

CHAPTER V

THE BATTLE ON THE SEA

On the morrow Thorvald, my father, sent messengers to the head men of Agger, telling them of all that he and his House had suffered at the hands of Steinar, whereof those of their folk who had been present at the feast could bear witness. He added that if they stood by Steinar in his wickedness and treachery, thenceforward he and the men of the North would be their foes and work them mischief by land and sea.

In due course these messengers returned with the tale that the head men of Agger had met together and deposed Steinar from his lordship over them, electing another man, a nephew of Steinar's father. Also they sent a present of gold rings in atonement for the wrong which had been done to the house of Thorvald by one of their blood, and prayed that Thorvald and the northern men would bear them no ill will for that in which they were blameless.

Cheered by this answer, which halved the number of their foes, my father, Thorvald of Aar, and those Over-men of whom he was the High-lord, began to make their preparations to attack Athalbrand on his Island of Lesso. Of all these things Athalbrand learned by his spies, and later, when the warships were being prepared and manned, two messengers came from him, old men of repute, and demanded to see my father. This was the substance of his message, which was delivered in my

hearing.

That he, Athalbrand, was little to blame for what had happened, which was due to the mad passions of two young people who had blinded and misled him. That no marriage had taken place between Steinar and his daughter, Iduna, as he was prepared and able to prove, since he had refused to allow any such marriage. That, therefore, he was ready to outlaw Steinar, who only dwelt with him as an unwelcome guest, and to return his daughter, Iduna, to me, Olaf, and with her a fine in gold rings as compensation for the wrong done, of which the amount was to be ascertained by judges to be agreed upon.

My father entertained the messengers, but would give them no answer till he had summoned a council of the Under-lords who stood with him in this business. At that council, where I was present, some said that the insult could only be washed out with blood. At length I was called upon to speak as the man most concerned. While all listened I rose and said:

"These are my words. After what has chanced, not for all the wealth in Denmark would I take Iduna the Fair to be my wife. Let her stay with Steinar, whom she has chosen. Still, I do not wish to cause the blood of innocent men to be spent because of my private wrong. Neither do I wish to wreak vengeance upon Steinar, who for many years was my brother, and who has been led away by a woman, as may chance to any one of us and has chanced to many. Therefore I say that my father should accept Athalbrand's fine in satisfaction of the insult to our House, and let

all this matter be forgotten. As for myself, I purpose to leave my home, where I have been put to shame, and to seek my fortune in other lands."

Now, the most of those present thought this a wise saying and were ready to abide by it. Yet, unluckily enough, it was made of no account by what had slipped from my lips at its end. Although many held me strange and fey, all men loved me because I had a kind heart and gentleness, also because of the wrongs that I had suffered and for something which they saw in me, which they believed would one day make of me a great skald and a wise leader. When she heard me announce thus publicly that I was determined to leave them, Thora, my mother, whispered in the ears of Thorvald, my father, and Ragnar and others also said to each other that this might not be. It was Ragnar, the headlong, who sprang up and spoke the first.

"Is my brother to be driven from us and his home like a thrall caught in theft because a traitor and a false woman have put him to shame?" he said. "I say that I ask Athalbrand's blood to wash away that stain, not his gold, and that if need be I will seek it alone and die upon his spears. Also I say that if Olaf, my brother, turns his back upon this vengeance, I name him niddering."

"No man shall name me that," I said, flushing, "and least of all Ragnar."

So, amidst shouts, for there had been long peace in the land, and all

the fighting men sighed for battle, it was agreed that war should be declared on Athalbrand, those present pledging themselves and their dependents to follow it to the end.

"Go back to the troth-breaker, Athalbrand," said my father to the messengers. "Tell him that we will not accept his fine of gold, who come to take all his wealth, and with it his land and his life. Tell him also that the young lord Olaf refuses his daughter, Iduna, since it has not been the fashion of our House to wed with drabs. Tell Steinar, the woman-thief, that he would do well to slay himself, or to be sure that he is killed in battle, since if we take him living he shall be cast into a pit of vipers or sacrificed to Odin, the god of honour. Begone!"

