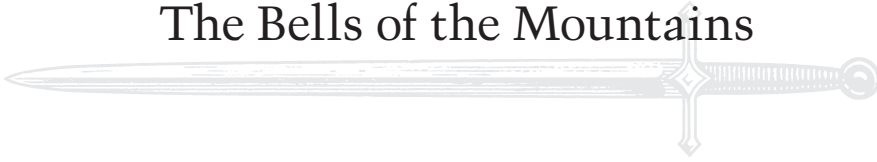


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The Bells of the Mountains



Rorik the Yngling tried to catch up with the bell. It was the only thing he could hear moving around him, but he couldn't find it.

He had taken the wrong path; he was lost, and unless he worked his legs fast he was going to be late for the battle.

It would never do if Rorik the Yngling missed the battle, for then he would have no gold—neither pay nor plunder, or the chance of finding a girl somewhere about afterward.

Shouldering his long two-handed sword, he hurried his lanky legs after the clank-clong of the elusive bell. Being a Dane, Rorik was not accustomed to mountains. Up through the pines a black shoulder of rock showed, and far above that a white summit of snow, but no sign of a road or the camp he was looking for.

The Good Lord, thought Rorik the Yngling, had made the farming land down in the valleys, and up here the devil must have piled everything evil. Up here in these Swiss mountains. No, Rorik wouldn't be surprised if he found a forest troll ringing that bell to fool him.

Running up the path he found a cow standing there alone, with a heavy brass clapper bell hanging on its neck. The bell grated when the cow looked at him, but it didn't clatter as before. Someone had been driving the cow—someone who couldn't be seen. Rorik listened and dropped suddenly to a knee.

A rock swished over his head, and he jumped into the laurel bushes by the path, sliding the sheath from the five-foot blade of his sword.

"Pfut!" he said. He reached out and caught the arm of a girl who was trying to slip out of the bushes. She tried to bite his wrist. He felt beads around her bare throat.

"Kitten," said Rorik, "you can keep the cow. I am too much in haste to drive it off, now. Where is the camp?"

She shook her head, listening.

"The soldiers, the army, the *verlorene Haufen*—where are they, girl?"

Getting no answer he pulled her up to him, rubbing his head against her hair, feeling the gasping of her throat, kissing her. She tried to twist away from him.

"Listen, flaxhead," he whispered in her ear, "I am a Yngling of Jons-son's dale—of pastureland and homestead. No man has gentler blood than I have, child. And no weapon man can stand against me, foot to foot. In truth," said Rorik modestly, "I am a champion."

In spite of this assurance, the girl pulled away, silently.

"I like you well enough," he told her, "and you can tell me your name."

"Maera," she gasped.

That was a strange name and her tongue had a strange, slow twang to it, unlike Danish.

"Why do you stay here where a battle will be with only a cow?"

Maera looked up from the tangle of her hair, and stopped pulling suddenly. Taking his hand, she drew him along the path. "Look," she said quickly, "I have all the cows to milk."

Before he could think about that, she had reached a turn in the path where a hut perched on the mountain slope with cattle and pigs pressing against the pens.

"This is the homestead," she said, catching him from the corners of her eyes, while she tried to keep her arms from trembling. Often, while she peered down through the pines at the lower valley, Maera had wondered what the enemy would look like—those men-at-arms of the emperor, riding over the crops—if she met one face to face.

Now here she was with this giant of a man looking not at all like a soldier, his head thin and brown, his hands hard and curved as if from the grip of a mattock. She had been frightened when she felt his strength.

Rorik wanted to pick her up and carry her into the hut. Such a foolish thing as she was, to stay here alone. The place was certainly empty except for her—with faggots for the fire stacked along its bare planks, and shirts and hose washed clean hanging among the apple trees where a terrace had been scraped from the mountain and walled up with stone.

"Your hide isn't safe here," he said. "Where have your menfolk gone?"
"I won't tell you!"

To Maera it seemed certain now that this prowler was a spy, spying and peering to find out where the Swiss fighting men were gathering, in these Bernese uplands. "You are no champion," she cried at him. "No—a dunderhead, trying to talk like a soldier. You are as full of lies as a hive is of honey, Sir Nobody!"

