

An excerpt from
Beorn the Proud
by Madeleine Polland

Chapter One

The sudden breeze before the dawn stirred the rushes round the island, rocking the small boat which lay among them. In the bottom of the boat a girl moved and woke, confused first at where she found herself. Then she remembered clearly and all the happenings of the previous day came back to her as in a dream of terror. She lay still, looking backwards to the moment yesterday when she had crept happily among these same rushes on the other side of the island. Thigh-deep in water, she had searched for the nests of wildfowl, to surprise her mother with the brown, strong-flavoured eggs which she so valued for the table.

The monastery bell had startled her, clanging violently in the quiet air, but she was not yet frightened—perhaps it was a fire among the island huts or a pack of wolves marauding from the forest by the abbey on the lake shore. Idly, she had parted the tall rushes and peered out between them, only to see great white and scarlet sails spaced all across the lower lake, billowing above long-boats which bore down upon the islands in speed and silence, like huge and brilliant birds of death.

She had not been able to get back to the village in the centre of the island. She had splashed and clawed her way in panic to shallower water, only to realize that the mighty ships were closing even faster than she upon the shore. There had been nothing left to do but hide among the rushes and watch in helplessness as the dark invaders swarmed from their beached ships and poured yelling up the shore to fall upon her father's village.

Now she could no longer bear her thoughts and sat up abruptly in the boat. Only then did she see the boy, a few feet from her at the water's edge. He had not seen her and she stared at him in silence; he was one of the invaders and she knew well who they were. She had often heard her father tell of how they had been raiding Ireland now for many years; of how they had come to the homestead when he was a youth in our Lord's year of 826. That time, however, the people had had warning of their coming and fled to the forests, taking all they could carry, leaving only their crops and homesteads to the pillaging invaders. They came from a far land beyond the sea to the north; the Dubh Gaills they were called. The Black Strangers.

The boy was not tall, but vigorously built, standing braced on his strong brown legs as his eyes followed a flight of duck across the paling sky. She could not see his face but his skin seemed darker than she had ever known, and the hair falling to his shoulders was straight and black. He wore a tunic of grey linen, long-sleeved, and striped with blue and scarlet at the hem. In the leather belt around his waist was the sheath of a long knife.

"But I am *not* afraid," she told herself. "He is only a boy, about twelve years old like me. He is like one of my brothers."

At the thought of her brothers and the death of her family she stirred again restlessly and this time the boy heard her.

The speed of his movement was like an animal. In one bound he was beside her, reaching for the little wicker boat and drawing it to him through the rushes, staring at her fiercely with wide-open dark-blue eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

She stared at him astonished and did not answer.

"Who are you?" he said again. "My father thought to leave no one alive on these islands. Who are you and how are you here?"

Still she stared at him, amazed green eyes on the demanding blue ones. "But you are a Black Stranger—a Viking," she managed to say at last, "and yet you speak my tongue."

"Yes, yes." The dark face creased with impatience. "My father came on viking here before, and took himself a slave. She reared me when my mother died. My father grew to have much regard for her and we speak your tongue often, my father, my cousin and myself. Also my lord Ragnar and others of the older men have landed here before and passed a winter living among your people. But who are you that I should tell you this! Tell me at once who you are and how you come here. I am Beorn, the Sea King's son, and I would know."

Life flared back into the frightened and exhausted girl. "And I am Ness, daughter of a chief, and I will tell you only if I please!"

She knelt in the boat, her face only a space away from his, and they glared fiercely, anger risen in them both. Slowly the boy moved his hand to the hilt of the long knife. "I am Beorn," he said again, "the son of Anlaf the Sea King, and you will tell me *now!*"

Her eyes followed his hand, and then dropped, although her breath still came quick and angry. "Very well, I will tell you."

"It is good," said the boy. He crouched at the bow of the little curragh, never moving while she told him how she had hidden in the rushes and escaped the sacking and burning of the village.

"And then? That was the other side of the island. How did you get here?"

She went on to tell him how she had waited patiently for darkness, almost to her waist in water. Then, when the Vikings had started their feasting on the shore and were gathered rejoicing and unheeding round their fires, she had crept round the island to the little bay on the far side where the curraghs lay in shelter. She had thought to row to the monastery and seek safety with the monks in their tall tower but the Vikings were there before her. It was only the shelter of darkness in a familiar place that had let her escape again to row back, terrified and without thought, to her own island. Here she had lodged the boat deep in the reeds, with no idea of what to do next, and finally in the late night had fallen asleep.

