

# Egil's Saga

## *The Gathering of the Host*

Olaf king of Scots, drew together a mighty host, and marched upon England. When he came to Northumberland, he advanced with shield of war. On learning this, the earls who ruled there mustered their force and went against the king. And when they met there was a great battle, whereof the issue was that king Olaf won the victory, but earl Gudrek fell, and Alfgeir fled away, as did the greater part of the force that had followed them and escaped from the field. And now king Olaf found no further resistance, but subdued all Northumberland.

Alfgeir went to king Athelstan, and told him of his defeat. But as soon as king Athelstan heard that so mighty a host was come into his land, he despatched men and summoned forces, sending word to his earls and other nobles. And with such force as he had he at once turned him and marched against the Scots. But when it was bruited about that Olaf king of Scots had won a victory and subdued under him a large part of England, he soon had a much larger army than Athelstan, for many nobles joined him. And on learning this, Hring and Adils, who had gathered much people, turned to swell king Olaf's army. Thus their numbers became exceeding great.

All this when Athelstan learned, he summoned to conference his captains and his counsellors; he inquired of them what were best to do; he told the whole council point by point what he had ascertained about the doings of the Scots' king and his numbers. All present were agreed on this, that Alfgeir was most to blame, and thought it were but his due to lose his earldom. But the plan resolved on was this, that king Athelstan should go back to the south of England, and then for himself hold a levy of troops, coming northwards through the whole land; for they saw that the only way for the needful numbers to be levied in time was for the king himself to gather the force.

As for the army already assembled, the king set over it as commanders Thorolf and Egil. They were also to lead that force which the freebooters had brought to the king. But Alfgeir still held command over his own troops. Further, the king appointed such captains of companies as he thought fit.

When Egil returned from the council to his fellows, they asked him what tidings he could tell them of the Scots' king. He sang:

'Olaf one earl by furious  
Onslaught in flight hath driven,  
The other slain: a sovereign  
Stubborn in fight is he.  
Upon the field fared Gudrek  
False path to his undoing.  
He holds, this foe of England,  
Northumbria's humbled soil.'

After this they sent messengers to king Olaf, giving out this as their errand, that king Athelstan would fain enhazel him a field and offer battle on Vin-heath by Vin-wood; meanwhile he would have them forbear to harry his land; but of the twain he should rule England who should conquer in the battle. He appointed a week hence for the conflict, and whichever first came on the ground should wait a week for the other. Now this was then the custom, that so soon as a king had enhazelled a field, it was a

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shameful act to harry before the battle was ended. Accordingly king Olaf halted and harried not, but waited till the appointed day, when he moved his army to Vin-heath.

North of the heath stood a town. There in the town king Olaf quartered him, and there he had the greatest part of his force, because there was a wide district around which seemed to him convenient for the bringing in of such provisions as the army needed. But he sent men of his own up to the heath where the battlefield was appointed; these were to take camping-ground, and make all ready before the army came. But when the men came to the place where the field was enhazelled, there were all the hazel-poles set up to mark the ground where the battle should be.

The place ought to be chosen level, and whereon a large host might be set in array. And such was this; for in the place where the battle was to be the heath was level, with a river flowing on one side, on the other a large wood. But where the distance between the wood and the river was least (though this was a good long stretch), there king Athelstan's men had pitched, and their tents quite filled the space between wood and river. They had so pitched that in every third tent there were no men at all, and in one of every three but few. Yet when king Olaf's men came to them, they had then numbers swarming before all the tents, and the others could not get to go inside. Athelstan's men said that their tents were all full, so full that their people had not nearly enough room. But the front line of tents stood so high that it could not be seen over them whether they stood many or few in depth. Olaf's men imagined a vast host must be there. King Olaf's men pitched north of the hazel-poles, toward which side the ground sloped a little.

From day to day Athelstan's men said that the king would come, or was come, to the town that lay south of the heath. Meanwhile forces flocked to them both day and night.

But when the appointed time had expired, then Athelstan's men sent envoys to king Olaf with these words: 'King Athelstan is ready for battle, and had a mighty host. But he sends to king Olaf these words, that he would fain they should not cause so much bloodshed as now looks likely; he begs Olaf rather to go home to Scotland, and Athelstan will give him as a friendly gift one shilling of silver from every plough through all his realm, and he wishes that they should become friends.'