Now Rorik of Yngling had broad shoulders and a small head. Perhaps he did not think things out easily in that head; but when he did have an idea he was sure of it. Up on the mountain he had expected to meet devils and Swiss pikemen. Instead, he had found the little Maera. And he began to think she was mocking him.

"Sir No—" he stared at her.
"Nobody of Nowhere."

There she stood, with fire in her blue eyes—so thin and young he could have broken her back with his fist. No longer afraid of him.

She had touched the pride of Rorik the Yngling. "I will show you," he said. "Pfut! I will let you see that I am first among all those soldiers." Then he remembered that he had lost his way. "But first tell me where the German camp has moved to."

Maera laughed. Such a clumsy lie!

"The dog would know where his kennel is. Go down past the waterfall, my fine soldier. Take the forest path to your left. And stay away there, or it will be the worse for you."

"No. I will come back. And you, girl—you will wait here?"

Maera looked up at him curiously. "I will be here. But you will never come up again."

As he jumped the stone wall, sliding down by the mountain stream, it seemed to Rorik the Yngling that this girl with her blue eyes and her cowbells had managed to put a spell upon him. There might, after all, be a power of magic in these mountains . . .

Maera, running back from her lookout, flitting through the timber where no path ran, hurried to take her message to the pikemen of the Bern canton assembling at the stone church where the tolling bell summoned them from their land. Her father, waiting among the captains, the blue steel of his pike by his head, breathed deep at sight of her safe.

"Still they stay down in the valley," Maera cried. "Only one dunder-head of a spy came peering up into the *wald*."

"Yes," said her father, "yes, they are careful. If their scouts have not gone up into the forest, they will come along the valley, this way, to the head of the pass. Now that the sun is down, they will not venture where their scouts have not explored."

As Maera made her way back to watch the cattle, she passed the bands of Swiss moving along the mountain trails where they could not be seen in the darkness, to where the church bell tolled.

The echo of the bell comforted Maera. In that gray church atop the pass she had been christened, to drive out the devil in her. There, sometime, she would walk in her bride's veil. She felt that the voice of the bell was speaking to her, telling her she was not alone on the mountain. She prayed that it would drive Rorik and all his fellows away.

"Mark ye well," said the Genoese, "he is a noble Yngling." And he nudged Weiphart, who was turning the spit at the fire.

"Ach so," muttered Weiphart, blinking into the smoke. "From the land of Jonsson's dale. Like a baron he is, indeed. Will his nobility have white wine with the fowl?"

"It is not like beer," said Rorik the Yngling, "but I will have it."

He chewed the flesh from a chicken's back, tossed away the shell of bones, and wiped his hands politely on the straw where he sat before taking the wine jug.

Rorik had followed his nose among the fires of the *gewaltige Haufen*, the main guard, to the smell of fat fowls sizzling by this fire. A good camp, Rorik thought, where the sentries challenged sharp, and the horse lines were quiet. Never had he seen so many great horses together, fit for drawing the heaviest plows. And here the men had good steel shirts, well oiled and cared for. How kindly they greeted him!

"Almost you were too late, Rorik, my sir," said Weiphart, pouring wine into his own steel cap. "Before daylight we advance up. Yes, already have the high sirs given orders."

"Good," nodded Rorik the Yngling. "Good! Then you will have me with you in the battle."

Weiphart and the Genoese breathed hard over their meat. "You will win this battle for us?" asked the Italian crossbowman anxiously.

"I do not say that," replied Rorik modestly, "but no man could stand foot to foot with me in Jonsson's dale."

Conrad the Schwarzreiter looked up at him. "Have you ever," he snarled, "stood in the line of a battle?"

Rorik shook his head. "The messenger of the emperor said in Jonsson's dale that his majesty called, for men broad of shoulder and long of leg. To me he gave a silver thaler. I walked to Cologne, where they said the army was up the river. Pfut, at the river they said it was here, in the mountains of the Swiss. Eight gold florins they will pay me for a battle."

"Eight—gold!" grunted Weiphart.

Rorik the Yngling nodded. He remembered the amount very well. And he had calculated what he could buy with the gold. "Eight they said, and eight it is."

"Dane gold," said Conrad.

Conrad thought that he had never seen a recruit with such broad shoulders and so little wit. "This one," he nodded at Weiphart, "is *doppelsoldner*—frontline-pay man. For an open attack he gets one gold piece and for an assault on fortification, one and a half pieces."

