



## The Adventures of King Horn

### Overview



Horn was an old Danish hero who fought and conquered many enemies. The story of his adventures was told by so many bards, each of whom probably added a few exciting incidents, that by the time it came to be written down, it contained more adventures than the

real Horn could possibly have had.

As Horn was a Danish hero who lived in the early days of England, he could not have had any battles with Saracens, for no one knew anything of the Saracens until after the Crusades. The Crusades, in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries were wars in which knights of Christian countries tried to win Palestine, the Holy Land, back from the heathen Saracens. As these unsuccessful wars made a deep impression upon everyone, the word Saracen soon came to be used as a name for any particularly villainous enemy.

### The Tale of The Adventures of King Horn

In the country of Sudenne lived good King Murry and Queen Godhild. They had a son named Horn, a boy of fifteen years, so brave and strong and fair that his like could not be found in any kingdom. As companions and playmates, Horn always had with him twelve lads of about his own age, all sons of noblemen. There were two of these, Athulf and Fykenhild, whom he loved more than the others. Athulf was as true

and faithful a friend as ever lived, but Fykenhild was false.

One summer day King Murry happened to be riding by the seashore with two of his knights when he saw fifteen ships of Saracens coming to land. He called to them and asked them what they wished and why they were coming to his land. "We have come to capture your land," answered a bold Saracen. "You shall never leave this shore. We will slay you at once.

King Murry and his two companions gripped their swords and fought bravely. They killed scores of Saracens, but they were only three against hundreds, and, at last, were slain. Then the Saracens advanced and took all the land. Queen Godhild was in great sorrow and fear.

She escaped from the palace and fled to a cave in the rocks. Here she dwelt in misery, always mourning the death of her husband and praying for the safety of her son, Horn. Now Horn and his companions were in the hands of the Saracens and were waiting while the Saracens decided whether to kill them or let them live.

At last the Saracen leader came up to Horn and said, "Horn, you are bold and fair and strong. We fear to leave you and your companions alive, for when you have grown older and stronger, you may kill us to avenge your father's death. So we are going to put you to sea in an old, leaky ship. The ship will founder and sink, and you will drown. Then we shall not have to fear you any longer."

They took Horn and the other boys down to the sea and set them adrift. A strong current soon caught the ship and whirled it around and carried it along so fast that they were all afraid. The rotten old timbers of the ship began to creak and

twist. Horn tried to row, but could not make much headway. For a day and a night they were tossed about on the ocean. Then at dawn Horn aroused his comrades, calling, "Friends, I have good tidings. I can hear the birds sing and see the grass grow." They looked eagerly and saw before them a strange land. They brought their ship to shore and landed. Then they went inland over hill and dale until at last they came to a town. Here they found that they were in the land of Westnesse and soon met King Aylmer.

"Whence do you come, all so strong and bold?" the King greeted them. "I have never seen a fairer company come to Westnesse."

"We come from Sudenne," answered Horn. "The Saracens conquered our land. Then they put us to sea in a ship. We were adrift on the sea a day and a night before we came to your land. Now, you are a strong king and might well slay us, but I pray that it be your will to treat us kindly."

"What is your name?" the King asked.

"Horn, Sir," he replied.

"Horn," said the King, "as a horn sounds over hill and vale, so will your name be heard through all Westnesse."

Then King Aylmer brought Horn and his twelve companions into his castle among his knights and summoned his steward.<sup>1</sup> "Take my foundling, Horn, and his twelve companions," said he to the steward, "and teach them the lore of wood and river. Teach Horn how to carve meats and serve at table, and train his companions to do other services, but see to it especially that Horn can play the harp and knows all of the art of a minstrel."

So the steward taught Horn and his companions. Horn gladly learned all that was taught him both in court and in the field. Everyone loved him, for he was both fair and good; but the King's lovely daughter, Rymenhild, loved him most of all. She had never spoken to Horn, for she never saw him alone; and she did not dare to speak to him in the hall before all the knights. At last she commanded the steward to send Horn to her bower.<sup>2</sup> He went forth to the hall where Horn was serving and drew him aside.

