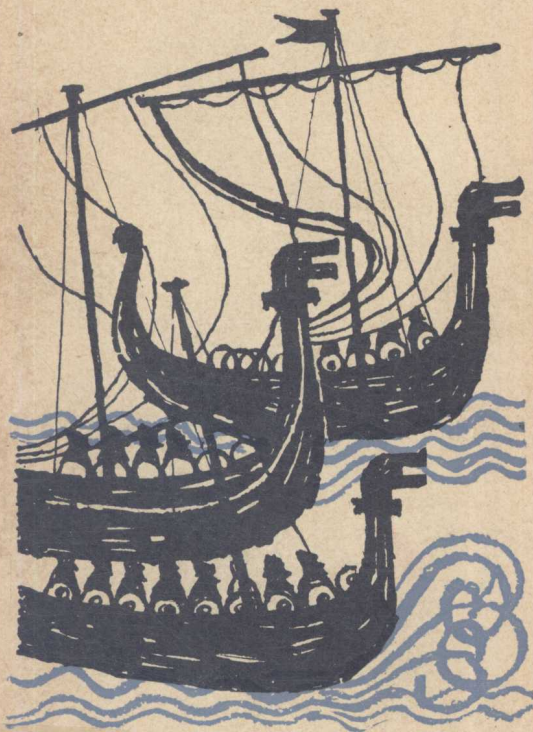


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The Ring-Givers



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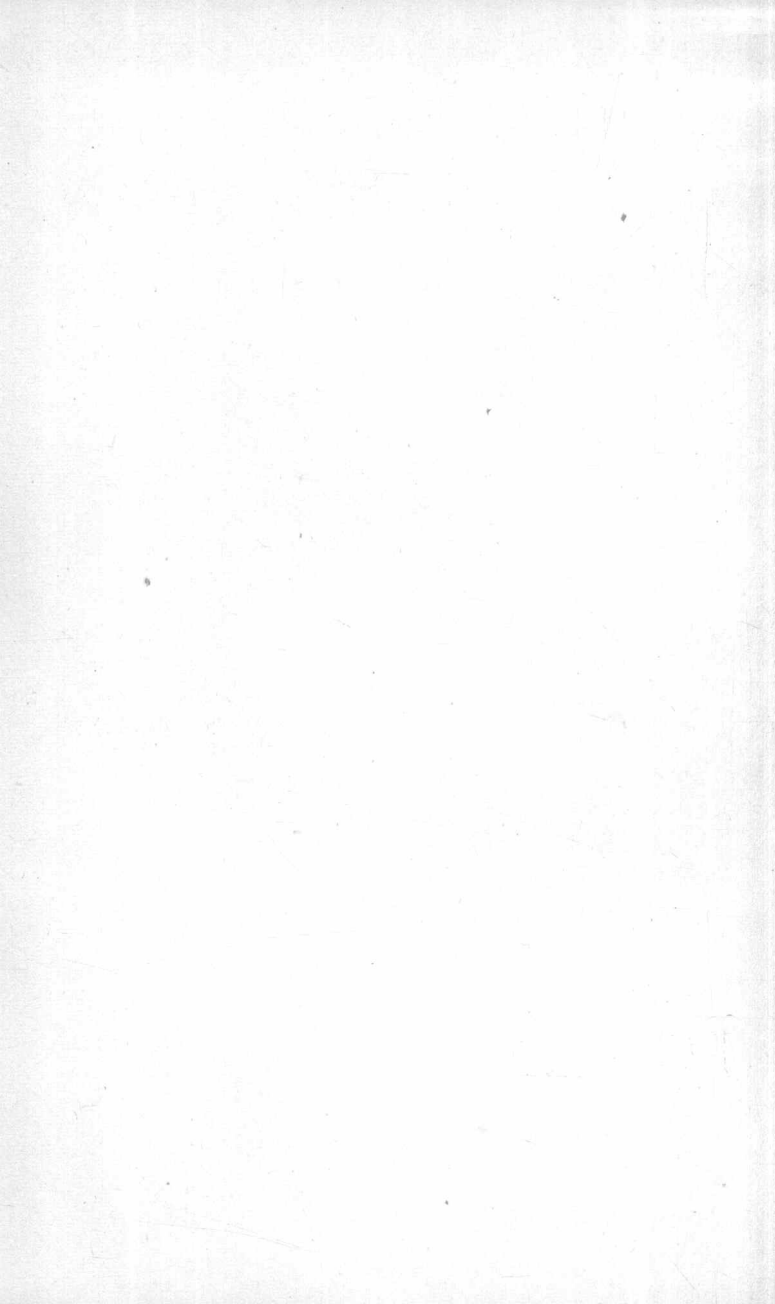
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Sceal se hearda helm hyrstedgolde,
fǣtum befeallen; feormynd swefað,
þā ðe beadogriman bȳwan sceoldon;
gē swylce sēo herepād, sīo æt hilde gebād
ofer borda gebræc bite irena,
brosnað æfter beorne. Ne mæg byrnan hring
æfter wigfruman wide fēran,
hæleðum be healfe. Næs hearpan wyn,
gomen glēobēames, nē gōd hafoc
geond sæl swingeð, nē se swifta mearh
burhstede bēateð. Bealocwealm hafað
fela feorhcynna forð onsended!

