

H. Bedford-Jones



*The Cross and
the Hammer: A Tale
of the Days
of the Vikings*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066423551

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FOREWORD.

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This is a story about the very real people and events; if ever you chance to read the old Sagas of Norway you will come upon most of the characters of this tale. The viking age was not Christian, it was full of the clash of arms and of unknighly deeds, yet its story is vitally interesting.

The Hammer of Thor, the War-god of northern Europe, did not yield to the Cross of Christ without a struggle, and the story of Norway's conversion is intensely dramatic. King Hakon the Good, a foster-son of the English King Athelstan, was forced to recant his faith in order to hold his throne; King Olaf Triggveson lost his kingdom, or rather gave it up, at Svolde Sound, because he refused to do the like; and King Olaf the Thick, who followed him, fell beneath the heathen weapons of his subjects, becoming the patron saint of Norway.

It was the first King Olaf who broke the power of the old gods and who introduced Christianity into his realm. Short as was his reign, he was the greatest king Norway ever had. He built the first church in the land, and sent the first missionaries to Iceland; during his reign Thangbrand, the priest, won that island to the true faith.

Many of the incidents narrated are taken direct from the Sagas, and although King Olaf is said to have died at Svolde, the story of his escape is well authenticated; I give his own words in refusing to win back his kingdom. He went to Rome and the Holy Land and held rule there under the Crusader Kings of Jerusalem, dying fifty years later. King Edward the

Confessor used to have the story of his life chanted to his court once every year, upon his death being reported in England during that king's reign.

H. BEDFORD-JONES.

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"*bonders*."—This word is used in the Sagas to represent the free farmers of Norway, who held their lands from the king, or owned them; they were subject only to the orders of the king or his Jarls, and are equivalent to our own "farmers," except that they had special rights and privileges.

"*scat*."—A fine or any other penalty which might be imposed on an offender by an assembly of the people. The scat was usually a fine of money, lands, or goods.

"*skoal*."—This plain word corresponds to our own "Hurrah!" It means both long life, good health, and joy, and is still used in Norway in that sense.

I have avoided the use of many words which are usually retained in the translations of the old Sagas. Nearly all the facts about which the story of Sigurd Fairhair is woven are historical, and are taken from the Heimskringla, and the Saga of King Olaf by the Abbot Berg Sökkason. Both histories were compiled from the accounts of eye-witnesses of the events contained therein, to a great extent, and

especially was this true with the life of Olaf Triggveson.—*The Author.*

The Cross and the Hammer
A Tale of the Days of the Vikings
By H. BEDFORD-JONES

CHAPTER I.

HOW THE VOW WAS MADE.

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The great hall of the Danish kings at Leira was filled to overflowing on this autumn evening of the year 994, for King Harald Gormson had fallen in battle some weeks before, and his son Svein Twyskiegge, of Forkbeard, was celebrating his accession feast in the hall of his fathers.

Around the town lay a whole city of tents and brush huts, for besides the Danish lords present, sixty ships had come from Jomsborg, bearing the noblest of the famous Viking brotherhood, under their chiefs Jarl Sigvald and Bui the Thick. Visitors and Danes were clad in their bravest array, and both town and camp presented a scene of the gayest festivity.

Within, the hall was hung with ancient arms and trophies of the chase, the floor was strewn with a thick layer of fresh rushes, and the long tables were heaped high with dishes. At one end of the hall sat King Svein, with his chiefs and the Jomsborg nobles, while above them towered the high-seat or throne of the king; along the hall were ranged the vikings and men of Denmark, with Queen Gunhild and her ladies sitting at the far end.

Servants flitted in and out, bearing food and horns of ale, while in the center of the hall, between the tables and before the seat of the king, sat two skalds, singing to the music of their harps the great deeds of King Harald and of

his son, the new king. Presently, as the hunger of the throng was somewhat appeased, all began to wonder what vow the king would make, for it was the custom that at the heirship feast the new king should make a vow to do some great and noble deed.

Seated near Queen Gunhild as guests of honor were two boys, one fair and ruddy-cheeked, the other darker and with very quick, bold eyes. The latter, Vagn Akison, was a nephew of Bui, the Jomsborg chief, and grandson of Palnatoki, the founder of the viking brotherhood; although he was only seventeen, he and his cousin Sigurd were already well known for the prowess.

Sigurd Fairhair, who was a year younger than Vagn, was in high spirits to-night, for a little before King Svein had given him a very fine sword, and he was proud of it.