"Horn," he said, "you are to go to the bower to speak with Rymenhild, the daughter of our

King." Horn went to the bower and knelt down before her. She was so fair a sight that the whole place seemed alight with her beauty.

"Rymenhild, fair Princess," said he, "the King's steward sent me to your bower to hear what might be your will."

Rymenhild went up to him and kissed him, saying, "Horn, for a long time I have loved you. I want you to promise to marry me."

"I fear that can never be," replied Horn. "I am a servant and your father's foundling, too. It would never do for a servant to marry the daughter of a king. Help me to be made a knight and then I can go forth and win honor enough to marry you."

"I promise you that you will be made a knight within two weeks," said Rymenhild. "Take this cup and these rings and give them to the steward and tell him that I bid him ask the King to knight you."

Horn took Rymenhild's presents to the steward and told him her message. At once the steward went to the King.

"Oh, King!" he said, "tomorrow is your birthday and a great feast. I beg a great favor of you. Pray, make Horn a knight."

"Nothing would please me better," said the King. "I like Horn and think that he will make a good knight. I know that he will fight for me bravely. Then after I have knighted him, he can knight his twelve companions himself."

The next morning early, Horn and his twelve companions came before the King. The King set Horn upon a roan steed, smote him lightly with his sword, and made him a knight. Then Horn alighted and made knights of all his companions. The rest of the day was spent in feasting and merrymaking in honor of the King's birthday.

As soon as the celebration was over, Horn said farewell to Rymenhild and set out to win glory. He sang merrily as his horse galloped along the shore, for he was very happy. Then, when he had gone scarcely a mile, he saw a ship filled with Saracens. He hailed the leader and asked him why he was landing.

"We have come to win the land and slay all the people," answered the Saracen boldly. Horn

gripped his sword and struck the head off the Saracen. The other Saracens all rushed and attacked Horn at once. He fought bravely and well. Before long he had killed over a hundred of them. Of all that had come, there were few left alive; and those fled back to the ship.

Then Horn put the head of the leader on the point of his sword. Bearing it on high, he rode back into the King's hall among all the knights.

"O King!" he cried, "today as I rode along the shore, I met a company of Saracens who had come to kill you and all your people. They attacked me. I fought with my sword and soon struck over a hundred of them to the ground. The others fled. I am bringing you the head of the leader as witness to my deeds. I am glad that I could fight for you and show you that I am worthy of my knighthood."

The next morning at daybreak, King Aylmer went hunting in the wildwood. The false Fykenhild rode by his side. Horn did not know that Fykenhild was false. He did not give him a thought, but went to Rymenhild's bower to tell her of his adventure. He found her sitting white as foam and weeping as though her heart would break.

"Love, why do you weep so?" he asked.

"Last night I dreamed that I went fishing," answered Rymenhild. "I cast my net and caught a beautiful silver fish. Before I could get it in my boat, it burst the net and escaped. I know that this dream means that you, whom I love, must soon go away from me."

Even at that very moment, Fykenhild, jealous of Horn, was saying, "King Aylmer, I warn you that Horn will not be true to you. He plans to take your daughter, Rymenhild, from you and make her his wife. Even now he is in her bower and he has been there many times before."

King Aylmer rode back to the palace in haste and found Horn with Rymenhild, just as Fykenhild had said.

"Horn, you faithless foundling," he cried in a rage, "go from this land at once. I give you a day to be gone. If tomorrow I find you anywhere in my kingdom, I will have you killed."

Horn hurried to the stable, saddled his horse, and laced on his coat of mail. Then he went to bid farewell to Rymenhild.

"Rymenhild," he said, "now your sad dream has come true, for I must leave you. Your father calls me false, because I, a foundling, seek to marry a king's daughter. But I am a king's son. My father was king in Sudenne before the Saracens conquered the country. I am going to win back my land. Then I shall be king of towers and towns and you shall be my queen."

