

ALFRIC



HERE were shouts that horribly clove the night air—the ring of axes on heavily smitten shields—every now and then a crash that meant a crushed head, and a cry that was not the full, defiant voice of onset but the stifled note of one who sinks earthward. And then Alfric saw that in a short while—a moment or two at most—he would be ringed round by the men whose ill-fame had come swiftly from Northumberland—the torturers of King Ella. He had fought hard while his friends remained standing, and had seen them go down one after another, a fate which is good and honourable for every one, and which he himself would have chosen as his own, had choice been. But now, that for a breathing-space he stood over the body of the Dane he had cut down, he had a vision of the story that had come from the North, of Ella lying face downwards—alive—while his exulting foes opened his ribs into the form of a spread eagle . . . and then he swore mightily that never should these men have that triumph over him.

Swift was the thought, and instantly he hurled shield and bill at the oncoming assailant, smiting him backward; then turned, with his knife between his teeth, fled like a hare to the water's edge, out of the fiery circle shed by the burning homestead; then shot out into the black water and thick fenland mist, followed by all who dared, and they were very many.

With an instinctive cunning which is bred in the bone by such ravagous times, he turned the very instant he had come to the end of his long forward shoot, and dived sharply to his right hand, swimming under water as far as his breath would hold out. He did this as one who had lived an amphibious life ever since his birth, and who was not afraid of any strange things that might be sleeping in the depths he threaded, who wished to get away from his fellow-men who had burnt his home, cut his friends to pieces, and intended in all likelihood a disgraceful end for himself.

And as he twisted and kicked his feet out of the water with the dive, as a duck turns up its tail, there came what he had forethought—a sleet of arrows pelting fast, cutting the water with a sharp 'phit-phit,' along the oily wake he had left behind, and far out beyond it into the darkness.

darkness. So very prompt had the Northmen been with their bows, and so very nearly had they guessed his exact whereabouts, that one of these messengers of the Raven stuck quivering into the sole of his upturned foot as he went down, and five or six more clove the place where his head had been an instant previously. He felt the sting in his heel and snorted angrily at it, trailing behind him and wagging its point about in his wound as he swam on in the depths; soon, doubling together for a second, he plucked it out of the leather shoe that had stayed the steel from inflicting a serious hurt, and stuck it in his girdle for further use; then feeling his pent-up breath becoming a painful weight at his heart, he rose and swam stealthily as an otter, holding little more than his nose above the surface, with a pang of wrath at his losses, and exultation at his escape.

Not one of those who had entered after him could he see.

So he swam on and on, thinking of nothing but speed and silence, for he knew they would row over a wide surface if they could find the boat betimes—still, it was well hidden. The mist was heavy on the face of the great mere, he could hardly see a hand's-breadth before him, but from behind he heard faint whooping and yelling, and a splash of oars that died gradually as he slid along. So they had found that boat, and were exploring. They were prompt indeed, but his trick had succeeded, evidently; they were on the wrong track. Therefore he took his knife from his teeth and placed it in his girdle, as being no longer needed for instant use, then raised his head out of the water and settled down to a swinging stroke that could be kept up for a very long while.

Once he brushed against some great soft mass that quivered suddenly, and swished away in a hurry; once as he skirted a thicket of deep-growing rushes, where of old an island had been, some writhing thing began softly to twine round his leg, and instantly he drew back his limb with a swift twist, and darted off at full speed. After a long interval of strokes that seemed to bring him nowhere, he slid quietly into a group of some great waterfowl, sleeping with their huge bills on their backs. One or two awoke, and brandished these formidable things as a man will wave a broad blade, but quickly he sank below the surface, and there was no cry of surprise from them. Perhaps they thought him only a floating corpse—such a sight being too common to arouse appetite in birds who had supped well—anyhow, he rose beyond them, and renewed his course into the unknown without

out their betraying his whereabouts to any who might yet be after him.

Into the Unknown.

For he had quite lost his bearings, and could only hope he had not taken some unnoticed turn and was not going back to the ravaged shore. . . . The submerged islet he seemed to know, but even that indicated the edge of a region whither he had never extended his fishing journeys—a place of water—water, and little else, on whose farther side the moon arose at this time of the year; a place said to be haunted by a Grendel, which had so far met with no Beowulf to destroy it . . . and as he thought of these things, lo! his fenland eye felt a slightly lesser darkness over against his face, and he knew, as no dweller inland could have known, that the moon was there, and that he was indeed swimming out into the region of Fear.

Yet little he cared for Grendel in his present mood of fury against those he had eluded; to meet the Marsh Demon in all his dreadfulness of clutching arms and serpent head would be but the honourable end of a warrior: as he swam he growled in fierce grief to think of the spread eagle which, perhaps, was even then being inflicted on some wounded friend. Visions of return at the head of a troop, and the sweet word Revenge, danced about in his head, until the hopelessness of them trailed its chilling certainty across all such rosy dreams. The fever of fighting was being cooled by the autumn water, and he fancied every now and then that henceforth he must be a dweller among strange faces, content if he could keep unharmed. So suddenly came this spasm of cold upon him, that he felt as if some weight were pressing his shoulders and trying to drown him . . . Grendel, perhaps! stealthily arisen behind . . .?

