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SAGA PLAYS

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SAGA PLAYS

BY

FRANK BETTS



Orford

B. H. BLACKWELL, BROAD STREET

MCMXVII

BY SAME WRITER.

'IRON AGE.' Poems. *B. H. Blackwell.*

'WESTERN ISLES.' Poems. *Private.*

GIFT

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PREFACE

THE SWORD OF SIGURD is not intended to be a complete play. It is a prologue to a play, as yet unfinished, dealing with the death of Sigurd.

It is impertinent for an artist to explain his own symbolism. He is not the man to do it: moreover, the reader who is moved needs no explanation, and if the mark is missed, interpretation is ridiculous.

But here a misconception is made possible by the times in which we live.

The following plays were completed in April, 1914, by one who did not believe that great wars were any longer possible. Especially in THE SWORD OF SIGURD he used the traditional motif of the sword to stand in his imaginations for all the adventurous and creative life of men. There is now need for the actual and physical sword as well as the Sword of the Spirit: and we have seen another Cœur de Leon gather armed men from the ends of the earth to drive the Paynim from a concrete Holy City.

The writer finds nothing to alter on this account: and to-morrow, when the actual sword is beaten into a ploughshare, there will be, as always, the need of the Sword of the Spirit to preserve and extend that for which our brothers of many nations have laid down their lives.

FRANK BETTS.

28TH JANUARY, 1917.

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THE PASSING OF SINFIOTLI

CHARACTERS.

SIGMUND, King of the Volsungs.

SINFIOTLI, his Son.

HAMDIR, his Brother-in-law.

HERVARD, and other Earls.

EYOLF, }
THORSTEIN, } Comrades of Sinfiotli.

HJALLI, }
ODD, } Thralls.

BORGHILD, Wife of Sigmund.

GUNNHILD, a Widow: Mistress of Thorolfstead.

THORA, Borghild's Foster Sister and Attendant.

LJOD, Gunnhild's Maid.

Scenes :—Act. I. Thorolfstead : an upland Farm near Nidaross.

„ Acts II & III. Sigmund's Hall at Nidaross.

Time : The Viking Age.

ἐπέε νύ τοι αἴσα μίννθά περ, οὔτι μάλα δῆν.

Iliad, A. 416.

THE PASSING OF SINFIOTLI

ACT I.

THOROLFSTEAD. *An upland farm. In the far distance a fiord and glimpse of the sea. To the right a pine wood—visible behind it a farmhouse.*

GUNNHILD *is a dark-haired woman of about 27. She looks down a path to the left. She is simply dressed, her only ornament a brooch at the throat, a silver circle with a ring of gold and a boss of red enamel.*

Enter from the left LJOD—out of breath with a climb. She is tall, gold-haired, fragile. Probably consumptive.

LJOD. I have not seen him.

GUNNHILD. You have not seen him?

LJOD. No. I spoke to Eyolf. I made sure he would come. I gave Eyolf part of your word.

GUNNHILD. Could you not speak to Sinfiotli?

LJOD. He was at the smithy. All the men were at the smithy. Kjartan was finishing a great sword for Sinfiotli. Great as Gram, the sword Odin gave to

Sigmund. There was awe in the heart even of Kjartan, who is smithying the death edges every day, as the sword grew terrible under the hammer.

GUNNHILD. Stark sword for stark smiter. But the glory is not in the sword. It is the King folk set the flame on the edges, and the magic in the runes. All swords are stark in his hands.

LJOD. They were all at the smithy. I dared not go to Sinfiotli. Hjalli was near the door. I am afraid he saw me. He would tell Thora, or the Queen. Men say he sees all things and the wraith of the battle doomed and hears the sound of swords before the smiting. I fear a foresighted man.

GUNNHILD. Was not Eyolf at the smithy?

LJOD. He was going. I met him. Sinfiotli will come.

GUNNHILD. What did you tell Eyolf?

LJOD. I fear Sinfiotli. His eyes are quick as a blow. And colder than steel. . . .

GUNNHILD (*looking keenly at her*). What new craft of yours, Ljod?

LJOD. He may love you a little, between a hearth murder and a faring overseas: but he loves another better. The blue steel. Cold as the sea breaking on the floes. He loves the steel best.

GUNNHILD. Eyolf you may fool, Ljod, and Sinfiotli you think you are able to tangle with lying words. But I will have the truth. What did you tell Eyolf?

LJOD. Sinfiotli would perhaps come for your eyes and breast, lady. But I said Hamdir was coming to Thorolfstead and boasted he would not brook Sinfiotli. I thought to add that he called him bastard. But it's

often a word too many will spoil a fair tale. He will come.

GUNNHILD. I grudge that you should speak against his honour. Let him come without your taunting, or let him abide.

LJOD. I strove to bring your will to pass, lady, as I might. There is none of them, not the fieriest lover, but should come to sword strokes before kisses, if he have any heart in his breast. So, by your saying it should be with the man you love.

GUNNHILD. And I love Sinfiotli?

LJOD. Your eyes say it, and your voice, lady. For me I could not love the son of Sigmund. Not even were I of the queen folk. His heart is cold . . . as his sword.

GUNNHILD. Whether I love him or no . . . he is not like the other kings. Cot carles. They strive bravely when they are drunken. Sigmund, they say, was a man once . . .

LJOD. Cot carle or king, I mind my father's saying—cold the heart that ale cannot warm. I ask no such lover.

GUNNHILD. Ljod, you are content amid the milk pails. A little gossip and a lie to please you, and a meeting beside the wedge of hawthorn or in the pine-wood. I am weary of the homefield and the gossipers. I am weary of the stream, roaring in spring with broken snow, a trickle in Autumn amid the stones. Homefield and byre and the cackle of neighbours—and your lies also, Ljod. My tryst shall be between the rollers of the sea. Not for a trinket will I sell my kisses, as you, Ljod. The price of my body is great strokes and a longship aflame over a battle smitten earl. And, may-

be, a crown more red than the battle dew of the striving for the spoil.

LJOD. O, Sinfiotli may well pay such a bride price. And yet, for the tryst, you meet at the edge of the pine-wood . . . (*enter HAMDIR*) . . . with Sinfiotli—or perchance, Hamdir

GUNNHILD *turns*—LJOD *slips out*. HAMDIR *is two or three and twenty, a well set up ingenuous youth. He is flushed and eager. GUNNHILD looks at him and turns deliberately away.*

HAMDIR. Greeting, Gunnhild.

GUNNHILD *does not answer. HAMDIR waits irresolute. After a long pause.*

GUNNHILD. The old errand, Hamdir?

HAMDIR. The old errand.

GUNNHILD. And the old answer.

HAMDIR. Is the love of a king's son so light, Gunnhild?

GUNNHILD. O, they are kings in Westerdale, and the love of the deedless is always light.

HAMDIR. Sigmund was deedless once; and I am not altogether deedless, Gunnhild. I helped beat off the raiders in Westerdale a year ago. Osric and Heimdar from Halgoland. Before Sigmund bade me hither with Borghild. I have crossed swords—

GUNNHILD. A raid beaten off—cudgel play with cow-stealers rather than swords.

HAMDIR. Love me, Gunnhild. A fine swordsman is a proud housemate—but passionate and ill to build up the homestead. And I will sail West-over-sea in the

Spring. It is too late this year. My mother's cousin will be fitting out a longship from the Wick.

GUNNHILD. Do a deed and I will hearken you, Hamdir. But it must be a king's deed. And then I do not promise to love you.

HAMDIR. Name your deed.

GUNNHILD (*walking away*). O, I cannot set a man's heart in your breast. Nor the wit of a Viking. I am weary of you and your prating. Dwell with old Sigmund, who grows childish and speaks soft words, and the Queen, your sister. And find a wife from the lowland farms. Be at ease and build up a homestead—garner and store—feed full and sleep soft—and awake in the dark to find fire in the gables and steel in the doorway. The Viking shall divide the spoil.

SINFIOTLI *enters unnoticed and waits among the pines, motionless. He is a tall man of thirty or thereabouts—dark-haired and a little haggard. All his movements, and even his glances, are very swift and abrupt. HAMDIR, utterly cast down at first, rallies.*

HAMDIR. Hjalli told me you were wild-hearted. Gunnhild, Gunnhild, hearken me. It were better for you than this upland desert, to wed me and dwell by the fiord mouth. And since you desire deeds and the praise of the skalds . . .

GUNNHILD. How should your name be in their mouth?

HAMDIR. Next spring I will fare overseas. And perhaps the Norns will send me back with praise and spoil. I am not a cot carle, Gunnhild, indeed . . . or if you have a deed in your heart. . . .

GUNNHILD (*catching sight of SINFIOTLI—after a very short pause*). There is a deed to your hand.

HAMDIR (*lights up, looks round and sees Sinfiotli. He is undaunted*). I . . . do not understand, Gunnhild.

GUNNHILD. I said you had not the heart or the wit of a Viking, Hamdir. You do not understand, and you are afraid.

HAMDIR *looks steadily at SINFIOTLI. SINFIOTLI does not move. HAMDIR half turns aside and bites his lip. He grips his sword hilt convulsively. There is a pause.*

GUNNHILD. Go home, Hamdir, before Sinfiotli slay you.

HAMDIR (*aside*). Hjalli told me her heart was like a sword.

GUNNHILD. Go home, Hamdir, before Sinfiotli slay you.

HAMDIR. The death of Thorolf her man, and the death of Snorri Gunnarson, and another death to-day.

GUNNHILD. Go home, Hamdir, before Sinfiotli slay you.

HAMDIR (*suddenly*). I will strive with Sinfiotli since you will have it so. We are not cowards in Westerdale.

SINFIOTLI (*advancing*). Greeting, Hamdir. You are not cowards in Westerdale. But we will not strive to-day, you and I.

HAMDIR (*absolutely dauntless and cheerful*). Greeting, Sinfiotli. Greeting of friends before the swords meet.

SINFIOTLI. Our swords need not meet, Hamdir. I do not think you are doomed to stand over my body. Either to-day or any other day. And it is ill for a brave man to seek his own death.

HAMDIR. She has set me my deed. O Sinfiotli, son of Sigurd, bane of Siggeir, very sword of Odin, I know you and your battle craft. I have not fared overseas and pulled down Kings and smitten at the gates of Micklegard. I think this will be my only battle. But none knows the purpose of the Norns, before the iron stands in the heart of the slain. And I swear to you, Sinfiotli, that if I am fated to live and not you, then death and hell shall take hold of this woman. Albeit I love her. I swear it, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI. I am not deemed backward, when men call me to the sword play. But, Hamdir, why seek your death? Let this woman go and her striving for the death of men. Neither I nor any deem you a coward. She sent her maid to me with lies . . .

GUNNHILD. The lies were her own.

SINFIOTLI. I would not strive with you, Hamdir. The High Gods set a fire in the hearts of some, to seek death on the seas, and under the walls of great cities, for the sake of spoil, or the songs of skalds, or maybe, for the sake of the fire itself. Yet this burns not in your heart, as in mine: and yet I hold you a man. Go home, live long and happy and play the man when war comes of its own will.

GUNNHILD. I bade you live like a cot carle, Hamdir. But do not ask me to share a carle's lot. I am already weary of it. It may be you will find content therein.

HAMDIR. You have spoken like a king, Sinfiotli. Indeed the Norns set not in my heart the love of

death. But they lit another flame—the desire for this woman. Though she be a knife for the slaying. In the end it is the same thing. Except that the skalds remember you and your deeds.

He draws slowly.

SINFIOTLI. Put back the steel, Hamdir. There is that in my breast answers its shining. And the eyes of Gunnhild . . . but I do not desire your death.

HAMDIR. Sinfiotli, a man may well be foresighted in his last hour. And I think I am speaking the words of a foresighted man. Your death. . . and not mine only. It is not of my seeking, Sinfiotli. Gunnhild would be as the Norns: but the driving is not hers. I cannot draw back.

HAMDIR steps back, pauses and leaps. SINFIOTLI draws like a flash, parries, avoids, and slashes backhand as HAMDIR passes him. HAMDIR falls. GUNNHILD laughs.

SINFIOTLI. You ask a deed, Gunnhild. And you have your price.

GUNNHILD (*with an effort*). Better he should die like a man.

GUNNHILD bends over HAMDIR who is still. She draws herself up with a shudder.

SINFIOTLI. What ailed you to egg the lad to his slaying?

GUNNHILD (*forcing herself*). Sinfiotli, I am weary of these wooers. And he would take no answer—(*she nearly breaks down, takes another line*) . . . are you now daunted for a manslaying? . . . (*desperately trying to be understood*) Son of Sigmund, I know you . . . no common slayer . . . no wolf's head in the woods . . .

like a wild beast . . . there is more in your heart than violence and the rending of shields. Have I done ill in your eyes, Sinfiotli ?

SINFIOTLI. You have done what was appointed, Gunnhild.

GUNNHILD. I held you wise, Sinfiotli. Do you not know what the kings, and the idle queen folk, and the skalds who know all things, and even old Sigmund know not, that the light of the sun, laughter and dancing, peace and a harvest overflowing the garner, and Spring racing down the south-west wind, that all these are lies? There are three things that never cheat their lover—the shining of swords, the surf driven by the storm, and the venture snatched at beyond man's reach, with death at the end. Thou and I only in all Thrandheim have this bitter wisdom. Signy knew it.

SINFIOTLI. No word of Signy to-day.

GUNNHILD. What wrong have I done Hamdir? Those dogs yonder sleep out life till their death day. He at least saw the swords flicker in a hopeless battle. Were I an earl I would ask nothing better . . . What more do you ask, Sinfiotli?

SINFIOTLI. I ask no more, Gunnhild.

GUNNHILD. Thou and I are mates, Sinfiotli. We understand.

SINFIOTLI. He had a man's heart. And you egged him to his death.

GUNNHILD. Sinfiotli broods over his slain !

SINFIOTLI. There is no taunt in your heart. Why taunt with your lips? For you partly understand.

GUNNHILD. O, we are mates, you and I. Take me, son of Sigurd. Take me from this house. I grow wild

here . . . and hateful. I cannot bear it—the silly chatter of the farming folk and the lies. They hate me . . . because I have dreams . . . and because . . . O, the long desolate winter, Sinfiotli . . . I cannot bear it . . . I am eating my heart, day after day. Overseas. . . .

SINFIOTLI (*with a smile*). Hard faring with Vikings. And rough weather now and again.

GUNNHILD. I care not, I care not.

SINFIOTLI. Ran's net is always spread. And little ease if we escape her. They fire the beacons when they see our longship from the headlands. Stakes in the rivers and spears at the landings and the countryside aflame. Ill faring even for a brave woman.

GUNNHILD. I care not ! Overseas.

SINFIOTLI (*still smiling*). No truce, no rest. Some have fared with me, strong lads and sons of earls, who had fain seen the home mead again, high above the fiord. And the cattle pens, for all they smell of dung.

GUNNHILD. O, cannot you understand? I am strong, and O, I am not afraid. Ran's net or the sword on the throat. Summer and winter, chatter at the fair and the desert of snow—I am weary. And base folk . . . and they hate me, Sinfiotli. Take me.

SINFIOTLI. Do you think, Gunnhild, that you alone find these things a weariness? But the same fire burns here and West-over-sea. The Norns kindled the fire.

GUNNHILD (*faintly*). Take me, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI. If I pulled down the Lords of London and made you a kingdom, as Osric did in Ireland, or Earl Sigurd at Wick in Caithness, do you think

you would find content? Crowned and clad in silk. And for one handmaid fifty. I think you would be weary in your pride.

