

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE SWORD AND THE RING

I, Hubert of Hastings, write this in the land of Tavantinsuyu, far from England, where I was born, whither I shall never more return, being a wanderer as the rune upon the sword of my ancestor, Thorgrimmer, foretold that I should be, which sword my mother gave me on the day of the burning of Hastings by the French. I write it with a pen that I have shaped from a wing feather of the great eagle of the mountains, with ink that I have made from the juices of certain herbs which I discovered, and on parchment that I have split from the skins of native sheep, with my own hands, but badly I fear, though I have seen that art practised when I was a merchant of the Cheap in London Town.

I will begin at the beginning.

I am the son of a fishing-boat owner and was a trader in the ancient town of Hastings, and my father was drowned while following his trade at sea. Afterwards, being the only child left of his, I took on his business, and on a certain day went out to sea to net fish with two of my serving men. I was then a young man of about three and twenty years

of age and not uncomely. My hair, which I wore long, was fair in colour and curled. My eyes, set wide apart, were and still are large and blue, although they have darkened somewhat and sunk into the head in this land of heat and sunshine. My nose was wide-nostrilled and large, my mouth also was over-large, although my mother and some others used to think it well-shaped. In truth, I was large all over though not so tall, being burly, with a great breadth of chest and uncommon thickness through the body, and very strong; so strong that there were few who could throw me when I was young.

For the rest, like King David, I, who am now so tanned and weather worn that at a little distance were my hair and beard hidden I might almost be taken for one of the Indian chiefs about me, was of a ruddy and a pleasant countenance, perhaps because of my wonderful health, who had never known a day of sickness, and of an easy nature that often goes with health. I will add this, for why should I not--that I was no fool, but one of those who succeed in that upon which they set their minds. Had I been a fool I should not to-day be the king of a great people and the husband of their queen; indeed, I should not be alive.

But enough of myself and my appearance in those years that seem as far off as though they had never been save in the land of dreams.

Now I and my two serving men, sailors both of them like myself and most of the folk of Hastings set out upon a summer eve, purposing to fish all night and return at dawn. We came to our chosen ground and cast out the

net, meeting with wonderful fortune since by three in the morning the big boat was full of every kind of fish. Never before, indeed, had we made so large a haul.

Looking back at that great catch, as here in this far land it is my habit to do upon everything, however small, that happened to me in my youth before I became a wanderer and an exile, I seem to see in it an omen. For has it not always been my lot in life to be kissed of fortune and to gather great store, and then of a sudden to lose it all as I was to lose that rich multitude of fishes?

To-day, when I write this, once more I have great wealth of pomp and love and power, of gold also, more than I can count. When I go forth, my armies, who still look on me as half a god, shout their welcome and kiss the air after their heathen fashion. My beauteous queen bows down to me and the women of my household abase themselves into the dust. The people of the Ancient City of Gold turn their faces to the wall and the children cover their eyes with their hands that they may not look upon my splendour as I pass, while maidens throw flowers for my feet to tread. Upon my judgment hangs life or death, and my lightest word is as though it were spoken from heaven. These and many other things are mine, the trappings of power, the prerogative of the Lord-from-the-Sea who brought victory to the Chanca people and led them back to their ancient home where they might live safe, far from the Inca's rage.

And yet often, as I sit alone in my splendour upon the roof of the

ancient halls or wander through the starlit palace gardens, I call to mind that great catch of fishes in the English sea and of what followed after. I call to mind also my prosperity and wealth as one of the first merchants of London Town and what followed after. I call to mind, too, the winning of Blanche Aleys, the lady so far above me in rank and station and what followed after. Then it is that I grow afraid of what may follow after this present hour of peace and love and plenty.

Certainly one thing will follow, and that is death. It may come late or it may come soon. But yesterday a rumour reached me through my spies that Kari Upanqui, the Inca of Tavantinsuyu, he who once was as my brother, but who now hates me because of his superstitions, and because I took a Virgin of the Sun to be my wife, gathers a great host to follow on the path we trod many years ago when the Chancas fled from the Inca tyranny back to their home in the ancient City of Gold and to smite us here. That host, said the rumours, cannot march till next year, and then will be another year upon its journey. Still, knowing Kari, I am sure that it will march, yes, and arrive, after which must befall the great battle in the mountain passes wherein, as of old, I shall lead the Chanca armies.

