

# King Horn

*anon*

*a thirteenth century Middle English tale in rhymed couplets*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

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# King Horn

anon

*thirteenth century*

*Alle beon he blithe · that to my song lithe. · A sang ich schal you singe · of Murry the Kinge. · King he was bi-  
weste · so long si hit laste* – May happiness come to all who listen to me now! I shall sing you a song about King Murry. Murry was a king from far in the west, and he was so for as long as he lived! His queen was named Godhild and there was no fairer lady in the whole world. He had a son whose name was Horn, who was as good-looking as his mother; no rain fell upon him, no sun darkened his features and there was no fairer young man nor so bold. He was as bright as glass, as white as flour and his complexion was rose red. When he was fifteen years old there was no young man to compare with him, in any kingdom.

Horn had twelve friends who were always with him, all of them the sons of wealthy men and all of them fine young men themselves. They were inseparable, but Horn loved two of them in particular: Athulf and Fikenhild. Athulf was the best of young men, but Fikenhild proved to be one of the worst.

On a summer's day, good King Murry went riding beside the sea, as was his custom, He had only two companions – Oh, not nearly enough! – for he came across fifteen ships beached on his shore, filled with Saracens. He asked them what they had come for, or what they had brought to sell. A pagan heard him asking this and replied: 'We intend to kill all the people that are here, all those who believe in Christ, and we are going to kill you as well, very shortly. This is the last beach you'll ever see!'

The king dismounted and so did his two companions. He drew his sword and battle commenced. The king managed to thrust his sword under the shields of some, but there were just too many of them; it was easy for such a crowd of villains to overcome just three, and the king and his two companions were soon killed.

The pagans came onto the land and seized it for themselves. They killed many people and burnt churches to the ground. Nobody was allowed to live unless they denied their religion and rejected it in favour of a new one. Of all women, Godhild suffered the most. She wept bitterly for her husband King Murry, and still more for her son Horn. She left the hall, left all her maidens behind and went to live by herself under a rock of stone; she served God in defiance of the pagans' command, served Christ there, unknown to any pagan, and continually implored Jesus Christ to be kind and generous to her son.



Horn was in the hands of the pagans, and all his companions were as well. Jesus Christ had caused him to be very handsome, but the pagans wanted to kill him, or to skin him alive even. But he was so good-looking! The children had to be killed though. An emir spoke bluntly to Horn:

‘Horn, you are strong and intelligent, we can all see this. You are tall and athletic, and you still have seven years of physical development ahead of you. If you are allowed to live, you and your friends, you will kill us all in the fullness of time. Therefore, you shall go, you and all your companions, into a boat, and there you will sink to the ground. The sea will drown you, and we will shed not a tear, for if you are allowed to live, we will die by the sword or the knife and pay a high price for killing your father, this we know.’

So they took the children to the beach. The youths were distraught with fear, but at the first command, they were put into the boat. Horn had often been full of sorrow, but never more so than now. The current took them and Horn was full of woe. The sea carried their boat along so swiftly that the youths were very frightened, expecting to lose their lives at any moment. This much was certain. The voyage lasted all that day and all the following night, until dawn broke and Horn could see men walking about on a shoreline.

‘My young friends, I have news for you,’ he said to his companions. ‘I can hear birds singing and I can see a great spread of green grass over there. Be happy that we are alive! Our ship has made landfall!’

They hurriedly disembarked and set foot on the land, leaving the boat to float in the water.

‘I was born in Suddene,’ he told some men preparing to set off in their own vessel on the beach. ‘We’ve just arrived in a boat from the sea. We wish you every good fortune, but we are thirsty, for on the sea there is nothing to drink. If you go to Suddene, greet my family and my friends, greet my mother Godhild the good and tell the pagan king there, who is the enemy of Jesus Christ, that I am fit and healthy in this land that I’ve arrived in, and tell him that he will feel the weight of my sword in due course.’

The youths turned and made their way across the countryside, along valleys and over hills until they came to King Aylmar, may he have Christ’s blessing. He was the king of Westernness, may he receive Christ’s bliss.