The boy made no comment. He stood up, holding the boat with his foot. "You will get out," he said.

A hot answer rose once more to Ness's lips, but again the boy laid a casual hand on the long knife, and, her mouth tight with anger, she got out.

As she stood up the boy looked at her. Her tunic was stained and crumpled, her dark-red hair a knotted tangle down to her waist, but her eyes were fierce and her head, he was pleased to find, very nearly as high as his own.

"I like you," he said. "I think you are brave. I will ask my father and you shall be mine."

This time Ness could not hold her temper. "I shall be *yours!*" she flamed at him. "I shall be *yours!* I am myself and I shall belong to *nobody! Nobody!* Least of all to..."

The boy rocked gently on the balls of his feet. The blue eyes mocked her. "Least of all to me," he finished for her. "Very well," he went on, his voice indifferent, "very well. You shall not belong to me. We will tell that to my father Anlaf. Come. Will you then die

slowly or quickly, he will surely let me choose? I should say quickly were best. Come. Let us go to my father."

Ness thought of the day before. She thought of the horde of warriors rushing over her father's almost defenceless village. She heard again the thin, frantic screaming of the women and children, smelt the bitter smell as the smoke and flames rose above the dry thatch of the huts, and heard above everything else the blood-crazy yelling of the plundering Danes. Her anger faded into hopelessness as she looked at the boy—he was only a boy, but he was a Viking like the others.

"I will be yours," she said tonelessly, and for the first time the young Viking smiled.

"It is good. Now come to my father." He set off so suddenly across the short turf that for a brief moment she was alone. She looked at the boat, but before she could think to move he was beside her again. "*This* is the way to my father." He stood still, close to her, until she turned and went before him along the path which crossed the island.

It was now clear daylight, an early morning in late summer. The small fields above the lake shore had been harvested and the rising sun gilded the stubble above the glitter of the morning lake. In the wood of silver birches in the middle of the island the leaves whispered and rustled with the dryness of the late season. Ness's steps began to lag.

The boy prodded her from behind. "What?" he said mockingly. "Can you not keep the speed of Viking legs?"

Her chin went up and her steps quickened. She would not tell this hateful boy that she could not bear to see the ruins of her family home on the other side of the wood and, when they passed it, she glanced only once and not again.

The quiet fields above the lake, where her father's cattle had browsed only yesterday and where the children had wandered down to play around the water, were alive with men. The huge boats, their masts stepped and their striped sails furled, were drawn up on the narrow strip of shore and the morning life of the Vikings was beginning. Aboard the ships some were working. On the shore and in the fields many still slept beside their dead fires, wrapped in their big grey cloaks, the remnants of last night's feasting still strewn round them. Others sat in groups of three or four round fresh-lit fires, intent on their morning meal.

Numbers of them got up and crowded round the boy and girl as they came out of the wood and down the fields, some laughing, some threatening, all talking noisily. Ness hesitated and drew back nervously. The blue eyes derided her again, but without speaking the boy took her hand in his and led her down the crowded shore until they stood beneath the carved serpent-head which crowned the tall prow of the largest ship.

"What have you there, Beorn? Has one escaped us? Surely you do not come to ask what to do with her?"

The voice, speaking in Ness's tongue, came from above, and with hardly a glance upwards the boy answered. "You will see, my cousin, both what I have and what I mean to do. Is my father awake?" As he spoke, he scrambled up over the shallow side of the boat, turning to pull Ness after him but without much care, so that she stumbled over the rowers' benches and fell into a heap in the well of the boat.

There was a loud laugh and the same voice spoke again. "These Irish, they are not people of the sea. Throw her out and let her try again!"

Bruised and resentful, Ness glared upwards. The young man who straddled the high foredeck was tall and broad, handsome, and as fair as Beorn was dark. He laughed uproariously with a couple of men who had drawn close to him, jeering at the girl.

"Throw her back!" the fair young man shouted again to Beorn. "Throw her back and let her try again. That was no way to get into a boat!"