Glancing over at him with a smile, Queen Gunhild said, "Sigurd, have you shown Astrid your new sword?"

"Of course he has," replied Astrid, her niece, who sat beside Sigurd, and her dark eyes gleamed with fun. "He is going to try its edge on the big pine tree near the harbor to-morrow!"

At this sally a laugh went up, and Vagn cried, "Be careful not to bring down the tree into the harbor, Sigurd! It would be a pity to sink all our best ships!"

Sigurd reddened, and retorted, "Well, I never aroused the whole camp just because a pig was wandering around in the bushes!"

This turned the laugh on his cousin, who had wakened the camp the night before, mistaking a pig for a spy, and even the Queen joined heartily in the merriment.

Suddenly a silence fell on the tables, for King Svein had arisen and was holding in both hands a great silver bowl. Amid a dead hush he drained it, handed it to an attendant, and stepped to the high-seat. Grasping an arm of this, the king turned.

"Here, as I ascend the throne of my father Harald, I vow that with the help of God I will lead my fleet to the land of England, and ere three winters have passed I will chase King Ethelred from the land and sit in his throne!"



"I will lead my fleet to the land of England."

As King Svein took his seat a low murmur of astonishment ran around the hall, followed by a tremendous shout of "Skoal! Skoal!" for this was a great vow to be fulfilled.

"See how pale the Queen is," whispered Astrid to Sigurd. "The vow must have surprised her also."

Indeed, Queen Gunhild had turned white, for the King's vow meant that a great war would be undertaken, and how it would end no man could tell. Before Sigurd could reply, Jarl Sigvald arose and called for silence.

"Men of Denmark and Jomsborg," he said slowly, in his deep voice, the light glinting on his dark, strong face and black eyes, "I also would make a vow, and no light one. As you all know, Jarl Hakon, a heathen man and doubly a traitor, rules Norway while the rightful king, Tryggvee's son, is a wanderer or mayhap dead. This then is my vow: that I go to Norway ere three winters pass, take the rule from the hands of Jarl Hakon, and drive him from the land."

Sigvald sat down, amid a dead hush of amazement; but it was broken by a shout from young Vagn Akison.

"Skoal, Jarl Sigvald, skoal!"

Then what a cheer went up! Ere it subsided, Sigvald's brother, Thorkel the Tall, leaped to his feet and swore to follow the Jarl; Bui the Thick joined him, and amid fresh cheers, Vagn, from the other end of the hall, cried:

"I, too! And ere I return I will slay Thorkel Leira, the villain who betrayed my father to his death!"

"Skoal!" shouted Sigurd, excitedly, "I'm with you, Vagn!"

As the tumult subsided, the Queen looked at Vagn and Sigurd sadly. "You are rash boys, you two! Do you realize what blood and tears these oaths will cost?"

Sigurd answered her respectfully. "Noble Gunhild, that may well be; yet Jarl Hakon is an evil man and a pagan, as is

Thorkel. At any rate, I won't have to try my new sword on the tree, now!" His keen gray eyes twinkled.

The Queen made no reply, however, and sat watching King Svein; but Astrid whispered:

"I think that was splendid! I wish I could go, too!"

Vagn laughed. "You'd be a fine one! Why, the first war-horn would send you down below trembling!"

"It wouldn't either!" retorted the girl indignantly. "I can shoot better than you or Sigurd, either of you!"

"Good! I challenge you to a match to-morrow," cried Sigurd. "We'll go over to the shore beyond the harbor, where no one will interrupt, and if you best either of us I'll give you my trained falcon from France!"

"Then look out," laughed Astrid, "because I'm going to win the bird to-morrow morning!"

With this she arose and followed the Queen, who was leaving. The two boys, not wishing to join in the carouse that most of the vikings would keep up for the better part of the night, also left the hall and proceeded to their own tent.

"What think you of these vows, Sigurd?" asked Vagn, as they went along.

"Well, now that we have cooled down, it looks rather different," replied Sigurd, thoughtfully. "It is one thing for King Svein to conquer England, with the resources of a realm at his command, and another for Sigvald to conquer Norway with only the brother of Jomsborg behind him."

"But remember, Fairhair, we are Christians, while Hakon is a pagan and a traitor; that will make some difference, surely! My own vow was no hasty thing; I must avenge my father's death or else be disgraced forever."

