



Ririro

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King Horn (Full Book)

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Chapter 1: The Adventures Of King Horn

Murray was King of Suddenne in the west country, a wise king whom all his subjects honoured. Godhild was his queen, and no woman of that day was lovelier than she. Their son was named Horn; and when Horn was fifteen years old, the sun shone and the rain fell on no fairer boy.

Twelve squires, each one the son of a man of noble birth, were chosen to be Horn's companions. Athulf was the best and truest of them, and dearest to Horn's heart; and one Fikenhild was the basest among them.

It pleased King Murry, on a certain summer's day, to ride, as was his wont, by the seashore, with only two comrades. Suddenly, as they rode, they came upon a strange sight. There before them on the edge of the waves lay fifteen ships beached, full of fierce Saracens; and many other Saracens went busily to and fro upon the shore. "What seek you here, pagan men?" cried Murry at that sight. "What wares do you bring to this my land of Suddenne?" For he thought them to be merchants from a far land,

"We are come to slay all your folk who believe in Christ," answered one of them; "and that we do right soon. As for you, you go not hence alive. "Thereat Murry was sorely troubled in heart. Nevertheless, he made no sign of fear. He and his two companions, with bold mien, leapt down from their horses, to fight more readily, and drew their swords, and fell upon the pagans. Many a stout blow they dealt; many a Saracen felt the strength of their arms: but for all their might and valour, they were but three against a host. From every side the enemy fell upon them unceasingly, and in a little time they lay there dead upon the sand. Then the Saracens left their ships and spread over the whole of Suddenne, slaying and

burning and laying waste wheresoever they came. None might live, were he stranger or friend or native of the land, unless he forswore the Christian faith and became a pagan.

Of all women in those days Godhild the queen was saddest. Her kingdom was lost, her husband cruelly slain, and all her days were filled with grief. But worse befell her, for on a certain day the Saracens came suddenly and took Horn prisoner and carried him away. Godhild escaped, and in her dire distress fled alone to a distant cave, and there lay hid, worshipping her God in secret, and praying that He would save her son from harm.

Horn and his companions—for all his twelve squires had been captured with him—seemed in sorry case. The savage pagans were for killing all Christians. But their chief Emir wished to have no innocent blood on his hands, and spoke out boldly. "We might well slay you, Horn," he said; "you are young and fair and strong, and will grow yet stronger. Perchance, if we spare you now, you will some day return and be avenged upon us, when you have come to your full power. Yet we ourselves will not put you to death; the guilt shall not be on us, but on the sea. To the sea will we give you and your comrades; the sea shall be your judge, to save or drown you as it will."

Weeping and wringing their hands, Horn and his comrades were led down to the seashore. There a boat was made ready for them, with oars, but no rudder or sail.

All their tears were vain: the Saracens forced them aboard, and turned the little craft adrift into the wide ocean.

The boat drove fast and far through the water, and fear came down upon those in it. Soon they were tossing haphazard upon the rushing waves, now resting forlornly, now praying for help, now rowing wildly, as if for their lives, if ever the violence of the sea abated for a moment. All that afternoon, and through the long, dark night, they voyaged in cold and terror, till in the morning, as the day dawned, Horn looked up and saw land at a little distance. "Friends," said he, "I have good tidings. Yonder I spy land; I hear the song of birds, and see grass growing. Be merry once more; our ship has come into safety."

They took their oars and rowed lustily. Soon the keel touched the shore, and they sprang out eagerly on to dry land, leaving the boat empty. The waves drew the little craft gently back to themselves, and it began to glide away into the great sea. "Go now from us, dear boat," cried Horn lovingly to it, as he saw it drawn away; "farewell, sail softly, and may no wave do you harm."

The boat floated slowly away, and Horn wept sorely at parting from it. Then they all turned their faces inland, and left the sea behind them, and set forth to seek whatsoever fortune might bring them.



Chapter 2: Horn Is Dubbed Knight

The country to which Horn and his comrades had come was called Westerness: Aylmer the Good was king of it. But of that the wanderers knew nought as yet.

They journeyed far over hill and dale, ignorant of the way, and seeing no living man, until, as the day drew to an end, there met them Aylmer the king himself. "Whence do you come, friends?" asked he. "Who are you that are so fair and straight of body?"

Horn spoke up for them all, for he was wisest and most skilled in the use of courteous words. "We are from Suddenne, sire, of good lineage and Christian faith. The pagans came to our land, and slew my father and many others, and drove us from our homes. We thirteen whom you see were set adrift in a boat, to be the sport of the sea; a day and a night have we travelled without sail or rudder, and our boat brought us to this land. We are in your hands, sire: slay us, or keep us bound as prisoners; do with us as you will."