Perchance I am doomed to fall in that battle. Does not the rune upon Wave-Flame, the sword of Thorgrimmer my ancestor, say of him that holds it that,

"Conquering, conquered shall he be,

And far away shall sleep with me"?

Well, if the Chancas conquer, what care I if I am conquered? 'Twould be a good death and a clean, to fall by Kari's spear, if I knew that Kari and his host fell also, as I swear that fall they shall, St. Hubert helping me. Then at least Quilla and her children would live on in peace and greatness since they can have no other foe to fear.

Death, what is death? I say that it is the hope of every one of us and most of all the exile and the wanderer. At the best it may be glory; at the worst it must be sleep. Moreover, am I so happy that I should fear to die? Quilla cannot read this writing, and therefore I will answer, No. I am a Christian, but she and those about her, aye, my own children with them, worship the moon and the host of heaven. I am white-skinned, they are the hue of copper, though it is true that my little daughter, Gudruda, whom I named so after my mother, is almost white. There are secrets in their hearts that I shall never learn and there are secrets in mine from which they cannot draw the veil because our bloods are different. Yet God knows, I love them well enough, and most of all that greatest of women, Quilla.

Oh! the truth is that here on earth there is no happiness for man.

It is because of this rumour of the coming of Kari with his host that I set myself to this task, that I have long had in my mind, to write down something of my history, both in England and in this land which, at any

rate for hundreds of years, mine is the first white foot to press. It seems a foolish thing to do since when I have written who will read, and what will chance to that which I have written? I shall leave orders that it be placed beneath my feet in the tomb, but who will ever find that tomb again? Still I write because something in my heart urges me to the task.

I return to the far-off days. Our boat being full with merry hearts we set sail before a faint wind for Hastings beach. As yet there was little light and much fog, still the landward breeze was enough to draw us forward. Then of a sudden we heard sounds as of men talking upon ships and the clank of spars and blocks. Presently came a puff of air lifting the fog for a little and we saw that we were in the midst of a great fleet, a French fleet, for the Lilies of France flew at their mast-heads, saw, too, that their prows were set for Hastings, though for the while they were becalmed, since the wind that was enough for our light, large-sailed fishing-boat could not stir their bulk. Moreover, they saw us, for the men-at-arms on the nearest ship shouted threats and curses at us and followed the shouts with arrows that almost hit us.

Then the fog closed down again, and in it we slipped through the French fleet.

It may have been the best part of an hour later that we reached

Hastings. Before the boat was made fast to the jetty, I sprang to it shouting:

"Stir! stir! the French are upon you! To arms! We have slipped through a whole fleet of them in the mist."

Instantly the sleepy quay seemed to awaken. From the neighbouring fish market, from everywhere sailormen and others came running, followed by children with gaping mouths, while from the doors of houses far away shot women with scared faces, like ferreted rabbits from their burrows. In a minute the crowd had surrounded me, all asking questions at once in such a fashion that I could only answer them with my cry of:

"Stir! the French are upon you. To arms, I say. To arms!"

Presently through the throng advanced an old white-bearded man who wore a badge of office, crying as he came, "Make way for the bailiff!"

The crowd obeyed, opening a path, and soon we were face to face.

"What is it, Hubert of Hastings?" he asked. "Is there fire that you shout so loudly?"

"Aye, Worship," I answered. "Fire and murder and all the gifts that the French have for England. The Fleet of France is beating up for Hastings, fifty sail of them or more. We crept through them in the fog, for the

wind which would scarce move them served our turn and beyond an arrow or two, they took no note of a fishing-boat."

"Whence come they?" asked the bailiff, bewildered.

"I know not, but those in another boat we passed in the midst shouted that these French were ravaging the coast and heading for Hastings to put it to fire and sword. Then that boat vanished away, I know not where, and that is all I have to tell save that the French will be here within an hour."

Without staying to ask more questions, the bailiff turned and ran towards the town, and presently the alarm bells rang out from the towers of All Saints and St. Clement's, while criers summoned all men to the market-place. Meanwhile I, not without a sad look at my boat and the rich catch within, made my way into the town, followed by my two men.

Presently I reached an ancient, timbered house, long, low, and rambling, with a yard by its side full of barrels, anchors, and other marine stores such as rope, that had to do with the trade I carried on at this place.