They were all veterans of long campaigns from Spain to Bohemia—the Genoese being in a high-paid class, with the best of the new steel crossbows. They had horses and body armor, while Rorik seemed to have lugged along only the heavy two-handed sword.

"Eight it will be," he said, "for me."

"For using that woodchopper?" Weiphart reached over and gripped the handle of the Dane's long sword.

"Yes," said Rorik.

With a grin Weiphart tried to raise the point off the ground. Using one arm, by straining he could raise it; taking both hands he swung it once in the air, and it sagged down.

"Great Lord of heaven," grunted the *doppelsoldner*, "no one can cut with it."

It seemed to Rorik that this German was disparaging his sword. He took the handle himself, gripping with both hands. He planted his feet and the muscles of his long body tensed. His arms shot up, and the five-foot blade slashed the air over the soldiers' heads, whistling.

At the edge of the firelight two men stopped to look. One wore a cloak with an eagle embroidered on the shoulder, and a silver chain shone under the other's beard. Conrad, who noticed everything, sprang up when he saw them.

"If you have not found one, my sirs," his clipped words came, "I offer, with gladness, Conrad, captain in the Thuringen riders."

"We have not decided," the cloaked man said, watching Rorik. "Who is your Hercules?"

The two were staring at Rorik the Yngling as if at a new breed of war horse, marking his stand and his points, as he sheathed the two-handed sword.

"My sirs," said Conrad, stiff, "it is a Dane from the farmlands who fancies himself the best of us."

"He's the tallest, certainly," observed the officer with the armiger's chain. "Too tall, eh, Strube?"

"A lighthouse has its uses. It can easily be seen at all times."

"But he has as much wit, my sir," Conrad grated, "as your Livonian mare. Less."

"That also has its use." The official of the eagle walked around Rorik, studying him. Suddenly he looked up into his eyes. "So you are a mighty man-at-arms, Dane?"

"True enough," agreed Rorik.

"Would you like to be given armor fit for a noble. Or even—an emperor? From helm to spurs, eh?"

"Well enough," Rorik smiled, pleased, "if it is for the battle."

"It is for the battle."

He of the eagle glanced once at the armiger, who nodded. Then between them they conducted Rorik the Yngling away from the fire, through the lines of the Black Riders to a pavilion that glowed with candles. Young squires who were oiling saddles and cleaning leather sprang up at sight of them. And here, where swords and armor were stacked, the armiger took charge of Rorik.

Not once did he look him in the face. First he tried a hauberk of fine linked steel on the giant Dane. It gleamed as with silver. The boys fitted mail to his legs and tried low boots on his feet until a pair was found to fit. They fastened shoulder pieces etched with gold up against his neck—they clasped a cloak over his shoulders. They even combed out his long hair while he admired his gleaming limbs. The steel mesh, being too small for him, gripped his muscles tight.

"With the padding out, it will do," decided the armiger, and the one named Strube nodded.

They studied the effect and seemed satisfied. Strube hung a gold chain around Rorik's neck, while the armorer fetched a shield with two eagles, black, painted on it, and a half-helm with tiny silver figures and an eagle spreading its wings for a crest. "My sir," said the armorer carefully, "I will bear your shield, of course, but you must take the war helm on your arm. So."

With pleasure Rorik contemplated it. The boys were fastening a belt over his hips.

"You understand," pointed out the one called Strube, "that this is the armor of majesty." He gestured at the pavilion. "You wear now the insignia of empire."

Rorik nodded, hardly understanding, but well content at this kindness.

They laid out some swords for him to look over, asking him to take the one he fancied. Suddenly Rorik stopped, shaking his head. If it was a question of swords, he wanted none but his own. For the first time the two officers looked ill-pleased. Strube said it would never do to carry such a thing—the armorer could not hang it over a horse's side. Rorik explained that he shouldered it.

"Oh, strap it on his back," cried Strube, "and take him along. God's thunder—we have no more time to waste."

When they hung the two-handed sword along his back, the armorer signed to him to hurry and went before him to a pavilion entrance where a knight stood with drawn sword by the standard pole. Within the pavilion, voices hummed with long words—the night advance to surprise the Swiss—the Schwarzreiter maneuver—flanks refused—holding back the charge—

Making nothing of this, Rorik watched the sentry who moved only his eyes. A voice rose over the others: "Have they the mock king?"

