

THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE

BOOK I

AAR

CHAPTER I

THE BETROTHAL OF OLAF

Of my childhood in this Olaf life I can regain but little. There come to me, however, recollections of a house, surrounded by a moat, situated in a great plain near to seas or inland lakes, on which plain stood mounds that I connected with the dead. What the dead were I did not quite understand, but I gathered that they were people who, having once walked about and been awake, now laid themselves down in a bed of earth and slept. I remember looking at a big mound which was said to cover a chief known as "The Wanderer," whom Freydisa, the wise woman, my nurse, told me had lived hundreds or thousands of years before, and thinking that so much earth over him must make him very hot at nights.

I remember also that the hall called Aar was a long house roofed with sods, on which grew grass and sometimes little white flowers, and that inside of it cows were tied up. We lived in a place beyond, that was separated off from the cows by balks of rough timber. I used to watch them being milked through a crack between two of the balks where a knot had fallen out, leaving a convenient eyehole about the height of a walking-stick from the floor.

One day my elder and only brother, Ragnar, who had very red hair, came and pulled me away from this eyehole because he wanted to look through it himself at a cow that always kicked the girl who milked it. I howled, and Steinar, my foster-brother, who had light-coloured hair and blue eyes, and was much bigger and stronger than I, came to my help, because we always loved each other. He fought Ragnar and made his nose bleed, after which my mother, the Lady Thora, who was very beautiful, boxed his ears. Then we all cried, and my father, Thorvald, a tall man, rather loosely made, who had come in from hunting, for he carried the skin of some animal of which the blood had run down on to his leggings, scolded us and told my mother to keep us quiet as he was tired and wanted to eat.

That is the only scene which returns to me of my infancy.

The next of which a vision has come to me is one of a somewhat similar house to our own in Aar, upon an island called Lesso, where we were all visiting a chief of the name of Athalbrand. He was a fierce-looking

man with a great forked beard, from which he was called Athalbrand Fork-beard. One of his nostrils was larger than the other, and he had a droop in his left eye, both of which peculiarities came to him from some wound or wounds that he had received in war. In those days everybody was at war with everybody else, and it was quite uncommon for anyone to live until his hair turned grey.

The reason of our visit to this chief Athalbrand was that my elder brother, Ragnar, might be betrothed to his only surviving child, Iduna, all of whose brothers had been killed in some battle. I can see Iduna now as she was when she first appeared before us. We were sitting at table, and she entered through a door at the top of the hall. She was clothed in a blue robe, her long fair hair, whereof she had an abundance, was arranged in two plaits which hung almost to her knees, and about her neck and arms were massive gold rings that tinkled as she walked. She had a round face, coloured like a wild rose, and innocent blue eyes that took in everything, although she always seemed to look in front of her and see nothing. Her lips were very red and appeared to smile. Altogether I thought her the loveliest creature that ever I had looked on, and she walked like a deer and held her head proudly.

Still, she did not please Ragnar, who whispered to me that she was sly and would bring mischief on all that had to do with her. I, who at the time was about twenty-one years of age, wondered if he had gone mad to talk thus of this beautiful creature. Then I remembered that just before we had left home I had caught Ragnar kissing the daughter of one of our

thralls behind the shed in which the calves were kept. She was a brown girl, very well made, as her rough robe, fastened beneath her breast with a strap, showed plainly, and she had big dark eyes with a sleepy look in them. Also, I never saw anyone kiss quite so hard as she did; Ragnar himself was outpassed. I think that is why even the great lady, Iduna the Fair, did not please him. All the while he was thinking of the brown-eyed girl in the russet robe. Still, it is true that, brown-eyed girl or no, he read Iduna aright.

Moreover, if Ragnar did not like Iduna, from the first Iduna hated Ragnar. So it came about that, although both my father, Thorvald, and Iduna's father, Athalbrand, stormed and threatened, these two declared that they would have nothing to do with each other, and the project of their marriage came to an end.