But Beorn dragged her from the well deck and up on to the foredeck, his face dark and angry. "She is mine," he said briefly. "I found her."

"She is yours?" answered the tall one. "Indeed? I would not mind an Irish slave myself, but your father forbade we take them on this raid. Especially I would like one whose hair has tangled with the setting sun. Maybe I will take her." He stretched out a hand and pulled sharply at Ness's hair.

Beorn jerked her aside, and she glanced from the boy to the fair young man. He still smiled at Beorn, but close to him his face was hard and cruel and there was no smile in his fierce light eyes. The boy's face was flushed with open hate and he hustled Ness on towards an awning under the curved prow, his flush deepening at the noisy laughter which followed them.

"I will teach him," he muttered. "When I am older, by the great Hammer of Thor, I will show him what it means to be the son of Anlaf!"

But Anlaf the Sea King, when they reached him, was hardly yet awake, and drowsily uninterested in his son's captive. "Indeed, my son?" He hunched the grey cloak higher around his long form. "You found her? Then you may keep her. What? Oh, pay no heed to your cousin's teasing. Now leave me. I feasted late and the night watch is not yet over. Go, boy, go, and let me sleep."

For all her sadness and her anger and resentment at being treated like a piece of merchandise, Ness by now was very hungry. When the boy told her to follow him for the morning meal she did so for the first time almost willingly. As they splashed into the shallow water she looked up again and saw the fair young Viking watching them in silence from above.

"I do not like that man," she said. "Who is he?"

The boy glanced sideways at her as if wondering whether he should speak. "He is Helge. I call him cousin, but he is not in truth my cousin, only the son of my father's foster brother, whom he loved. Helge's father was killed and Helge driven away, so my father kept him. He is a great fighter, a great Viking and second to my father in command of the fleet, keeping the night watch. He would rule the fleet should anything happen to my father. I am too young to command." His voice was short and resentful. He paused a moment and then burst out: "I do not like him either. I do not trust him. And I do not think my father trusts him; he watches him carefully."

"Why is he so fair, when all the other men are dark or brown?"

"He is no true Dane. He is from Scania, across the water in the country they call Sweden." Beorn remembered suddenly that he was Anlaf's son and she a captured slave. "I should not talk to you like this! You are my slave, my father said so. Now we shall eat and you shall wait on me."

Ness remembered, too, that she was a chieftain's daughter. "Wait on you I will not! I am used to having my mother's servants wait on me. In this country we do not have the meanness of slavery, for we are Christians, and blessed Patrick, who was himself a slave, taught us that no man should own another. And also my father says... said..." Her words

and her rage faltered together, and her mouth trembled as she looked piteously across at the ruined village, unable to go on.

The boy watched her a long moment in silence. "A Viking does not drive a woman," he said, then. "Come, we will eat together."

While they ate, the watches changed on the longships. She saw Beorn's father emerge from the canopy on the *Great Serpent*, stretching his great length up to the morning sky and shouting for his captains. Never had she seen a man so tall, thin but heavy-shouldered, and moving with the same speed and neatness that marked his son.

The meal over, Ness paused to finger the horn from which she had drunk. She marvelled at the carving on the silver bands which bound it. She had not thought to see barbarians own such a thing of beauty.

The boy got up and left her. "Do not try to run away while I am gone. I have you well watched and you would have no success," he said. "And think, what if Helge caught you!" The blue eyes widened in mockery, and with a laugh at her rising anger he was gone.

She sat on the familiar short turf, where the fields broke on to the lake shore, and tried to think what she might do. She paid no attention to the Vikings, mustering to the ships in their companies for the day's orders. Her back turned resolutely on her ruined home, she stared down the lake towards the sea. It looked as it had always looked on peaceful summer days; the woods crowding to the edge of the still blue water; the silver birches idling on the small scattered islands and the wildfowl plaintive in the clear air. She was helpless. Her only chance might come at night if she could escape again and reach a boat. Once on the mainland she might be able to find a way through the forests to the fort of her father's brother, who was a lesser King. A shiver of fear struck her; there were wolves in the forest, sometimes even bears. Defiantly her head went up. Far better wolves and bears than Vikings, she told herself, for she would *never* belong to any arrogant infuriating Danish boy.