"We go," answered the spokesman of the messengers; "yet before we go, Thorvald, we would say to you that you and your folk are mad. Some wrong has been done to your son, though perhaps not so much as you may think. For that wrong full atonement has been offered, and with it the hand of friendship on which you spit. Know then that the mighty lord Athalbrand does not fear war, since for every man you can gather he numbers two, all pledged to him until the death. Also he has consulted the oracle, and its answer is that if you fight with him, but one of your House will be left living."

"Begone!" thundered my father, "lest presently you should stay here dead."

So they went.

That day my heart was very heavy, and I sought Freydisa to take counsel with her.

"Trouble hovers over me like a croaking raven," I said. "I do not like this war for a woman who is worth nothing, although she has hurt me sorely. I fear the future, that it may prove even worse than the past has been."

"Then come to learn it, Olaf, for what is known need no more be feared."

"I am not so sure of that," I said. "But how can the future be learned?"

"Through the voice of the god, Olaf. Am I not one of Odin's virgins, who know something of the mysteries? Yonder in his temple mayhap he will speak through me, if you dare to listen."

"Aye, I dare. I should like to hear the god speak, true words or false."

"Then come and hear them, Olaf."

So we went up to the temple, and Freydisa, who had the right of entry, unlocked its door. We passed in and lit a lamp in front of the seated

wooden image of Odin, that for unnumbered generations had rested there behind the altar. I stood by the altar and Freydisa crouched herself before the image, her forehead laid upon its feet, and muttered runes. After a while she grew silent, and fear took hold of me. The place was large, and the feeble light of the lamp scarcely reached to the arched roof; all about me were great formless shadows. I felt that there were two worlds, one of the flesh and one of the spirit, and that I stood between the two. Freydisa seemed to go to sleep; I could no longer hear her breathing. Then she sighed heavily and turned her head, and by the light of the lamp I noted that her face was white and ghastly.

"What do you seek?" her lips asked, for I saw them moving. Yet the voice that issued from them was not her own voice, but that of a deep-throated man, who spoke with a strange accent.

Next came the answer in the voice of Freydisa.

"I, your virgin, seek to know the fate of him who stands by the altar, one whom I love."

For a while there was quiet; then the first voice spoke, still through the lips of Freydisa. Of this I was sure, for those of the statue remained immovable. It was what it had always been--a thing of wood.

"Olaf, the son of Thorvald," said the deep voice, "is an enemy of us the gods, as was his forefather whose grave he robbed. As his forefather's

fate was, so shall his be, for in both of them dwells the same spirit. He shall worship that which is upon the hilt of the sword he stole from the dead, and in this sign shall conquer, since it prevails against us and makes our curse of none effect. Great sorrow shall he taste, and great joy. He shall throw away a sceptre for a woman's kiss, and yet gain a greater sceptre. Olaf, whom we curse, shall be Olaf the Blessed. Yet in the end shall we prevail against his flesh and that of those who cling to him preaching that which is upon the sword but not with the sword, among whom thou shalt be numbered, woman--thou, and another, who hast done him wrong."

The voice died away, and was followed by a silence so deep that at length I could bear it no more.

"Ask of the war," I said, "and of what shall happen."

"It is too late," answered the voice of Freydisa. "I sought to know of you, Olaf, and you alone, and now the spirit has left me."

Then came another long silence, after which Freydisa sighed thrice and awoke. We went out of the temple, I bearing the lamp and she resting on my arm. Near the door I turned and looked back, and it seemed to me that the image of the god glared upon me wrathfully.

"What has chanced?" asked Freydisa when we stood beneath the light of the friendly stars. "I know nothing; my mind is a blackness."

I told her word for word. When I had finished she said,

"Give me the Wanderer's sword."

I gave it to her, and she held it against the sky by the naked blade.

"The hilt is a cross," she said; "but how can a man worship a cross and preach it and conquer thereby? I cannot interpret this rede, yet I do not doubt but that it shall all come true, and that you, Olaf, and I are doomed to be joined in the same fate, whatever it may be, and with us some other who has wronged you, Steinar perchance, or Iduna herself. Well, of this at least I am glad, for if I have loved the father, I think that I love the son still more, though otherwise." And, leaning forward, she kissed me solemnly upon the brow.