*King Horn tells a story that will sound familiar to many who have read any one of a number of other medieval romances. Horn, the son of a king, is carried overseas as a youngster, adopted as a foundling by a royal family where the ruler’s daughter, and his sole heir, falls in love with him; Horn claims not to deserve her love, goes away, takes on a number of other new identities and disguises and returns after many adventures, and many episodes of disguise, worthy at last to marry her.*

*In this romance, there is an additional hint, if indeed a hint it is, that these journeys are to be regarded as incarnations. Horn’s journeys seem ever westwards, even as he returns to the place of his initial departure at the end. Towards the setting sun. And in one of these journeys he changes his name to Cutberd, just as Sir Eglamour of Artois changes his name to Sir Adventurous in Sidon, or as Tristram becomes Tramtris in Ireland, having set off in a boat-of-the-dead like Emaré, who herself becomes Egaré when she lands in Wales.*

*The Middle English Romance of King Horn was composed in the thirteenth century and is found in three other late medieval manuscripts. The version of the tale here is identical to that in Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27.2, dating to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.*

‘Where are you from?’ the king asked them, mildly. ‘What has brought thirteen such good-looking youngsters into my land? By God who made me, I’ve never seen such an impressive company of young men in any place in these western lands before. Tell me, why are you here and what do you want?’

Horn spoke for them all, as was fitting, since he was the best amongst them and the most fluent, and the lad with the greatest wit:

‘We are from Suddene,’ he said, ‘from noble families, all of us, Christian families and the families of good kings. Pagans arrived and slaughtered everybody. So help me God, they led us to a boat so that we could go and occupy our time on the sea. The day passed and another day arrived, we had no sail and no steering gear, our ship floated helplessly and was guided by wind and tide to the shores of this land. You may tie our hands behind us now and kill us if you wish, but if it pleases you, don’t let us die.’

The king, who was a kind man, replied: ‘Tell me, young man, what is your name? There’s no need to worry, you’re in no danger here.’



‘My name is Horn and I’ve come from a boat beside the sea. King, may all good things come to you.’

‘Then live up to your name, Horn! For the loud sound of your horn will soon carry over vales and hills, your name will spread from king to king and your nobility and valour will soon be known throughout all of Westernness. Your strength will be felt in every land, Horn. You are so good-looking I will not abandon you.’

King Aylmar rode home with Horn, his foundling, and took all of Horn’s dear companions along with him. The king then went into his hall where all his knights were gathered and called the steward of his house to him. The man’s name was Athelbrus.

‘Steward, take my foundling here and go and instruct him in everything you do. Teach him about the forest and the river, let him learn to play the harp with his sharp fingernails, teach him how to carve meat at my table and to serve me my cup of wine. Teach him everything you know and guide his companions into other worthwhile occupations. But take personal charge of Horn, and in particular, make him into a good harper and a singer.’

Athelbrus began to educate Horn and all his friends, and Horn picked up everything he was taught very easily. Inside the court and out of it, everywhere in fact, Horn Child was much loved, and in particular, he was loved by the king’s own daughter, Rymenhild. She thought about him all the time. She loved him so much that very soon it began to drive her insane! She couldn’t speak to him at the table, nor in the hall amongst all the knights, nor anywhere else for fear of people’s wagging tongues, and this was tormenting her;

there was no way that she could speak to Horn at all and her pain and distress became unbearable. But then she thought that if she were to send a message to Athelbrus, asking him to come to her private chambers and to bring Horn with him, for she was feeling unwell, he might come. So she arranged for the message to be sent, saying that she was lying ill and that he should come quickly with Horn, for she was feeling dreadful.

The steward was sad to receive this news, but rather puzzled also and didn't know what to do. It was a strange request that he should bring Horn with him to her private chambers. He didn't like the idea at all. So he summoned another of the youths to him: Athulf, Horn's brother.

'Athulf,' he said, 'come with me right now while I speak privately to Rymenhild in her chambers and find out what she wants. You'll go in the likeness of your brother and fool her, for I'm sure she wants to lead Horn astray.'

Athelbrus took Athulf along with him and they went into Rymenhild's chamber. At once, Rymenhild got very excited and passionate, thinking she had Horn in the room with her. She invited him to sit on the bed with her, and at once she pulled him down on top of her in a loving embrace.

'Horn,' she said, 'I have loved you so very much, for such a long while. You must pledge faithfully, upon my hand, to love me, and me alone, and you shall be my lord and husband.'

Athulf whispered in her ear: 'Stop this! Horn is not here. We are not alike at all. Horn is fairer and excellent, fairer by one rib than any man that lives. Even if Horn was buried in the ground, or wherever else he wanted to be, or a thousand miles away, I would never deceive him, or you.'

Rymenhild's mood changed in an instant. She turned to Athelbrus, her father's steward, and shouted a stream of filthy abuse at him.

'Get out of my room, you criminal!' she screamed. 'That's the last time I trust you! Get lost! Go away and die! I hope you end your days in disgrace, on a gallows. This isn't Horn. Horn is much more handsome than he is. Go and die a shameful death!'