The good king was no ungentle boor: he spoke them fair and graciously. "Tell me, child," he said, "what is your name? No harm shall come to you at my hands, whosoever you be."

"Horn am I called, sire."

"Horn, child, you are well and truly named: your fame shall ring like a horn over dale and hill. Now, Horn, come with me. You and your comrades shall abide at my court."

They set out for the king's palace. When they were come thither, Aylmer entrusted them to his steward, Athelbrus, whom he charged to bring them up in knightly ways. They were added to Aylmer's household, and taught all that squires of kings should know. But Horn was to come to greater things than this. He learnt quickly, and became beloved by every one; and most of all, Rimenhild, the king's daughter, loved him from the day when she first set eyes on him. Her love for him grew daily stronger and stronger, though she dared speak no word of it to him, for she was a princess, and he only a squire rescued by chance from the sea.

At length Rimenhild could hide her love no longer.

She sent for Athelbrus the steward, and bade him bring Horn to her bower. But he, guessing her secret from her wild looks, was unwilling to send Horn to her, fearing the king's displeasure; and he bade Athulf, Horn's dearest companion, go to the princess instead, hoping either that the princess would not know him from Horn (for she had as yet spoken to neither of them, and they were much alike in face and mien), or that by this plan she would see the folly of her desire.

Athulf came to Rimenhild's bower, and she did not know that he was not Horn, and received him lovingly. But soon the trick was made plain, for Athulf, as befits a loyal heart, could not hear himself praised above all other squires at Aylmer's court, and vowed that Horn was far fairer and better than he. Then Rimenhild in a rage sent him from her, and bade Athelbrus bring Horn to her without more ado. And thus at last Horn came before the princess.

"King's daughter," said he with reverence and courtesy, "Athelbrus, the steward, bade me come to you here. Say what you would have me do."

Rimenhild rose, answering nothing till she had taken him by the hand, and made him sit by her, and embraced him lovingly. "Welcome, Horn," she said; "you are so fair that I cannot but love you. Take me to wife; have pity on my love."

Horn knew not what to say. "Princess," he began at last, "I am too lowly for such a wife as you. I am but a thrall and a foundling, and owe all that I have to the king your sire. There is no meet wedding between a thrall and the king's daughter." At those words Rimenhild fell into a swoon; and Horn was filled with pity and love at the sight, and took her in his arms, and kissed her.

"Dear lady," he said, "be brave. Help me to win knighthood at the hands of my lord the king; if I be dubbed knight my thralldom is ended, and I am free to love you, as I do in my heart already." For Horn had long loved the princess secretly, but dared not hope that she would give him her love in turn.

Rimenhild came to her senses as he spoke. "Horn," she said, "it shall be as you wish. Ere fourteen days have passed you shall be made a knight."

Thereupon she sent for Athelbrus again, and bade him pray the king Aylmer to dub Horn a knight; and, to be brief, Horn was speedily knighted, and, asking the king's leave, himself knighted in turn his twelve companions.

As soon as he was knighted, Rimenhild called him to her; and Athulf, his dear comrade, went with him into her presence. "Sir Horn, my knight," she said, "sit by me here. See, it is time to fulfil your word. Take me for your wife."

"Nay, Rimenhild," answered Horn; "that may not be yet. It is not enough that I am knighted. I must prove my knighthood, as all men do, in combat with some

other knight. I must do a deed of prowess in the field for love of you: then if I win through with my life, I will return and take you to wife."

"Be it so, Horn. Now take from me this carven ring of gold. On it is wrought: 'Be true to Rimenhild.' Wear it always on your finger, for my love's sake. The stone in it has such grace that never need you fear any wound nor shrink from any combat, if you do but wear this ring, and look steadfastly upon it, and think of me. And you, Athulf, you too, when you have proven your knighthood, shall have such another ring also. Sir Horn, may Heaven bless and keep you, and bring you safe to me again."

With that Horn kissed her, and received her blessing, and went away to prove his knighthood in brave feats of arms.



Chapter 3: Horn The Knight Errant

When Horn had saddled his great black horse, and put on his armour, he rode forth to adventure, singing gaily. Scarce had he gone a mile when he spied by the seashore a ship, beached, and filled with heathen Saracens. "What do you bring hither?" asked Horn. "Whence do you come?" The pagans saw that he was but one man, and they were many, and answered boldly, "We are come to win this land, and slay all its folk."