On the night before we were to leave Lesso, whence Ragnar had already gone, Athalbrand saw me staring at Iduna. This, indeed, was not wonderful, as I could not take my eyes from her lovely face, and when she looked at me and smiled with those red lips of hers I became like a silly bird that is bewitched by a snake. At first I thought that he was going to be angry, but suddenly some idea seemed to strike him so that he called my father, Thorvald, outside the house. Afterwards I was sent for, and found the two of them seated on a three-cornered, flat stone, talking in the moonlight, for it was summer-time, when everything looks blue at night and the sun and the moon ride in the sky together. Near by stood my mother, listening.

"Olaf," said my father, "would you like to marry Iduna the Fair?"

"Like to marry Iduna?" I gasped. "Aye, more than to be High King of Denmark, for she is no woman, but a goddess."

At this saying my mother laughed, and Athalbrand, who knew Iduna when she did not seem a goddess, called me a fool. Then they talked, while I stood trembling with hope and fear.

"He's but a second son," said Athalbrand.

"I have told you there is land enough for both of them, also the gold that came with his mother will be his, and that's no small sum," answered Thorvald.

"He's no warrior, but a skald," objected Athalbrand again; "a silly half-man who makes songs and plays upon the harp."

"Songs are sometimes stronger than swords," replied my father, "and, after all, it is wisdom that rules. One brain can govern many men; also, harps make merry music at a feast. Moreover, Olaf is brave enough. How can he be otherwise coming of the stock he does?"

"He is thin and weedy," objected Athalbrand, a saying that made my mother angry.

"Nay, lord Athalbrand," she said; "he is tall and straight as a dart, and will yet be the handsomest man in these parts."

"Every duck thinks it has hatched out a swan," grumbled Athalbrand, while with my eyes I implored my mother to be silent.

Then he thought for awhile, pulling at his long forked beard, and said at last:

"My heart tells me no good of such a marriage. Iduna, who is the only one left to me, could marry a man of more wealth and power than this rune-making stripling is ever likely to be. Yet just now I know none such whom I would wish to hold my place when I am gone. Moreover, it is spread far and wide throughout the land that my daughter is to be wed to Thorvald's son, and it matters little to which son. At least, I will not have it said that she has been given the go-by. Therefore, let this Olaf take her, if she will have him. Only," he added with a growl, "let him play no tricks like that red-headed cub, his brother Ragnar, if he would not taste of a spear through his liver. Now I go to learn Iduna's mind."

So he went; as did my father and mother, leaving me alone, thinking and thanking the gods for the chance that had come my way--yes, and blessing Ragnar and that brown-eyed wench who had thrown her spell over him.

Whilst I stood thus I heard a sound, and, turning, saw Iduna gliding

towards me in the blue twilight, looking more lovely than a dream. At my side she stopped and said:

"My father tells me you wish to speak with me," and she laughed a little softly and held me with her beautiful eyes.

After that I know not what happened till I saw Iduna bending towards me like a willow in the wind, and then--oh, joy of joys!--felt her kiss upon my lips. Now my speech was unsealed, and I told her the tale that lovers have always told. How that I was ready to die for her (to which she answered that she had rather that I lived, since ghosts were no good husbands); how that I was not worthy of her (to which she answered that I was young, with all my time before me, and might live to be greater than I thought, as she believed I should); and so forth.

Only one more thing comes back to me of that blissful hour. Foolishly I said what I had been thinking, namely, that I blessed Ragnar. At these words, of a sudden Iduna's face grew stern and the lovelight in her eyes was changed to such as gleams from swords.

"I do not bless Ragnar," she answered. "I hope one day to see Ragnar----" and she checked herself, adding: "Come, let us enter, Olaf. I hear my father calling me to mix his sleeping-cup."

So we went into the house hand in hand, and when they saw us coming thus, all gathered there burst into shouts of laughter after their rude

fashion. Moreover, beakers were thrust into our hands, and we were made to drink from them and swear some oath. Thus ended our betrothal.

I think it was on the next day that we sailed for home in my father's largest ship of war, which was named the Swan. I went unwillingly enough, who desired to drink more of the delight of Iduna's eyes. Still, go I must, since Athalbrand would have it so. The marriage, he said, should take place at Aar at the time of the Spring feast, and not before. Meanwhile he held it best we should be apart that we might learn whether we still clung to each other in absence.