After Freydisa and I had sought the oracle of Odin, three long ships of war sailed by the light of the moon from Fladstrand for Athalbrand's Isle of Lesso. I do not know when we sailed, but in my mind I can still see those ships creeping out to sea. In command of the first was Thorvald, my father; of the second, Ragnar, my brother; and of the third myself, Olaf; and on each of these ships were fifty men, all of them stout fighters.

The parting with Thora, my mother, had been sad, for her heart foreboded ill of this war, and her face could not hide what her heart told her.

Indeed, she wept bitterly, and cursed the name of Iduna the Fair, who had brought this trouble on her House. Freydisa was sad also. Yet, watching her opportunity, she glided up to me just before I embarked and whispered to me,

"Be of good cheer, for you will return, whoever is left behind."

"It will give me little comfort to return if certain others are left behind," I answered. "Oh, that the folk had hearkened to me and made peace!"

"Too late to talk of that now," said Freydisa, and we parted.

This was our plan: To sail for Lesso by the moonlight, and when the moon went down to creep silently towards the shores of the island. Then, just at the first break of dawn, we proposed to beach the ships on a sandy strand we knew, and rush to attack Athalbrand's hall, which we hoped to carry before men were well awake. It was a bold scheme and one full of dangers, yet we trusted that its very boldness would cause it to succeed, especially as we had put it about that, owing to the unreadiness of our ships, no attack would be made until the coming of the next moon.

Doubtless all might have gone well with us but for a strange chance. As

it happened, Athalbrand, a brave and skilful captain, who from his youth had seen much war by sea and land, had a design of his own which brought ours to nothing. It was that he and his people should sail to Fladstrand, burn the ships of Thorvald, my father, that he knew were fitting out upon the beach, which he hoped to find unguarded, or at most only watched by a few men, and then return to Lesso before he could be fallen upon. By ill luck he had chosen this very night for his enterprise. So it came about that just as the moon was sinking our watchmen caught sight of four other ships, which by the shields that hung over their bulwarks they knew must be vessels of war, gliding towards them over the quiet sea.

"Athalbrand comes to meet us!" cried one, and in a minute every man was looking to his arms. There was no time for plans, since in that low light and mist the vessels were almost bow to bow before we saw each other. My father's ship ran in between two of Athalbrand's that were sailing abreast, while mine and that of Ragnar found themselves almost alongside of the others. On both sides the sails were let down, for none had any thought of flight. Some rushed to the oars and got enough of them out to work the ships. Others ran to the grappling irons, and the rest began to shoot with their bows. Before one could count two hundred from the time of sighting, the war cry of "Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!" broke upon the silence of the night and the battle had begun.

It was a very fierce battle, and one that the gathering darkness made

more grim. Each ship fought without heed to the others, for as the fray went on they drifted apart, grappled to their foes. My father, Thorvald's, vessel fared the worst, since it had an enemy on either bulwark. He boarded one and cleared it, losing many men. Then the crew of the other rushed on to him as he regained his own ship. The end of it was that my father and all his folk were killed, but only after they had slain the most of their foes, for they died fighting very bravely.

Between Ragnar's ship and that of Athalbrand himself the fray was more even. Ragnar boarded Athalbrand and was driven back. Athalbrand boarded Ragnar and was driven back. Then for the second time Ragnar boarded Athalbrand with those men who were left to him. In the narrow waist of Athalbrand's ship a mighty battle was fought, and here at last Ragnar and Athalbrand found themselves face to face.

They hacked at each other with their axes, till at length Ragnar, with a fearful blow, drove in Athalbrand's helmet and clove his skull in two, so that he died. But even as he fell, a man, it may have been friend or foe, for the moon was sinking and the darkness grew dense, thrust a spear into Ragnar's back, and he was carried, dying, to his own vessel by those who remained to him.