At that Horn gripped his sword, and his blood ran hot. He sprang upon the Saracen chief and smote him with all his strength, so that he cleft the man's head from off his shoulders. Then he looked at the ring which Rimenhild had given him; and immediately such might came upon him that in a trice he slew full five score of the pagans. They fled in terror before him, and few of those whom he did not slay at the first onset escaped.

Horn set the head of the Saracen leader on the point of his sword, and rode back to Aylmer's court. When he had come to the king's palace, he went into the great hall, where the king and all his knights sat. "King Aylmer," he cried, "and you, his knights, hear me. To-day, after I was dubbed knight, I rode forth and found a ship by the shore, filled with outlandish knaves, fierce Saracens, who were for slaying you all. I set upon them; my sword failed not, and I smote them to the ground. Lo, here is the head of their chief."

Men marvelled at Horn's prowess, and the king gave him words of praise. But not yet did Horn dare speak of his love for Rimenhild. On the morrow, at dawn, King Aylmer went a-hunting in the forest, and Horn's twelve companions rode with him. But Horn himself did not go to the chase; he sought instead to tell his lady Rimenhild of his deeds, and went to her bower secretly, thinking to hear her joy in the feats he had done. But he found her weeping bitterly. "Dear love," he said, "why do you weep?"

"Alas, Horn, I have had an evil dream," she answered. "I dreamed that I went fishing, and saw my net burst. A great fish was taken in it, and I thought to have drawn him out safely; but he broke from my hands, and rent the meshes of the net. It is in my mind that this dream is of ill omen for us, Horn, and that the great fish signifies you yourself, whereby I know that I am to lose you."

"Heaven keep this ill hap from us, dear princess," said Horn. "Nought shall harm you, I vow; I take you for my own for ever, and plight my troth to you here and now." But though he seemed to be of good cheer, he too was stirred by this strange dream, and had evil forebodings.

Meanwhile Fikenhild, riding with King Aylmer by the river Stour, was filled with envy of Horn's great deeds against the Saracens; and at last he said to the king, "King Aylmer, hear me. This Horn, whom you knighted yesterday for his valour in slaying the Saracens, would fain undo you. I have heard him plotting to kill you and take Rimenhild to wife. Even now, as we ride here by the river, he is in her bower—he, Horn, the foundling, is with your daughter, the Princess Rimenhild. Go now, and take him, and drive him out of your land for his presumption." For Fikenhild had set a watch on Horn, and found out the secret of his love for Rimenhild.

Thereupon King Aylmer turned his horse, and rode home again, and found Horn with Rimenhild, even as Fikenhild had said. "Get you hence, Horn," he cried in anger, "you base foundling; forth out of my daughter's bower, away with you altogether! See that you leave this land of Westerness right speedily; here is no place nor work for you. If you flee not soon, your life is forfeit."

Horn, flushed with rage, went to the stable, and set saddle on his steed, and took his arms; so fierce was his mien that none dared withstand him. When all was

ready for his going, he sought out Rimenhild. "Your dream was true, dear love," he said. "The fish has torn your net, and I go from you. But I will put a new ending to the dream; fear not. Now fare you well; the king your father has cast me out of his realm, and I must needs seek adventure in other lands. Seven years will I wander, and it may be that I shall win such fortune as shall bring me back to sue honourably for you. But if at the end of seven years I have not come again to Westerness, nor sent word to you, then do you, if you so will, take another man for husband in my stead, and put me out of your heart. Now for the last time hold me in your arms and kiss me good-bye."

So Horn took his leave. But before he went away from Aylmer's court, he charged Athulf his friend to watch over Rimenhild and guard her from harm. Then he set forth on his horse, and rode down to the sea, and took ship to sail away alone from Westerness.



Chapter 4: Horn In Exile

Ere Horn had sailed long, the wind rose, and the ship drove blindly before it for many leagues, till at length it was cast up on land. Horn stepped out on to the beach, and there before him saw two princes, whose names (for they greeted him kindly) were Harild and Berild.

"Whence are you?" they asked, when they had told him who they were. "What are you called?"

Horn thought it wise to hide his real name from them, lest it should come to Aylmer's ears, and his anger reach Horn even in this distant land. "I am called Cuthbert," he answered, "and I am come far from the west in this little ship, seeking adventure and honour."

"Well met, sir knight," said Harild. "Come now to our father the king: you shall do knightly deeds in his service." They led him to King Thurston their father; and when Thurston saw that Horn was a man of might, skilled in arms, and a true knight, he took him into his service readily. So Horn—or Cuthbert, as they knew him—abode at Thurston's court, and served the king in battle. But no great and notable thing befell him until the coming of Christmas.