When the messengers came to Olaf he was just beginning to make ready his army, and purposing to attack. But on the messengers declaring their errand, he forebore to advance for that day. Then he and his captains sate in council. Wherein opinions were much divided. Some strongly desired that these terms should be taken; they said that this journey had already won them great honour, if they should go home after receiving so much money from Athelstan. But some were against it, saying that Athelstan would offer much more the second time, were this refused. And this latter counsel prevailed. Then the messengers begged king Olaf to give them time to go back to king Athelstan, and try if he would pay yet more money to ensure peace. They asked a truce of one day for their journey home, another for deliberation, a third to return to Olaf. The king granted them this.

The messengers went home, and came back on the third day according to promise; they now said to king Olaf that Athelstan would give all that he offered before, and over and above, for distribution among king Olaf's soldiers, a shilling to every freeborn man, a silver mark to every officer of a company of twelve men or more, a gold mark to every captain of the king's guard, and five gold marks to every earl.

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Then the king laid this offer before his forces. It was again as before; some opposed this, some desired it. In the end the king gave a decision: he said he would accept these terms, if this too were added, that king Athelstan let him have all Northumberland with the tributes and dues thereto belonging. Again the messengers ask armistice of three days, with this further, that king Olaf should send his men to hear Athelstan's answer, whether he would take these terms or no; they say that to their thinking Athelstan will hardly refuse anything to ensure peace. King Olaf agreed to this and sent his men to king Athelstan.

Then the messengers ride all together, and find king Athelstan in the town that was close to the heath on the south. King Olaf's messengers declare before Athelstan their errand and the proposals for peace. King Athelstan's men told also with what offers they had gone to king Olaf, adding that this had been the counsel of wise men, thus to delay the battle so long as the king had not come.

But king Athelstan made a quick decision on this matter, and thus bespake the messengers: 'Bear ye these my words to king Olaf, that I will give him leave for this, to go home to Scotland with his forces; only let him restore all the property that he has wrongfully taken here in the land. Then make we peace between our lands, neither harring the other. Further be it provided that king Olaf shall become my vassal, and hold Scotland for me, and be my under-king. Go now back,' said he, 'and tell him this.'

At once that same evening the messengers turned back on their way, and came to king Olaf about midnight; they then waked up the king, and told him straightway the words of king Athelstan. The king instantly summoned his earls and other captains; he then caused the messengers to come and declare the issue of their errand and the words of Athelstan. But when this was made known before the soldiers, all with one mouth said that this was now before them, to prepare for battle. The messengers said this too, that Athelstan had a numerous force, but he had come into the town on that same day when the messengers came there.

Then spoke earl Adils, 'Now, methinks, that has come to pass, O king, which I said, that ye would find tricksters in the English. We have sat here long time and waited while they have gathered to them all their forces, whereas their king can have been nowhere near when we came here. They will have been assembling a multitude while we were sitting still. Now this is my counsel, O king, that we two brothers ride at once forward this very night with our troop. It may be they will have no fear for themselves, now they know that their king is near with a large army. So we shall make a dash upon them. But if they turn and fly, they will lose some of their men, and be less bold afterwards for conflict with us.'

The king thought this good counsel. 'We will here make ready our army,' said he, 'as soon as it is light, and move to support you.'

This plan they fixed upon, and so ended the council.

## *Of the Fight*

Earl Hring and Adils his brother made ready their army, and at once in the night moved southwards for the heath. But when day dawned, Thorolf's sentries saw the army approaching. Then was a war-blast blown, and men donned their arms selects spirited and that they began to draw up the force, and they had two divisions. Earl

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Alfgeir commanded one division, and the standard was borne before him. In that division were his own followers, and also what force had been gathered from the countryside. It was a much larger force than that which followed Thorolf and Egil.

Thorolf was thus armed. He had a shield ample and stout, a right strong helmet on his head; he was girded with the sword that he called Long, a weapon large and good. In his hand he had a halberd, whereof the feather-formed blade was two ells long, ending in a four-edged spike; the blade was broad above, the socket both long and thick. The shaft stood just high enough for the hand to grasp the socket, and was remarkably thick. The socket fitted with iron prong on the shaft, which was also wound round with iron. Such weapons were called mail-piercers.

Egil was armed in the same way as Thorolf. He was girded with the sword that he called Adder; this he had gotten in Courland; it was a right good weapon. Neither of the two had shirt of mail.