Then that fight ceased, for all Athalbrand's people were dead or wounded to the death. Meanwhile, on the right, I was fighting the ship that was commanded by Steinar, for it was fated that we two should be thrown together. Here also the struggle was desperate. Steinar and his company

boarded at the prow, but I and my men, charging up both boards, drove them back again. In that charge it is true that I, Olaf, fighting madly, as was my wont when roused, killed three of the Lesso folk with the Wanderer's sword. Still I see them falling one by one. Followed by six of my people, I sprang on to the raised prow of Steinar's ship. Just then the grapnels parted, and there we were left, defending ourselves as best we could. My mates got their oars and once more brought our boat alongside. Grapple they could not, because the irons were lost. Therefore, in obedience to the order which I shouted to them from the high prow of the enemy's ship, they began to hurl their ballast stones into her, and thus stove out her bottom, so that in the end she filled and sank.

Even while she was down the fray went on. Nearly all my people were down; indeed but two remained to me when Steinar, not knowing who I was, rushed up and, having lost his sword, gripped me round the middle. We wrestled, but Steinar, who was the stronger, forced me back to the bulwarks and so overboard. Into the sea we went together just as the ship sank, drawing us down after her. When we rose Steinar was senseless, but still clinging to me as I caught a rope that was thrown to me with my right hand, to which the Wanderer's sword was hanging by a leathern loop.

The end of it was that I and the senseless Steinar were both drawn back to my own ship just as the darkness closed in.

An hour later came the dawn, showing a sad sight. My father, Thorvald's, ship and one of Athalbrand's lay helpless, for all, or nearly all, their crews were dead, while the other had drifted off and was now half a mile away.

Ragnar's ship was still grappled to its foe. My own was perhaps in the best case, for here over twenty men were left unhurt, and another ten whose wounds were light. The rest were dead or dying.

I sat on a bench in the waist of the ship, and at my feet lay the man who had been dragged from the sea with me. I thought that this man was dead till the first red rays of dawn lit upon his face, whereon he sat up, and I saw that he was Steinar.

"Thus we meet again, my brother," I said in a quiet voice. "Well, Steinar, look upon your work." And I pointed to the dead and dying and to the ships around, whence came the sound of groans.

Steinar stared at me and asked in a thick voice:

"Was it with you, Olaf, that I fell into the sea?"

"Even so, Steinar."

"I knew it not in the darkness, Olaf. If I had known, never would I have lifted sword against you."

"What did that matter, Steinar, when you had already pierced my heart, though not with a sword?"

At these words Steinar moaned aloud, then said:

"For the second time you have saved my life."

"Aye, Steinar; but who knows whether I can do so for a third time? Yet take comfort, for if I may I will, for thus shall I be best avenged."

"A white vengeance," said Steinar. "Oh, this is not to be borne." And drawing a knife he wore at his girdle, he strove to kill himself.

But I, who was watching, snatched it away, then gave an order.

"Bind this man and keep him safe. Also bring him drink and a cloak to cover him."

"Best kill the dog," grumbled the captain, to whom I spoke.

"I kill that one who lays a finger on him," I replied.

Someone whispered into the captain's ear, whereon he nodded and laughed

savagely.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I am a thickhead. I had forgotten Odin and his sacrifice. Yes, yes, we'll keep the traitor safe."

So they bound Steinar to one of the benches and gave him ale and covered him with a blood-stained cloak taken from a dead man.

I also drank of the ale and drew a cloak about me, for the air was keen. Then I said,

"Let us go to the other ships and see what has chanced there."

They got out the oars and rowed to Ragnar's vessel, where we saw men stirring.

"How went it with you?" I asked of one who stood upon the prow.

"Not so ill, Olaf," he answered. "We won, and but now, with the new light, have finished the game. They are all quiet yonder," he added, nodding at the vessel of Athalbrand, to which they were still grappled.

"Where is Ragnar?" I asked.

"Come on board and see," answered the man.

A plank was thrust out and I ran across it, fear gripping at my heart. Resting against the mast sat Ragnar, dying.

"Good morrow to you, Olaf," he gasped. "I am glad you live, that there may be one left to sit at Aar."

"What do you mean, my brother?"