Athelbrus fell to his knees at once. 'My lady, let me explain,' he cried. 'I'll tell you why I thought it unwise to bring Horn to your chamber. Horn shows far more promise than any youth of his age; he is an excellent young man and King Aylmar put him into my personal care. If he was here with you, I was in great fear that you would both want to lie down beside one another and make love together, and when the king found out about it, as he surely would, he would be very angry with you and with me. So Rymenhild, please calm down. Forgive me, my lady. I will bring Horn to you at once, whatever the consequences, if this is your wish.'

Rymenhild gathered herself together and cheered up greatly on hearing this. 'Go now, and bring Horn to me this afternoon,' she said. 'Dress him as a squire. My father will

have left the hall and gone hunting in the woods by then and no one will betray us. He can stay with me all afternoon, until evening, and we will make love together. I don't care what happens after that.'

Athelbrus went away and found Horn in the hall, sitting on a bench near the king, pouring wine for him.

'Horn,' said Athelbrus in private, 'after you have finished here, you must come with me to Rymenhild's chamber. Keep this a secret between the two of you. Horn, keep faith with me and you will never live to regret it.'

Horn's pulse raced as he made his way to Rymenhild's bedchamber. There, he fell to his knees and greeted her very sweetly. At the sight of him, the room lit up. He spoke very eloquently:

'You make for a lovely sight Rymenhild, sitting next to your six maidens on the bed there. The king's steward has sent me here to speak with you. Please tell me what you want. Say what it is, and I shall know what it is that you desire.'

Rymenhild stood up and took Horn by the hand. She sat him down on a fur quilt and gave him wine to drink – as much as he wanted – and made him feel very welcome; she put her arms around his neck and kissed him many times, as often as she wanted to.

'Horn,' she said, 'be in no doubt, I'm going to be yours, I'm going to be your wife. Horn, take pity on me and swear to be mine and mine alone.'

Horn thought carefully and said: 'May Christ guide you and grant you the bliss of a marriage made in heaven, you and your future husband, whoever he may be. I am of too low estate to consort with you. I am from peasant stock, and an orphan as well. It would be unnatural and against all custom for you and me to be bound in wedlock. There is no joy to be had from a marriage between a peasant and a king's daughter.'

Rymenhild was very cross with this answer and sighed in despair. She fell to the floor in a faint. Horn was very upset to see her in this way. He took her into his arms and kissed her – many times, it has to be said.

'Darling,' he said, 'think clearly then, sweetheart. Do your absolute best to bring it about that I can receive a knighthood from the king. Then my thralldom will be turned into knighthood, my honour will increase and I'll be able to do everything you wish me to.'

Rymenhild, that sweet thing, recovered her senses at once and opened her eyes.

'Horn,' she said, 'this will happen very quickly, be assured. You'll be dubbed a knight before seven days have passed. Take this cup and this ring also. Take them to Athelbrus the steward, and see that he is willing to keep his side of the bargain. Say that I implore him, in the friendliest terms, to fall before the king, when he is seated in his hall, and ask him to knight you. He will be well rewarded with silver and with gold, and may Christ grant him every success in doing what you ask of him.'

Horn took his leave, for evening was drawing on. He looked for Athelbrus and when he found him, gave him the cup and the ring and eagerly told him everything that had happened that afternoon. He asked him to do what Rymenhild had said, and promised him the reward that she was willing to give him for it. Athelbrus went into the hall immediately.

‘King,’ he said, ‘listen to one of the finest things that I have ever thought of. Tomorrow you will wear your crown in public, and at the ensuing feast it is traditional to have some spectacle and a sight for everybody to enjoy. It would be no bad thing to grant young Horn his knighthood then. He will prove to be a great asset to you, I am sure, and he will make a splendid knight.’

‘This is a fine idea!’ exclaimed the king. ‘I have been very pleased with him and it will suit him well. I shall confer knighthood upon him and give him my love thereafter. Then he can knight his twelve companions himself; he can knight all his friends in front of me, tomorrow.’

King Aylmar spent a thoughtful night, and when day broke, Horn came before the king with his twelve companions – not all of them with good intentions, it has to be revealed.

The king knighted Horn, gave him his spurs and a sword and set him upon a white horse. There was no knight to compare with him. He dubbed him, asked for his loyalty and made him pledge that he would fight for the good. Then Athulf fell to his knees before King Aylmar.

‘King, please grant me a favour,’ he implored. ‘Sir Horn, who was born in Suddene, is now a knight, and therefore he is the lord, now, of us who stand in his presence. He wields your arms, and carries your shield, and will do this into battle, so please allow him to knight every one of us now.’