They set up their standard, which was borne by Thofid the Strong. All their men had Norwegian shields and Norwegian armour in every point; and in their division were all the Norsemen who were present. Thorolf's force was drawn up near the wood, Alfgeir's moved along the river.

Earl Adils and his brother saw that they would not come upon Thorolf unawares, so they began to draw up their force. They also made two divisions, and had two standards. Adils was opposed to earl Alfgeir, Hring to the freebooters. The battle now began; both charged with spirit. Earl Adils pressed on hard and fast till Alfgeir gave ground; then Adils' men pressed on twice as boldly. Nor was it long before Alfgeir fled. And this is to be told of him, that he rode away south over the heath, and a company of men with him. He rode till he came near the town, where sat the king.

Then spake the earl: 'I deem it not safe for us to enter the town. We got sharp words of late when we came to the king after defeat by king Olaf; and he will not think our case bettered by this coming. No need to expect honour where he is.'

Then he rode to the south country, and of his travel 'tis to be told that he rode night and day till he and his came westwards to Earls-ness. Then the earl got a ship to take him southwards over the sea; and he came to France, where half of his kin were. He never after returned to England.

Adils at first pursued the flying foe, but not far; then he turned back to where the battle was, and made an onset there. This when Thorolf saw, he said that Egil should turn and encounter him, and bade the standard be borne that way; his men he bade hold well together and stand close.

'Move we to the wood,' said he, 'and let it cover our back, so that they may not come at us from all sides.'

They did so; they followed along the wood. Fierce was the battle there. Egil charged against Adils, and they had a hard fight of it. The odds of numbers were great, yet more of Adils' men fell than of Egil's.

Then Thorolf became so furious that he cast his shield on his back, and, grasping his halberd with both hands, bounded forward dealing cut and thrust on either side. Men sprang away from him both ways, but he slew many. Thus he cleared the way forward to earl Hring's standard, and then nothing could stop him. He slew the man who bore the earl's standard, and cut down the standard-pole. After that he lunged with his halberd at the earl's breast, driving it right through mail-coat and body, so

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that it came out at the shoulders; and he lifted him up on the halberd over his head, and planted the butt-end in the ground. There on the weapon the earl breathed out his life in sight of all, both friends and foes. Then Thorolf drew his sword and dealt blows on either side, his men also charging. Many Britons and Scots fell, but some turned and fled.

But earl Adils seeing his brother's fall, and the slaughter of many of his force, and the flight of some, while himself was in hard stress, turned to fly, and ran to the wood. Into the wood fled he and his company; and then all the force that had followed the earl took to flight. Thorolf and Egil pursued the flying foe. Great was then the slaughter; the fugitives were scattered far and wide over the heath. Earl Adils had lowered his standard; so none could know his company from others.

And soon the darkness of night began to close in. Thorolf and Egil returned to their camp; and just then king Athelstan came up with the main army, and they pitched their tents and made their arrangements. A little after came king Olaf with his army; they, too, encamped and made their arrangements where their men had before placed their tents. Then it was told king Olaf that both his earls Hring and Adils were fallen, and a multitude of his men likewise.

## *The fall of Thorolf*

King Athelstan had passed the night before in the town whereof mention was made above, and there he heard rumour that there had been fighting on the heath. At once he and all the host made ready and marched northwards to the heath. There they learnt all the tidings clearly, how that battle had gone. Then the brothers Thorolf and Egil came to meet the king. He thanked them much for their brave advance, and the victory they had won; he promised them his hearty friendship. They all remained together for the night.

No sooner did day dawn than Athelstan waked up his army. He held conference with his captains, and told them how his forces should be arranged. His own division he first arranged, and in the van thereof he set those companies that were the smartest.

Then he said that Egil should command these: 'But Thorolf,' said he, 'shall be with his own men and such others as I add thereto. This force shall be opposed to that part of the enemy which is loose and not in set array, for the Scots are ever loose in array; they run to and fro, and dash forward here and there. Often they prove dangerous if men be not wary, but they are unsteady in the field if boldly faced.'

Egil answered the king: 'I will not that I and Thorolf be parted in the battle; rather to me it seems well that we two be placed there where is like to be most need and hardest fighting.'

Thorolf said, 'Leave we the king to rule where he will place us, serve we him as he likes best. I will, if you wish it, change places with you.'

Egil said, 'Brother, you will have your way; but this separation I shall often rue.'