It was King Thurston's custom to make each Christmas a great feast, lasting many days. To this feast Horn was bidden, with all the other knights of the court. Great mirth and joy was there that Yule-tide; all men feasted with light hearts. Suddenly, about noon-day, the great doors of the king's hall were flung open,

and a monstrous giant strode in. He was fully armed, in pagan raiment, and his mien was proud and terrible.

"Sit still, sir king," he roared, as Thurston turned to him. "Hearken to my tidings. I am come hither with a Saracen host, and my comrades are close at hand. From them I bring a challenge; and this is the challenge. One of us alone will fight any three of your knights, in a certain place. If your three slay our one, then we will depart and leave you and your land unscathed. But if our one champion slays your three, then will we take your land for our own, and deal with it and you as it pleases us. To-morrow at dawn we will make ready for the combat; and if you take not up this challenge, and send your appointed knights to battle, then will we burn and lay waste and slay all over this realm." Thereupon he turned, and stalked out of the hall, saying never another word. "This is a sorry hap," said King Thurston, when the Saracen had gone and left them all aghast. "Yet must we take up this challenge. Cuthbert," he said, turning to Horn, "you have heard this pagan boast; will you be one of our three champions? Harild and Berild, my sons, shall be the other two, and may God prosper all three! But alas! it is of little avail. We are all dead men!"

But Horn felt no fear. He started up from the board when he heard the king's sorrowful words. "Sir king," he cried, "this is all amiss. It is not to our honour that three Christian knights should fight this one pagan. I alone will lay the giant low, with my own sword, unaided."

Thurston hoped little of this plan, but none the less he agreed to it; and when the next day came, he arose betimes, and with his own hands helped to arm Horn; and having made ready, he rode down to the field of battle with him. There, in a great open space, stood the Saracen giant awaiting them, his friends standing by him to abide the issue of the combat. They made little tarrying, but fell to right soon. Horn dealt mightily with the giant; he attacked him at once, and showered blows upon him, so that the pagan was hard pressed, and begged for a breathing space.

"Let us rest awhile, sir knight," he said. "Never suffered I such blows from any man's hand yet, except from King Murry, whom I slew in Suddenne."

At that dear name Horn's blood ran hot within him: before him he saw the man who had slain his father and had driven himself from his kingdom. He fell to more furiously than ever, and drove hard at the giant beneath the shield; and as he smote he cast his eye upon the ring Rimenhild had given him.

Therewith his strength was redoubled; so straight and strong was the blow, so true his arm, that he pierced the giant to the heart, and he fell dead upon the ground.

When they saw their champion slain, the Saracens were stricken with panic.

They turned and fled headlong to their ships, Thurston and his knights pursuing. A great battle was fought by the ships: Harild and Berild were slain, but Horn did such deeds of prowess that every pagan was killed.

There was great lamentation over the two princes. Their bodies were brought to the king's palace and laid in state, and lastly buried in a great church built for them.



Chapter 5: Horn's Return

There was now no heir to Thurston's kingdom, since Harild and Berild were slain; and in a little time, when the king's grief abated, he bethought him of what should befall his people when his time came to die.

"Cuthbert," he said to Horn one day, when he had pondered long over these things, "there is no heir to my kingdom. There is but my daughter Reynild to come after me. Will you wed her, and be king and rule this land after my death?"

Horn was sorely tempted. But he looked on his ring, and remembered Rimenhild. "Sir king," he answered, "you do me great honour, and I give you thanks. But I am under a vow, and cannot wed the lady Reynild." He would say no more, but was firm in his purpose; and King Thurston had to be content with his loyal service only. For seven years Horn abode at Thurston's court, serving in arms under him and winning great fame by his knightly deeds. No word did he send to Rimenhild, nor received tidings of any kind from Westerness.

About the end of the seventh year Horn chanced to be riding in the forest, when he met a page journeying as if towards Thurston's palace. "What do you here?" he said. "Whither do you go?"

"Sir," answered the page, "I have a message for one Sir Horn from Sir Athulf in

Westerness, where Aylmer is king. The Lady Rimenhild is to be wedded on Sunday to King Modi of Reynes, and I am sent to bring tidings thereof to Sir Horn. But I can find him nowhere, nor hear even so much as his name, though I have wandered far and wide."

At this heavy news Horn hid his name no longer. He told the page who he was, and bade him go back with all speed, and say to Rimenhild that she need no longer mourn: her lover would save her ere Sunday came.