Rymenhild was heartbroken, because Horn was driven away from her and was going to undertake such a hard and dangerous quest. When the time came to part, she gave him a gold ring engraved with her name and set with a glowing red stone.

"Take this ring," she said, "and wear it always in remembrance of me. The stone has magic power. No matter how many enemies attack you, if only you look on the stone and think of me you can not be harmed. If any harm comes to me while you are gone, the clear red of the stone will become dull and clouded. Now go forth: be brave, and may God bring you safely back to me."

Horn hastened away. With him went the faithful Athulf. When they reached the shore, they found a good ship to take them out of Westnesse. The wind began to blow and bore them away to a foreign land. They set foot on shore and soon along their way they met two princes, the sons of King Thurston of Ireland. The princes greeted them as friends and asked them why they had come to Ireland. Horn said that they had come from the West to seek their fortunes.

One of the princes rode near and took hold of Horn's bridle, saying, "You and your companion must come with us to the palace and meet our father, the King, for I have never seen so fair a knight as you."

So Horn and Athulf went to the King's palace with the two princes. King Thurston thought that Horn was the fairest man alive and gave him and his friend a hearty welcome. It was Christmas time and King Thurston was giving a great feast for all his knights. Horn and Athulf sat down at the banquet table and made merry with the rest.

Suddenly a giant in Saracen armor appeared in the doorway and shouted this rhymed challenge:

“Greetings to you, O King,  
And listen to my tiding.  
The Saracens are here at hand  
And wish to conquer your whole land.  
One of us wants to fight  
Against three of your knights.  
If your three our one slay,  
We will go from here away.  
If our one kills your three,  
All this land ours will be.  
Tomorrow will be the fight  
At the first dawn of light.”

He disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

“Sir King,” spoke Horn, “it is not right that three of us should fight against one Saracen, for we are as brave and bold as they. Let me go alone and I will easily put them all to death with my sword.”

The next morning Horn arose early and firmly buckled on his armor. Then he went before the King and said, “O King, pray come to the field and watch the fight.”

King Thurston and Horn and all the knights rode forth. In a level green in the midst of the forest they found a Saracen giant and his companions waiting for them. This giant was even larger and uglier than the one who had brought the challenge to the castle. Then the fight began, and Horn and the giant exchanged hard and bitter blows. For a long while, neither one gained any advantage.

“Knight, please rest a while,” gasped the giant at last. “I am tired nearly to death. I have never received such hard blows from the hand of any man except the sturdy King Murry, whom I slew in Sudenne.”

Then Horn knew that he was fighting with the one who had killed his father. His blood boiled with anger. He looked upon his magic ring and thought of Rymenhild. He smote the giant again and this blow went through the giant’s heart. Then he and the knights attacked all the Saracens.

At first, the Saracens fought fiercely and killed the King’s two sons, but soon they were fleeing for their ships. Few of them ever reached the

shore, for Horn pursued them and killed many of them.

When the battle was over, King Thurston summoned Horn and said to him, “If it had not been for you, we should all have been slain. You are good and brave and fair. Now my own two sons are dead and I have left only one child, my fair daughter Ermenhild. I shall marry her to you and make you heir to my kingdom.”

“You do me great honor,” replied Horn, “but I fear that you can not have your will, for I have a sweetheart in the land from which I come. Let my friend Athulf wed the fair Ermenhild and be your heir, for he is as good and true a knight as ever lived. But first we must go to Sudenne. My father was king there before the Saracens conquered the land. I wish to win it back again.”

King Thurston was disappointed, but he wished Horn good fortune in his quest and lent him a ship and a brave company of Irish knights. Horn and Athulf and the knights set sail. The wind drove the ship along quickly and, on the fifth day, they came in sight of Sudenne. At midnight Horn and Athulf landed and went inland, leaving the knights behind on the shore. As they went along through forest and field, they suddenly came upon a lone knight lying asleep under his shield. Upon the shield was a cross.

Horn went up to him and said, “Sir Knight, awake and tell me whether you are friend or foe. I think by the cross on your shield that you are no Saracen, but you must prove it or I will slay you with my sword.”

