

The Prior of Tynemouth

By H. Pease

Prior Olaf stood on the central merlon of the gate tower that protected the little cell of Tynemouth from assault on the landward side, and gazed intently over the sea below him to the eastward haze wherein he feared to descry the red-brown sails of the serpent ships.

He was himself by birth a Dane: had even in his ardent youth been a follower of the Raven sign and the banner of the Landwaster, but having been wounded and left behind in a raid into England had been nursed by monks, and eventually had taken the robe and cowl.

The wind had been continuously for a week in the eastern airt, and a raid from his heathen fellow-countrymen seemed inevitable, since Providence appeared to be tempting them with opportunity.

The good Prior could discern nothing alarming, yet he had a foreboding that even now the heathen were approaching on the favouring wind, and would thunder on the gate that very day.

Descending, he proceeded slowly to the chapel built by Oswald—saint and king—in honour of the mother of our Lord, and there before the shrine of Saint Oswyn prostrated himself in prayer. Long and earnestly he prayed, for it seemed to the Prior that the test of his acceptance was to be found in the continued absence of the Danes. The sin that he had committed in his youth had, he trusted, been washed away by his fastings and mortifications. In that event surely his prayers to the Virgin, Saint Cuthbert, and Saint Oswyn, would prevail, and the Danes would come not with fire and sword against his beloved cell.

The Prior's heart glowed in hope renewed.

'*Sursum corda,*' he murmured, then recommenced his litany.

'*De Saevitia Teutonorum qui veniunt in pandis myoparonibus, libera nos, Domine!*'

Scarce had he finished, when a startled brother approached rapidly a-tiptoe and touched the Prior gently on the shoulder.

'They come, Holy Prior! They come! the cruel heathen can be seen swiftly approaching in their long ships.'

Prior Olaf turned ashen pale. He could not prevent a groan escaping him, for now he knew that his penances had not yet proved effectual.

'*Mea culpa, mea culpa,*' he murmured wearily, then as he rose up with pale cheek a gleam of fire lit in his eye, for he would die rather than permit Saint Oswyn's shrine to be pillaged by the heathen. He called for the sub-Prior and entrusted the defence to him.

The cell was splendidly situated, being protected on the three sides—east, north, and west—by moat, steep cliffs, and the immediate sea.

To the south or land side a strong wall with gate tower, furnished with parapet and bretices for casting down of stones and melted lead, stood sentinel and protector.

The sub-Prior—the light of battle in his eye—gave orders to his affrighted flock, and bade the *Conversi* (lay brethren) heat the lead and carry up big stones to the bretices, where he himself took command. Thereupon he looked down upon the serpent ships sailing into the mouth of the Tyne, and on the sands below discharging their freight of long-haired men with bucklers, swords, and torches in their hands.

In a plump they swarmed up the cliffs and advanced—led by a young chief known to his followers as Eric the Red—to the monastery gate.

There Eric demanded instant admittance for his men, the surrender of all treasure, sacred and profane, as well as of food and stores.

This the sub-Prior proudly refusing in honour of the Virgin, Saint Cuthbert, and Saint Oswyn, a flight of arrows hissed over the parapet, torches were lit and flung against the gate; the fight became general.

The sub-Prior had prepared a quantity of heavy stones upon the bretices which he designed to use in the last resort, and now when the gate was beginning to burn he bade his men be ready with their levers.

'Down with the gate!' cried Red Eric triumphantly. 'Down with it! See, it burns!' and as he shouted he led his followers on with a rush. Like a swarm of bees they clustered about their leader, and clambered up on each other's shoulders. Fire was afoot below; battle-axes crashed above.

'Now!' cried the sub-Prior, as he thrust his lever home, and each man upon the bretices echoed 'Now,' and thrust the lever home at the word.

The stones crashed down; the heaviest of all caught Eric himself and drove him to the ground, where he lay unconscious, his ribs driven deep into his lungs.

'Open the gate and drag their leader in!' cried the sub-Prior triumphantly from above to his servants below.

Obeying, they rushed forth upon the astounded Danes, seized the dying chief, and bore him swiftly within the gate tower.

The attackers, disconcerted by this sudden sortie, and disheartened by the loss of their chief, withdrew from the wall, and shortly desisted from their assault, for the English saints, they muttered to themselves, were this day evidently fighting on behalf of their priests; 'twere wiser to meddle no further with them this day.

Dispersing, therefore, they ravaged the hamlet of Shields and forayed the country for cattle, then before the sun's setting embarked upon their long ships, and sailed southward along the coast.

Meantime the sub-Prior in the moment of his triumph had looked exultingly upon his enemy, then more compassionately as became a Christian monk, and drew near as if to ease his suffering.

But the young Dane was already dead.

As he bent over the corpse the Prior himself approached, for he trusted to learn that in answer to his renewed prayers the Danes had been driven off.

'We ha' prevailed,' cried the sub-Prior triumphantly; 'see, their leader, whom they called "Eric the Red," will trouble us no more. *Laus Deo et omnibus Sanctis!*'

'Eric!' echoed the Prior, as he stooped towards the young Dane lying dead below him. 'Eric!' Then as he gazed he reeled backward, and only escaped falling by reaching forth his hand to the wall.

Leaning back in the shadow of the gate-house he pressed his hand to his heart and shrouded his face from oversight within his cowl.

Then slowly recovering self-possession he gave orders that the young man should be buried without the cemetery garth, and walked with unsteady footstep towards the chapel.

'Our saintly Prior,' said Brother Boniface, with awe, as he watched his Superior's tall, bowed figure enter within the chapel, 'even in his moment of triumph thinks of Heaven. He has gone to render thanks for the death of this savage, red-haired Dane.'

Songs of thanksgiving were uplifted that night at Compline in the choir. 'Te Deum' was especially chanted with inspired ardour in honour of victory.

'Look!' whispered the simple-hearted, tawny-faced, tousled-haired Brother Boniface to his neighbour, a sharp-eyed Anglian Brother, the artist and illuminator of the little community, 'Look upon the ascetic, saintly face of our beloved Prior! what joy must be his in that his prayers prevailed this day!

'Thou jolter-head!' muttered the Anglian to himself; then with a jog to Boniface's ribs, 'Didst not mark the exact resemblance'—here he delineated a contour with swift movement of finger—'twixt Red Eric and our Prior?' Then to himself again he muttered, 'I doubt he is not long for this world, since I met his wraith as I entered into the choir.'

But Boniface heeded not his words: his eyes were still fixed upon his beloved Prior, who moved not, though the rest of the monks having sung the '*Deo Patri sit gloria*' were leaving the choir.

Boniface moved a-tiptoe and touched his Superior reverently on the shoulder. 'Beloved Prior,' he said, 'thou art outworn with the care of thy community. Arise and seek repose.'

He touched the Prior's hand, then started back, for it was quite cold; the Prior had already sought and gained eternal repose.