GUNNHILD (*half-choking*). I love you, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI. I do not think peace is to be won, Gunnhild. I also would find peace. The Norns set fire in our hearts.

GUNNHILD. Cheat the Norns. To-day and to-morrow. I would fain lie as Hamdir, so I may live for a moment, as he lived, under your falling sword.

SINFIOTLI. The Norns are ill to cheat. They dwell in lofty places. And the ernes scream around their heads. They are cold and weary. Weary of life and time. They envy us a hearth flame.

GUNNHILD. Let me live for an hour, Sinfiotli. And the sea may have me after.

SINFIOTLI. They envy us, Gunnhild. They have set a fire in our hearts, to burn up our peace. In the end they will loose wild fire on the world, if by any means they may warm their hands at the blaze. Their hands and their hearts.

GUNNHILD (*despairingly*). We are mates, you and I, Sinfiotli. And we have the same fire in our hearts. For an hour.

SINFIOTLI (*to himself—looking at HAMDIR*). A destroying fire.

GUNNHILD (*with a flash*). In yours also, destruction!

SINFIOTLI. In mine also. And Hamdir lies between us. Their swords for his slaying. And the fools yonder (*he points to the fiord*) praise and blame. They would be wiser than Odin and more crafty. They would mould life and time as Kjartan forges a sword.

And the iron of the Norns is too hard for any men's forging.

GUNNHILD. There are other dead than Hamdir, by your hand. . . and mine.

SINFIOTLI. I know not how or why. But they slew him by our hands and set his blood like a river between us. I have crossed seas on a light errand . . . but this is more deep and wide than all the waters from here to Micklegard. It is farewell, Gunnhild.

ACT II.

THE HALL of Sigmund—to the left a low dais with a table. To the right is a door with a porch leading thence into the open air. There is a door to the left rear. Along the front of the stage are a number of small hearths. There is a High Seat with pillars in the middle of the back wall. The place is dimly lighted from louvres in the roof. The back wall is covered with tapestry. There are benches along the walls. ODD, HJALLI and THORA are talking near the outer door. THORA is very upright—she wears a silver pendant and a silver bracelet—her features are clear cut and tragic looking—but on close inspection she is not so queen like as she seems at first. ODD is short, red-haired, freckled, and frightened. HJALLI is a tall man of forty-five, aquiline, and haggard.

THORA. ANOTHER manslaying at Thorolfstead?

ODD. A dreadful deed . . . Sinfiolti.

THORA. Wolf, son of a wolf.

HJALLI. We are all wolves when a woman laughs at the bared edges.

ODD. Sinfiotli came into the homefield. We looked up, we thralls . . . there was that in his bearing that meant tidings.

THORA (*shuddering*). Who is slain?

ODD. And he cried out—I proclaim a manslaying, at Thorolfstead, at my hands.

THORA. Snorri Gunnarson went west-over-seas . . .

HJALLI (*with a touch of sympathy*). A year ago . . . all but three weeks.

THORA. Snorri Gunnarson went West-over-sea . . . I think Sinfiotli will sail for Micklegard. Ran's net is always spread.

HJALLI (*quietly*). Who is the slain?

ODD. We are afraid . . . the others would neither meddle nor make in the matter of Sinfiotli's slayings. So he took the path to the fiord. And after I came hither.

THORA (*with a cry*). Who is the slain?

ODD (*suddenly cowed*). I am afraid.

THORA. Tell me, Odd. I also am afraid.

HJALLI. Is it the Queen's brother, Odd?

Silence.

THORA. I would have Thorolfstead burned to ashes.

ODD (*very low*). I have brought ill-luck with my tidings. And I am Sigmund's man.

THORA. Hjalli, had you tidings?

HJALLI. Men hold me weatherwise, Thora, in the matter of storms. But this guessing would not tax a foresighted man.

THORA. Thorolfstead should be burned with fire.

HJALLI. Fire enough at Thorolfstead.

THORA. Snorri Gunnarson went West-over-sea.

They say Thorolf sleeps ill in his cairn. And Snorri was wrecked near the Orkneys.

HJALLI. A perilous water the Pentland. And a deadly coast. The reefs are like sword edges.

THORA. There are other waters and other reefs between here and Micklegard, Hjalli. Reef and sand and wrath of the open sea. Thorolf in his cairn unquiet . . . Snorri taken in Ran's net . . . Hamdir slain in the bracken and the son of Sigmund . . . I would burn Thorolfstead with fire.

ODD. Who will tell the Queen?

THORA. They sent you with the tidings, Odd.

ODD. I . . . dare not face the Queen, Thora.

THORA. O, he is a wolf . . . the skalds said it in Westerdale. And the son of a wolf.

HJALLI. Sigmund wrought Odin's will. And he bears the sword Odin gave. For Odin's battles. Never a wolf.

THORA. They were wood dwellers once and wolves, he and Sinfiotli. Before they burned King Siggeir in his house. And Sinfiotli is a wolf to this hour. And the rest is lies. (*She crosses the room towards the left and pauses at door.*) I will tell the Queen, Odd.

A step is heard outside—THORA pauses. Enter LJOD—very frightened. She looks round timidly. THORA glares at her. Pause.

ODD. Tidings from Thorolfstead?

LJOD (*blankly*). Who has told? . . . I have no tidings.

ODD. No tidings of King's son and Queen's

brother, Ljod? For one of them has declared a man-slaying in our homefield.

THORA. You may speak. You, at least shall depart unharmed.

LJOD. Yes . . . I had tidings . . . Queen's brother and King's son.

ODD. And you saw the slaying?

LJOD. No, not the slaying . . . not the slaying. I have seen the slain.

THORA. You must bring the news to Borghild, Ljod.

LJOD. No . . . no . . . I cannot face the Queen.

HJALLI. What brought you then to Thorolfstead?

THORA. You shall tell the Queen, Ljod. I think you and Gunnhild plotted the blow.

LJOD. I did not plot it. And I cannot face Queen Borghild. She thinks ill of us at Thorolfstead. Thora . . . I cannot tell her.

THORA. I never laid a snare yet, but I do not think I should blench after the blow. Neither in my own cause or another's.

ODD (*awed*). Where was the slaying?

HJALLI. Ljod did not share in the plot. I think Gunnhild alone enough for the slaying of Hamdir.

THORA. Gunnhild and Sinfiotli.

HJALLI. It is you must tell Borghild, Thora.

ODD. I would not face Borghild with Hamdir's blood on my hands.

LJOD. There is no blood on my hands, no blood on my hands . . . unless when I lifted the dead. . . .

HJALLI. Who sent you hither, Ljod?

LJOD. I came for help . . . to bring the dead to the house, Hjalli.

ODD (*in a whisper*). Have they left him lying, Ljod?

LJOD. In the bracken . . . where he fell. . . .

THORA. Little they reckon of the slain at Thorolfstead.

LJOD. The thralls were south, on the hills . . . I could not lift Hamdir alone.

HJALLI. Where does he lie?

LJOD. I was talking to Gunnhild . . . at the edge of the pine wood . . . you know the pines on the high ground.

HJALLI. We know the pines, Ljod.

ODD (*whisper*). They found Thorolf under the pines.

LJOD. And then Hamdir came . . . I left them . . . they were talking like lovers.

HJALLI. You are lying, Ljod.

LJOD. I am not lying . . . I turned to the home mead. As I entered the garth I looked round. They were talking among the pines . . . the sun was east, among the pine stems. They were black against the sun . . . Hamdir and Gunnhild . . . and the light gleamed on steel in the bracken below.

HJALLI. With the sun beyond the hill?

LJOD. The light was on a sword in the bracken, Thora.

THORA. Sinfiotli's sword?

HJALLI. Sinfiotli amid the bracken? (*Silence*).
What then, Ljod?

ODD. You did not see the blow?

LJOD. I turned into the garth . . . I was afraid, Thora . . . I was afraid. And I heard a blow and a cry.

THORA (*a shot at a venture*). And Gunnhild laughed?

LJOD. Gunnhild laughed . . . and I fled to the house. Afterwards I went to the wood. I met Gunnhild . . . It was a long time after.

THORA. With blood on her hands and her breast.

LJOD. I saw no blood. I found Hamdir . . . Hjalli, a great wound, neck and shoulder. I tried to lift the dead. . . .

LJOD *collapses*. THORA *looks scornfully at her and goes through the inner door*.

HJALLI. You have been lying, Ljod. (LJOD *sobs*). Listen, men call me foresighted. If it be foresight to know you are a liar, I am a seer indeed. Now tell me this—did Gunnhild send you here with this story?

LJOD (*half rising*). Gunnhild did not send me here. But he lies dead in the bracken.

HJALLI. Go, Ljod. (LJOD *pulls herself together and goes out*.) Come, Odd, we will bring the dead to the house.

HJALLI and ODD *go out through the outer door*. Shortly after THORA and BORGHILD enter. BORGHILD is young and richly dressed. She wears gold ornaments. She is slighter, weaker and more refined than THORA. BORGHILD goes to the High Seat—*pale and ready to break down*.

BORGHILD. There shall be swords out for this in Westerdale.

THORA. Who will draw swords on Sigmund? They

are brave enow . . . But Bjorn is bedridden. They have no leader. Lady, there will be no swords out for this day's work.

BORGHILD. O, if I were an earl . . . a blow from behind. . .

THORA (*cold and provocative*). How can you strive, Lady? This also must be endured that Hamdir sleep unavenged. (BORGHILD *sobs*.) And had he an avenger . . . who should battle with the luck of the Volsungs?

BORGHILD. Hamdir! Hamdir!

THORA. Luck and witchcraft. Sword and venom will not bite on them, men say. They slay and give no atonement.

BORGHILD. Hamdir—my strong brother—proud to come North to Nidaross. He said he would learn honour from the most honourable of all the kings. And after a while they cut him down from behind.

THORA. Wolves and manslayers both.

BORGHILD (*flaring up*). Never Sigmund, never Sigmund. Sigmund will do justice—Håmdir!

THORA. The skalds say venom will not touch Sigmund. The skalds are liars, perhaps. But I never heard that Sinfiotli was armoured against death.

BORGHILD (*pulling herself together*). Sigmund will be coming back soon from the hunt.

THORA. Sigmund will soon be back.

BORGHILD. I will ask justice of the King.

THORA. Little justice the Volsungs are wont to deal.

BORGHILD. I think Sigmund will do justice. And if not . . . Go, Thora, I hear horns in the courtyard.

Voices outside. THORA goes out, but BORGHILD waits and twists her hands in the High Seat.

SIGMUND (*without*). Where is Hjalli?

FIRST VOICE. I do not know.

ANOTHER. He and Odd left a while ago in haste.

A THIRD. They made eastward.

A FOURTH. In great haste, on the road to Thorolfstead.

FIRST VOICE. Good sport, King Sigmund?

SIGMUND. A rough hunting, Thorgeir. We roused a bear. Orlyg, bear this spear to Kjartan's smithy.

THIRD VOICE. The shaft is splintered.

SIGMUND. Ill to trust ash wood to ward a bear's grip.

FOURTH VOICE. A sword is a man's weapon, Sigmund.

General laughter.

SIGMUND. Ay, Orlyg, we know your sword play. Trustier sword than spear, Orlyg, and the ale horn trustiest of all.

More laughter.

SIGMUND *enters, letting in sunlight. He stands dazzled by the half dark. He is a big man, looking older than he really is. His face is furrowed by rough times. He is in every way a strong man, but a little slow till roused. His intellect is older than his physique, and under the combined influences of camping out, hard fighting, and consistent drinking in the*

*evening, he has grown a little sluggish.
But his real force of character is plain.*

BORGHILD *gets up, hesitates, crosses the room.*

BORGHILD. A doom, Sigmund!

SIGMUND. Borghild?

BORGHILD (*gaining courage from her volubility*).
Sigmund, Sigmund, vengeance—vengeance for blood.
O Sigmund, show a King's heart, the heart of a Volsung.
Not a wolf's heart, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. Vengeance on whom, Borghild?

BORGHILD. Vengeance for blood. O Sigmund, I feared you, when your earls came to my father's house. Men had said round the hearth great things and strange—words of terror, Sigmund. Red sword and wolf's heart, they told me, and I was afraid. High honour to me and a great fear, Sigmund. A great loneliness and strange fellowships in the far woods . . . beyond the Keel . . . witchcraft, and changing of shape. No sword would bite, no venom. Show a King's heart, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. What of the old stories? I am true blood of the Volsungs, and I am a King to reward good deeds and evil. Have you found in me a wolf's heart?

BORGHILD. Proof against sword and venom, men said . . . and the heart of a wolf. Forgive me . . . I am afraid. Ever a King's heart to me, Sigmund. There is another . . . a wolf's heart indeed. . . . Make him a wolf's head, Sigmund. Is he proof also? . . .

SIGMUND. Vengeance for blood? . . . for whose blood, Borghild?

BORGHILD. It was a crafty blow, Sigmund. A sudden blow. Requite it.

SIGMUND. Who is slain?

BORGHILD. The stroke was behind. Hamdir is no shirker of sword strokes. A sudden stroke . . . Sigmund . . . the leap of the wolf.

SIGMUND. Hamdir?

BORGHILD. My brother, Sigmund. It is your shame if he escapes. . .

SIGMUND. Who struck the blow?

SIGMUND *is seated on a bench, BORGHILD moving all the time.*

BORGHILD. Strife over a woman—dark hair and dark heart, Sigmund. She loved Hamdir best . . . short joy of her kisses. O, there's many she loved best, but Hamdir briefest of all. He leaped out of the dark . . . like a wolf.

SIGMUND. Who is the wolf, Borghild?

BORGHILD. A fit stroke to win Gunnhild. An ill blow for an ill woman. The wolf leap. He knew the strokes she loves, Sigmund. She was waiting to kiss Hamdir, and (*she shrieks*) she kissed his wolf over the dead.

SIGMUND. Who is the wolf?

BORGHILD (*very slowly*). There is one wolf in Thrandheim. There is one wolf in thine house, Sigmund. A wolf's heart.

SIGMUND (*thoughtfully*). A high heart and a wild heart . . . but no wolf. He did not strike Hamdir from behind . . . unless Hamdir shrank from the eyes of him.

BORGHILD. Fit mates, Gunnhild and Sinfiotli. It was treachery. Hamdir was no shrinker. You Vol-

sungs, drunk with battle, raven-feeders, city-burners, fire and sword, think no man brave unless battle-mad. Swift and cunning and his onset like the wind . . . but the Valkyrs choose the slain, and not the Volsungs. (*In a whisper to herself*). They kissed over the dead.

SIGMUND. I do not think he struck him from behind.

BORGHILD. They saw the wound. Neck and behind the shoulder. A great sword sweep. I can see it all, Sigmund. I can see two talking under pine branches and another crouched in the bracken. And the hard grip on his sword. I can see into their hearts—three hearts—one feverish and greedy of sweet words, one mad with desire, and one . . . a wolf's heart.

SIGMUND. Did any see the blow?

BORGHILD. None save the three. Gunnhild's maid heard the cry.

SIGMUND (*to himself*). Sinfiotli would never have cried.

BORGHILD. Gunnhild's maid heard the crash and the cry and the laugh to follow. And they found him . . . in the bracken . . . on his face. And the great sword-slash between neck and shoulder. O, it is so clear. Sigmund, Sigmund, be a true King. Shall your earls and your Queen's brother be slain sackless?

SIGMUND. Was Hamdir's sword in his hand?

BORGHILD. I do not know.

SIGMUND. Hamdir had his sword . . . What doom do you ask?