Heinrich barked, "Here at command."

Then Heinrich pulled Rorik down to a knee, whispering "Altesse." A tall man, muffled in a robe, stepped out, yawning. And Rorik knew that this was the emperor, who slipped a ring from his finger and pressed it into Rorik's hand.

"Faith," said a drowsy voice, "you have found one as tall as the standard itself, Heinrich."

"At command!"

And the emperor went back to his officers.

Ring in hand, Rorik walked away with the armorer. Beyond the stir of the men-at-arms, the calling of orders by the horse lines, he heard the echo of a distant bell. When the wind blew, the chime came clearly, and he thought of that cowbell. But this was a great, chiming bell. Restlessly, Rorik stirred. "Heinrich, I would like a horse."

"In two hours, my sir—when we advance."

"No, not in two hours—now, Heinrich."

"Why now?"

"To see the girl—the little Maera."

Heinrich grunted. This was not the time, he pointed out, to think about a girl. She would keep well enough, until afterward—when Rorik could do what he pleased. Didn't Rorik understand that now he wore the arms of majesty? He would carry them into the battle, wouldn't he? He would get his eight florins, wouldn't he? Wasn't he content?

And Rorik had to say he was content.

When the armorer hurried off to his duties, he suggested that Rorik drink some wine and stay within sight of the great pavilions. He told off an esquire-at-arms to follow the Dane and see that he did not stray.

When Rorik thought of wine, he thought of his companions at the fire, and he walked over to show himself to them. When men passed him, carrying a torch, they stared at the immense figure holding the crested helm, and they saluted.

Only Conrad sat awake by the embers, still drinking. He lowered the jug when the Dane stepped into the embers' glow, with the small squire behind him. The hilt and wide handguard of the huge sword seemed like a cross behind his bare head.

"Eyes of God," breathed Conrad. "They have done it."

Pleased by the effect on Conrad, Rorik sat down in the straw, examining the gold ring. The ring had a flat jewel that shone, and on the jewel were traced letters that meant nothing to him because he could not read. But when Conrad inspected the ring, he interpreted the letters. Gloria.

"Is that a sign?" asked Rorik, curiously.

"A kind of sign," said Conrad, pondering, "to many men. Do you know what they have made of you?"

Rorik shook his head. Truly, something in this puzzled him.

"They have made you the mock king."

"How, the mock king?"

The words sounded both pleasant and ominous to the Dane. Giving him the jug, Conrad explained, low-voiced. In an hour Rorik would be mounted on a high horse and placed at the head of the *gewaltige Haufen*. With the half-helm on his head, he would appear to be the emperor himself to all those who were not close to him, or in on the secret. During the fighting, the enemy would drive at the one who seemed to be emperor, to kill him. Probably they would reach him and kill him. But the real emperor, in plain dress, would be directing the battle elsewhere, unharmed.

"Seven to one," said Conrad softly, "you will turn up your toes this morning."

Rorik thought about that.

The eyes of the Schwarzreiter searched beyond the fire glow, where the squire, seeing Rorik seated, loitered carelessly. Groups of men were in motion already, toward the head of the valley, although they carried no torches and no trumpets had sounded. He knew the step of the Italian mercenaries. He listened to the movement at his own horse lines, where the sergeants called and cursed. The Black Riders would go up with the advance, with the Genoese covering them. His troop mates would be calling for him in a few minutes.

"Don't let them make a fool of you, Sir Rorik," he whispered, straining his ears. "What's the sense of becoming chopped meat—with your face bashed in, belike?"

"Mine?"

"Yours. Look—I know the horses of our troop. We can edge over to the lines now, and get two of the best. We can rein down the valley. Before full light we can be four leagues away. Safe enough. We can pass this ring and stuff to the usurers, and live like lords. We can pick over the girls, Rorik."

"Where?"

"Take our choice—Basle, Munich, Paris—"

Reaching out, Rorik took back his ring, while Conrad still breathed words. Rorik had no wish to go to Paris. He wanted to stay here in the valley. Conrad changed his tone:

"Rorik my sir, you've never felt your bones broken in as I have. The Swiss poleaxes can cut the head from a horse—"

He checked at a quick step near him. A voice called, "Thuringen troop in the saddle, Conrad."