These were the reasons he gave, but I think that he was already somewhat sorry for what he had done, and reflected that between harvest and springtime he might find another husband for Iduna, who was more to his mind. For Athalbrand, as I learned afterwards, was a scheming and a false-hearted man. Moreover, he was of no high lineage, but one who had raised himself up by war and plunder, and therefore his blood did not compel him to honour.

The next scene which comes back to me of those early days is that of the hunting of the white northern bear, when I saved the life of Steinar, my foster-brother, and nearly lost my own.

It was on a day when the winter was merging into spring, but the

coast-line near Aar was still thick with pack ice and large floes which had floated in from the more northern seas. A certain fisherman who dwelt on this shore came to the hall to tell us that he had seen a great white bear on one of these floes, which, he believed, had swum from it to the land. He was a man with a club-foot, and I can recall a vision of him limping across the snow towards the drawbridge of Aar, supporting himself by a staff on the top of which was cut the figure of some animal.

"Young lords," he cried out, "there is a white bear on the land, such a bear as once I saw when I was a boy. Come out and kill the bear and win honour, but first give me a drink for my news."

At that time I think my father, Thorvald, was away from home with most of the men, I do not know why; but Ragnar, Steinar and I were lingering about the stead with little or nothing to do, since the time of sowing was not yet. At the news of the club-footed man, we ran for our spears, and one of us went to tell the only thrall who could be spared to make ready the horses and come with us. Thora, my mother, would have stopped us--she said she had heard from her father that such bears were very dangerous beasts--but Ragnar only thrust her aside, while I kissed her and told her not to fret.

Outside the hall I met Freydisa, a dark, quiet woman of middle age, one of the virgins of Odin, whom I loved and who loved me and, save one other, me only among men, for she had been my nurse.

"Whither now, young Olaf?" she asked me. "Has Iduna come here that you run so fast?"

"No," I answered, "but a white bear has."

"Oh! then things are better than I thought, who feared lest it might be Iduna before her time. Still, you go on an ill errand, from which I think you will return sadly."

"Why do you say that, Freydisa?" I asked. "Is it just because you love to croak like a raven on a rock, or for some good reason?"

"I don't know, Olaf," she answered. "I say things because they come to me, and I must, that is all. I tell you that evil will be born of this bear hunt of yours, and you had better stop at home."

"To be laughed at by my brethren, Freydisa? Moreover, you are foolish, for if evil is to be, how can I avoid it? Either your foresight is nothing or the evil must come."

"That is so," answered Freydisa. "From your childhood up you had the gift of reason which is more than is granted to most of these fools about us. Go, Olaf, and meet your fore-ordained evil. Still, kiss me before you go lest we should not see each other again for a while. If the bear kills you, at least you will be saved from Iduna."

Now while she said these words I was kissing Freydisa, whom I loved dearly, but when I understood them I leapt back before she could kiss me again.

"What do you mean by your talk about Iduna?" I asked. "Iduna is my betrothed, and I'll suffer no ill speech of her."

"I know she is, Olaf. You've got Ragnar's leavings. Although he is so hot-headed, Ragnar is a wise dog in some ways, who can tell what he should not eat. There, begone, you think me jealous of Iduna, as old women can be, but it's not that, my dear. Oh! you'll learn before all is done, if you live. Begone, begone! I'll tell you no more. Hark, Ragnar is shouting to you," and she pushed me away.

It was a long ride to where the bear was supposed to be. At first as we went we talked a great deal, and made a wager as to which of the three of us should first drive a spear into the beast's body so deep that the blade was hidden, but afterwards I grew silent. Indeed, I was musing so much of Iduna and how the time drew near when once more I should see her sweet face, wondering also why Ragnar and Freydisa should think so ill of her who seemed a goddess rather than a woman, that I forgot all about the bear. So completely did I forget it that when, being by nature very observant, I saw the slot of such a beast as we passed a certain birch wood, I did not think to connect it with that which we were hunting or to point it out to the others who were riding ahead of me.

At length we came to the sea, and there, sure enough, saw a great ice-floe, which now and again tilted as the surge caught its broad green flank. When it tilted towards us we perceived a track worn deep into the ice by the paws of the prisoned bear as it had marched endlessly round. Also we saw a big grinning skull, whereon sat a raven picking at the eye-holes, and some fragments of white fur.

