

When Wulstan was at home Turgar asked him many questions about the Romans, and Wulstan could tell wonderful stories; but he was not at home long at a time, and when he was at home there were many matters about the farm to keep him busy.

Turgar's mother, Gyneth, was a woman much above the average of her time, but she did not read or write, and neither in fact did Wulstan. Indeed, there were very few people in the land who could. Gyneth had a good

memory and she had learned much about the history of the country through the stories which had been handed down from one generation to another, and through the songs and tales of the minstrels who wandered about from castle to camp, and from camp to castle. These minstrels were welcomed wherever they went, and earned their living by means of their stories and songs.

History, preserved only by such means as these, could not be very accurate, and its heroes were sure to be given more than mortal honors as one after another told the tale of their brave deeds; but all early history has been handed down in this same fashion.

Gyneth could not tell Turgar much about the Romans, but she knew the stories of her own time and her own people, as well as the legends of the gods of Asgard.

One day Turgar came to her, carrying in his hand a trinket which the goldsmith had just made for him. "May I have a chain, mother," he asked, "so that I may wear the charm about my neck? The goldsmith told me that Prince Alfred always wears a charm, and that his mother gave it to him when he was a very little boy."

Gyneth laid aside her embroidery while she selected a light chain which she fastened about Turgar's neck, with the new ornament attached to it. Then she said, "Yes, Turgar, I have heard about Prince Alfred's charm. His

mother had it made for him, and she placed it about his neck just before he left her to go on his long pilgrimage to Rome.”

“Oh, do tell me all about it!” cried Turgar. “How old was the Prince then?”

“He was five years old,” answered Gyneth; “a very little boy to go on so long and perilous a pilgrimage. But he was put in the care of the good bishop Swithin, who watched over him like a father.”

“And is it a long way to Rome?” asked Turgar, for, since there were no schools in the land of the Anglo-Saxons, Turgar had not the remotest idea of geography.

“Yes, it is a long way,” replied Gyneth. “The little Prince had to travel first on horseback to the sea, then in vessels with big brightly colored sails, and, after that, on horseback again. Part of the way they passed over mountains where the paths were steep and narrow, and where bands of robbers were hiding. But King Ethelwolf, his father, knew of these perils, and so he sent a whole troop of thanes and priests, of soldiers and horsemen and thralls to guard the Prince, for he knew that no band of robbers would dare to assail so large a number of men.”

“How long were they on the way?” asked Turgar.

“Many, many weeks,” replied his mother. “They took great stores of food and goods with them, and always

they looked out for the little Prince first. They had furs to wrap him in when the weather was cold, and the bishop and his nurse were always close beside him to see that he did not grow too tired, or lack for any good thing that they could furnish. But even then the pilgrimage was long and tiresome.

“Here and there on the way they came to great walled castles, and then they stopped for several days to rest, for the owners of the castles were glad to have a royal guest, even though he were but a little boy.

“At last they reached Rome, where they could rest for a long time. They had brought rich gifts to the Pope, Leo IV, and he was especially pleased with the little Prince who had come so far to see him.”

“What did they take to the Pope?” questioned Turgar.

“There were vessels of gold and of silver set with precious jewels. There were robes of great beauty, embroidered in gold and precious stones, and there were gifts of money for schools and churches.”

“I am so glad the Pope liked the Prince, said Turgar; then he added hastily, “but he could not help it.”

Gyneth smiled. “He liked him so well,” she said, “that he anointed him, it is said, with holy oil, and told him that he would one day be King.”

“Oh,” cried Turgar, “did he say that? And Alfred is

not the eldest son. Oh, I am glad! I wish I could help to make it come true.”

“Perhaps you can,” said Gyneth, “if it proves to be for the good of the country. Every man can help his country and his King by being brave and true. There is no telling what your chance may be when you are grown. But you can be ready for it by being strong and courageous and faithful each day.”

“Must I wait till I am grown?” asked Turgar.

“What could a boy do?” asked his mother. “I do not know,” said Turgar, “but sometimes boys can help if they are brave.”

CHAPTER III
"MY PRINCE"

The wedding of Prince Alfred to Elswitha had been heralded throughout the land. Wulstan, Gyneth, and their elder son, Withgar, had, as we know, been bidden to the castle of King Ethelred to witness the event, and to take part in the festival which would follow.

"Oh, I do wish I were as old as Withgar!" exclaimed Turgar vehemently, bringing his foot down upon the stone flagging of the floor as he spoke. He thought himself alone, but a hearty, laughing voice responded, "And why are you so eager to be of Withgar's age?"

"Oh, Father!" exclaimed Turgar, recognizing the voice, although he had not known of his father's return, "I want to witness the wedding of my Prince. I want to look upon him just once. I am sure if I could only see him it would help me to be true and brave always."

"Why!" exclaimed his father, "I did not know you were so fond of Prince Alfred. How do you happen to know so much about him?"