BORGHILD. Put him away, put him away. Let him depart . . . with any that would follow. Wolf's heart and wolf's head. O, Sigmund, there is no desire in him except manslaying. There is no peace in his heart . . .

no part in the life of menfolk, sowing and reaping and the ale by the fireside.

SIGMUND. Sinfiotli is young yet.

BORGHILD. Young and deadly. A wolf's cub.

SIGMUND. I remember when men called me wolf. I have learned wisdom. There is only one way to peace, one true love of field and fireside. We come to peace and joy in the harp over the ale, and the slow happy ending . . . over many seas . . . through great battles. Sinfiotli will find that path . . . and then perhaps someone will taunt him . . . the old King that the skalds are praising . . . that he was a wolf and manslayer once.

BORGHILD. Forgive me, Sigmund . . . (*rallying*); but he will never find that peace . . . A wolf . . . strife and manslaying, spoil gathered to-day and scattered to-morrow. The mood of a wolf. If he eat out his heart, let him eat it alone . . . in the woods . . . in a cave . . . gaunt and alone . . . till Death lay hold of him. He has no part in the fellowship of men folk. A wolf's head at the feast, a wolf's head over the ale, a wolf's head when the harp goes round and men's hearts are uplifted. Manslaying and strife for the glory of manslaying. Wolf's heart and wolf's head . . . let him dwell with the wolves (*with overwhelming violence*) HIS BRETHREN.

BORGHILD *is staggered by her own words.*
There is a long pause. SIGMUND does not notice the insult.

SIGMUND (*to himself*). I have never paid weregild for my slain.

BORGHILD. Odin reared the house of the Volsungs,

Sigmund. They have waged the wars of Odin . . . but this is a wolf . . . a wolf of the Gods. . . .

SIGMUND. Sinfiotli never struck craftily. Face to face . . . and victory to the swifter sword. But strife in the house is an evil thing.

BORGHILD. Sigmund, let him be a wolf's head. O, when the wild fire wraps Asgard and Odin cries out for Baldur . . . then perhaps he will glut his battle longing.

SIGMUND. I am not wont to pay weregild. Only two know how Hamdir died . . . who struck the first stroke, Borghild . . . and you would put little faith in the tale of either. I have been in straits with Sinfiotli. You have heard strange stories . . . men twist the strands of truth and falsehood in the long evenings and all to make a new wonder. Stark and eager he is, but in the end he shall see the Volsungs in great fame and drink the harvest ale in peace among his earls. I have never paid weregild for any man. But I will not uphold a wrong against a King's daughter. I, Sigmund, son of Volsung, offer atonement. I am old and I bear a King's heart and not a wolf's. Eager as fire; but he has the Volsung blood and some day will find content. Borghild, the heart is hot and the blood cries out bitterly. I too have heard it and answered. And I offer a treble weregild. When a may sets man against man . . . the sword smites of its own will. Name the atonement, Borghild. I too loved to scatter once, when I too was a wolf. But I have learned to gather and store, and to love the long days of the mowing and the yellow acres and the harp over the ale, as I once loved the wind on the outer sea and the breaking shield-burg of the enemy. The treasure house is open . . . red rings and strange cloths from the south

and the gauds the dark-haired Welsh sold for amber.
I would buy peace, for my son, from my wife.

Pause.

BORGHILD. A wolf's head.

SIGMUND. It were less honour, Borghild, to win vengeance from a lesser man. . .

BORGHILD. No; the law, Sigmund, the law. They kissed across the dead. A wolf's head, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. It is not the young earls only that make unpeace. The wolf's heart—the heart that cries out for blood . . . the Queens know a wolf's mood also. They laugh when the sword flashes . . . and they will not have it sheathed when the edges are once red. Sheathe the sword, Borghild. Gunnhild kindled the fire . . . will you foster it to burn the Volsungs' roof tree?

BORGHILD. It was a coward blow, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. Twenty years has Sinfiotli fought by my side. I reared him when he was very little, and he was a man's help to me in my straits. A wolf's leap, a wolf's grip if you will, but never a coward blow . . . I offer atonement, Borghild.

BORGHILD (*motionless*). I will take atonement.

SIGMUND. The weregild of three earls and a King's gift withal. And men are wont to blame my giving, Borghild. I go now to choose a ransom.

He goes out by the inner door. BORGHILD *half collapses onto one knee with her face in hands.* *Pause.* THORA *enters and stands watching her.*

BORGHILD (*without moving*). He has offered atonement, Thora.

THORA (*ostentatiously avoiding comment*). Ljod was lying. She saw the blow struck. Hjalli has been to Thorolfstead.

BORGHILD. Sigmund is no wolf. I gave him bitter words. I scolded like a carle's wife. Thora . . . it was a King's deed to buy peace. Sigmund has no one to fear.

THORA. Ljod was lying. She was afraid. They found the sword in Hamdir's hand and footprints in the bracken. And the bracken was beaten down in the sword play. Hjalli and Odd have been to the stead.

BORGHILD. However the blow was struck . . . I have given them peace. (*Rising with arms open as if to show her own inability to battle*). I, I, have given peace to the Volsungs' asking.

THORA. The Volsungs are little wont to ask peace . . . or to grant it.

BORGHILD. It was like Sigmund to offer a weregild. If I had been a King, a seafarer in a great dragon, with her bulwarks bright with shields and the swords grim on the foredeck.

THORA (*meditating*). The Norns have their will in the end, be the Kings never so strong. I think that some day the battle will beat over Sigmund's head also.

BORGHILD. Weregild he gives to me; but he will never give weregild to the riders of the foam, to the earls in the long ships, to ward off his last battle. I am Sigmund's wife and my brother lies dead at the hand of his son, and I am glad at heart for Sigmund's honour.

A pause.

THORA (*greatly daring*). And does not the blood cry out?

BORGHILD (*viciously*). He has done a King's deed and I will not hearken it.

THORA. The thralls come to bear in the feast. Will the thralls learn that Sigmund, son of Volsung, has made atonement? Or shall men tell each other, meeting on the far hills, that Hamdir died sackless?

BORGHILD. Let them say what they will.

THORA. Men say that blood cries bitterly. It was my father's brother reared me; and he told me, once, of the slaying of my father. And he said that the blood cried out day and night. And at last, he waited, he and my mother's cousin and two others, where the ferry puts to land, in Gothar fiord. You know Gothar fiord well, in the south, and the rock path to the uplands and the Westerdale steads. There was a slaying round the ferry. My father's brother showed me the scar on his throat. I was little but I remember the telling. That was because of the crying out of a carle's death. It is well to know that the blood of a King's brother can be stilled for a ransom.

BORGHILD. Be silent; be silent. I will not hear the blood.

THORA. Perhaps the blood will be silent for your bidding. I will be silent, Lady.

THORA *goes out*. BORGHILD *hesitates—makes an agonised gesture and rushes out*.

ACT III.

The Scene is as before.

SIGMUND and BORGHILD sit on the High Seat. EYOLF, HERVARD and other Earls sit on the benches. The hall is lit with torches. There is a table on the dais with ale and mead. Maids are filling horns for Earls. Thralls, including HJALLI, sit at each end.

SIGMUND (*rising*). The Bragi cup!

There is a shout and all drink.

EYOLF (*a young man, flushed with drink*). My vow, King Sigmund.

SIGMUND. What is your vow, Eyolf?

EYOLF. A journey to Micklegard and a deed that shall sound in the North, within the year.

An awkward silence.

AN EARL (*to his neighbour*). One thing and one alone wilder than the heart of Sinfiotli—and that is Eyolf's talk when the ale is in him.

SIGMUND. What is the deed to be, Eyolf?

EYOLF (*unabashed*). I know not yet: but there are

great deeds to do in Micklegard. Room for a sword sweep.

ANOTHER EARL. We have found North broad enough for any man's sword sweep, Eyolf.

SIGMUND (*smiling*). True heart of a Norseman, Eyolf. But Micklegard is far. It would be a loud trumpet to sound to here from Micklegard. (*Pause*). Has not Sinfiotli come? The ale does not warm the heart without Sinfiotli.

SECOND EARL (*to FIRST*). Brave feast fellow, Sinfiotli. . . . for Hamdir's funeral ale.

FIRST EARL. Are we ravens that he alone must pour us our wine?

BORGHILD (*with restraint*). Sinfiotli never loved the ale, Sigmund, and to-night I think he does well to shun it.

SIGMUND (*drinking vigorously*). Plough and scythe, roof-tree and fiddle, these four are weariness to all Volsungs. Until they grow wise.

EYOLF. Then may I, and those I love, grow never wise, O Sigmund. I drink to three good things, King Sigmund. I drink to the sword that breaks the peace strings, to the storm that drives us whither we would go, to the comrade who trusts little in Odin and Thor, and much in his own high heart. (*Drinks hugely and sinks on to the benches.*) And the rest is . . . foam on a broken wave.

SIGMUND (*half amused*). Wild words, Eyolf.

HERVARD. O Sigmund, after many years wise and famous, I think your own heart says the same.

EYOLF. Drink with me, Sigmund, son of Volsung, to the swift blow and the scattered spoil.

SIGMUND. I will drink to the sheathed sword and the garnered harvest, Eyolf. And I have yet to be called dastard by any man.

HERVARD. You have smitten and scattered, Sigmund, and now you may have peace if you will. But I think that the days of storm-faring were better.

EYOLF. Drink a cup to my heart's desire, Sigmund, for the sake of the slaying of . . . Siggeir. (*He looks straight at BORGHILD. BORGHILD flushes.*)

SIGMUND. Brave days, Hervard. Well, I drink.

BORGHILD. To the wolf's heart, Sigmund?

SIGMUND. To the young man's sword and the long ships and the old warfaring, Borghild. And the ale round the hearth to follow . . . Sinfiotli has not come. He will drink this cup with a will.

BORGHILD (*softly*). This and another, Sigmund. For my asking. Because I have given him peace.

Pause.

SIGMUND (*rising*). I drink the funeral ale, I drink the ale of Hamdir . . . in the harping of the skalds . . . in the feasts of Asgard . . . in the hearts of the Norsemen. (*The toast is honoured with moderate enthusiasm, except by EYOLF, who shouts very loudly.*) O Borghild, tomorrow we lay Hamdir in his cairn. With sword and byrnie, as befits a warrior who died with sword aloft. And the barrow shall be greatly piled, far seen, a landmark for the long ships. The Vikings on the long ships shall see the howe. High on Langness. Till it shall no more be Langness in the mouths of seafaring men, but Hamdirness. Memory to Hamdir. (*Another draught.*) Farewell, brother, till the twilight falls and the great darkness, and thou and I stand with all true Norsemen against the wolf and the wildfire. And what

shall then betide, the wisest skald cannot tell us. This is sure, that Death and Hell lay hold on the faint heart.

EYOLF. Hell for the faint heart! Valhall for the slayer!

HERVARD. Fool!

There is some confusion in EYOLF's direction.

SIGMUND (*again rising*). Earls of the Goth folk, hear-ken. Ye have heard, lies or truth, stories of the slaying of Hamdir. This at least is sooth, that he strove with Sinfiotli over a may. And his stroke was the slower. I, Sigmund, son of Volsung, give my first weregild. I have slain some in battle and some wreaking the wrongs of the Volsungs. Nor has the sword of Sinfiotli always slept in the peace strings. We twain have made no atonement for our dead. But this is a hearth slaying and strife is evil in the house. Queen Borghild is no stepmother, and I would not have hatred come between my son and my wife. Therefore I offer weregild, the weregild of three earls.

He makes a sign to HJALLI, who, with ODD, brings an open chest to BORGHILD's feet. EYOLF growls.

SIGMUND. Behold, Borghild, the atonement of Hamdir. Many have wreaked their dead, here and in the South lands and West-over-sea; but no man hides in his treasure house the weregild of the Volsungs. No, not in all the broad lands where the Volsungs have done battle from Nidaross to Micklegard. To you, Borghild, I give it. I have chosen out red rings and red wedges, silken raiment wrought cunningly, brooches gay with strange stones and molten glass; and I add this great golden beaker. My father's brother won it, a King's gift of the East, in his wars beyond Micklegard. And

I have seen Volsungs drink the Odin cup therein, and the memory of many great earls whom Odin took in the sword play. Has my son your peace, Queen Borghild?

The outer door opens and THORSTEIN enters.

BORGHILD has the cup in her hands. The maids are stretching their necks.

THE FARTHEST FROM THE CENTRE. Outland silk, he said.

ANOTHER. There is a great peacock wrought in the silk.

ANOTHER. Borghild will be giving her blue mantle to Thora.

ANOTHER. Thora will have the mantle. And Thora had the coif with the pearls.

EYOLF. Does Sinfiotli fear Borghild?

AN EARL. Eyolf is drunk.

SIGMUND (*to BORGHILD*). Has my son your peace?

THORSTEIN. A word, King Sigmund, from Sinfiotli.

BORGHILD (*to herself*). Sigmund is never ashamed. Shame could not touch Sigmund.

SIGMUND. What word from Sinfiotli? Why comes he not?

BORGHILD (*to herself*). Sigmund is never ashamed, shame could not touch Sigmund.

THORSTEIN. Sinfiotli sails for Micklegard. His dragon is making ready. They are filling the water casks even now.

EYOLF (*shouting*). Ale for Vikings, Thorstein.

THORSTEIN. He would say farewell, King Sigmund.

SIGMUND. Tell Sinfiotli I have made his peace. The

dragon need not sail. Let him join the feast with his fellows. The ale is not merry without Sinfiotli.

THORSTEIN. He doubted your anger would be hot against him, King Sigmund.

EYOLF (*shouting*). Sinfiotli fears neither Sigmund nor Borghild.

HERVARD (*draws his sword*). Drunken fool.

EYOLF. A blow like his before I sail.

Confusion—all rise—EYOLF is tripped and falls.

SIGMUND. Hervard! Small profit striving with the drunken. The ale speaks and not he.

EYOLF is thrust outside through the outer door into the rain.

EYOLF (*as he is pushed out*). Sinfiotli . . . is not the only one . . . who can . . . strike a great stroke.

SIGMUND. Bid Sinfiotli come, Thorstein. There is no anger against Sinfiotli. Neither in my heart or the Queen's.

Exit THORSTEIN.

BORGHILD. Will he thank you for the atoning, Sigmund?

SIGMUND. The atoning is taken, Borghild. And he also knows that hearth-slaying is evil, and exile a sore thing. Am I ashamed in this atoning?

BORGHILD. I do not hold you shamed, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. I taught Sinfiotli honour. When we were wolf's heads, he and I. Wood-dwellers—wolves they said. I taught him honour. Stark against the Kings and the bearers of the sword. Sinfiotli knows there is no honour in striving with the Queen folk. Peace is better than seafaring, Borghild. The thralls and the

handmaids think there is no honour except in sword-strokes. But the Volsungs are of the King folk and the Queens also, know that there is glory in forbearing.

BORGHILD. There is honour in forbearing, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. Sinfiotli is not as Eyolf, Borghild. He and I have been the swords of Odin. When a man drinks ale in the hall, manslaying is a fine thing. A gaud or a peacock's feathers for the dazzling of the maidens. And the skald loves a manslaying, to make a song of it.

SKALD. The skald praises the fallen also, King Sigmund.

SIGMUND (*still garrulous*). Ay, the skald praises the fallen. Some day, when I am worn with working Odin's will, I too shall face my last battle. I think it is near at hand. And the young earls who have never stood in the shield wall, will cry out—Valhall for the slayer, Hell for the slain.