I, Hubert, with a mind full of fears, though not for myself, and a stirring of the blood such as was natural to my age at the approach

of my first taste of battle, ran fast up to that house which I have described, and paused for a moment by the big elm tree that grew in front of the door, of which the lower boughs were sawn off because they shut out the light from the windows. I remember that elm tree very well, first because when I was a child starlings nested in a hole in the trunk, and I reared one in a wicker cage and made a talking bird of it which I kept for several years. It was so tame that it used to go about sitting on my shoulder, till at last, outside the town a cat frightened it thence, and before I could recapture it, it was taken by a hawk, which hawk I shot afterwards with an arrow out of revenge.

Also this elm is impressed upon me by the fact that on that morning when I halted by it, I noted how green and full of leaf it was. Next morning, after the fire, I saw it again, all charred and blackened, with its beautiful foliage withered by the heat. This contrast remained upon my memory, and whenever I see any great change of fortune from prosperity to ruin, or from life to death, always I bethink me of that elm. For it is by little things which we ourselves have seen and not by those written of or told by others, that we measure and compare events.

The reason that I ran so hard and then paused by the elm, was because my widowed mother lived in that house. Knowing that the French meant mischief for a good reason, because one of their arrows, or perhaps a quarrel from a cross-bow, whistled just past my head out there upon the sea, my first thought was to get her away to some place of safety, no easy task seeing that she was infirm with age. My second, that which

caused me to pause by the tree, was how I should break the news to her in such a fashion that she would not be over-frightened. Having thought this over I went on into the house.

The door opened into the sitting-room that had a low roof of plaster and big oak beams. There I found my mother kneeling by the table upon which food was set for breakfast: fried herrings, cold meat, and a jug of ale. She was saying her prayers after her custom, being very religious though in a new fashion, since she was a follower of a preacher called Wycliffe, who troubled the Church in those days. She seemed to have gone to sleep at her prayers, and I watched her for a moment, hesitating to waken her. My mother, as even then I noted, was a very handsome woman, though old, for I was born when she had been married twenty years or more, with white hair and well-cut features that showed the good blood of which she came, for she was better bred than my father and quarrelled with her kin to marry him.

At the sound of my footsteps she woke up and saw me.

"Strange," she said, "I slept at my prayers who did so little last night, as has become a habit with me when you are out a-fishing, for which God forgive me, and dreamed that there was some trouble forward. Scold me not, Hubert, for when the sea has taken the father and two sons, it is scarcely wonderful that I should be fearful for the last of my blood. Help me to rise, Hubert, for this water seems to gather in my limbs and makes them heavy. One day, the leech says, it will get to the

heart and then all will be over."

I obeyed, first kissing her on the brow, and when she was seated in her armed chair by the table, I said,

"You dream too well, Mother. There is trouble. Hark! St. Clement's bells are talking of it. The French come to visit Hastings. I know for I sailed through their fleet just after dawn."

"Is it so?" she asked quietly. "I feared worse. I feared lest the dream meant that you had gone to join your brothers in the deep. Well, the French are not here yet, as thank God you are. So eat and drink, for we of England fight best on full bellies."

Again I obeyed who was very hungry after that long night and needed food and ale, and as I swallowed them we heard the sound of folk shouting and running.

"You are in haste, Hubert, to join the others on the quay and send a Frenchman or two to hell with that big bow of yours?" she said inquiringly.

"Nay," I answered, "I am in haste to get you out of this town, which I fear may be burnt. There is a certain cave up yonder by the Minnes Rock where I think you might lie safe, Mother."

"It has come down to me from my fathers, Hubert, that it was never the fashion of the women of the north to keep their men to shield them when duty called them elsewhere. I am helpless in my limbs and heavy, and cannot climb, or be borne up yonder hill to any cave. Here I stop where I have dwelt these five-and-forty years, to live or die as God pleases. Get you to your duty, man. Stay. Call those wenches and bid them fly inland to their folk, out Burwash way. They are young and fleet of foot, and no Frenchman will catch them."

I summoned the girls who were staring, white-faced, from the attic window-place. In three minutes they were gone, though it is true that one of them, the braver, wished to bide with her mistress.

I watched them start up the street with other fugitives who were pouring out of Hastings, and came back to my mother. As I did so a great shout told me that the French fleet had been sighted.

"Hubert," she said, "take this key and go to the oak chest in my sleeping room, lift out the linen at the top and bring me that which lies wrapped in cloth beneath."

I did so, returning with a bundle that was long and thin. With a knife she cut the string that tied it. Within were a bag of money and a sword in an ancient scabbard covered with a rough skin which I took to be that of a shark, which scabbard in parts was inlaid with gold.