The Black Rider got up, with his gun. "At once!" The step went on. "Quick, Rorik—we can get away."

Rorik shook his head. For an instant Conrad stared at him, then swung off toward the horses. Steel clanked as men swung themselves into the saddle; troop commanders called as they led off their men. Rorik did not want to run off from this. They had made him like a king. He would be the first in the battle. And if he left them, where would he get his eight florins? Conrad, with all his cleverness, had not thought of that.

With the sun full on the valley, Rorik the Yngling was riding up in majesty, with the battle standard swaying in the wind behind him, and Heinrich carrying his shield beside him and the squire leading another horse. Rorik was riding on a great bay charger, his sword strapped fast to him, and the helm on his head agleam with silver.

Ranks of men-at-arms paced beside him, their spears rising like a forest of young, slender trees. Thousands of riders moved up the valley, toward the pass where they could see the spire of a church.

It seemed to Rorik that these marching ranks were fine, and surely he was the first of them. He could see nothing of the real emperor, although he heard the fanfare of trumpets blowing commands. Heinrich, he noticed, listened closely to the notes of the trumpets, but watched the narrowing fringe of pines on either side.

"Tell us, Heinrich," he said, "what to do."

"Nothing," muttered the armorer, "but what you are doing—sit in the saddle."

This suited Rorik, but he had another question to ask: "Heinrich, why do we go up this valley?"

"By command."

Rorik nodded. "But for what?"

"To break the infantry of the Swiss cantons."

The armorer answered with half his mind, because the other half was listening to a faint popping and crackling somewhere ahead. So, the Swiss were making their stand in front of the pass.

For a while Rorik thought about it. "But why is there war with the Swiss?"

In the mountains, Heinrich explained, the Swiss refused to accept the sovereignty of the new Reich. They were, he said, commoners having no king. They had no generals. They had only infantry. They called them-

selves free men of the cantons. They were stubborn, meeting together like a mob, refusing allegiance to the German emperor whose sovereignty in this new plan of the Holy Roman Empire would dominate from Frankfurt over the continent, from sea to sea.

"They rolled down rocks on Maximilian's array of knights," Heinrich grunted. "They broke back the lancers of His Grace of Burgundy, when those dismounted to fight on foot. But no infantry can stand against the cavalry of the Reich."

Rorik was looking up the mountainside, where a rock summit jutted beneath a snow peak. Barely he could make out the patch of Maera's potato field.

"Is that the battle," he asked, lifting his steel headgear to let the air cool his skull, "going on ahead of us, where the noise is?"

Laughing, Heinrich explained that was only their advance, skirmishing with the Swiss, to bring the Swiss into action. Undoubtedly the Swiss would charge with their main onset from the screen of pines here, on one flank. So thought the sir commanders of the Reich's army. And then the Swiss would be charged by all the horse of the *gewaltige Haufen*, held back in readiness for just such a maneuver—

"But still, Heinrich, I do not see any fighting."

It was noon and Rorik was tired, before he saw it, while the hot sun made him sweat in his steel mesh and the apple orchards around him smelled fragrant with the heat. Stone walls hemmed in the peasants' fields here, and the heavy German chargers labored over plowed land.

Through these trees Rorik could watch a line of Swiss pikemen pressing down the valley with the sun flickering on the steel of their pike-heads. Behind them another brown line carried long axes, coming on slowly, keeping step without trumpets, climbing over the stones. Those lines seemed small in the face of the German regiments now crowding into the narrowing valley.

"Why," muttered Heinrich, "why, they come here—they make no maneuver."

In front of the brown ranks, the Schwarzreiter wheeled in troops, snapping off their pistols when they were close to the Swiss. Bands of Italian crossbowmen sifted back through the trees, fast.

"Bad ground," Heinrich observed. "But now comes our charge—ah, so!"

Suddenly—hearing a call from the trumpets—he caught the rein of Rorik’s horse, leading it to a knoll where the figure of the mock king could be seen above the apple trees. Past that knoll the German cavalry surged, with lances down, sweeping up the disordered Italians, forcing the Black Riders off to the flanks.