SKALD. The skalds cry out—Valhall for the mightily fallen, Sigmund. And men hearken the skalds.

SIGMUND (*drinking*). Sinfiotli and I have been through many battles. And are beyond vainglory. The Queens do not hear the words of the drunken.

The outer door opens. SINFIOTLI enters amid dead silence, followed by THORSTEIN and another, and walks half way up the hall.

SIGMUND. Have you no word for my son, Borghild?

The silence continues and becomes oppressive.

BORGHILD (*with an effort*). I give Sinfiotli peace.

Still silence.

SIGMUND. Borghild gives you peace, Sinfiotli. The dragon will not sail.

AN EARL. Then there may be peace on the road to Micklegard also.

Uneasy laughter in the hall. SINFIOTLI is still silent.

BORGHILD. Sigmund has bought you peace. With silks and a beaker the craftsmen wrought in the south. You have peace, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI (*calmly*). And the Volsungs have learned to pay weregild.

SIGMUND. I do not think the Volsungs are shamed.

THORSTEIN (*with intense scorn*). Shamed!

SINFIOTLI does not move.

SINFIOTLI. I can set little store by weregild. I think that no man is able to change the word of the Norns. Though he offer gold or peacocks wrought on outland silks, or a beaker smithied by a very cunning craftsman.

BORGHILD. I have taken atonement . . . for my brother's blood. And I give you peace . . . And you are too proud, Sinfiotli, to take my peace.

SINFIOTLI (*wearily*). I am proud no whit, Queen Borghild. But I think weregild is an idle thing. Be the craftsman never so cunning. The Norns have their will and every man's heart drives him to the end they have appointed.

BORGHILD (*making a final effort, amid dead silence*). I, too, set little store by the red rings. But there is a weregild of the heart also. And Sigmund has paid it in full.

Pause.

SIGMUND. Sinfiotli, I have made a hearth peace. Will you rend it with your cold words? Drink a peace ale with my Queen and the earls.

SINFIOTLI. I do not scorn this atonement, Queen Borghild.

SIGMUND. Drink a peace ale, Sinfiotli. And my earls will be merry.

SINFIOTLI (*more passionately*). We ride the horse of the Norns, thou and I, Queen Borghild. It is altogether vain to blind our eyes and to bridle our hearts. To strive against the end appointed is to battle with the sea. Ride the horse of the Norns, and the skalds may make a song of the riding.

BORGHILD (*very still*). To Death and Hell, Sinfiotli?

SINFIOTLI. To the end appointed, Borghild.

The silence is leaden.

SIGMUND. Sit and drink a peace ale, Sinfiotli, among the Volsung earls. Why make the hearts of the earls cold with your forebodings? I think foreboding is also idle.

SINFIOTLI. It is all idle, except the purpose of the Norns.

AN EARL. Sinfiotli is drunk with pride.

ANOTHER EARL. He is fey.

SINFIOTLI (*suddenly*). I take your peace, Queen Borghild. I take your goodwill and your love. You will not remember my cold words. You also are of the blood of the King folk.

He crosses the stage and sits on SIGMUND'S right. As he passes he exchanges a curious look of intelligence with BORGHILD.

SIGMUND (*drinking*). I am glad of this peace. My son will not sail for Micklegard.

SINFIOTLI. I will not sail for Micklegard.

BORGHILD repeats the words to herself.

SIGMUND. You will be weary of warfaring for a little, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI (*with his head dropped a little, and a touch of sarcasm in his tone*). Yes, I have had my fill of slaying for a little.

SIGMUND. Let them have peace, West-over-sea, and the Kesar's foemen of Micklegard, even as we have peace. I drink to peace and the garnering of the harvest.

SINFIOTLI. Peace and the garnering of the harvest for me also.

Disquiet in the hall—the health is not properly honoured.

HJALLI (*to ODD*). I think the blow is going to fall.

SIGMUND. I also am glad because of the peace. You will abide in the Hall of the Volsungs, Sinfiotli, for a season. And we will ride in the woods with falcons. You are young yet, but the peace shall not weary you. And the skald shall remember the old stories and the last battle of Volsung, my father. You will abide here the winter, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI. I shall abide the winter through, father.

HJALLI. The blow is ready to fall.

SIGMUND. The harvest ale is always merry. But it shall be merrier yet. And men shall remember our Yuletide feasting.

HJALLI (*whisper*). The ale is red as blood.

SIGMUND. Borghild, it were a Queen's deed to pour ale to Sinfiotli. Let all the Earls see that the striving is forgotten.

Pause.

BORGHILD. We have not yet drunk the peace cup, Sinfiotli, you and I. We have drunk the garnering of the harvest, but the harvest of peace is yet to garner. Earls of the Goth folk, behold! Not ale but mead shall be the drink. Mead that I brewed—and in Westerdale they deemed me not unhandy at the brewing of the mead. Honey of my own bees, and the herbs I gathered in my own plot.

She rises and goes out. Deadly silence.

SIGMUND. You will honour the cup, Sinfiotli?

SINFIOTLI. I will honour the cup, father.

Re-enter BORGHILD, with a great jug of mead.

HJALLI (*shrieking*). Blood in the mead cup!

AN EARL. Is Hjalli drunken as Eyolf?

ANOTHER EARL. Words of ill-luck.

HERVARD. Hjalli is not wont to be drunken over the ale.

BORGHILD pours mead into the beaker to SINFIOTLI. He rises, takes it, and looks her full in the eyes.

BORGHILD. Drink our peace ale, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI. There is guile in the cup, Borghild.

There is a dead silence. SIGMUND takes the cup and drinks it off. BORGHILD again pours mead. SINFIOTLI again looks her in the face.

BORGHILD. Drink our peace ale, Sinfiotli. If you will peace. The first draught of the cup of atoning.

SINFIOTLI. Venom in the cup.

SIGMUND *again takes it and drinks it off.* BORGHILD, *trembling slightly, again fills and presents the cup.*

BORGHILD. The Volsungs have not the old heart, Sinfiotli. They give weregild, and let others drink their ale. Drink our peace ale, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI. Death in the cup.

SIGMUND (*quite tipsy*). Ride the horse of the Norns, Sinfiotli.

SINFIOTLI (*clearly*). I drink to Valhall and the last battle of Odin.

He drinks and falls to the ground with a crash.

SIGMUND *stares down at SINFIOTLI.* BORGHILD, *pale as death, looks at him, then rises, turns to the chest and with a gigantic effort, overturns it. The gold rolls all over the hall.*

BORGHILD. I will not have Hamdir's weregild. (*A long silence*). Take back the red rings . . . take back the red rings.

The Earls are gathered in a circle close to the dead. SIGMUND slowly descends the steps and stands over the dead. The earls retire a little.

BORGHILD. He bade me ride the horse of the Norns . . . cold heart and deadly . . . cold heart, Sigmund . . . I will not have the gold, Sigmund.

The maidens are all shrinking and deadly afraid. THORA comes right down the stage and stands bolt upright beside BORGHILD.

SIGMUND. He has fought the wars of Odin . . . Signy's son and mine . . . together in the wild wood . . . wolves together . . . together in the burning of Siggeir. Swords of Odin.

BORGHILD. Take back the weregild, Sigmund . . . (*half mad*) lock up the gold in the treasure house . . . slayings enough to atone, Sigmund . . . slayings enough . . . but not Hamdir's . . . Take back the weregild, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. Swords of Odin. And my last battle at hand also. Swords for Odin's slayings . . . and a song for the skalds.

HERVARD (*very quietly and gravely*). The dastard is a fickle sword. And you have been swords of a true forging. I, too, would fain be broken when the sword has ended its smiting.

SIGMUND. Swords side by side. And I do not think the skalds will forget them. Here nor in Valhall, Sinfiotli. And I think my last battle is at hand.

BORGHILD (*sobbing*). Take back your gold, Sigmund.

SIGMUND. Odin has always need of the Volsungs. Other swords for Odin's battles. But none more stark than Sinfiotli. Other blades and great deeds for the skalds. But this sword is broken.

SIGMUND *lifts* SINFIOTLI. *The earls part before them. Slowly and in great silence he bears him out. As the door opens the thresh of rain is heard, and the draught makes the torches flicker. A maid stealthily puts her foot on a ring which has rolled to where she was standing with a ewer of ale. BORGHILD has collapsed.*

THORA supports her, trying to look defiant, but awed. Another maid is sobbing, away at the back. Her sobs are the only sound to be heard. Everybody is watching the two go out as the door slashes to.

HJALLI (*staring*). I think I hear the horns sounding. They blow the horns for the last battle of Sigmund. And the Volsung sword broken.

CURTAIN.

INGIALD EVILHEART

CHARACTERS.

INGIALD EVILHEART, King of Raumrealm.

ASA EVILHEART, his Daughter.

EGIL,	}	Retainers.
EINAR,		
FJOLNIR,		
KARK,		
HERVOR,		
THORGEIR,		

Scene : Hall of King Ingiald, Rimulstead, near
Raumriver.

En niör ok norör liggr Hølvegr.

—PROSE EDDA.

INGIALD EVILHEART

The hall of KING INGIALD on a late afternoon in winter. A long narrow building of timber with a dais at the far end and a larger door to the left, leading outside. HERVOR, EGIL and FJOLNIR are talking round a fire in the hall. FJOLNIR is very quiet and moody. His head is in his hands. HERVOR, the oldest of the three, is making the conversation. EGIL, a big middle-aged man, makes brief replies.

HERVOR. I am overweary of biding at home, Egil.

EGIL. There must needs be someone to keep the stead.

HERVOR. Aye. And I am somewhat in years. Younger men to ride King Ingiald's errands. . . . There are sword strokes at hand, Egil. I feel it in my bones.

EGIL. Small foresight in guessing blows. When Ivor sails North out of Scania.

HERVOR. Hall abiding irks a man at all times. But the waiting for the strokes most of all. . . . I always said King Ingiald did ill to wait. Of old he did otherwise. Few swordsmen or many, he rode outward. It was thus he slew Harald Goldhair.

FJOLNIR (*quietly, without lifting his head*). And King Hakon.

HERVOR. What know you of the slaying of Hakon, Fjolnir? . . . I told him hall abiding would eat the hearts of his men. But he would not hearken.

The outer door opens and EINAR enters. He is a short, sturdy man, in full armour. There is snow on his leggings and shoulders. He stamps the snow from his shoes and shakes it from his shoulders.

EGIL. Tidings, Einar?

EINAR. Is King Ingiald in the hall?

He takes off his helm and comes eagerly to the fire.

HERVOR. He rode North up Raumriver with half a score of men. I must needs keep the stead, Einar, all day. He is not back yet. Nor do I know on what errand he should ride North. South and West the danger. That every fool knows.

EGIL. Have you tidings, Einar?

EINAR. A night in the forest, Egil. But of Ivor Wide-Fathom sight nor sound.

FJOLNIR. News enough of King Ivor before all is done.

EINAR. A night in the pine woods. On the hill crest, South, above Langdale. A clear night last night, and a bitter. I watched the great river reaches and the stars broken in the stream. Wolf I saw now and again, and I heard the wolves howling. The night through. But no sound or sight of Ivor and his host.

FJOLNIR. King Ivor is at hand. And not he alone. Earl Olaf in Vingulmark has brooded his father's death. The Dane King's ships at Oak Island. And King Sigvaldi moves in Upsala.

EINAR. That may be. But Ivor comes not North up the river.

HERVOR. Somewhat crafty, men say, King Ivor. He may well try the West passes. Clear weather, for all it is hard on Yuletide and Earl Olaf no friend of ours. North out of Scania to the Wick and no long journey over the fells.

FJOLNIR. South or West I know not. But even now they ride, Ivor and his men. And a queen's death at the end of the riding.

EGIL. Queen Asa may be hearkening, Fjolnir.

FJOLNIR. A doomed man is ill to fear. My death riding hard and yours, Egil. And yours, Einar, and yours, Hervor. Riding in Ivor's host. (*Raising his voice*) And the death of King Ingiald. And the death of Asa Evilheart.

EINAR. None the less, you are speaking a fool's word. Perhaps Ivor is at hand and the sword bared for your slaying. I know not. But I know that you are crying out for death in open hall.

HERVOR. I have followed King Ingiald nigh on forty years. It may be that his foes press him hard. Yet I have seen him in straits, times and again. Little I praise Fjolnir's word.

FJOLNIR. Ill to fear a death doomed man. Swords bare North and South. Swords in the West. Eastward the fells under the snow. And the death of Ingiald Evilheart beating at his doors. *Horns far off.*

EINAR. The King's horn.

HERVOR. Ill to miscall a king in his own hall. A hard man to his foes King Ingiald, and a deadly. Sword to match with sword and craft with the crafty. And men set an ill name on the craftier. But it is a fool takes a foe's word to fling against his lord.

Pause.

FJOLNIR (*to himself*). Swords matched with swords when Harald Goldhair fell. And to-day Ingiald's sword broken. And he took Harald the Swede King in his own snare. And to-day guile will avail little. (*Worked up, very loud*) But it was black murder brought King Hakon to his death.

HERVOR. Fool . . . but I always said that the slaying of Hakon was not altogether a King's deed.

EGIL. I doubt not Queen Asa has heard, Fjolnir. And you no more than I, think her likely to forget.

FJOLNIR. Father and daughter alike, Egil. The clean sword if you are surely the stronger . . . and the blood of Hakon cries out. And the snare for King Gudrod her lord. Ingiald Evilheart! Asa Evilheart!

A slight movement is heard, and ASA is seen standing in the doorway. She has drawn back the hangings with one hand. How long she has been there none of the men know. She is tall, pale and unmoved by what she has heard. She looks intently at FJOLNIR. She has a silver ring on her arm and a silver torque round her neck. Her robe is fastened at the breast with a large brooch of silver, with a central circle of blood red enamel. This gleams against

*her dark dress. FJOLNIR leaps to his feet.
Pause.*

ASA. I have seen men slain for a lighter word, Fjolnir. As you well know.

FJOLNIR. They say you have seen some little of the death of men, Queen Asa.

ASA. And they say truth. Indeed, they are wont to call me Asa Evilheart. In my own hall.

FJOLNIR. Nor without cause.

ASA. Nor without cause. And now the sword breaks in my father's hand. And my murder craft will avail me little. Your death and mine at hand, Fjolnir. . . . I see small profit in slaying you to-night.

Horns again at hand.

FJOLNIR. Small gain, Queen Asa, if you spare. But I do not think it is in your heart.

ASA. And you deem our strait beyond hope. Some have fled the hall, Fjolnir. And one or two think to thrust back the death by selling their Lord to Ivor Wide-Fathom. And a few are dull and witless. They are ready to stand by King Ingiald Evilheart for a little longer, not knowing that his death is already at hand. But you, I think, are none of these.

FJOLNIR. Bid Hervor cut me down, Queen Asa. Your heart warms at a slaying. And this will be the last slaying of all.

ASA. It may be. I will turn the matter in my mind for a little. Hervor—I think I heard the King's horn.

HERVOR goes to the door.

HERVOR. He rides into the garth.

ASA. Go all of you and tend the horses. Fjolnir, also.

They go out—FJOLNIR last. Noises are heard in the garth. ASA sits on a bench and rests her chin on her hand, and looks stedfastly at the fire. Enter INGIALD. He is an oldish, sinister man, rather short, with thick eyebrows, a low bridge to his nose, and somewhat hanging cheeks. He comes to the fire. ASA looks up and says nothing.

INGIALD. Harder drinking to-night, Asa. Let them have their fill. Pour ale with your own hands.