“Indeed I am no Saracen,” answered the knight, “but long ago the Saracens conquered this land and killed King Murry and many others. They took Horn, the King’s son, and put him to sea in an old ship. With Horn went twelve other boys, and one of them was Athulf the Good, my own son. If Horn is well, then Athulf is safe and sound, for they were good friends and were always together. If Horn is alive now, he must be a strong man and I wonder much that he does not come to win back his land. I should die happy if only I might see Athulf and Horn again.”

“Then be happy, Sir Knight,” said Horn, “for Athulf and Horn stand here before you. Then the knight put his arms around them and greeted them joyfully. He told Horn that his mother, Queen Godhild, was still living in her lonely

cave. This news made Horn very happy and more determined than ever to conquer the Saracens.

He blew a loud blast on his horn and summoned his Irish knights from the shore. Soon his people heard that he had returned, and they came flocking to him from far and near. They all attacked the Saracens, and they fought all night and all day. Many times did Horn's magic ring save his life in this great battle. At last they killed all the Saracens and won back the land.

Horn had bells rung all over the land. He brought his mother back from her cave to the castle. Then he put on the kingly crown and made a great feast. In the midst of the feast he happened to glance down at his ring. The stone was as dull and drab as any beach pebble. He knew that some harm must have come to Rymenhild.

At once he ran down to the shore and set forth in his ship with Athulf and his knights. The next morning at sunrise they came in sight of Westnesse. Horn and Athulf rubbed their eyes in astonishment. There in the middle of a plain stood a new castle with strong, thick walls of lime and stone. Around it was a moat filled with water. This moat was so wide and deep that, when the drawbridge was lifted, nothing could reach the castle but a bird in its flight.

Soon they landed and started inland toward the strange new castle. On their way they met a band of minstrels coming from the castle. Horn hailed them. "From whose castle do you come?" said he. "I have long been away from this land and the castle is new to me.

"Sir Fykenhild built the castle," answered the minstrels, "and made it the strongest in the land. Then he carried away the King's daughter, Rymenhild. King Aylmer can do nothing, for Fykenhild is so powerful that even the King dares not oppose him. Fykenhild and the Princess are to be married at noon today and even now the feasting has begun. We ourselves come from the strange bridal where the bride does nothing but weep all day long. We could not stay and make merry in the midst of such sorrow.

"I would see that strange bridal myself," said Horn, "but I suppose that no armed knight can get within the castle wall. Come, let us change garments. We will take your long cloaks and

your harps and fiddles, and you may have our velvet robes and this besides."

He pressed a fat purse of gold into the hand of the leader of the band. The exchange was quickly made. Horn and Athulf and a chosen few of the knights put the minstrels' long cloaks over their swords and coats of mail. Then they went up the gravel road to the castle, playing sweet music and singing merrily so that Fykenhild would hear them. He heard and asked what it was.

"Another band of minstrels," replied a knight who stood by the window.

"Let them in to make music for us," said Fykenhild.

Soon the drawbridge was lowered, and Horn and his band entered the hall. There at the end of the long banquet table by Fykenhild's side sat Rymenhild, weeping as though her heart would break. And along the whole length of that table there was not one smiling face.

"Play us a merry lay and make us some cheer," ordered Fykenhild.

Then Horn dropped his harp, cast off his cloak, and seized his sword. He looked at his magic ring and smote Fykenhild through the heart.

The others cast off their cloaks and began to fight. They conquered the castle at noon just as the chapel bell was ringing for the wedding.

Then Rymenhild was married to Horn instead of to Fykenhild. At once they went down to the shore and set sail again. At Ireland they left Athulf to marry Ermenhild and become the heir to the kingdom. Horn and Rymenhild went on to Sudenne, where they ruled happily all their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> The steward was an important person in court. He had charge of all affairs of the household and, in the absence of his lord, often had charge of affairs of state.

<sup>2</sup> A lady's private apartment in a castle was called a bower.