"Oh," said Turgar, "long ago I heard Withgar telling

of a hunt in which he and the Prince took part. It ended in a battle with a party of Danes, and oh! the Prince was wonderful. Withgar said they came upon the Danes just as they were about to set fire to a farmhouse, and a woman and a young girl were shut inside the house. The Prince fought like a young lion, and he alone killed three of the Danes, and he set the woman and girl free. The others of the hunting party settled the rest of the Danes and put out the fire. Oh, it was glorious, the way Withgar told it, and the Prince has been my hero ever since!”

“That was truly a brave deed,” said Wulstan. “But is that all that you know about the Prince?”

“Oh, no, indeed!” replied Turgar. “I have asked everybody questions about him since then, and I have heard ever so many stories. And in them all he is good and just, as well as brave and strong. Mother told me about his going to Rome when he was only five years old, and of how much the Pope liked him—and that he said he would some day be King.”

Turgar was quite breathless when he finished. His father looked into his flushed face and smiled, but the smile was a very tender one. “And so Alfred is your Prince and your hero,” he said. “Well, Turgar, you could not find a worthier model. I truly wish that you might see him, and I hope that some day you may.”

Then Wulstan went in search of Gyneth, that they might complete their plans for an early start in the morning.

When the party left on the following day no one was quite so happy as Turgar himself, for it had been decided that he should accompany his father and mother as far as the castle, and then return with the escort of soldiers and servants, under the special care of Acca, and a stern young warrior named Algar.

In his heart Turgar hoped that he might by some chance see the Prince, but Gyneth assured him that this was altogether unlikely.

It was a gay procession that started out. They were mounted upon horses wearing rich trappings, while other horses were laden with costly wedding gifts.

For many weeks Gyneth and her maidens had been busily at work weaving and embroidering rich garments and furnishings, while the goldsmith had been equally busy fashioning curious jeweled clasps and bracelets and cups.

When, after several hours of riding, the party reached the castle, the gifts were taken from the packs and carried by the servants into one of the great rooms which had been set aside to receive them.

Then Wulstan and Gyneth bade Turgar good-bye, and gave special charge to Acca and Algar regarding him.

Turgar looked longingly back as he rode away, for although the journey had been full of interest, and the sight of the castle with all its bustling activities had aroused his enthusiasm, his dearest hope—cherished in spite of his mother’s words—had not been realized, for he had not seen his Prince.

As they rode along, the men of the company, relieved of the restraint which they felt when in the presence of Wulstan and Withgar, began an eager discussion of the scenes at the castle. They joked and laughed, and even the horses seemed to feel the relaxation of their riders. Turgar rode between Acca and Algar where the width of the road would permit, and listened keenly to the conversation of the men.

The leader of the party was riding some little distance in advance. As he came to an abrupt turn in the road, an arrow shot swiftly across the way, so close to his horse’s head that the animal gave a sudden plunge, wheeled about, unseating his rider by the quick and unexpected movement, and galloped madly back among the other horses.

In a moment all was confusion. The horses and many

of the men became panic stricken. Of course the first thought of all was "the Danes!"

In an instant Algar's voice arose in stern command, but although there were soldiers in the company, there were untrained thralls as well, and these lost all control of their plunging horses as well as of themselves.

There was a moment of wild confusion. One of the frightened animals reared, struck the horse upon which Turgar was mounted with his hoofs, and, before Algar or Acca saw what had happened, Turgar was being borne down the road at breakneck speed. At the bend of the road the horse reared, then plunged, and Turgar was thrown in a crumpled heap in the dust.

Algar and Acca followed swiftly, but before they could reach him a strange rider dashed from the side of the road, slipped from his horse, and lifted Turgar's head upon his arm.

"I crave your pardon," he said, as Algar and Acca came up. "I saw a buck in yonder thicket, and sent an arrow after it, not knowing of your approach."

In an instant the two men were beside him in the road, while the men of the company, relieved from their fear of the Danes, were succeeding in quieting the horses, and getting themselves into more orderly array.

Algar's face was dark with rage at the conduct of his

band, which had resulted in such an accident, and been witnessed by the man who now held Turgar's head upon his arm. For this stranger was no stranger to Algar, the soldier; and as the latter leaped from his horse beside him, he gravely saluted as he said: “Your Honor, Prince Alfred!”

But what of Turgar? Stunned by the fall, he lay for a moment wholly unconscious, but as Algar uttered these words it was as though a magic potion had been given him. His eyes opened, and he looked long and earnestly into the face bent above his own.

“Prince Alfred?” he repeated questioningly. “Yes, my boy,” was the answer, “I am Prince Alfred.”

A sudden flood of color came back into Turgar's face as he raised himself, saluted, and said, still half wonderingly, “My Prince; my hero!”

At these words the eyes of the young prince shone with pleasure, and then he helped Turgar to his feet. Fortunately there were no bones broken, though it had been a bad throw, and in a few moments Turgar declared himself well able to mount and continue his journey.

Algar, muttering imprecations upon his own head for the accident, assisted him to mount, and then Prince Alfred offered Turgar his hand. He blamed himself heartily for the accident and ended by saying, “Some day,