ASA. This I never greatly loved, pouring ale to louts.

INGIALD. The men must be put in heart. . . (*stares blankly into the fire*).

ASA. You have spoken with Einar?

INGIALD. Aye. No sight of Ivor coming from the South. He will be faring East over the fells. It may be he thinks to find me unready. Ivor was ever a fool.

ASA. Hervor was even now saying the same. Hervor is something in years, and he deems that he has found wisdom to atone for his old might. It seems we have none in the house except foresighted men and seers.

INGIALD. We must put them in heart to-night . . . or there are one or two will be flinching.

ASA. I think they have cause.

INGIALD. O, Ivor rides gold helmed. And the young earls gay under his banner. A brave array faring out of Scania. Gold trappings for the war horse and gauds

shining on the hilt of his new sword. It may be his gold shall taste bare iron before all is done.

ASA. More foes than one mustering, father. Or I might hold the Southmen as lightly as you. Knowing some little of their heart.

INGIALD. I have seen swords bared before to-day. Ill to pit a young man's wit against old battle craft and a sword forged yesterday against trusty iron. They shall yet ride hard for the ships, the Southmen. And Earl Olaf rot with his father. If the men are but steadfast . . . but I cannot strive with a broken sword.

ASA. Aye, Fjolnir was saying that the Yngling sword was broken in your hands.

INGIALD (*after a pause*). Three I left to keep the stead. Hervor, Egil and Fjolnir. Are they also for selling me to my foes?

ASA. He said moreover that my murder craft would not for this time avail me. To his mind the wolves are in the trap. But I do not think him like to betray us.

INGIALD (*pacing up and down*). Eyolf rode off westward in the pine woods above Harbrandstead. Thorgrim struck at my back, half way over the Gardale ford. Eyolf got clear away . . . and now Fjolnir. Pour ale mightily to-night, Asa. Let them be drunk as they will.

ASA. And will that avail anything?

INGIALD. A grim strait most would deem it. What can be done with frightened men? But some have found me a wolf ill to trap.

ASA. I have King Hakon in my mind.

INGIALD. It shall be a foul hunting Ivor rides with

his wolf-hounds. And Sigvaldi . . . a far cry to Upsala and the Swede King's anger. Put heart into the men, Asa.

ASA. Little need to hearten me with words, father. I have some little skill to read your heart. Have you any plan?

INGIALD (*after a pause*). If our dolts are in heart . . . broken country, and there are always chances for onset. And a strange battle to be lost before the swords are crossing.

ASA. Ivor rides with a host. And your men are melting on every side. You will need brave ale to hearten them for that battle.

INGIALD. Einar has seen no one Southward. Olaf rides down Raumriver. . . . East the hills, and we might win beyond to the Gautdale folk.

ASA. Aye, welcome guests in Gautdale, the Ynglings fleeing from their foes. There are one or two matters might well be remembered in Gautdale and sheer need hard upon us.

INGIALD. There are the hills.

ASA. Ill wintering in the Keel . . . death for death, I choose not to starve in the snow. I will die, as I have lived, in a King's house.

INGIALD. I have no plan.

ASA. It is in your heart . . . death among the swords. Neither shall Ivor take me alive.

INGIALD. It is Ivor shall taste death if it come to handystrokes. I am wont to set store by my life.

ASA. I blame not your battle craft. And you think to find good hap. O, they say in Scania my speech is something bitter. Yet I could praise the sword red

from Ivor's slaying. Like a skald seeking a full belly. Charge home, if you are sure luck rides with you in the saddle.

Pause.

INGIALD. Never before has luck failed the Ynglings. In their straits. Luck and craft.

ASA. Fjolnir cried out that the Yngling craft had turned to folly. And there was none to gainsay him. And that the Yngling pride was now beaten to its knees.

INGIALD. I think our pride stark as of old. While you live, Asa. Though all the North ride to its breaking.

ASA. Fjolnir cried out that doom rode hard on Rimulstead. And King Ingiald Evilheart would fain ride to his death like a fool. That his men may scatter and Ivor take him alive.

INGIALD. No easy feat to take a doomed man . . . and you, you must needs provide as you may.

ASA. I will not flee before the Southmen.

INGIALD. Indeed, of all your wit, no man ever had help or profit. And now you can but flout my striving. And if there is any plan laid up in your heart . . . be sure that it is not my death only will make Ivor content.

ASA. Wise heart or foolish, I am yet not utterly witless. I think not to make peace with Ivor over your body. I have had my fill of Scanian fellowship. And they their fill of mine.

INGIALD. I would strike as I may . . . if need drives, with a broken sword. Unless there is any help behind your silence.

ASA. The men shall have their ale. Till they are mightily in heart.

INGIALD. And your heart . . . and mine?

ASA. I think I am of iron. In the matter of quailing before King Ivor Wide-Fathom.

INGIALD. Little I flinch from the Southmen. Or the son of King Hakon. But I can see my luck turned against me. And the battle lost before I see the banners. Yet they shall not take me alive.

ASA. I have yet counsel in our strait. And some would say a grim one.

INGIALD. Let me but have a plan . . .

ASA. Ale to be poured. As you say. And a face set on the matter before the men. And they shall not mock us in our death.

INGIALD. I have set a front on the matter these many days. And now I feel that the veriest dolt can see into my heart. And is afraid.

ASA. For to-night only. The fools in the South and the Swedish dastards have had the Ynglings in awe. Great and grim their counsels and stark their pride, men say, and grim deeds are wont to come thereof. And that shall be the name of the house. To the last.

INGIALD. Your counsels are not like to be too mighty for my mood. If you have any plan . . .

ASA. Earl Olaf thinks to have a mighty weregild for his father's slaying. And to avenge him withal. It was black murder, and his heart is set thereon. And King Sigvaldi looks for his share of the loot. But there is a way.

INGIALD. I am weary of Earl Olaf's wrongs. And Ivor's. Speak out or let your great counsel rest. I care not. The sword shall find a way.

ASA. The sword is shattered. There remain the iron

heart and the pride unbroken. (*Trembling*) To-night. . . . O, I am overwrought . . . to-night it shall be done. A grim counsel . . . but I have yet to flinch . . . now, now . . .

INGIALD. King Gudrod, may be, was wont to weigh your fancies. Little store I set thereby who have known them some deal longer than he. Speak now. I do not think you are able to daunt me, be the device very terrible.

ASA (*pulling herself together*). I am wont to have my will. Hearken. (*Whispers to* INGIALD).

INGIALD (*without moving*). I had thought to have a blow at the youngling.

ASA. Watch the mood of your men, as I have watched it. Your sword is broken.

INGIALD. I had some such matter in my heart. No coward's counsel, Asa. I have laughed, not once only, over the snares they laid for my life. And, as you, I would not be matter for Ivor's laughter.

ASA. You are my father, and I am now the last of the Ynglings. They have been wont to set fire in the roofs of the Kings. And it is by fire they should come to their end. And men marvel at the beacon.

INGIALD. You shall pour the ale. And maybe you shall have your will. I see as yet no other way.



The same hall, but it is now late evening. A few torches are alight, and about twenty men are scattered round the hall drinking. Some are uneasy, some moody, one or two boisterous. The hall is not by any means full. Two old women are serving the ale. ASA and INGIALD in the High Seat on the dais.

HERVOR. King Ingiald.

INGIALD. Speak out, Hervor.

HERVOR. I was a lad when I drew sword for you for the first time. And it was, moreover, your first battle. Some thirty years since. And I bear my scar therefrom to this day.

INGIALD. What of it?

HERVOR. Thirty years since and more. Many things have passed out of mind, but a man remembers his first onset. I think I have served the Ynglings as a man should, King Ingiald. And my father before me.

ASA. I think there will be found few to gainsay you, Hervor.

HERVOR (*disregarding her pointedly*). And after thirty years a man, maybe, has the right to say a word, King Ingiald, although I know you battle crafty.

INGIALD. What have you to say, Hervor?

HERVOR. Few words and welcome message, King Ingiald. No secret that Ivor Wide-Fathom rides out of Scania. And they say that Earl Olaf stirs in the North. Or else why should King Ingiald ride North up Raumriver with half his men?

INGIALD. Why else, Hervor?

HERVOR. And we older men know that fools will be cackling. And they say the Swede King musters against the Raumriver folk.

INGIALD. What of all this, man?

HERVOR. I have served you thirty years and more . . . there are cowards in every house. King Ingiald . . . there are some saying that the Yngling foes are leagued mightily, and that they will be ill to withstand.

INGIALD. The Yngling foes have been mustering this thirty years. And you and I, Hervor, have ever been too hard for them.

HERVOR. Aye . . .

INGIALD. And I think we shall be too hard for them for this time, also.

HERVOR. A thankless gift counsel unsought. Yet I will be overbold, King Ingiald. There are some . . . one or two, beginning to doubt . . . dastards.

INGIALD. And what say you, Fjolnir?

FJOLNIR. Aye, there are one or two doubting a little. For me, I doubt not at all.

HERVOR. Lay your mind open, King Ingiald. For it is a weighty matter if the Swedes are arming.

INGIALD. A weighty matter, indeed.

HERVOR. Thirty years, King Ingiald, since you and I stood in our first battle. For me, I know you. I heed not if all Sweden are mustered, and the Danes, moreover. But the others are younger and fools. Lay your mind open, King Ingiald. They will serve you none the worse.

INGIALD. Thirty years have taught you this at least,

Hervor, that they are younglings and fools indeed who are daunted by Ivor Wide-Fathom. Under the Yngling banner.

HERVOR. . . . Aye . . .

INGIALD. You and I have seen some few battles, and we are in heart. And Fjolnir also, whom we all know, a marvel for his good counsel. (*Laughter.*) Hervor, you are in good heart (*drinks*), and I am in heart also. And the others may doubt if they will. Are you now content?

HERVOR. . . . Aye . . .

INGIALD. Ale for Norsemen. I drink memory to King Hakon and his father's luck on Olaf's head. (*Calls to a woman.*) Unn. It is some twenty years since they called you Unn the swift footed. Yet, as swiftly as you now may, bear ale round the benches. And pour to Hervor first of all. He has spoken much to-night, and I doubt his throat feels the brunt of it.

EGIL. King Ingiald . . .

INGIALD. Ale, Egil, is better than many words, and no long time to wait before Unn bears ale down your bench.

EGIL. King Ingiald . . . maybe I rank with the fools and youngsters. Inasmuch as I am harder than Hervor to content.

INGIALD. Have you lacked aught in my house . . . meat or ale or a gift now and again . . . that you are ill content?

EGIL. We are all like to lack more than that in a little. . . . Bare life saved over the winter, and I quarrel not with my ale.

ASA. So it is Egil is the doubter?

EGIL. Aye, Queen Asa. Egil. And some few beside.

EINAR. I, moreover, ask you to speak out, King Ingiald.

There is a murmur among the men. INGIALD
smiles grimly.

HERVOR. They will fight for the Ynglings none the worse if you open your heart . . .

INGIALD. Hitherto I have laid my own snares, and my swordsmen trusted my wits. Far and wide we have ridden, Hervor and I. And latterly some of the others. East and West, North into Gautdale and South into Scania. . .

FJOLNIR. It is not warfaring that has drawn our death out of the South.

INGIALD. All the North has seen our swords bared to the sun.

FJOLNIR (*to himself*). And, once and again, swords bared in the dusk.

INGIALD. Is there a man here has drawn sword in an Yngling quarrel but won fame and loot out of the striking? It is not so long since that we set little store by Swede King and the dragons of the Danes. I have seen those same Danes swim, like otters, for their ships in the reaches of Raumriver, and Egil and the rest hot on their trail. And now Ivor Wide-Fathom rides North, and I must take counsel in open hall with every dolt who drinks my ale.

EGIL. A grim pass. Foes on every side . . .

ANOTHER. Sigvaldi . . .

ANOTHER. Earl Olaf . . .

INGIALD. Earl Olaf! We know the dastards out of Vingulmark. King Hakon rode South into Raumrealm . . . not so long ago but some of you may remember. And Hervor wears the ring from Hakon's arm.

HERVOR. Nay . . . a goodly gift . . . but my heart never rejoiced in it, King Ingiald. I cannot wear Hakon's ring.

INGIALD. Who asks a gift from Earl Olaf's war gear? They say it is heavy with red gold.

EINAR. Full early to share the gear . . .

EGIL. We are your men, King Ingiald, and no dastards . . .

ASA laughs.

EGIL (*white hot*). Neither liars nor dastards, Queen Asa. Nor lovers of the knife in the dark. But it seems to us King Ingiald would fling his men to their death.

EINAR. We are not as Thorgrim and Eyolf, King Ingiald. We stand by the Ynglings.

The clamour grows.

HERVOR. Of old you were not wont to wait for your foes to burn your house about your ears.

EINAR. Some snare, King Ingiald. You have some snare laid. Open your heart. For me I will follow you to the death.

INGIALD is about to speak when the door opens and THORGEIR rushes in. He is out of breath and covered with snow. His face is slashed with a recent wound. Sudden silence. He staggers. Two men support him and bring him to the High Seat. Suppressed and intense excitement.

INGIALD. Bring him ale, one of you.

Ale is brought to THORGEIR, who drinks and rallies a little. His wound is roughly bandaged.

INGIALD. What tidings, Thorgeir?

THORGEIR. Weighty news, Ingiald . . .

INGIALD. Speak out, man.

THORGEIR (*he looks round and hesitates*). Am I to tell the news in open hall.

INGIALD. Speak out.

THORGEIR. Ivor Wide-Fathom holds the west passes. He camps in Storddale, and his watchmen are flung forward half a score of miles east. One of them has watched for the last time.

INGIALD. Ah!

THORGEIR. I sought Ivor's camp. And my story was flight. I met Eyolf in the camp.

HERVOR. Craftily done.

THORGEIR. Good welcome in Ivor's host. He is something eager for news from Rimulstead. But to depart therefrom I found a harder matter.

INGIALD. What inkling had you of their plan?

THORGEIR. He moves with Earl Olaf step by step. To-morrow night, men say, they meet under Rimulstead gables. With torch and steel. King Ingiald—I know not what muster Earl Olaf brings. But all Scania is behind Ivor Wide-Fathom. Arne and his men out of Bleking, and Eyolf Blacktooth from Bornholm.

ASA. I wonder to hear that feud atoned. I had thought the Bornholm folk had weighed Ivor aright.

THORGEIR. I heard Eyolf Blacktooth say that the North had too long suffered the Ynglings. And that other wars could wait the slaying of King Ingiald.

ASA. Then I think it may be long before Eyolf Blacktooth draws sword in his own quarrel.

THORGEIR. They have watchmen out on every side. They say Sigvaldi has thrust men already into the East passes. And the Gautdale folk are mustering. They all hold it likely you will be fleeing North-ward . . .

INGIALD. That is what I needed to know. We are not faring to Gautdale for Yuletide, Thorgeir. Yule at Rimulstead.

THORGEIR. That is all of moment, King Ingiald. Brief in the telling. Nor am I able to say how welcome.

ASA. How came you by your wound, Thorgeir?

THORGEIR. I said Ivor had a watchman the less, Queen Asa.

INGIALD. To-morrow night the onset?

THORGEIR. So the word goes in the host, King Ingiald. They would strike together. A tardy blow, says Eyolf Blacktooth, but a weighty. And they think you not able to withstand it.

INGIALD. No long while, Egil, since you were mighty in counsel. And now you seem something silent. What gift for the bearer of good tidings?

HERVOR. Good tidings?