Sigurd nodded thoughtfully, for he well knew that the fierce vikings would yield small obedience to a man who appeared unable to avenge the betrayal of his father. As they turned in at their tent, a man ran up, and Vagn recognized one of Bui's men in the moonlight.

"Hello, Egil, what is it?"

"You and Sigurd are wanted at council in Jarl Sigvald's big tent," panted the man.

Without delay, the boys followed him to the large tent of the Jarl. Here they found all the Jomsborg leaders assembled, and took their places beside Bui of Bornholm, who was speaking as they entered.

"It was a rash vow, Sigvald, but we cannot back out, and it may well be that we shall win great honor in the effort, win or lose. Our vikings are the best warriors in the world to-day, and we will at least give a hard battle to Hakon and his son Eirik."

A murmur of assent ran around the tent, and Sigvald arose.

"Brothers, I was over-hasty in the vow, but it cannot be helped. This is my counsel; that since the attempt must be made, we make it without delay, send for the rest of our men, and strike at Norway's capital without delay. What think you?"

Vagn stepped forward. "I will answer for my father's ships and men. Let us strike before Hakon can meet us; we have the pick of our men here, with most of our ships. We can leave here at the end of the week, wait at Limafiord for the rest of our men, then sweep up to Thrandheim."

"Good for you, Vagn!" cried his uncle. "Men say that I am somewhat stout, but my friends never complain of my weight in battle!" Everyone laughed, for although Bui deserved his nickname, he was one of the greatest warriors of the day. "I'll let Sigurd here go with you, if you want him," he continued, and the boy's heart leaped with joy, for this was indeed just what he did want.

Jarl Sigvald smiled. "Then is it agreed that we go from here to Limafiord on the fourth day?"

"Yes!" The answer was accompanied by a clash of weapons, as the chiefs struck sword and spear on shield, and the council was over, although most of the leaders remained to talk over details and despatch a messenger to Jomsborg at once.

The boys returned to their tent, however, and as they dropped off to sleep the shouts of "Skoal! Skoal!" drifted faintly to them from the town, and they knew that the vikings and the Danes were still making vows, some of which they would bitterly repent in the morning.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHOOTING-MATCH.

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Early next morning the boys were afoot, and after a hasty breakfast beside a camp fire they took their bows and quivers and started for town.

Astrid lived with Queen Gunhild at the Kings' Hall, and thither they directed their steps. Early as it was, the place was thronged with servants, who were laying fresh rushes in the hall and putting the place in order for the day. Seeing a house-carl pass, with his clipped hair and golden collar, Sigurd called him and sent him to ask if the Lady Astrid was ready.

Five minutes later Astrid herself appeared, bearing bow and quiver, and joined them with a cheery, "Good-morning, my vikings! Has your rash resolution cooled off yet?"

"Small chance of that," replied Vagn, his half-grave, half-humorous eyes lighting up in a quick smile.

"My falcon is ready to change owners," added Sigurd, "but then there is no chance for that to-day, of course."

"Oh, indeed!" Astrid's dark eyes flashed gayly. "That remains to be seen, my lord of Jomsborg and Bornholm!"

Talking and laughing, they started off, leaving the town behind and cutting across the fields to the harbor. There, as they came to the brow of the hill, they paused. Far below lay the great fleet, the sixty Jomsborg ships and those of the assembled Danish lords, their shield-rims glittering in the

morning sun, their dragon-prows and high carved sterns gilded or painted in bright array.

Astrid caught her breath in admiration. "Oh, how wonderful it is to be a viking! I wish I were a boy!"

The other two laughed. "It is not so very wonderful," smiled Sigurd. "I think it is hard work. Every morning the drilling and practice in arms, the weapons to be rubbed up—and the rowing! Whew, my back hurts even to think of those low, heavy oars!"

"There's our ship, with the gilded prow," pointed Vagn, to a large long-ship apart from the rest. "Sigurd talks a lot about work, but he is equal to any man in the fleet with sword and shield, save his father, or the Jarl—"

"Or yourself," broke in his cousin quickly. "However, let's get on; I'm anxious to decide the fate of my falcon."

They left the road, and after walking two or three miles, came out on a lonely stretch of shore, wild and rocky. Vagn had brought an old wooden shield with him, and he set this up as target on a large rock a hundred feet distant.

"Do you shoot first," ordered Astrid. "I'll go next, then Vagn."