Sturdily he plucked his knife from his girdle and twisted round with all the force of his body. No! there was no claw on his back, no Grendel with eyes like torches, as the tale went. It was all fancy; he was still alone on the face of the deep mere, with nothing visible above or around, just as if he were hung in the middle of the sky. However, that vigorous twist had sent his blood stirring up and down him; he pushed the knife again into his girdle, and forward once more with the long, steady stroke, keeping on towards the feeble greyness, which he felt rather than saw, in that one spot of the thick fen mist. How long he thus persevered he could not tell—hours, it seemed.

Until something black arose before him, came close, and looked into

R

his

his face. It was very large, its big eyes were mild and wondering, also it had a pair of tusks, and moustaches long and sweeping-white, like the lip-clothing of some barrow-ghost that once had been a king of the northern seas. Whether it were man, or beast, or Grendel, it gazed awhile at Alfric as he hung there in the water with a beating heart, overshadowing him with its bulk. Then, instead of attacking him, it went again on its way, uncertainly, as one that is far from home and lost, with a gentle groan, so that Alfric felt a sorrow for it which he could not understand, but which might be of his own thought that he also had lost his kinsfolk: and he knew that it was no Grendel, whatever else it might be.

After which, the chill of the water came creeping into all his bones and weighed upon him as before, until he kicked and twisted smartly, recovering his strength with difficulty for the task of going onward to a place he did not know. Once or twice he felt a sudden anger at all his swimming being so apparently vain, and beat the water furiously, lying on his side as a ship does when the wind blows strongly abeam, cleaving the cold surface with a great rush and bubbling; but at last he had to pause, and turn over to float and get a little rest, feeling in those intervals as if the slightest hair-weight more would send him down to the bottom like a stone, without his being able to move a finger.

But then he would recover from staring up into the grey nothingness aloft, struggle round on his face, and toil on, though now it was as if he were pulling himself with difficulty through a vast heap of wet wool, so spent did he know himself to be after the fight and the long swimming.

And still he came to nothing—nothing at all; still the everlasting grey mist; still he hung poised, to all seeming, in a sky with nothing all round him, though the end was below if he were to hold up his hands and take no breath.

Then he felt a mortal weariness of moving, and wondered why he so persisted in the strife for what he did not know, when all he cared for were lying with cloven skulls on the far sandbank. Straight at that thought he held up his arms, and sank like a stone. . . .

All at once, as the water covered his descending head, his foot touched soft mud. He might have stayed there to drown, but the feel of earth in those depths stirred in him a fresh desire of life; and a beat of his hand, weak though it was, brought him again to the surface.

And now, as once more he painfully drew in his arms and put them forth

forth through the entangling water, he saw a great reed standing sentinel in front, causing the life-longing to glow red within him. Soon he reached it, and was aware of many others behind—huge stems, with purple tassels high over him. Never before had he seen such giants, standing like a water-forest, drooping their sword-like blades. He grasped one, and it cut his softened flesh, but he was very glad, and catching at each stem helped himself on into shallower water. So at last he wound his way through them into a swamp, lying flat on his back to keep from the sucking mud, and slowly dragging himself along. Thus he came to lumps of earth on which grew grass, over which he crawled, sinking a little at times, until it was firmer under him, and the soil appeared dry between the rushes, which here were small and low. And then he tried to stand upright, but fell again with a sting in his heel and lay there exhausted, at last to sleep heavily. . . .

The daylight filled his eyes as he awoke. There was a hand upon his shoulder, lightly pressing—the hand of a woman. Wonderingly he gazed up at the tall figure of a maiden dressed in some grass-woven garment, a cross dangling from her breast, her hair hanging down to her waist, and waving over him like a golden veil as she stooped to look at his face. Her blue eyes showed the good Saxon blood; she was very beautiful to see, much as the angels the priests had discoursed of when he was in the land of living men. ‘It is Saint Alchfrida,’ murmured he.

‘Who are you?’ she asked. ‘Whence come you?’

‘I was Alfric, son of Beortric, till I came to my end in the deep water. The Danes broke in upon us, and I slew my man, maybe more. Nor were they able to take me, O Saint. Have I not done rightly?’

‘Indeed I know not,’ she said, wondering also and with pity.

Then she vanished, as it seemed, and he slept.

But again he awoke, and she stood there once more, with a white-headed man by her side, dressed in an old grey cassock. ‘Canst rise, stranger, and come with us?’ said this figure; ‘or is thy body too weak for one more trial? It is but a little way.’

At that Alfric arose with difficulty, and went with the pair as one in a dream, over the grass and through a reedway, until he came to a cleared space where stood a hut, on whose roof was a rude cross of osier, of which material the dwelling also was made.

He now knew that he was alive, and that these were of his race, living here unknown and unmolested.