INGIALD. What gift? An earnest at least (*throws him a ring*). To-morrow night a nobler. Or perhaps a little earlier.

THORGEIR *is supported on to a bench.*

ASA (*rises*). Tidings good or ill, I care not. But my

gift is for a deed done manlike (*she takes off her brooch, looks at it and gives it to THORGEIR. She glances at one of the women who brings her a brooch of plain bronze. As she fastens it*). Those same Scanians held the brooch a marvel. But to me it is more marvellous that there should be one man only among all who drink our ale.

EINAR (*rising*). You lie, Queen Asa.

HERVOR (*pulling at him*). Einar!

EINAR. Let me speak. King Ingiald may lead his men to their death if he will. But I never swore to be his daughter's man.

KARK *draws his sword.*

INGIALD. Put up your sword, Kark. For me, I deemed the tidings good. But Einar deems I am caught unready and my men flung to their death. And Hervor also. . .

HERVOR: Nay, King Ingiald. . . .

INGIALD. You, like the rest, thought the play played. And you thronged to hear the wolf own himself trapped. O, you are all staunch for the Ynglings, till you think sheer need cries out for your swords.

EINAR (*manly but sulky*). You have needed my sword before to-day, and it is yours still. But Queen Asa shall not . . .

INGIALD. Have you not spoken your fill, Einar? Or are you fain to draw death on your head with your folly? (*EINAR sits sulkily.*) You must all needs hear my plan, because you are afraid for your lives of Ivor Wide-Fathom.

KARK. I fear no man, dark or day. Let them set on Rimulstead, say I, and a foul welcome waiting for the onset.

INGIALD. You shall hear my plan. South by West before dawn and over the fells. Ivor looks for us fleeing North and merry hunting over the hills into Gautdale. He shall find us at dawn, at his throat. Out of the South.

HERVOR. No ill plan, King Ingiald. . . . The Yngling craft. But, by Thorgeir's tale, a very great host.

INGIALD. O, it is a faithful league mustered against the Ynglings. Three old foes banded, Ivor, Sigvaldi, and Eyolf Blacktooth. Let the luck turn ever so little against one, and the others will be remembering old grudges. Fine sport for the wolf—the hunters at handstrokes. Men of Rimulstead, a blow at dawn!

HERVOR. I know not . . . but there is heart in the Ynglings yet.

INGIALD. For Einar, he is a fool, but no traitor. Asa, his words are forgotten?

ASA. A great venture, before dawn to-morrow And no grudge remembered.

INGIALD. Before dawn. And the old Yngling luck. And, as of old, the shame and death turned against our foes. Unn, more ale.

ASA. Nay there are deeds toward. And to-night I pour wine to our men. (*She speaks to the women. They bring a great sealed jar. It is opened.*) Men of the Ynglings. I was born something bitter of speech. I would have no word remembered to-morrow. To-morrow a great venture and a great fame, whatever come of it. And I at home waiting news of battle. Drink wine, men of the Ynglings, to the luck of war.

She goes round from bench to bench. The women follow her with the jar. Each man

rises in turn, and she pours wine. At last she reaches FJOLNIR. FJOLNIR rises as the others.

FJOLNIR. I will not drink your wine.

Silence.

ASA (*quietly*). Einar, slay me that man.

EINAR stands hesitating. FJOLNIR faces him—a long pause.

FJOLNIR (*violently*). Never a smooth word but hard upon it murder. I know not what you plan, but there is death thereon. And not mine only. . . .

INGIALD has leaped to his feet and drawn his sword. KARK leaps at FJOLNIR and cuts him down as he turns.

ASA (*languidly*). This is true, at least, that when men speak ill of me to my face, death is wont to follow.

ASA looks at FJOLNIR and slowly moves away to the High Seat.

INGIALD. Wine poured and Queen Asa's toast. For Fjolnir, he was crying doom on the Ynglings but an hour since. Yet was his doom the sooner. And I swear by Odin. . . .

KARK. Little was King Ingiald wont to reckon of Odin and Thor.

INGIALD (*laughing*). I swear by the Yngling luck and the hope of battle . . . to-morrow Ivor shall lie with Fjolnir. Ingiald Evilheart they call me in Scania and the Wick, and even now that dead dog cast the byename at me in my own hall. Evilheart indeed, to foes and traitors, but as I may, a King to my true men. Drink, men of the Ynglings, to the luck of war.

Drink and shout.

KARK. King Ingiald—I drink to the ravens. May they also have their fill of the ale that likes them best.

Enthusiasm grows. Most of the men are quite convinced now. The ale goes round furiously.

HERVOR. King Ingiald, I am old. Many battles, but to-morrow's the starkest of all. Neither need I be ill content if it be my last. My toast, King Ingiald. Great fame won out of to-morrow's swordplay. But life and death as the Norns choose.

EGIL. I always said the King had a plan. Hervor is an old fool.

HERVOR. I spoke for the rest. I doubted nothing.

EGIL. Never for me.

KARK. You lie, Egil. King Ingiald, I am none so ill at the slaying of traitors. . . .

ASA. Keep your sword for to-morrow, Kark. There will be greater need. Neither do I blame Egil.

KARK (*spits*). Dastard.

EGIL. Swords out if you will. No great gap in the Yngling line even if Kark the Black be missing.

Both men draw—they are separated. Most of the men are drunk. Drinking continues.

HERVOR (*very unsteadily*). King Ingiald . . . those lads are drunk. And we need watchers. And sleep before battle is good. Bid them cease drinking.

INGIALD. Aye, need of watchmen. Though I think they strike not to-night, best to be sure. So I choose the wariest of watchmen, and name Hervor Thorgeirson to stand sentry.

HERVOR. Aye, you do well, King Ingiald . . . the

others are heavy with ale. You do well. (*Rises and turns towards an inner door.*) Sleep, King Ingiald. Sleep sound and wake with fresh eyes. Fair rest to you also, Queen Asa.

The others are all stretched round in drunken sleep.

INGIALD. Wait a little, Hervor. Unn and you other women, darken the hall torches. And go sleep. Hervor—one cup with me before you take your watch.

The women darken all the torches except one on the dais. They go out.

HERVOR. Nay, I have drunk deep enow.

INGIALD. Nay, Hervor, when I was young there were men indeed under the Yngling banners. Crafty and wise in counsel and stark when it came to the sword play. You have not forgotten Olaf Hare-lip, and Rerir Thorgrimson and the death of Wolf the Red in Gautdale.

HERVOR. Aye, King Ingiald. I have them all in mind. But the starkest of all to my mind was Halfdan, your foster-brother. No such men as these in our hall.

INGIALD. You and I are the last, Hervor. And to-morrow a great venture. You shall drink a last cup with me to the memory of old battle friends.

*ASA goes through the darkened hall and pours
HERVOR a great horn of ale.*

HERVOR. Olaf's memory and Halfdan's. And to the memory of the old Yngling swords. It may well be that you and I fall to-morrow, King Ingiald. And that will be the end of a great story. Well, we will fall like men. Memory, King Ingiald.

HERVOR *drains the horn and drops it with a crash. He turns very unsteadily—staggers, and rolls on to a bench. Half-rises, sinks again, and sleeps. ASA remains standing. INGIALD sits in the seat still. A long pause.*

ASA. I have poured them their ale. And it seems not altogether in vain

INGIALD. There is no other way.

ASA. I said the sword was broken in your hand.

INGIALD. I was fain of a blow at Ivor.

ASA. At the last, sheer need will have every man by the throat. Though he be mighty indeed. And I am too proud to battle with my death.

INGIALD. The very steel cries out for a blow. . . .

ASA. It is strange to think on. I have striven, as a woman may, for my heart's desire. And to-morrow . . . striving is over. And no longer a heart's desire, to reach after it.

INGIALD. Sheer need, as you say. I have always known that some day the luck would fail me. Time and again I found a way. Craft or the bare sword. And it seems the play is played at last.

ASA. Handystrokes while handystrokes avail. But it is a drunkard's deed to fling himself on the swords. And the Ynglings are wont to be clear-eyed.

INGIALD. And yet a man would fain have a blow at the last.

Pause.

ASA. The watchers will see the flame.

INGIALD. Aye, a clear night. And men looking warily toward Rimulstead from the hills.

ASA. I would fain be able to see . . .

INGIALD. A goodlier sight in my eyes, fire in the Scanian roof tree, and steel to guard the door, and the Southern fools trapped in the flame.

ASA. Fire blazing in the dark. Rimulstead a flare under the stars. And the pines black behind it. The watchmen wondering and men roused out of sleep to see the marvel.

INGIALD. Ivor will camp in a hollow of the fells. They will see nothing from the camp.

ASA. The Scanians were ever gaping after some small matter. But this will be a wonder indeed. (*With a little laugh*) I think it will tax their wits.

INGIALD. Ivor has gathered a great host. He has ransacked the North for allies. And yet they move warily. . . .

ASA. Fire blazing in the dark. And to-morrow grey ash. And my heart's desire ash also. I have been a fire in the North for a little.

INGIALD. It is something that they are daunted. In our very death.

ASA. I think it will be a tame world after to-morrow . . . neither shall I heed, though fool and dastard be greatly at their ease.

INGIALD (*violently, after a pause*). Let us be swift. O, they may well hate you in Scania. Neither have you forgotten your craft, to find the coward in a man's heart.

ASA. There is no coward in my heart. Albeit it is something strange to stare into the dark. . . . Dry wood stored in the barn, and a cold task, I am thinking, to pile it.

INGIALD. I had wood brought within doors. Dry frost and ironhard outside. For all there is little wind, no great labour to fire Rimulstead.

*They move to and fro in the darkened hall.
They quietly pile wood by both doors.
Once INGIALD stumbles over a sleeping man
and curses under his breath. At last.*

INGIALD. That labour brought to an end.

ASA. I never loved thrall's tasks. And my hands are soiled with the wood.

ASA stands upright on the steps of the High Seat. INGIALD lights a brand from the dying fire and goes to the door. As he passes the blaze of the brand shows ASA clearly.

INGIALD. Shall I lay torch to the wood?

ASA (*softly, with a tremble*). When you will.

INGIALD lays the brand to the wood. There is a crackle and a spurt of flame.

THE END.

THE SWORD OF SIGURD

THE SWORD OF SIGURD.

CHARACTERS.

SIGURD, Son of Sigmund.

HJORDIS, his Mother.

REGIN.

HALFDAN MADHEAD.

REFNA.

Scene : The land of King Elf the Helper by Axwater.

Act 1. Regin's Smithy.

„ 2. A room in King Elf's hall.

„ 3. Regin's Smithy.

οὔρεά τε σκίοεντα θάλασσά τε ἠχήμεσα.

—ILIAD A, 157.

THE SWORD OF SIGURD

ACT I.

REGIN'S *Smithy.* *To the spectators' right an open door shows mountains beyond. There is a great anvil in the middle and a furnace behind. SIGURD sits opposite the door on a bench—he is a lad, middle height, fair and freckled, with a maze of yellow hair. He wears a dark green jerkin, belt, hunter's horn and hunting knife. With his head on his hand he watches REGIN at the anvil. REGIN is short and powerful, with a hairless and lined face—hard to guess his age. He limps a little. REGIN smithies in silence. He is hammering out a stirrup. He works quickly without any ostentation of effort. At last he sighs and draws himself up.*

SIGURD. I think all crafts are alike to you, Regin. Iron is clay in your hands. . . . Much you have taught me, songs and beechcraft, and the like. But I would fain know some little of the smithying.

REGIN (*smiling*). What should that avail you? Wield the sword as craftily as you will. But leave the forging to another, son of Sigmund.

SIGURD. Nay, Regin. There are many small needs to be righted in a man's harness. A dented helm or the broken hilt of a sword. And it is right that a King's son should be able to smithy his gear at need. And to break and tend his horse. Nor is a carle always to be trusted in either matter.

REGIN. Then are your brothers Kings indeed. Albeit not, as you, of the Volsung kin. For their mood is mightily set on horse breaking. But I thought there was another heart in the Volsung breast.

SIGURD. You are for ever egging me, Regin.

REGIN. Nay, you shall have peace for me. King Elf's is a fair land. A man may well wear out his days here without peril or unrest. Or remembrance after he is dead. I have seen many such . . . but never a Volsung.

SIGURD. Why are you bitter against the land, Regin?

REGIN. Nay, I am nothing bitter. I have had great quiet this many years.

SIGURD. For me, I hold it right gracious. The salt marshes where Axwater takes the tide, the sea bright beyond, and the sea birds, and the clover fragrant in the river meadows and the great pinewoods on the slope of the hills . . . O, a fair land and a lovely. And fair friends, Regin, and true comrades. Why are you always mocking?

REGIN. I blame it not. Good pasture indeed for kine. And they say there is great hunting out to westward. Rare sport for a King's son, hawk on wrist, and the sons of King Elf rare comrades. Overseas there are peril and sore toil. You do well to shun them.

SIGURD (*hotly*). There are no truer comrades under

the sky. I find nothing at all to blame in their fellowship.

REGIN. Mighty huntsman, I doubt not. Of their might in the shieldwall I have heard little. But who can be first in all things?

SIGURD. O, you grudge us our youth. Bend over your forge if you will, till your heart is like your iron. For me, I will be glad for a little before I ride Hell road.

Enter REFNA—a winsome girl. She carries a brooch. SIGURD subsides.

REGIN. Greeting, Refna.

SIGURD (*to himself*). There is small need of Regin's egging.

REFNA. Greeting, Regin . . . greeting, Sigurd.

SIGURD. Greeting.

REFNA. Bergthora sent me. . . . She asks you to mend this brooch.

REGIN. Let me see it.

REFNA. She would have it to-morrow if it can be done.

REGIN (*smiling*). I am some little pressed at my smithy. But it shall be done. I will find time between whiles.

REFNA. She sets great store by this brooch. A gift she says to pay the labour, if the breaking can be made good. See, the amber is cracked from the bronze, and the silver bent that holds it.

REGIN (*looking*). Aye, it shall be done, Refna. For the asking and not for the gift. Sigurd, you were even now hankering after the smith's craft. Will you mend the brooch and have the gift for the mending?

REFNA. Nay . . . if it were a matter of main strength and no cunning, I had asked Sigurd first of all. It will be done, Regin?

REGIN. Aye. To-morrow.

REFNA. I know not why she should set store by the brooch. She has other gauds. Some of your making, Regin. I hold it nothing marvellous. . . .

REGIN. Who can tell what a woman will prize, Sigurd?

SIGURD (*laughing*). Not I . . . I think they are something witless for the most part.

REFNA. We cannot swim Axwater and the stream black with snow. And we are ill at the breaking of horses. And Sigurd holds us witless. I think we are altogether unlucky. Farewell, Sigurd. (*She makes as if to go, but stops at the door.*) Regin, there is another matter, not Bergthora's . . . my own. But it is not worth the toil.

REGIN. What is it?

REFNA. This is not silver even . . . bare bronze . . . my ring.

REGIN. Show me the ring.

REFNA (*producing an arm ring*). The catch is broken.

REGIN. No great toil.

REFNA. The ring is not worth the labour. But . . . you will do it to-day? Bergthora has other gauds. I know not why she should set store by the brooch for a day's waiting. You will mend my ring first, Regin?

SIGURD. Shall I mend the ring, Refna?

REFNA. Nay, it is of no great price. But I would

not have it broken past mending. Farewell, Regin.
Farewell, Sigurd the witty. *Exit.*

REGIN (*brooding*). Light of heart and few years to weigh on her head. And fair to look on. It is strange. Long ago, when King Elf's father was but a lad, before Siggeir laid the snare for the Volsungs, she came to my smithy on the same errand, Refna herself or another. . . . I can hardly tell. I have wrought their will, ring and brooch and bridle; they come to me and praise my cunning and depart satisfied. Year after year they return. I grow something weary.