Through the orchards the packed ranks of horsemen edged around the trees, plunging over the low stone fences. The horses, tired and heavily weighted, slowed in the plowed land.

The Swiss did not stop. The Swiss came to meet the cavalry, closing together. Against those steel pikes, longer than their lances, the German horses piled up, rearing, the first ranks forced into a mass by pressure from the rear. Into the crush of riders the Swiss poleaxes beat like flails. Steel clanged and roared as if a thousand hammers were beating forges.

“Good Lord!” breathed Heinrich.

He heard the trumpets calling to the horsemen to re-form and charge.

Crowded regiments tried to get clear of the press. The steel of the Swiss flashed at their heels. The Swiss were shouting now, digging their feet into the plowed ground, slashing down everything in front of them. They were coming up the knoll where the mock king waited by the standard.

Rorik heard the armorer calling, “Go back—”

“No,” said Rorik the Yngling, “now we can fight.”

Swinging down from his charger, he pulled clear the two-handed sword. He stepped out toward the Swiss who shifted their pikes lower. He planted his feet, and his heavy sword drove down the pikes. Heinrich held the great shield in front of Rorik, and he elbowed the shield away for arm room. He felt swordsmen pressing against his right shoulder then the steel pike-heads pushed them back.

Rorik did not feel tired now. His arms threshed, swinging the two-handed sword at the bearded men stepping closer. Foot to foot. Something clanged against his headgear and it flew off. He could see better to strike now.

A splintered pike shaft jammed into his shoulder, and he leaned to one side to free himself. A two-foot ax blade ripped the steel rings down his arm. “Ho,” he roared, “a good one, that.”

Never had he seen so many honest bearded faces in front of his sword. His heavy sword smashed them back, and Heinrich flung up the shield to catch the swing of a poleax. Another blade came down, and Heinrich fell on the stone wall.

Steel struck at Rorik from the side, and he stepped back against the stones of a well. Turning, his long arms thrashing, he kept a space clear about him. "Stand up to them, mates!" he shouted, his feet gripping the earth. But he was alone now on the knoll.

The broken cavalry troops, reining back past the knoll, saw this figure in imperial armor fighting on foot. They went on back, knowing that this was a mock king, meant to draw the enemy's attack.

Conrad, getting clear of the orchards at last, stopped to watch and nurse a broken arm bone. He saw the Swiss close in around Rorik, while the tall figure climbed up higher on the stones. The standard was gone and Rorik was alone.

"What if he had been the king?" Conrad wondered, watching until the man on the stones went down, and the Swiss came on over the mound.

And Conrad turned his horse's head. He had kept within sight of a group of officers around a man in plain armor, with four trumpets behind them. They were riding now down the valley, in silence, away from the mountains.

Hard cobbles pressed against Rorik's neck, and a church bell clanged above him. His shoulders ached and a bone's end grated in his hip. Faces of women and bearded men looked down at him and passed on. Blood caked the fingers of a hand when he looked at it, and Rorik thought he was lying here like a calf in the marketplace for the Swiss to stare at. Then one woman did not go away, and he recognized Maera.

Now, he thought, she sees nothing good in me. His steel mesh was ripped, his cloak a rag around one arm, and he could not move.

"Well," he said, "I tried to come back to the hut to show you, but I could not."

She shook her head, staring at him, trying to wipe the blood from his hand. Then Rorik remembered. He pulled the ring from his little finger and gave it to her. She held back from taking it, her eyes startled.

"Girl," said Rorik the Yngling, "even if I am not a soldier, and cannot hold my ground, I can make you a gift. Somehow," he went on, shamed, "I like you."

He could feel her hair brush against his face, and it was pleasant to have her bending over him, "What does it say?" she whispered, looking at the letters inscribed on the jewel. Gloria.

"That I do not know," said Rorik, who could not read. "That is for you to tell me."

Tight she gripped the gold ring, closing her eyes.

"My father says," she whispered, "there was no one like you, in the valley. So I am proud, and I will take your ring and be your wife."

Rorik looked up at the bell tower, to think about this. He had wanted to be first in the battle, to get his gold, and perhaps a girl. Maera had arranged matters in a way of her own, and he found that he liked it.

"They can ring their bells," he agreed. "For Rorik the Yngling will stay in these mountains."