After this they formed in the divisions as the king had arranged, and the standards were raised. The king's division stood on the plain towards the river; Thorolf's division moved on the higher ground beside the wood. King Olaf drew up his forces when he saw king Athelstan had done so. He also made two divisions; and his own standard, and the division that himself commanded, he opposed to king Athelstan and his division. Either had a large army, there was no difference on the score of

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numbers. But king Olaf's second division moved near the wood against the force under Thorolf. The commanders thereof were Scotch earls, the men mostly Scots; and it was a great multitude.

And now the armies closed, and soon the battle waxed fierce. Thorolf pressed eagerly forward, causing his standard to be borne onwards along the woodside; he thought to go so far forward as to turn upon the Scotch king's division behind their shields. His own men held their shields before them; they trusted to the wood which was on their right to cover that side. So far in advance went Thorolf that few of his men were before him. But just when he was least on his guard, out leapt from the wood earl Adils and his followers. They thrust at Thorolf at once with many halberds, and there by the wood he fell. But Thorfid, who bore the standard, drew back to where the men stood thicker. Adils now attacked them, and a fierce contest was there. The Scots shouted a shout of victory, as having slain the enemy's chieftain.

This shout when Egil heard, and saw Thorolf's standard going back, he felt sure that Thorolf himself would not be with it. So he bounded thither over the space between the two divisions. Full soon learnt he the tidings of what was done, when he came to his men. Then did he keenly spur them on to the charge, himself foremost in the van. He had in his hand his sword Adder. Forward Egil pressed, and hewed on either hand of him, felling many men. Thorfid bore the standard close after him, behind the standard followed the rest. Right sharp was the conflict there. Egil went forward till he met earl Adils. Few blows did they exchange ere earl Adils fell, and many men around him. But after the earl's death his followers fled. Egil and his force pursued, and slew all whom they overtook; no need there to beg quarter. Nor stood those Scotch earls long, when they saw the others their fellows fly; but at once they took to their heels.

Whereupon Egil and his men made for where king Olaf's division was, and coming on them behind their shields soon wrought great havoc. The division wavered, and broke up. Many of king Olaf's men then fled, and the Norsemen shouted a shout of victory.

But when king Athelstan perceived king Olaf's division beginning to break, he then spurred on his force, and bade his standard advance. A fierce onset was made, so that king Olaf's force recoiled, and there was a great slaughter. King Olaf fell there, and the greater part of the force which he had had, for of those who turned to fly all who were overtaken were slain. Thus king Athelstan gained a signal victory.

## *Egil buries Thorolf*

While his men still pursued the fugitives, king Athelstan left the battle-field, and rode back to the town, nor stayed he for the night before he came thither. But Egil pursued the flying foe, and followed them far, slaying every man whom he overtook. At length, sated with pursuit, he with his followers turned back, and came where the battle had been, and found there the dead body of his brother Thorolf. He took it up, washed it, and performed such other offices as were the wont of the time. They dug a grave there, and laid Thorolf therein with all his weapons and raiment. Then Egil clasped a gold bracelet on either wrist before he parted from him; this done they heaped on stones and cast in mould. Then Egil sang a stave:

'Dauntless the doughty champion  
Dashed on, the earl's bold slayer:

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In stormy stress of battle  
Stout-hearted Thorolf fell.  
Green grows on soil of Vin-heath  
Grass o'er my noble brother:  
But we our woe—a sorrow  
Worse than death-pang—must bear.'

And again he further sang:

'With warriors slain round standard  
The western field I burdened;  
Adils with my blue Adder  
Assailed mid snow of war.  
Olaf, young prince, encountered  
England in battle thunder:  
Hring stood not stour of weapons,  
Starved not the ravens' maw.'

Then went Egil and those about him to seek king Athelstan, and at once went before the king, where he sat at the drinking. There was much noise of merriment. And when the king saw that Egil was come in, he bade the lower bench be cleared for them, and that Egil should sit in the high-seat facing the king. Egil sat down there, and cast his shield before his feet. He had his helm on his head, and laid his sword across his knees; and now and again he half drew it, then clashed it back into the sheath. He sat upright, but with head bent forward.