SIGURD. It irks me also in this land some little, Regin. Already.

REGIN. They pass and they return. And the mountains black beyond and the same river breaking out of the gates of the hills. Some there are set up to be wise. And they are for ever prating that no man returns out of Hell's ward. It is not so. Many times has Refna brought me her broken gaud, and Halfdan Madhead fared hither seeking a new bit for his horse. And I am weary because there is no wit in the whole matter.

SIGURD. And I also have dreamed here, I doubt not. Years ago. I or my fellow. And there is no wit in our dreaming.

REGIN. I say not so. Perhaps something may be brought to pass. I know not.

SIGURD. What?

REGIN (*surlily and brooding*). I know not. *Pause.*

SIGURD (*abruptly*). Why may I not bide for a little?

REGIN. Bide if your heart is set thereon. You say I am always egging. But the louts yonder have peace, for me. And you also . . . if you will.

SIGURD. Why may I not be at peace for a little?

REGIN. It is well for a lad to be at his ease. Belike the hour is not yet come to prove your manhood. And a carle's son may have peace to his death day.

SIGURD. O, you may mock your fill, Regin. But there is some foresight behind your mocking. Some inkling of to-morrow and the deeds of life days. And that . . . a tale to be told hereafter.

REGIN. Aye, it may be so.

SIGURD. I see no path. And you speak of the proving of a man. As if it were at hand.

REGIN. It may well be at hand.

SIGURD. I see no path. All things gracious here, and I should have joy in them. The love of true friends and fellows, plenty and glad days, beside Axwater. And no path outward. Little I should heed your flouting, Regin . . . but the Volsung blood cries out in my heart.

REGIN. You are like to find unrest beside Axwater. Even if you flinch from the proving.

SIGURD. You have a deed in your heart.

REGIN. I know not. Some might hold it both stark and strange for a boy's venture.

SIGURD (*breathless, after a pause*). O, they shall know I am the son of Sigmund!

REGIN (*threateningly*). You are strong of limb. And I have seen you at the breaking of a horse. This is no boy's sport. Maybe you are great of heart, but I think it will be your death.

SIGURD. Be swift.

REGIN (*loud and dangerous*). There is treasure

hoarded yonder, in the hills. There have been strokes dealt ere now for that gold: grim strokes dealt, times and again, and a curse laid on the hoard by one smitten in the dark. Men call Fafnir a grim warden. It is long now . . . and hitherto he has held off the curse and the reward of the old slaying. Are you daunted, son of Sigmund? For it is surely a fool's errand.

SIGURD (*slowly*). Aye, you have set me a deed.

REGIN (*his tone changing—fawning on SIGURD*). It is my treasure, Sigurd. I have reared you a man . . . as a Volsung should be reared. And the hoard is mine. . . . O, my love shall avail and the care I gave to your fostering. You shall come to your heart's desire . . . deeds, and the fellowship of the Kings, and the love of the Queenfolk, and fame in the great world. Your heart's desire, Sigurd. This first for me who reared you. The wreaking of Reidmar my father, and the hearth slaying and the broken troth. I have waited overlong, for the deed asks sheer might and my craft might avail little. But I have known the Volsung iron and the doom of Fafnir, and perhaps the waiting is over. Win me my father's hoard, Sigurd. And for yourself, the first fruits of great fame.

SIGURD. Aye, the deed is mighty enow.

REGIN (*threatening again*). You make boast to be Sigmund's son. A stark kin and a mighty the Volsungs. And they say that Odin made them his sword swift and very terrible to deal death as he chose. Of old our kin were also something mighty. Before the day of the Aesir and the wisdom of Odin and the Kings he set up to make earth proud with their deeds. (*Forgetting SIGURD*) O, subtle is Odin and great of mood; and he set a strong heart in the Kings. War craft he taught them, and city craft, and the love of fame.

Crowned they sit in the High Seat and give their dooms : and the banquet is ordered nobly and the Queen-folk pour wine to the earls, and the skald rejoices their heart with song. Odin's gift. And betimes good peace in the land ; byre and barn stuffed with the increase, the carle glad at heart, and the fjord white with outland sails and the merchants faring from oversea. And betimes the hosts arrayed and the shieldwall stark under the banners and great deeds toward. And in the end he sends his Valkyrs through the sword play, and gathers the bravest to his hall, to abide Ragnarok. . . . Yet we also had might in our day. Lords of mere and forest and the wild places of the hills. And we also had the Kings we cherished . . . the wolf howling in the snow, erne and falcon, the otter and the pike that lurks in the water weed. The mountains were ours, and the hoards of the mountains, gold in the torrent sands, the ores of bronze and iron ; amber by the shore of the great sea and strange stones : and all these we wrought cunningly as we would. Great joy we had in our lordship, and mastery. And we are broken at the hands of the Aesir. Some haunt lonely places, great gullies of ice and broken rock ; and some dwell among the Kings and serve them, brooding the while their old might. Ai ! for the day of the Dwarf folk ! *(There is silence. At last he lifts his head, resuming the threatening tone.)* Yet I think there is such remnant of our old might in Fafnir that even a Volsung might flinch from that battle.

SIGURD. For Fafnir . . . I doubt not his might. Nor do I gainsay your care and the crafts you have taught me. But this I would know . . . you crave your father's treasure. Do you crave for the curse also?

REGIN (*eagerly*). For this I fostered you, Sigurd . . . for the death of Fafnir . . . aye, and maybe a greater deed thereafter. I had always the craft of my kin, and I have dwelt long in the halls of the Kings and gathered their wisdom and mingled it into my old cunning. Sigurd—I have done all that might avail you. . . . For the curse . . . as the Norns will.

SIGURD (*erect, in a ringing voice*). One task undone, Regin!

REGIN. Then has my wit failed me, Sigurd. In a matter I had brooded greatly. But you shall not ask twice. . . .

SIGURD. You boast the cunning of the Dwarfs. You know mountain and mountain hoard, treasure of bronze and iron. You wrought the great house of Reidmar, a marvel of all crafts. Master of forge and smithy. And you bid a swordless man to a great venture.

REGIN (*smiling*). Not I, Sigurd. It is long I have pondered this matter. No unlucky wind, I deemed, bore a son of Sigmund to Axwater. And I watched you from the first, and fostered, and my thought ran, as it might, before your asking. And I knew the Volsung brows and I guessed at the Volsung heart. And the greatest task was at hand. Dark and dawn I laboured, for all lesser ends must wait. Even now you praised my smithying . . . gauds, trappings for horses, and the small gear of a King's house. Ah, but you shall see, Sigurd. (*He hobbles to a chest and draws out something long wrapped in a cloth. He hobbles back and undoes it eagerly and reveals a great sword in a scabbard. He takes the sword to SIGURD.*) See, Sigurd. Toil here and cunning indeed. If I have any cunning at all. Look at that stone in the pommel. I have treasured that many years. Never before has that jewel come to

Axwater out of the East. See, a good grip for the hand. The sword will not slip in the smiting. And the sheath . . . not every craftsman can lay the thin gold on leather in this wise, Sigurd. (*He draws the sword and lays it in SIGURD'S hands.*) Nay, but the hilt is nothing . . . a Volsung's eyes are set on the blade. Runes, Sigurd, of the mightiest. And the swift clear edges. Ai! for the blaze of the Volsung sword and the broken shieldwall! Sinfiotli had no such blade. (*SIGURD turns the sword without a word.*) Is the blade to your heart's desire, Sigurd?

SIGURD *steps to the anvil.* REGIN *steps back as if afraid.* SIGURD *whirls the blade round his head and crashes it on to the anvil.* *The sword breaks.*

SIGURD. Yonder lies the Dwarf folk's cunning, Regin. And the faith of the Dwarfs.

Curtain.

ACT II.

The Chamber of QUEEN HJORDIS. A low room, not very large, with a sloping roof. It is lighted by a kind of clerestory window in the roof. The walls are covered with hangings. In one corner is a loom at which HJORDIS has been working. She is a grave, quiet-spoken woman of forty or thereabouts. Her face is sweet, but marked by a habitual restraint and watchfulness. A girl sits by the loom. HJORDIS is standing near the door talking to HALFDAN MADHEAD, a well grown lad a year or so younger than SIGURD, with a shock of black hair.

HALFDAN. Well, good-bye, mother.

HJORDIS. A week, you said.

HALFDAN. Aye, a week or thereabouts. Einar Hornetsbane . . .

HJORDIS (*laughing*). Einar Hornetsbane?

HALFDAN. O, I have always called him that since that matter of the hornets. The others used to call him Ale-Einar.

HJORDIS. Do you mean Einar Thorgrim's son?

HALFDAN. No. Ale-Einar . . . son of Gunnar . . . from the stead in the river bend. I set little store by

any of Thorgrim's kin. Ale-Einar is a very lout, mother, in hall. But he is something less foolish when it comes to the hunting. Unless, indeed, hornets are the quarry.

HJORDIS. Well, what of Einar Hornetsbane, as you name him?

HALFDAN. It seems you heard little of the deed of his. Would we had a skald to take it in hand. I am something handy at byenames . . .

HJORDIS. And your own is the best I ever heard, Halfdan Madhead.

HALFDAN. O, I have made many to better that. But it needs a skald to tell of that battle, and I am, to my sorrow, an ill skald . . . but of the matter in hand. Einar says there is good sport northward. We ford Axwater a day's journey past Garstead, and that is the last of the river farms. Aye, and barren at that.

HJORDIS. Little corn round Garstead. But they rear men there. There are few more sturdy than Hrut and Hrut's sons.

HALFDAN. Hrut is a churl. But Steinthor, his eldest, comes with us. And we work North into the hills. Einar says there is mighty hunting, and he promises us more bears than one. You would prize a bear skin, mother . . . if it was of my slaying?

HJORDIS. You would fain break Greyfell a few weeks ago, Halfdan Madhead. But it was your arm was broken, and there was some tending over that deed. Nay, I grudge it not at all. But a bear skin as a gift and you to nurse again were an ill bargain. And last time . . . you did not even break Greyfell.

Enter SIGURD hastily. He half stops when he sees HALFDAN.

HALFDAN. We are off bear-hunting, Sigurd, to-day. Will you make one? We are pushing two days' journey beyond Garstead. There is Steinthor Hrut's son . . . he is something akin to the bears by the walk of the man, and Ale-Einar, Thorgeir, and I. Make a fifth, Sigurd.

SIGURD. When was this plotted?

HALFDAN. O, an hour since—at noon. We set out very soon. We must sleep at Garstead to-night. Up before dawn to-morrow, Sigurd. . . . Will you come?

SIGURD. Nay.

HALFDAN. O, but we have the craftiest of hunters. Ale-Einar you may hold a fool . . . until you have fared with him in the woods. And there it is you who are uncouth. Mother, he knows the hills as you know your own garth. . . . And I think there is that in the lonely places which makes a man seem witless in hall, if he dwell overlong with the bear and otter.

HJORDIS. Are you going also, Sigurd?

SIGURD. Nay, not this time, Halfdan. But I wish you a lucky hunting.

HALFDAN. I would fain be quits with you, Sigurd, for you have the laugh of me with Greyfell. Before my arm is well healed Sigurd riding the horse I had marked for my own. Well, if I had a foul fall in the matter, the others dare not even lay hand on the steed. You were laughing even now, mother, but it is you are always praising, not the victory, but the venture. I ventured at least.

HJORDIS. I was not mocking you, Halfdan. And I look for my bearskin.

HALFDAN. You shall not wait long. Well, I am

glad you had luck with Greyfell, Sigurd. A steed for a King, I hold him, and even Hrut grants me the eye for a horse. You are sure you will not come?

SIGURD (*who is obviously impatient*). Nay, Halfdan, not this hunting.

HALFDAN. Then luck while I am gone. Farewell.

He goes out with a rush.

HJORDIS. Thorgerd, you may leave the loom. Unn yonder will need some help.

THORGERD *goes out.*

SIGURD (*as soon as the door is shut*). Mother. . . .

HJORDIS (*gazing at him*). Is it some great matter, Sigurd? For there is that in your eyes. . . .

SIGURD. Little enough to another, perhaps. . . . but to me a great matter.

HJORDIS. I have seen that light in a man's eyes. . . . once. . . . twenty years since.

SIGURD. You are troubled, mother.

HJORDIS. Nay, Sigurd.

SIGURD. Indeed, mother. . . . I have hurt you.

HJORDIS. Nay. But then also there was a mist before my eyes. The horns were blowing. And your father rode to his last battle.

SIGURD. Aye. . . . it is as if I had been by his side. And Odin brake his own sword. . . .

HJORDIS (*smiling*). What else, heir of the Volsungs? Shall the brand abide all onsets, or the swordsman live for ever?

SIGURD (*eager, but trying to be gentle*). Mother. No great heritage mine in the matter of gear. Halfdan and Hoskuld might well flout it, were they anything less

noble of heart. But, great or small, it is time. You called me a man . . . I also am not fain to live for ever.

HJORDIS. Yes, you are grown, Sigurd. And you would fare outward. I have been . . . no, not afraid of this. I shall have joy in you . . . gladness enough and to spare.

SIGURD. Mother, I shall come again in a little. In my own dragon, perhaps, with my own men. And a gift set aside against the meeting.

HJORDIS. I think I shall be rich in time. Halfdan's bearskin and a gift out of your spoil. Nay, I am rich enough. But it is not doomed that your dragon take ground in the reaches of Axwater. . . .

SIGURD. Mother . . . it is not Regin's egging. It is my own heart. A Volsung must needs ride . . . and there is no way. He made me a sword, O, cunningly. And it shattered at my first blow. Then I knew no craft of the Dwarfs might avail a Volsung, and that there was need of the iron of the Aesir. Mother, the shards of the Sword! Odin's sword and Sigmund's. For a great venture.

HJORDIS. Tell me the venture.

SIGURD. You will hold it a lad's folly. . . I ride with Regin. I would slay Fafnir and win him the great hoard of the Dwarfs. Mother, maybe the deed is too mighty by far. But I ride none the less.

HJORDIS. The proving of a Volsung is wont to be perilous. And I wish you good hap. Albeit, the Dwarf folk were ever something untrusty.

SIGURD (*trembling*). Let me but have a grip on Sigmund's sword. It will not be the first snare it has ripped asunder, if a snare be waiting.

HJORDIS. Sigmund was old and battle-weary when I knew him. But I see him now when he first laid hand on Odin's gift . . . Sigurd, sit and listen for a little. I withstand you not at all. And you are leaving me and I think we shall not speak together again. A small matter the heart of a Queen when a young man rides into his first battle. O, I would you should understand some little, Sigurd, before you depart.

SIGURD. Mother, I am sure I understand.

HJORDIS (*smiling*). Sigurd, your heart is set mightily on the shards of Gram. Surely they shall be the death of Fafnir and have their part in more deeds than one, aye, and cleave your path to your heart's desire. I am a woman, but I can understand a King's love for his sword. And this, somewhat apart from the run of swords, as your race from the other Kings. Sigurd, the shards are more to my heart than yours. I know you are not able to believe, or to understand. But I must speak out and weary you with a tale told over and over again. If by any means . . .

SIGURD. Mother, I can well believe you hold Gram dear. And for wearying me . . . it is not easy with that story.