"I mean, Olaf, that our father, Thorvald, is dead. They called it to us from yonder." And he pointed with his red sword to our father's ship, that lay side by side with one of Athalbrand's. "Athalbrand is dead, for I slew him, and ere the sun is well clear of the sea I also shall be dead. Oh, weep not, Olaf; we have won a great fight, and I travel to Valhalla with a glorious company of friends and foes, there to await you. I say that had I lived to be old, never could I have found a better death, who then at last might have died like a cow. Get the ships to Fladstrand, Olaf, and gather more men to put all Lesso to the sword. Give us good burial, Olaf, and build a great mound over us, that we may stand thereon at moonrise and mock the men of Lesso as they row past, till Valhalla is full and the world dies. Is Steinar dead? Tell me that Steinar is dead, for then I'll speak with him presently."

"No, Ragnar, I have taken Steinar captive."

"Captive! Why captive? Oh, I understand; that he may lie on Odin's altar. Friends, swear to me that Steinar shall lie on Odin's altar,

Steinar, the bride-thief, Seiner the traitor. Swear it, for I do not trust this brother of mine, who has woman's milk in his breasts. By Thor, he might spare him if he had his way. Swear it, or I'll haunt your beds o' nights and bring the other heroes with me. Swift now, while my ears are open."

Then from both ships rose the cry of

"We swear! Fear not, Ragnar, we swear."

"That's well," said Ragnar. "Kiss me now, Olaf. Oh! what is it that I see in your eyes? A new light, a strange light! Olaf, you are not one of us. This time is not your time, nor this place your place. You travel to the end by another road. Well, who knows? At that end we may meet again. At least I love you."

Then he burst into a wild war song of blood and vengeance, and so singing sank down and died.

Afterwards, with much labour, I and the men who were left roped together our vessels, and to them those that we had captured, and when a favouring wind arose, sailed back for Fladstrand. Here a multitude awaited us, for a fishing-boat had brought tidings of the great sea battle. Of the hundred and fifty men who had sailed in my father,

Thorvald's, ships sixty were dead and many others wounded, some of them to death. Athalbrand's people had fared even worse, since those of Thorvald had slain their wounded, only one of his vessels having escaped back to Lesso, there to tell the people of that island and Iduna all that had happened. Now it was a land of widows and orphans, so that no man need go wooing there for long, and of Aar and the country round the same song was sung. Indeed, for generations the folk of those parts must have told of the battle of Lesso, when the chiefs, Thorvald and Athalbrand, slew each other upon the seas at night because of a quarrel about a woman who was known as Iduna the Fair.

On the sands of Fladstrand my mother, the lady Thora, waited with the others, for she had moved thither before the sailing of the ships. When mine, the first of them, was beached, I leapt from it, and running to her, knelt down and kissed her hand.

"I see you, my son Olaf," she said, "but where are your father and brother?"

"Yonder, mother," I answered, pointing to the ships, and could say no more.

"Then why do they tarry, my son?"

"Alas! mother, because they sleep and will never wake again."

Now Thora wailed aloud and fell down senseless. Three days later she died, for her heart, which was weak, could not bear this woe. Once only did she speak before she died, and then it was to bless me and pray that we might meet again, and to curse Iduna. Folk noted that of Steinar she said nothing, either good or ill, although she knew that he lived and was a prisoner.

Thus it came about that I, Olaf, was left alone in the world and inherited the lordship of Aar and its subject lands. No one remained save my dark-browed uncle, Leif, the priest of Odin, Freydisa, the wise woman, my nurse, and Steinar, my captive foster-brother, who had been the cause of all this war.

The dying words of Ragnar had been noised abroad. The priest of Odin had laid them before the oracle of the gods, and this oracle declared that they must be fulfilled without change.

So all the folk of that land met together at my bidding--yes, even the women and the children. First we laid the dead in the largest of Athalbrand's ships, his people and Athalbrand himself being set undermost. Then on them we set the dead of Thorvald, Thorvald, my father, and his son Ragnar, my brother, bound to the mast upon their feet. This done, with great labour we dragged the ship on to high ground, and above it built a mighty mound of earth. For twenty days we toiled at the task, till at last it was finished and the dead were hidden beneath it for ever. Then we separated to our homes and mourned a

while.

But Steinar was carried to the temple of Odin at Aar, and there kept in the prison of the temple.