Beowulf, ll. 2255-66

(The tough helmet, adorned with gold, must be despoiled of its plates; the burnishers, who should prepare the war-masks, are sleeping in death; and the mailshirt, similarly, which experienced the stroke of sword-blades over the clash of shields in battle, crumbles into decay, following the warrior. The ring-mail cannot travel far along with the fighter, by the hero's side. There is no joy of the harp, no delight in music, nor does the good hawk swoop through the hall, nor the swift horse stamp in the courtyard. Baleful death has caused many generations of men to perish!)

King Froda of the Hathobards rolled and sweated in nightmare. His fingers plucked at the bearskins on his couch like a dying man's; foam flecked his greying beard; his bloodshot eyes flickered madly from time to time as he strove to climb out of the pit of sleep.

Two gigantic women, naked, yellow, loathesome, were grinding gold for him in a great stone hand-mill. With each turn of the quern, gold rings spilled from it and clashed at his feet, endlessly, until Froda was wading in red gold, and the glint of the metal winked at him from the farthest corners of the vast hall in which he stood in his dream. The sweat coursed down the backs of the giantesses as they ground, and dripped from the purple nipples of their hanging breasts, until the monstrous women cried, 'Froda! Froda! Give us rest!'

But Froda commanded them to grind on, and the groans of the women mingled with the grinding of the mill. Still the gold rings fell, for an eternity, it seemed, as Froda stood amongst his gold. A second time the giantesses begged for rest; again Froda refused; and it was then that his dream became nightmare. Again the rings fell from under the quern, but now blood fell with them, and the rings were all dabbled with scarlet.

A third time the women asked for respite; a third time Froda refused, dream-compelled, though he ached to assent. The women ground as before, but now they sang, too, and as they sang, Froda's whole being was caught up in stark terror, swinging, swinging in sick gyration with the sound and the motion of the mill. His will withered, and he was drained of everything save utter panic, while helpless to do anything but listen to the song, as the quern ground, ground, the gold clashed and the blood splashed to the floor of Froda's hall.

Fenia and Menia were the giantesses' names. They had ground gold and good fortune for him in the past, but now they were grinding his doom. So went their song.

Menia sang:

*My eye sees fire
east of the castle; battle-cries ring out,
beacons are kindled!
Hosts of foemen
hither will come
to burn down the hall
over Froda's head. . . .'*

and more in the same strain, foretelling misfortune, and the end of the peaceful days of Froda's kingship. But Fenia's song was the more terrible. She sang:

*'Swing more strongly:
the son of Yrsa
will spill Froda's blood
for the death of Halfdane -
he is called Rolf
and is to her
both son and brother
as we both know. . . .'*

And still the women strained and swung at the quern, but their song had lapsed into inaudible moaning, more horrible to Froda, if possible, than the singing. His dream, however, was nearly over. Incontinently the giantesses stopped their grinding. Menia strode over to Froda, picked him up and flung him on to the highest heap of gold. Froda had a fleeting vision of himself, arms outflung as he lay supine on the gold pile. He distinctly heard the small chink and susurrus of the rings shifting under his head. And then the form of Menia began to grow, even more enormous than before. She bestrode him, cackling, and began to sing again. Strangely, the words were clear. It was something about Froda's baby son, Ingeld; but, try as he might, Froda could make no sense of the words, could not relate one to another. He only knew that they filled him with complete misery and despair.