HJORDIS. Sigurd, my life is there. Behind me, one thing only to be remembered—the bent below Jarnfell. Night, and the wolves prowling over the slain. A glare beyond the hill, and that Lyngi's fire in my father's roof-tree. And Sigmund lying on the bed he had strewn. And his last word was of the Volsung kin rearsen and the sword welded and the old banner blown to every wind under heaven.

SIGURD. O, no long time to wait and it shall be made good.

HJORDIS. Nothing behind me that I care not to for-

get, save that only. Into my hands he gave the iron. Mine the trust and under my heart the hope of the Volsungs. And the winds bore me to Axwater, and it was my hap to rule King Elf's hall. Much care in a King's house, Sigurd, and many things to be had in mind; and this perhaps the greatest, that the Kings shall not even know there has been care in the matter. Neither is it altogether without toil to rear three sons, stark and manly. When one is a son of Sigmund and another a famous wrestler, and the third called Madhead by all that know him. Sigurd, I have been no foolish housewife. O, I have taken thought, and laboured; and my heart's secret the while, a broken sword and the hope of the Volsungs. And now you are grown and riding perilously, and I shall not see you or speak with you again. All the seas between us and the whole breadth of the hills, but I shall hear the smiting of your sword very far off. I must be content with a rumour born far overseas, a sailor's tale told now and again when luck brings outland men to Axwater . . . and at last, some word of your death. That is all my life in a little space. Sigurd, it is worth while.

A knock, and the door opens. REGIN enters.

He pauses.

REGIN. Greeting, Queen Hjordis. I have made good the beaker you sent. Neither would any guess, to look on it, that it had been a second time in the smith's hands. Greeting, Sigurd.

HJORDIS. The beaker may wait, Regin. I know we have a master smith beside Axwater. Yet Sigurd has a task that may well tax even your cunning.

REGIN. Cunning or sheer toil, Sigurd has yet to ask in vain, Queen Hjordis. Nor is it likely I shall now gainsay him. Albeit he is no easy taskmaster.

HJORDIS goes to a chest. SIGURD rises with blazing eyes. HJORDIS takes out a broken sword wrapped in silk. The hilt is simple iron. The blade is broken in three places. REGIN turns white as he sees it. SIGURD meets HJORDIS, and she lays the fragments in his hands.

HJORDIS. Odin's sword and Sigmund's. Fifty years and more since your father first wielded the gift of Odin. Never has that iron come back shamed from the onset, and its bearer was not greatly minded to shun battle. It was the bane of Siggeir the Goth: they were two men only beset that hall, two of the Volsung kin, and within a great lord and his housecarles very many. And Siggeir fell in his own doorway, and those who shrank from the Volsung edges know whether the fire was the easier death. And this sword won back the old heritage, and they feared it overseas, the lords of the South Isles and the Wessex carles and the Kesar's earls in Frankland. There was a great battle, and men talk of it to this day, beside Raumriver; no other blade rent the shield wall of the Danes; and it was foremost of any when the Jomsburg host was broken in Bornholm. And, at the last, Odin would shatter his own gift, yet not altogether. For there was one left to prize the broken sword and to abide the time. Sigurd, I have guarded your heritage. (SIGURD, *without a word, lays down the sword and kisses his mother. They stand for a moment.*) Bid Regin weld the sword, Sigurd.

SIGURD. Regin, you have set me a deed. And you boasted of your goodwill. Will you weld the sword?

REGIN (*after a pause, in a choking voice*). I will have no truck with the iron of Odin.

SIGURD. I ask not twice for the same boon. And in

the matter of smithying I have watched a good master. I am no foresighted man, Regin, but I think your ill-will shall hardly stand between a Volsung and his battle edge. Though I wield the hammer with my own hands.

REGIN. Forge and weld as you will. It may be you will be pleased with your own forging. But that iron lies never on my anvil.

HJORDIS. Nay, Sigurd. Regin, you shall weld the sword. And that truly, since you gave your word. And, moreover, at my bidding.

REGIN (*terrified, angry, and sulky at once*). I will have no truck with the sword.

HJORDIS. You are master of more crafts than one. O, you deemed the Volsung mood had slumbered but for your egging. You have chosen the path and set the death of Fafnir in Sigurd's heart, and now it is laid on you to tread your path to the end. Aye, though you would now flinch. You shall weld the sword, Regin, for I think that was doomed before ever I came to Axwater or Sigmund joined battle beneath Jarnfell. And what is doomed moreover I know not. But if you have any inkling it is in vain that you shrink therefrom.

REGIN (*desperately*). I will take the sword. Neither ask my service of me hereafter, Queen Hjordis. And I give Sigurd this counsel, for all he is forward and choice concerning a sword. Let him forbear my smithy for a little. Seven days and yet another seven, and since it is doomed, the blade may perhaps be welded. And Sigurd may perhaps rejoice, now and hereafter, in the iron of his heart. Who knows, Queen Hjordis, albeit we twain are so wise in the matter of dooms?

Curtain.

ACT III.

REGIN'S *smithy*. REGIN *sits alone, brooding. The sword is mended and leans against the anvil. Shouting is heard outside, and voices, including HALFDAN'S. REFNA rushes in.*

REFNA. Regin, tidings !

REGIN. And that is something unwonted by Axwater.

REFNA. Halfdan and the rest are back. They said a week for their hunting and it is now twice so long since they set out. And many feared they had come to harm. Except Queen Hjordis. But it seems it is only the bears have had illhap out of that journey. Steinthor indeed, is mauled some little, but who heeds Steinthor? Halfdan calls him Bear-wrestler already.

REGIN. I never deemed you like to set store by Hrut's son. No falcon's plume set jauntily in his cap and in Refna's eyes it needs little else to make a man. Except lightness of wit.

REFNA. O, we know you of old, Regin. And your tongue when the black mood is upon you. And for my tidings you care nothing at all. But you shall hear them out, if it is only to put your mocking to shame. Three bear skins

REGIN. A great hunt and a half a month away. And three bears slain. The work of four men . . . if indeed they are all to be called men.

REFNA (*up in arms*). It was Halfdan slew the greatest: whether you hold him a man or no. Steintor had closed, and man as he is, was in the bear's hug, and it was nothing more than his life he thought to lose. He says so himself. And Halfdan closed also, and all men say that was the bravest of deeds. But I am sorry I came to trouble you . . . another time you would thank me for my tidings. (*REFNA turns to go, and meets SIGURD in the door.*) Ah, Sigurd! Regin is somewhat brooding to-day and has little to say of those of us who are light witted. But you and he should be of one mind, both so deep in some great matter these many days. (*REFNA sees the sword and strolls up to it curiously.*) But whose is the sword, Regin?

REGIN. Maybe a gift for Halfdan. Or perhaps for some other. (*With sudden violence.*) Meddle with your own matters, Refna.

REFNA. O, if your mood is black to that height . . . neither is the owner hard to guess. But this I marvel, that we have heard you hammer at all hours and had good words at none, and the end of the matter is so bare a blade. You are old and your cunning wanes, Regin. Farewell, Sigurd, and I wish you joy of your gift.

REFNA *goes out.* *There is a pause.* SIGURD *looks at the sword.*

SIGURD. The sword is welded.

REGIN. The sword is welded. There is only a Sigmund lacking to handle the iron.

SIGURD (*smiling*). Time shall find out what lacks in the sword-bearer.

REGIN. Aye. There are many things time brings to the proof, beside a lad's boasting.

SIGURD. And the first matter is the sword.

He steps to the anvil and takes up the sword, which he turns over slowly and carefully in his hands.

REGIN. Sigurd is choice concerning his battle gear, as one born to wield death over the folk. This shall surely bear a grim name among the kings when the Vol-sung grows skilled in sword craft. If he come not first to his death.

SIGURD (*turning to him, quite gently*). Regin, I can make nothing of your mood. Neither it is easy to anger me to-day. You and I will not quarrel, because I have had great love at your hands this many years, and because to-day we two fare to the proving, not of a sword only, but of a sword-bearer. And for me, I am as one who girds him to a journey and I cannot tarry to answer your mocking. And you also know it is folly and to be borne as a dark mood in a man, that will shortly pass. My hands may be weak, and my heart, and of the doom that waits me I know little, whether fame, or as is likely, death in my first onset. But I am the last of a great house, and I have in my hands the sword of Odin, and I think to find shame only if I flinch from my inheritance. Mock if you will, but the proof is to be made. Of the man shortly, but of the sword even now.

He steps back, smites downright on the anvil, and cleaves it to the ground.

The sword at least will serve its turn, Regin. And I praise the welding.

A silence. REGIN seems to shake off his gloom with an effort.

REGIN (*slowly*). Son of Sigmund, the sword has come proudly from the trial. And for the sword-bearer, he may boast at least one great stroke. (*Smiling.*) But what of my anvil?

SIGURD. Small need of your anvil henceforward. For we ride to-day on the slaying of Fafnir.

REGIN (*rising*). Is there need, Sigurd, of much asking that you forget my folly? You are great of heart and you have spoken my amends for me. We ride, as you say, on the slaying of Fafnir. And there is a greater deed beyond.

SIGURD. Your mood is changed indeed, Regin. For me, I hold the watcher of the hoard a perilous quarry for a man untried. And I think greater deeds may well wait.

REGIN. I can see the hoard bare in the sunlight. And the iron in Fafnir's heart.

SIGURD. Then let us fare to our good luck.

REGIN. O, I have reared you, Sigurd, and to-day I am proud of the rearing. Mine the craft and the foresight, mine the dream and the great hope nursed through the days of many kings. And, for you, the strong hand and the sword not to be withstood, and the laugh in the teeth of battle. (*Dropping his voice to a whisper.*) Sigurd, they call Odin All-wielder. But I remember the years before his mastery . . . shall the day of the Aesir abide for ever? Is their lordship so gentle, Sigurd? (*Rising again.*) O, the Kesar of Frankland takes outland men, thralls and captives of the spear, and he bids them fight to the death for his mirth and the mirth of his earls; and that is the foulest of deeds. Not otherwise the Aesir deal with the folk. For their

game is wounding and bitter toil, fire in the carle's roof tree, and a sword at the throat of the carle, and wailing over the wide earth. Look closely on the craft of Odin, Sigurd, cities and swordbearers, the dooms of the lawmen, and the heart he sets in the kings and all the faring of men, war and travail by land and overseas; and the end of the matter is vainglory and desire denied, and a woman mourning over the dead. It was not so in the day of the Dwarfs, and if I but have my will, it shall not be so hereafter. Sigurd, your heart is set on fame, and you are like to win it. Here lies the greatest of all fame to be won and the last, and thereafter, neither strife nor slaying over the wide earth. It was not for nothing you came to my fostering, and the sword of Odin to be welded at my hands, albeit I hated it, and it has been a bane to my kin before ever it lay on the knees of Sigmund. And it is now Odin shall hate it, and his own engine turned against him and the death edges of the Aesir blazing in his own eyes. And the Gods overthrown, and an end to the lies of the lawmen and the bitter pride of the kings and the great deeds wrought out of the death pain of the folk. The world shall have its old peace and men take their ease, and none to withstand the heart's desire. Aye, and the Aesir forgotten, as a dream boding and unfulfilled. Are you with me, son of Sigmund?

SIGURD. I see not clear in this matter, Regin, nor how you would bring it to pass. I know there is woe in the world; but it is a man's part to battle with sea and sword and be steadfast. For the women-folk I know not. But I am Odin's man, as my father, and I stand by the Aesir. And it is time to ride.

HALFDAN *enters.*

HALFDAN. I am glad you are not gone, Sigurd. I

would not you should leave Axwater with no word to wish you good luck.

SIGURD. Aye, it is farewell to Axwater.

HALFDAN. Our mother told me. Nay, I have spoken to none beside. And she said something of your venture. You ride on greater sport than I. And I wish you at least no worse luck.

SIGURD. O, luck abide by Axwater, and good days and gladness. And with you most of all.

HALFDAN. I must not grudge your going, Sigurd. We have all looked that you would someday leave us and that we should hear of you. And that proudly. Albeit tidings come hither late and seldom. And you will come back some day. For we have had good sport together and glad days. Even though no deeds are toward great enough for a Volsung.

SIGURD. O, I will come back if I live. Glad days here indeed. And they say you played a man's part in your hunting.

HALFDAN. Nay. Steinthor and his black brother came to grips, and we must needs part them. It was a rough business, for it is ill to come between brothers who have fallen out. Indeed, one of them died of it. They mourn for him at Garstead. Do you go also, Regin?

REGIN. I know not.

SIGURD. Regin rides with me, Halfdan. And, moreover, he has wrought me a great service. See, this iron was Sigmund's, and it shattered in his last fight beneath Jarnfell. And Regin has welded the sword. Halfdan, I am untried, but I think it is not unlucky to strike my first blow with my father's sword.

He hands HALFDAN the sword.

HALFDEN. Nay, it is good to handle Sigmund's battle-edge. (*He turns it over eagerly.*) Knife and spear for bear slaying—but the very grip of the iron wakes the battle-mood. Even in one of the Axwater folk. O, you will be proud, Sigurd. Horsed kingly and armed. (*He gives back the sword and takes a knife from his belt.*) You would hardly prize this for its own sake . . . but I would not be altogether forgotten. Indeed, it brought some harm to Steinthor's brother. You can trust it, Sigurd. And, moreover, I give you a better gift, and that is a bye-name that shall be remembered. Luck and fair days and your heart's desire, SIGURD FAFNIRSBANE. And now farewell.

They shake hands in silence. HALFDAN goes out. A pause.

SIGURD. All is ready, Regin. The sword is tried and the steeds wait. And I have said my farewell. It is time to depart.

REGIN. Depart when you will. But you ride alone.

SIGURD (*quietly*). It is overlate to flinch.

REGIN (*growing more and more agitated*). Ride alone, Sigurd Fafnirsbane. It may be you will find the path and look on the great hall of the Dwarf folk. Or perhaps you will wander the hills some little. Who knows?

SIGURD. It was you named the venture. Neither did I quarrel with your choosing. You shall have the hoard, if it lie in my hands, all the ancient treasure, and the vengeance for Reidmar your father. You shall dwell in the house you wrought and weave what plans you will. You have chosen, and you shall abide the choice.

REGIN. I have measured my wits with Odin. And I know not if I shall prevail.

SIGURD. Little I meddle with All-wielder's craft or the plotting of his foes. This task lies to my hand, and it is to be carried through. Neither shall your moods withstand me. It is time to ride, Regin.

REGIN. I am the foe of the Aesir. And I know not if I shall prevail. But you at least shall not overmaster me. (*Violently*) Ride alone and die in the hills.

SIGURD. Regin, Odin has you in the snare. Even now the lust of the treasure gnaws at your heart, and the old desire. O, often have you praised the hoard and its glory, gold unwrought and red rings for chaffer, marvels in gold beaten by your hammer, the hauberk of red mail and the helm blazing against the sun: and beyond all, Andvari's ring, the seed of gold. Regin, you are a fool to fear what is doomed, and you will yet follow your heart's desire.

REGIN. I hate the iron of the Aesir.

SIGURD. You are cunning indeed. And yet I hold your mood something fickle to strive with the wisdom of Odin. And you, like any other, must needs run on your doom.

REGIN. I know not who shall prevail.

SIGURD. It is time to ride, Regin.

REGIN. It shall be tried. You also who are so staunch for riding, ride blindly. And they are witless who talk of dooms. I see not the end, and yet I will have my treasure and my vengeance and grudge not my heart's desire. And thereafter I will take up the ancient war. And who knows the chance of battle, Sigurd?

THE END.

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