

So saying he took from the ground a smooth strip of bark, on which, with the point of his sword, he wrote something. Then, turning to Thor, "Carry this," he said, "to her."

And as Thor turned and hastened off on his errand, Sigurd looked after him and sighed, and wished he too were going that way.

But time forbade that he should linger long thus, and once more he turned his face resolutely towards Jockjen and went on alone.

Although the forest stretched some leagues farther, the trees were no longer dense or the path difficult. In parts large clearings had been made, and felled timber here and there betokened the busy hand of the woodman. Sigurd met more than one of these, who accosted him. He would not, however, tarry with any of them, but pressed eagerly forward, so that they would turn and look after this noble knight and wonder who he was, and whither he hastened.

One of these simple folk with whom he waited a few minutes to partake of a hasty meal said, at parting,

"Beware, my lord, of the robbers who haunt the skirts of the forest. They come suddenly upon the unwary traveller, and have no pity."

Sigurd smiled.

"I have passed the four-footed wolves," he said; "I fear not the two-footed."

"Nay, but," said the peasant, "they are not to be despised. Ever since Sigurd was banished many of his soldiers have deserted the king, and now live the robber's life in these woods. Stay here, my lord, till a band of us will be going to Jockjen together."

But Sigurd smiled scornfully, and thanking the man, started forward, fearing nothing save arriving too late at Niflheim.

Yet the woodman's warning was not lost upon him, for he walked with his drawn sword in his hand, keeping both his eyes and ears open as he went.

All that day he pressed onward, and towards evening came to a lonely part of the wood, where the trees for a short space all round closed thickly overhead and shut out the light. He had passed through this spot, and was once more emerging into the open, when three men suddenly sprang out of the thicket and faced him.

Two of them were in the garb of common peasants, and carried, the one a club, the other a knife. Sigurd guessed them at once to be two of the robbers of whom the woodman had warned him. Their companion was a powerful man in the dress of a soldier, and carried a sword. In him, though he knew not the man, Sigurd recognised a soldier of the army of the king, who, as he might guess, had deserted his lawful calling for the life of a bandit.

The party was plainly unprepared to meet a knight fully armed. They had expected rather to find some defenceless merchant, or even woodman, whom they might easily overcome and as easily rob.

They fell back an instant before the noble form of Sigurd, but the next, true to their calling, rushed upon him, shouting to him to surrender and yield up whatever of value he might possess on his person.

Sigurd wasted not a word in replying to this insolent challenge, but defended himself against the sudden assault. At the first onslaught the two bandits were foremost, who thought to bear him down by sheer weight. But Sigurd, stepping back a pace, caught the knife of the one on his shield, while with his own sword he ran his comrade through the body. So quickly was it done, that the soldier, advancing wildly to the attack, stumbled and fell over the body of the prostrate man; and before he could rise again to his feet, a second thrust from Sigurd's sword had laid low the other bandit beside his comrade.

The soldier, therefore, was the only adversary that remained, and of him Sigurd thought to make short work; but in this he judged wrongly, for this robber proved to be a man of extraordinary strength and agility, while Sigurd himself was faint and jaded with his long and painful march.

For an hour that afternoon the woods resounded with the clash of swords. The two men spoke not a word, but fought with teeth set and lips closed. Once and again, by common consent, they halted, leaning on their swords for breath, but as often closed again more furiously than ever.

It surprised Sigurd to find an adversary so resolute and dextrous. At another time it might have pleased him, for he loved courage even in an adversary; but now, when every hour lost meant peril to Ulf, his bosom swelled with wrath and disappointment. By force of superior weight he drove his adversary back inch by inch, till at the end of an hour the two stood some yards distant from the spot where the fight began.

Yet, though falling back, the soldier kept a bold guard, and while not inflicting any wound on his enemy, was able to ward off all blows aimed at himself.

At length, when for a moment Sigurd seemed to flag in the combat, the man gathered himself together for one mighty stroke at the hero's head. It fell like a thunder-bolt but Sigurd saw it in time and caught it on his up-lifted sword, and with such force that the soldier's weapon broke in two, and he himself, overbalanced by the shock, fell backwards to the ground.

Then Sigurd, with a glance of triumph, planted his foot on the body of his prostrate foe, and prepared to avenge the delay of that hour's combat.

The man neither struggled nor called for mercy, but looked boldly up in his victor's face and awaited death with a smile.

The sword of Sigurd did not descend. Some passing memory, perchance, or some soft voice breathing mercy, held it back. He drew back his foot, and sheathing his weapon, said,

"Keep thy life, and return and serve the king thy master."

The man lay for a moment as one bewildered, then springing to his feet, and casting from him his broken sword, he knelt and cried,

"Oh, merciful knight, to thee I owe my life, and it is thee I will serve to the world's end!"

"Peace!" said Sigurd, sternly; "this is no time for parley. I must be in Jockjen this night. Follow me if thou wilt thus far."

And with that he began to stride once more forward with rapid steps, followed closely by his late adversary.

Sigurd uttered not a word, but walked with sword drawn as before, fearing nothing save to arrive too late at Niflheim.

Once, as they neared Jockjen, two other robbers rushed out from the woods as if to attack him, but when they perceived the stalwart champion who followed hasten forward and place himself beside the traveller, they refrained, and departed suddenly the way they came.

And now they were come at last to Jockjen. But when Sigurd made as though he would enter the town, his follower hastened to overtake him, and said,

"My knight, avoid this town, for Ulf, the king, is here, and has commanded that no stranger enter it."

"Is Ulf here?" inquired Sigurd. "They told me he was at Niflheim."

The man looked strangely at him.

"My lord," said he, "you know what only a few know. Ulf is to be at Niflheim."

"When?" demanded Sigurd.

"This night," said the man.