Sigurd nodded, and selected an arrow. Stringing his bow, he laid the shaft and pulled the string to his ear. Twang! The arrow was buried deep in the shield, just above the center boss of iron.

"Good enough!" cried Vagn, running forward, but Astrid only smiled and raised her bow. The string twanged, and an answering echo came back as the arrow glanced off and the shield fell backward.

"Hurrah!" cried Vagn, picking it up. "Full on the iron boss! But you can't do it again!"

Sigurd ran forward to see also, and as they examined the shield, a sudden cry startled them. Turning, they saw Astrid struggling with three men, while more appeared coming from behind a corner of the cliff.

"Norsemen and spies!" exclaimed Sigurd, and without an instant's hesitation he picked up Astrid's arrow and ran forward, fitting it to his bow.

"Your sword!" called Vagn, tearing the peace-bands from his own weapon as he ran. A shout answered him, and the Norseman ran forward to meet Sigurd. A spear whizzed by his head, and he loosed the bow.

The foremast viking fell with a clash, and as the others paused Sigurd tore the peace-bands from his sword. Next instant he was surrounded, struggling, striking, and he realized that more and more men had appeared from behind the cliff.

Now a blade gleamed beside him, and Vagn's voice sounded in his ear. One man was down—two; but others filled their places, and a heavy axe was poised over Sigurd. As it fell the boy darted in beneath the blow, and his sword fell on the viking's shoulder; but at that instant something crashed on his light steel cap, and he knew no more.

Sigurd awoke with a dull pain in his head, to find his arms tightly bound and the midday sun beating down on him. Raising his head, Fairhair saw that he lay on the forecastle of a small ship, with Vagn beside him, wounded in the shoulder and unconscious.

He saw nothing of Astrid, and a burning thirst consumed him; with a great effort he rose to a sitting position and looked around. They were out at sea, and the land lay far behind them; in the stern and waist of the ship were fifteen or twenty Norsemen.

"That was a stiff crack I gave you, lad, but the steel cap saved your skull," sounded a voice, and Sigurd twisted around. Behind him stood a dark man with an unpleasant face and straw-colored hair; evidently he was the leader, for he had just come out of the cabin.

Sigurd tried to speak, but his tongue was dry, and the man laughed. "Here, Thord," he called, "bring a horn of water."

One of the men in the waist took a horn and filled it from the cask beside the mast, handing it up to the leader, who put it to the boy's lips. Sigurd drank greedily, and then the other threw a few drops over Vagn, who opened his eyes.

He struggled to rise, with a sharp cry.

"Thorkel Leira! I—" The effort was too much for him, and he fell back again. Their captor smiled sneeringly.

"He is in a bad way to fulfill his vow, eh?" This was the man whom Vagn had sworn to kill, the betrayer of his father! As he realized this, Sigurd's head cleared.

"Why have you attacked us? Who are you?" he asked indignantly.

Thorkel laughed again. "Vagn, there, seemed to know my face! You two and the girl, whom I take to be Gunhild's niece, will make a nice gift to Jarl Hakon! Great boasts, great boasts!"

Sigurd flushed. As he looked at the viking, his heart gave a sudden leap, for, framed in the cabin doorway behind, he saw the face of Astrid, her finger on her lips. Making no sign, he answered the leader calmly.

"In that case, leave us alone till we get to Thrandheim." As he said this, Sigurd lay down again, turning his back on Thorkel. The latter sneered, and stepped to the edge of the forecastle, above the ship's waist. Sigurd opened his eyes, and saw Astrid making signs, and holding in her hand his sword.

Sigurd comprehended the plan instantly. He silently drew his feet up and gathered his muscles; Thorkel was giving orders, a few paces away, and paid no heed to him. The boy slowly rose to one knee; he saw Astrid run toward him, and at the same instant he threw himself headfirst at Thorkel, striking him fairly in the waist.

The viking fell forward with a cry, and lay motionless on the deck beneath. Sigurd would have followed him over the low rail, but for a hand that gripped his bound arms and stayed him; then he felt the bonds cut and a sword pushed into his hand.

"Hold the ladder," panted the girl, "while I arouse Vagn."

Sigurd sprang to the top of the narrow ladder that led up from the deck below just as the surprised men seized their weapons. An arrow tore through his hair; another followed, but Sigurd parried it with his blade, and another after it. This was an old viking exercise, and the boy felt no fear; but with a cry of dismay Astrid ran to the cabin, quickly returning with a shield.