Menia vanished, then reappeared by the side of Fenia, picking up the grinding slab of the mill, which she dashed to the ground. Fenia took up the huge quernstone and flung it on top of the slab

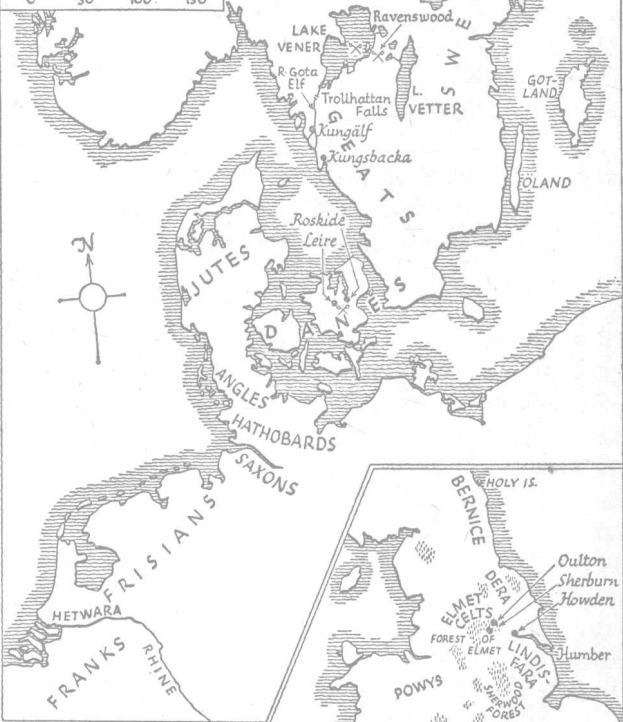
with a noise that made the hall shake. As she did so, a splinter flew from the stone and struck Froda in the left eye. He screamed and awoke. Ever after, he was blind in his left eye; and men feared him. Some said he was blessed, others, that he was accursed, but they were all afraid of him. For the one-eyed man was the form that Odin took on when he walked the earth; and, plainly, Froda had been marked by Odin for good or ill.

As for Froda, he ceased to take joy in anything but Ingeld, the baby prince, and went his way for the most part as if only half awake. Yet he seemed to prosper, for a time.

NORTH-WEST EUROPE

about 550 A.D.

Miles
0 50 100 150



ENGLAND and WALES

showing some Celtic and English settlements about 550 A.D.

(same scale as main map)



FORESTS

I

The Walker in Shadow

A.D. 499-515

I

'ONE day I shall be king over all these people,' said young Helmwulf to the crab he had picked up.

The crab, unimpressed, merely nipped him, so the boy flung it into the grey sea and resumed his walk along the shore.

'I hate them all!' said Helmwulf, kicking morosely at the strands of ribbon-weed that tried to trip his feet. 'If only I were strong, I'd show them!' he muttered. 'These Geats!'

Helmwulf was not happy at the Geat court. His father, Edgethew, had been a Waymunding, an ally of the Geats. On his death the Geatish king Hathcyn had allowed the boy protection at the Geat court, not because of any tender feelings, but because Hathcyn's brother, Hygelac, had insisted that the boy should be adopted as a token of their gratitude to Edgethew, who had been a great warrior. That was three years ago. Helmwulf was now ten, and a source of anxiety to Hygelac. Hathcyn considered the boy a weakling, and was privately wondering whether it would not be best to have Helmwulf tied in a leather sack and dropped quietly at night into the very sea into which Helmwulf had just thrown the crab. There were limits to one's duty to a dead ally; and the child's disappearance could always be blamed on a wolf or bear, for he was given to solitary wandering.

The boy himself, though he knew nothing of his danger, was well aware of his weakness, and cursed it as he walked

over the sand. He neared the estuary of a small river, seating himself on a dune for a rest.

A few hundred yards away, a bitch otter and her cub were playing in the water to windward of him as he sat motionless in the marram grass that covered the dune. He gazed with envy at the swimming otters as they approached him in the stream. How well they swam! His keen eyes saw that both mother and cub were swimming lazily and without effort, kicking with their hind legs and pushing the water on either side of them with alternate sidewise strokes of the forepaws. Helmwulf observed them unthinkingly for a while; then, suddenly, the boy thought to himself how much better those sidewise strokes must be than the feeble dog-paddle which was all he himself could muster in the way of swimming. A slow lunge forward with his arm, then sideways, till his hand touched his thigh, then the other arm, while he kicked his feet. That was it! Helmwulf resolved to try out the stroke the very next day. He had only time to watch the animals for a few more minutes before hurrying back to Hathcyn's hall for the meal. The otters emerged from the water and began to wrestle, biting each other playfully, the cub hugging its mother round the neck.