As she brooded, her eyes on the water, she did not notice that the warriors had begun to gather all together on the lake shore. Their talk and laughter roused her in the end and she turned to watch them. They were excited, laughing, shouting and jostling each other round something on the ground. Curiosity made Ness move closer, peering as best she could, for she would not go too close.

For seconds she gazed speechless at what she saw on the ground in the middle of their circle. Then fury took her. She hurled herself screaming through the astonished Vikings, clawing them aside in her blind rage until she stood shaking above the things which they had heaped on the sandy shore.

"You shall not have them!" she screamed. "You shall not have them! They are ours! That was my father's and this my mother's! The chalice was the Abbot's pride... it is *priceless!* It is not yours! You are thieves, villains, robbers!"

Frantically she struck out at the nearest man, struggling to grab his huge sword from its scabbard. Large hands seized her, and there was laughter above her head and some shouts of anger.

A voice cried, in her tongue: "By the Father of Peoples, my uncle, your son has trapped a wildcat! Take her, Beorn, lest we forget that she is yours—our swords may slip!"

Blind with tears and rage, she allowed the boy to drag her out of the crowd, who at once forgot her, intent on their loot.

Still she beat her fists against Beorn. "It is *ours!* I saw my mother's chain of gold, her Cross, it was my father's precious gift to her! I saw——!"

His strong brown hands grasped her wrists. "Peace, girl, peace! By all the gods, have peace! It is all taken in the raid. It is ours now, each man a share according to his rank. My father is only angry that in their excitement they burned the grain store. This also we would take as is our custom. But on this raid, no slaves, but you."

Anger gave way suddenly in Ness to bitter grief. For the first time since she had seen the great striped sails across the lake she collapsed in desperate knowledge of her loss. She laid her head down upon her knees and sobbed with loneliness and misery. The pathetic heap of goods which the Vikings wrangled over seemed suddenly to stand for all that had been taken—father, mother, five brothers and sisters, her home and all her happy childhood.

"I saw my mother's Cross," she moaned over and over and over again, never noticing when the boy left her. She sobbed herself at length into an exhausted sleep, worn out with her grief and her long terrifying night.

It was afternoon when she woke, and the soft late sun was creeping westwards towards the sea. Beside her, the boy Beorn sat sharpening his long knife carefully on a stone. She shivered and sat up, aware that the scene before her had changed, but unable to think for a few moments what was different. Then she realized the shore was empty. The great longships were no longer beached. They stood off a little in the water, held by their banks of oars. Only the serpent boat of the Sea King still lay high up upon the shore. She could not help, even in that moment, but see them beautiful; long, narrow and graceful, tapering in perfection to their high sterns and to the carved heads which topped their bows.

She turned to the boy. "What are they doing?"

"They make ready to sail," Beorn answered.

"But where?"

The boy looked at her. "On the next raid. Where else? There is nothing to keep us here. We have eaten your father's cattle and salted his pigs. We go on to greater treasure now for there was not much here." He breathed lovingly along the gleaming blade of his knife.

Ness stared at him in horror. "And I?"

"You? You will come also. Do you not understand yet that you are mine? You should be proud to belong to Beorn the Sea King's son. I am proud to *be* Beorn."

"Well, I am *not* proud!" she shouted at him. "*Not* proud! And I will not come to see more of my people slaughtered. You are butchers and robbers and I will not come. I hate you and I will not come!"

Beorn hardly appeared to have heard. He went on sharpening his knife, gazing quietly and critically along the edge of the long blade, brilliant with the light of the setting sun.

"Not many will be slaughtered," he said at last, as though it did not much interest him.

"Only a few monks. And you will come."

"I will not! I will not!"

"You will come. And you may keep this." Without taking his eyes from his knife, he tossed something at her feet. It was her mother's chain and Cross.

Dumbly she picked it up and held it, running her fingers over the fine carved links, coming in the end to the Cross itself and its small crowned figure. As long as she could remember her mother, she had fingered it thus, warm about her neck. She looked up at the boy, at a loss for words, too grateful to be angry, and yet still too angry to be properly grateful.

She still had found no words, when, in answer to a signal from his father's ship, Beorn stood up and sheathed his knife. "You will come," he said.

She slipped the chain over her head and looked in baffled fury at his back. In silence, she followed him.

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