The page returned blithely with this message. But he never delivered it, for as he went back he was by chance drowned; and Rimenhild, hearing no word of Horn, despaired. Athulf, too, watching long for Horn each day on a tower of Aylmer's palace, gave up hope.

But Horn was not idle or forgetful. When he had despatched the page, as he thought, safely back to Athulf and Rimenhild, he went straight to King Thurston, and without more pretence told him his true name and all the story of the adventures.

"Sire," he said, at the end, "I have served you well. Grant me reward for my service, and help me to win Rimenhild. See, you offered me the hand of your daughter Reynild; that I might not accept, for I was pledged already; but perchance my comrade Athulf might be deemed an honourable suitor. If you will but help me, Athulf shall be Reynild's husband; that I vow. Sire, give me your aid."

"Be it so," said Thurston, loath to lose Horn, but glad to hear of a knight waiting to wed the lady Reynild. Straightway a levy of knights was made, and Horn set forth in a ship with a brave body of fighting men. The wind blew favourably, and ere long they came to Westerness. Even as they touched the shore, the bells ceased ringing for the marriage of Rimenhild to King Modi.

Horn saw how late they had arrived, and that he must needs act warily, if he would save Rimenhild in the midst of the rejoicings over her wedding. He left his men on board ship, and landed alone, setting out to walk to the palace, where the wedding-feast was about to be held. As he walked thus, he met a palmer [Footnote: A pilgrim], clad in pilgrim's weeds. "Whither go you, sir palmer?" he asked.

"I have just come from a wedding," he answered, "from the wedding of Rimenhild, the king's daughter; and sad and sorrowful she seemed to be, in truth, on this wedding day."

"Now Heaven help me, palmer, but I will change clothes with you. Take you my robe, and give me your long cloak. To-day I will drink at that wedding feast, and some shall rue the hour that I sit at the board with them."

Without more ado he changed clothes with the palmer, taking also his staff and scrip, and staining his face till it was like that of a toil-worn traveller. Then he set out for the palace once more.

He came soon to the gates, where a porter strove to bar his entrance. But Horn broke in the wicket-gate, and entered, and threw the man over the drawbridge, so that his ribs were broken. None other stood in Horn's way, and he went into the great hall, and took his place in a lowly seat among the beggars and poor men.

As he looked about him, he saw, at a little distance, Rimenhild, weeping and lamenting sorely. Athulf he did not see, for he was still keeping watch in the tower for Horn's return. Before long Rimenhild rose from her seat and began to minister to the guests, according to custom, pouring them out wine and ale in horn beakers. When she came low down among the guests, Horn spoke to her.

"Fair queen," he said, "serve us also; we beggars are athirst."

She laid down the vessel she bore, and took a great gallon cup, and filled it with brown ale, and offered it him, thinking him a glutton. "Take this cup," she said, "and drink your fill. Never saw I so forward a beggar."

"I will not drink your ale, lady," answered Horn, for he was minded to let her know who he was, and yet to hide himself from all others at the feast. "Give me wine; I am no beggar. I am a fisherman, come hither to search my nets, and see what I have caught. Pledge me now yourself and drink to Horn of horn."

Thus by his strange words he thought to recall to her that dream she had formerly dreamed, of a great fish that escaped from her net.

Rimenhild looked on him, and hope and fear sprang up in her heart together. She knew not what his saying about his nets and "Horn of horn" might mean. With a steadfast look, she took her drinking-horn, and filled it with wine, and gave it to Horn.

"Drink your fill, friend," she said, "and tell me if you have seen aught of this Horn of whom you seem to speak."

Horn drained the beaker, and as he put it down dropped into it the ring that Rimenhild had given him so long ago. When Rimenhild saw the ring she knew it at once. She made an excuse, and left the feast, and went to her bower. In a little time she sent for the palmer secretly, and asked him where he got the ring.

"Queen," said Horn, "in my travels I met one named Horn. He gave me this ring to bring to you; it was on shipboard I met him, and he lay dying."

He said this to prove if her love were still constant to him. But Rimenhild believed him, and when she heard him say that Horn was dead, became as one

mad with grief. Then Horn, seeing how strong was her love, threw off his palmer's cloak, and showed her the false stain on his face, and told her that he was in very truth Horn, her lover.

When their first joy at meeting again was over, Horn told the princess of the men he had brought with him in his ship. Secretly they sent for Athulf, and when he too had learnt all Horn's tidings, a message was sent to the men in the ship, who came to the palace speedily, and were admitted by a private door. Then all the company of them broke suddenly into the banquet-hall, and fell upon those there, and slew many; but Modi and Fikenhild escaped and fled from Westerness.



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