'Ha!' shouted Helmwulf, scaring the otters as he rose. 'Little water-bears, you will make me strong!'

And he walked jauntily home along the beach, up the shore and on to the promontory, along the cobbled path and past the squalid huts that surrounded Hathcyn's hall.

The great fire of red fir was ablaze outside the hall, and the babble of warriors, laughing, talking and shouting, smote Helmwulf's ears as he passed through the narrow doorway. The meal had started. The long trestle-table down one wall was packed with men. Before the fire, smaller than the one outside, the king sat in the place of honour at the middle of the board, Hygelac at his side.

His confidence evaporating, Helmwulf squeezed as close to

the wall as he could, and began to edge his way over the rush-strewn floor. He had to pass the long line of men to reach his place at the back of the hall, where another table was laid for the women and children of the household, close to the opening to the women's quarters. There was no back door to Hathcyn's hall: the only way to the women's bower lay through the hall itself. So Helmwulf could not choose any other means of reaching his place than the conspicuous one forced on him by his lateness. But he was lucky. When he came opposite Hathcyn and was about to creep past, the king looked at him fleetingly with narrowed eyes. Hygelac laid a hand on his brother's arm in restraint. Hathcyn had been known to make latecomers to his board stand stripped by the fire until the skin blistered and scorched; the victims frequently died after days of screaming. Sometimes such a custom had spectacular results, as when Rolf Kraki visited Athils; but that will be told later. As it was, the child was past safely, and he slipped to his place with a scamper and a hop, as a mouse goes to its hole. Helmwulf's leg muscles were shaking with reaction. With downcast eyes, he began to eat his cold fat pork, washing it down with stale beer.

The royal womenfolk were in attendance at the men's table, so Helmwulf had no apologies to make. With the exception of one lad, Breca, the other children left him alone for the most part. Helmwulf wished that Breca would leave him alone, too, for Breca was a year older, was strong beyond his years, and a bully. He was watching Helmwulf with an eye of amused contempt.

'If I were king, I'd make you fry,' Breca said. Helmwulf remained silent, and Breca added, 'Dog's turd!'

Still Helmwulf said nothing. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Breca, though only a retainer's son, might one day become king; he had, at least, as much chance as Helmwulf, which was very little.

Breca wore a dagger at his side. He drew this with an air of ostentation, and stuck it fiercely into the plank beside his food. Then he picked up a bone, copying the warriors he had seen hurling bones at their weakest companion, and threw it at Helmwulf. The bone struck him on the nose before he had time to dodge, and the tears started to his eyes with the pain and the indignity. The other children laughed dutifully as Breca said, 'That's what you'd get if I were king. Ox-bones, though, not pig's trotters - every day!'

*

The drinking had started at the men's table. The king and Hygelac were both drunk, but not immoderately so, for although they drank stronger beer than the rest, they were used to it. They were in close conversation with two huge men, the brothers Wulf and Eofor, just returned from a visit to the Danish capital, Leire. The Geats were closely allied with the Danes, both in their war with the Swedes, and in their feud with the Hathobards, which had commenced when Froda killed King Halfdane.

'So Froda is dead,' mused Hathcyn, 'but who is the Hathobard king now?'

'Lord,' said Eofor, 'we do not know. But Hroar is enthroned at Leire.'

'You talk like an old spawwife, Eofor,' Hygelac said. 'You spend half an hour telling us that the sea was rough. When is it not rough? Then you say that Froda is dead, and Hroar is king in Leire. You sit on your news like a broody hen hatching out a pebble. Wulf, how did Froda die?'

'Halga's son Rolf killed him. Hroar, King Halga and Heregar made an oath as three brothers to avenge their father's death when Froda killed Halfdane last year.'

'We know that,' said Hathcyn, impatiently. 'And we know that they raised an expedition. But just what happened?'

Wulf looked at Eofor, and said, 'We are fighting men, lord,