"The bear is dead!" exclaimed Ragnar. "Odin's curse be on that club-footed fool who gave us this cold ride for nothing."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Steinar doubtfully. "Don't you think that it is dead, Olaf?"

"What is the good of asking Olaf?" broke in Ragnar, with a loud laugh.

"What does Olaf know about bears? He has been asleep for the last half-hour dreaming of Athalbrand's blue-eyed daughter; or perhaps he is making up another poem."

"Olaf sees farther when he seems asleep than some of us do when we are awake," answered Steinar hotly.

"Oh yes," replied Ragnar. "Sleeping or waking, Olaf is perfect in your eyes, for you've drunk the same milk, and that ties you tighter than a rope. Wake up, now, brother Olaf, and tell us: Is not the bear dead?"

Then I answered, "Why, of course, a bear is dead; see its skull, also pieces of its hide?"

"There!" exclaimed Ragnar. "Our family prophet has settled the matter. Let us go home."

"Olaf said that a bear was dead," answered Steinar, hesitating.

Ragnar, who had already swung himself round in his quick fashion, spoke back over his shoulder:

"Isn't that enough for you? Do you want to hunt a skull or the raven sitting on it? Or is this, perchance, one of Olaf's riddles? If so, I am too cold to guess riddles just now."

"Yet I think there is one for you to guess, brother," I said gently, "and it is: Where is the live bear hiding? Can't you see that there were two bears on that ice-head, and that one has killed and eaten the other?"

"How do you know that?" asked Ragnar.

"Because I saw the slot of the second as we passed the birch wood yonder. It has a split claw on the left forefoot and the others are all worn by the ice."

"Then why in Odin's name did you not say so before?" exclaimed Ragnar angrily.

Now I was ashamed to confess that I had been dreaming, so I answered at hazard:

"Because I wished to look upon the sea and the floating ice. See what wondrous colours they take in this light!"

When he heard this, Steinar burst out laughing till tears came into his blue eyes and his broad shoulders shook. But Ragnar, who cared nothing for scenery or sunsets, did not laugh. On the contrary, as was usual with him when vexed, he lost his temper and swore by the more evil of the gods. Then he turned on me and said:

"Why not tell the truth at once, Olaf? You are afraid of this beast, and that's why you let us come on here when you knew it was in the wood. You hoped that before we got back there it would be too dark to hunt."

At this taunt I flushed and gripped the shaft of my long hunting spear, for among us Northmen to be told that he was afraid of anything was a deadly insult to a man.

"If you were not my brother----" I began, then checked myself, for I was by nature easy-tempered, and went on: "It is true, Ragnar, I am not so fond of hunting as you are. Still, I think that there will be time to

fight this bear and kill or be killed by it, before it grows dark, and if not I will return alone to-morrow morning."

Then I pulled my horse round and rode ahead. As I went, my ears being very quick, I heard the other two talking together. At least, I suppose that I heard them; at any rate, I know what they said, although, strangely enough, nothing at all comes back to me of their tale of an attack upon a ship or of what then I did or did not do.

"It is not wise to jeer at Olaf," said Steinar, "for when he is stung with words he does mad things. Don't you remember what happened when your father called him 'niddering' last year because Olaf said it was not just to attack the ship of those British men who had been driven to our coast by weather, meaning us no harm?"

"Aye," answered Ragnar. "He leapt among them all alone as soon as our boat touched her side, and felled the steersman. Then the British men shouted out that they would not kill so brave a lad, and threw him into the sea. It cost us that ship, since by the time we had picked him up she had put about and hoisted her large sail. Oh, Olaf is brave enough, we all know that! Still, he ought to have been born a woman or a priest of Freya who only offers flowers. Also, he knows my tongue and bears no malice."

"Pray that we get him home safe," said Steinar uneasily, "for if not there will be trouble with your mother and every other woman in the

land, to say nothing of Iduna the Fair."

"Iduna the Fair would live through it," answered Ragnar, with a hard laugh. "But you are right; and, what is more, there will be trouble among the men also, especially with my father and in my own heart. After all there is but one Olaf."

At this moment I held up my hand, and they stopped talking.