They

They gave him food and water, and made him rest all that day on a couch of leaves in the corner, whence at times as he lay he saw the maiden passing to and fro. And once, when his eyes were nearly closed, so that one might think he slept, she came and stood at the door with hands pensively clasped, watching him with a face full of pity, until he looked up, when she withdrew to some labour in the border of the clearing.

After a while, as evening came on, she entered and prepared the meal, and he spoke to her to hear her voice, the sound of which was low and peaceful as a morning breeze between the green waterways. She asked him of his home, and he told her; but his place was not known to her, nor was his name, nor that of any of his kin, nor anything that he knew. So, too, in her turn she could tell him nothing, save that she had always been here since the Day of Flame, as she called it, and had no desire to go elsewhere than where her father was.

These things Alfric heard gladly, because of the sweetness of her voice, though it made him think for a while of his homestead and of other good things lost. Then as his heart came back to peace from that thought, and he watched her placing food in the bowls, the old man entered and greeted him Christianly, turning next to bless the board.

'Tell me, Father,' said Alfric, 'is there any truth in what men say of the Grendel that haunts these fens?'

'I know not, my son,' replied the priest. 'The Lord allows strange things to be, and so that may be of them. I have been here for twenty years with this child of a murdered kinsman. Only we two escaped, and our Lord brought us safely here, where we abide gladly, secure as I trust. Indeed, I had heard of the terrible Grendel, and had I not been in fear of life for Christiana and myself, might have feared the Thing that men said was in this place. But in despair I came, deeming that the Marsh Demon could not be more cruel to us than the Danes, and have not seen him through all these years; wherefore I believe that he lets us be, or is not.'

'It is very peaceful to be here,' said Alfric regretfully; 'indeed I would fain stay always, if it were not that my kinsfolk's blood cries for avenging at my hand.'

'Yet God is great, and full of purpose. Why shouldst thou go, my son? To kill many foes will not avail to make thy kinsfolk live.'

'That is true,' said Alfric musingly, with his eyes on the face of Christiana.

So

So the days passed over the isle in the haunted fen where the fugitive had found refuge, and as he laboured for the old man of failing strength and the daughter of his adoption, a peace settled upon his heart as new bark grows over the gashed tree; sometimes also, when he spoke to her alone, the thirst for revenge so abated that he almost felt content to leave it in the hands of God.

But these were seldom, and at last came an unrest that gave him trouble. One day he entered the little hut which he had built for himself, and sat long in thought, now that he understood what ailed him—so deep and so full of doubt it was that he forgot to go to the midday meal with his hosts. Therefore at last a shadow fell over his face—two shadows; the pair were standing before him in his own hut, and the radiance of Christiana's hair seemed to fill its dusk as the light of a torch. 'What ails thee, friend Alfric?' asked the priest.

'I will speak plain words,' said Alfric huskily as he rose, 'yet I am full of more than words can carry forth. I see thy face, Christiana, wherever I go, though thou be not at hand; it is an angel's face always, as first I saw it, and yet it is now so dear to me that it gives me a pain I never felt before. This I have held down with my hand for many days; but now my hand and my breast are too small for it, and knowing that it is love for thee . . . I will say it and then go to the place of danger and of strange men, leaving thee at peace as thou shouldst be. For I know also full well of myself that I am not worthy to be a mate of thine, being rough and blood-stained. Farewell, kind friends!'

He held out his two hands and hung his head.

The priest took them, while Christiana stood apart with fingers clasped and bent face. 'Nay,' said he, 'this is a strange thought. Canst thou not forget the ills that are past, and wouldst thou seek again the dangers that have allowed thee to escape? The times over there are very evil.'

'True,' said Alfric, 'but I am of them, not of you, and I would not bring them here to those that have befriended me; and for all I desire I cannot keep wild thoughts out of me. The wolf cannot live with the deer. She is too tender a flower for my rough grasp. Let me go, Father.'

'Yet if she would teach thee ways of peace, thinkest thou she could, my son?'

'Ay, . . . ay, indeed. I would be as patient a scholar as a man can be. I would do . . . what would I not? . . . But how can that be?'

be? Let me go, Father, for I cannot forget my slain kinsmen. Farewell!’

‘Nay, let her speak first. Speak, dear daughter!’

Then the girl raised her face, and met the young man’s disturbed eyes with a look so frank and kind that the vision of blood faded from his heart. ‘No, do not leave us, Alfric!’ she said.

So Alfric stayed; and the priest joined their hands, and the lesson of happiness lasted for many pleasant hidden years in the isle none dared approach because of the evil repute it had.

At Yuletide feasts and other gatherings, when the night drew on and the mists took weird shapes, men told tales of the fiend that haunted the water and entered halls in mid-dark and snatched away the bravest, tearing them to pieces as he went—a monster with eyes of flame and dragon claws. And all believed and shuddered and repeated these things . . . while Alfric and Christiana sat hand in hand over their lesson in the twilight.

W. DELAPLAINE SCULL.