"Draw it," said my mother.

I did so, and there came to light a two-edged blade of blue steel, such as I had never seen before, for on the blade were engraved strange characters whereof I could make nothing, although as it chanced I could read and write, having been taught by the monks in my childhood. The hilt, also, that was in the form of a cross, had gold inlaid upon it; at the top of it, a large knob or apple of amber, much worn by handling. For the rest it was a beautiful weapon and well balanced.

"What of this sword?" I asked.

"This, Son. With the black bow that you have," and she pointed to the case that leaned against the table, "it has come down in my family for many generations. My father told me that it was the sword of one Thorgrimmer, his ancestor, a Norseman, a Viking he called him, who came with those who took England before the Norman time; which I can well believe since my father's name, like mine, till I married, was Grimmer. This sword, also, has a name and it is Wave-Flame. With it, the tale tells, Thorgrimmer did great deeds, slaying many after their heathen fashion in his battles by land and sea. For he was a wanderer, and it is said of him that once he sailed to a new land far across the ocean, and won home again after many strange adventures, to die at last here in England in some fray. That is all I know, save that a learned man from the north once told my father's father that the writing on the sword means:--

"He who lifts Wave-Flame on high
In love shall live and in battle die;
Storm-tossed o'er wide seas shall roam
And in strange lands shall make his home.
Conquering, conquered shall he be,
And far away shall sleep with me.

"Those were the words which I remember because of the jingle of them; also because such seems to have been the fate of Thorgrimmer and the sword that his grandson took from his tomb."

Here I would have asked about this grandson and the tomb, but having no time, held my peace.

"All my life have I kept that sword," went on my mother, "not giving it to your father or brothers, lest the fate written on it should befall them, for those old wizards of the north, who fashioned such weapons with toil and skill, could foresee the future--as at times I can, for it is in my blood. Yet now I am moved to bid you take it, Hubert, and go where its flame leads you and dree your gloom, whatever it may be, for I know you will use it like Thorgrimmer's self."

She paused for a moment, then went on:

"Hubert, perhaps we part for the last time, for I think that my hour

is at hand. But let not that trouble you, since I am glad to go to join those who went before, and others with them, perchance Thorgrimmer's self. Hearken, Hubert. If aught befalls me, or this place, stay not here. Go to London town and seek out John Grimmer, my brother, the rich merchant and goldsmith who dwells in the place called Cheap. He knew you as a child and loved you, and lacking offspring of his own will welcome you for both our sakes. My father would not give John the sword lest its fate should be on him, but I say that John will be glad to welcome one of our race who holds it in his hand. Take it then, and with it that bag of gold, which may prove of service ere all be done.

"Aye, and there is one more thing--this ring which, so says the tale, came down with the sword and the bow, and once had writing on it like the sword, though that is long since rubbed away. Take it and wear it till perchance, in some day to come, you give it to another as I did."

Wondering at all this tale which, after her secret fashion, my mother had kept from me till that hour, I set the ring upon my finger.

"I gave yonder ring to your father on the day that we were betrothed," went on my mother, "and I took it back again from his corpse after he had been found floating in the sea. Now I pass it on to you who soon will be all that is left of both of us."

"Hark!" she continued, "the crier summons all men with their arms to the market-place to fight England's foes. Therefore one word more while I

buckle the sword Wave-Flame on to you, as doubtless his women folk did on to Thorgrimmer, your ancestor. My blessing on you, Hubert. Be you such a one as Thorgrimmer was, for we of the Norse blood desire that our loves and sons should prove not backward when swords are aloft and arrows fly. But be you more than he, be you a Christian also, remembering that however long you live, and the Battle-maidens have not marked you yet, at last you must die and give account.

"Hubert, you are such a one as women will love; one, too, who, I fear me, will be a lover of women, for that weakness goes with strength and manhood by Nature's laws. Be careful of women, Hubert, and if you may, choose those who are not false and cling to her who is most true. Oh, you will wander far; I read it in your eyes that you will wander far, yet shall your heart stay English. Kiss me and begone! Lad, are you forgetting your spare arrows and the bull-hide jerkin that was your father's? You will want them both to-day. Farewell, farewell! God and His Christ be with you--and shoot you straight and smite you hard. Nay, no tears, lest my eyes should be dimmed, for I'll climb to the attic and watch you fight."