Egil was large-featured, broad of forehead, with large eyebrows, a nose not long but very thick, lips wide and long, chin exceeding broad, as was all about the jaws; thick-necked was he, and big-shouldered beyond other men, hard-featured, and grim when angry. He was well-made, more than commonly tall, had hair wolf-gray and thick, but became early bald. He was black-eyed and brown-skinned,

But as he sat (as was before written), he drew one eye-brow down towards the cheek, the other up to the roots of the hair. He would not drink now, though the horn was borne to him, but alternately twitched his brows up and down. King Athelstan sat in the upper high-seat. He too laid his sword across his knees. When they had sat there for a time, then the king drew his sword from the sheath, and took from his arm a gold ring large and good, and placing it upon the sword-point he stood up, and went across the floor, and reached it over the fire to Egil. Egil stood up and drew his sword, and went across the floor. He stuck the sword-point within the round of the ring, and drew it to him; then he went back to his place. The king sate him again in his high-seat. But when Egil was set down, he drew the ring on his arm, and then his brows went back to their place. He now laid down sword and helm, took the horn that they bare to him, and drank it off. Then sang he:

'Mailed monarch, god of battle,  
Maketh the tinkling circlet  
Hang, his own arm forsaking,  
On hawk-trod wrist of mine.  
I bear on arm brand-wielding  
Bracelet of red gold gladly.  
War-falcon's feeder meetly  
Findeth such meed of praise.'

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Thereafter Egil drank his share, and talked with others. Presently the king caused to be borne in two chests; two men bare each. Both were full of silver.

The king said: 'These chests, Egil, thou shalt have, and, if thou comest to Iceland, shalt carry this money to thy father; as payment for a son I send it to him: but some of the money thou shalt divide among such kinsmen of thyself and Thorolf as thou thinkest most honourable. But thou shalt take here payment for a brother with me, land or chattels, which thou wilt. And if thou wilt abide with me long, then will I give thee honour and dignity such as thyself mayst name.'

Egil took the money, and thanked the king for his gifts and friendly words. Thenceforward Egil began to be cheerful; and then he sang:

'In sorrow sadly drooping  
Sank my brows close-knitted;  
Then found I one who furrows  
Of forehead could smooth.  
Fierce-frowning cliffs that shaded  
My face a king hath lifted  
With gleam of golden armlet:  
Gloom leaveth my eyes.'

Then those men were healed whose wounds left hop of life. Egil abode with king Athelstan for the next winter after Thorolf's death, and had very great honour from the king. With Egil was then all that force which had followed the two brothers, and come alive out of the battle. Egil now made a poem about king Athelstan, and in it is this stave:



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'Land-shielder, battle-quickener,  
Low now this scion royal  
Earls three hath laid. To Ella  
Earth must obedient bow.  
Lavish of gold, kin-glorious,  
Great Athelstan victorious,  
Surely, I swear, all humbled  
To such high monarch yields.'

But this is the burden in the poem:

'Reindeer-trod hills obey  
Bold Athelstan's high sway.'

Then gave Athelstan further to Egil as poet's meed two gold rings, each weighing a mark, and therewith a costly cloak that the king himself had formerly worn.

But when spring came Egil signified to the king this, that he purposed to go away in the summer to Norway, and to learn 'how matters stand with Asgerdr, my late brother Thorolf's wife. A large property is there in all; but I know not whether there be children of theirs living. I am bound to look after them, if they live; but I am heir to all, if Thorolf died childless.'

The king answered, 'This will be, Egil, for you to arrange, to go away hence, if you think you have an errand of duty; but I think 'twere the best way that you should settle down here with me on such terms as you like to ask.'

Egil thanked the king for his words.

'I will,' he said, 'now first go, as I am in duty bound to do; but it is likely that I shall return hither to see after this promise so soon as I can.'

The king bade him do so.

Whereupon Egil made him ready to depart with his men; but of these many remained behind with the king. Egil had one large war-ship, and on board thereof a hundred men or thereabouts. And when he was ready for his voyage, and a fair wind blew, he put out to sea. He and king Athelstan parted with great friendship: the king begged Egil to return as soon as possible. This Egil promised to do.

Then Egil stood for Norway, and when he came to land sailed with all speed into the Firths. He heard these tidings, that lord Thorir was dead, and Arinbjorn had taken inheritance after him, and was made a baron. Egil went to Arinbjorn and got there a good welcome. Arinbjorn asked him to stay there. Egil accepted this, had his ship set up, and his crew lodged. But Arinbjorn received Egil and twelve men; they stayed with him through the winter.