‘Do whatever you want to do,’ said the king to Horn.

Horn got down from the horse and knighted them all. The ensuing feast was very merry indeed, with a lot of fine entertainment. But Rymenhild was not present and the day’s progress felt like seven long years to her. At last, she sent for Horn and he went to her chamber, but he took Athulf with him, not wanting to go alone.

Rymenhild stood on the floor and was very pleased to see Horn when he arrived.

‘Welcome, Sir Horn,’ she said. ‘And welcome to the knight Sir Athulf who is with you. Sir knight, now is the time for you to sit beside me. Do now what you have only talked about before. Take me to be your wife. If you are true to your word, then do now what you have earlier promised. Now you can have all your will of me, so I want you to do it now and release me from my pain.’

‘Rymenhild, enough!’ exclaimed Horn. ‘I will do everything that you want me to, when the time is right. But first, I shall ride with a spear and prove myself in battle, before

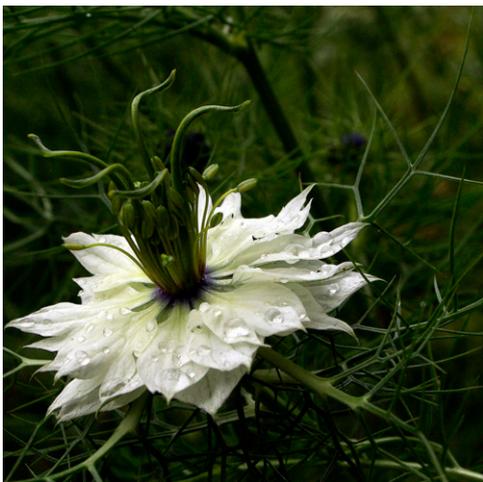
I turn my thoughts to lovemaking. We are young knights, all of us, honoured with knighthood on the same day, and it is the custom of those in our vocation each to fight with other knights for the love of his lady before taking a wife. Therefore I need to hurry! Today, with the grace of God, I shall show my prowess on the battlefield for your love, with spear and shield, and if I survive, I shall marry you.'

'Then let it be so, my faithful knight,' replied Rymenhild. 'Accept this gold ring. It will be very useful to you. Engraved upon this ring are the words 'Rymenhild the young' and there is no better ring under the sun, in fact, nothing known to man. You should wear it on your finger for the love of me, because the stones are of such grace that you need fear no blow from any weapon, wherever you are, and you need not be frightened of any battle, if you look at this ring and think of your loved one. Your brother, Sir Athulf, shall have another like it. May Christ be with you, Horn, and may he bring you back to me again,' she said lovingly.

Horn kissed Rymenhild, and she gave him her blessing. Then he took his leave and went back into the hall.

The knights all went to sit at the boards and trestles to eat, but Horn went straight to the stables. He selected his own, fine horse, which was as black as coal, and it shook its coat of chainmail with such eagerness that it made a noise that carried as far as the court. The horse was impatient to set off, and Horn began to sing merrily.

Horn had ridden for more than a mile when he came across a ship full of heathen dogs who were pouring ashore. He asked them what they were looking for, or what they were bringing to sell. One of these men called back, arrogantly: 'We intend to conquer this land and to kill everybody living here!'



Horn drew his sword and gave the blade a polish on his arm, then laid into them angrily. With every swing of his sword he took off a heathen's head. They tried to surround him, but he looked at the ring on his finger, thought of Rymenhild and attacked and defended himself with such renewed ferocity that he killed a hundred of them very quickly; and his horse did magnificently as well, trampling over them. The few who escaped alive were badly injured.

Horn took up their leader's head, which he had just cut off, and carried it on the point of his sword. Then he made off back to the hall and re-joined all the knights there.

'King,' he cried, 'while you've been sitting here with all your knights, I've been out seeking some entertainment, since you've conferred the order of knighthood upon me. I came upon some ships on the sea, full of Saracens, all of them foreigners. They intended to do great harm to you and to all of your people, so I attacked them. I knew that my

sword wouldn't fail me, and I cut them all dead to the ground, or gave them dreadful injuries, and here I have the head of their king to give to you. Now I think that I have fully repaid the faith that you placed in me when you offered to make me a knight.'

The next morning, the king rode off to go hunting. Fikenhild, the very worst of souls who would cause shame to any mother, stayed behind. Horn went to Rymenhild's chamber, but when he arrived, he found her in a very distressed state. She was sitting in the sun, weeping uncontrollably.

'Darling, have pity on me, but what's the matter?' he asked.

'I've had a dream,' she replied. 'I was casting a net into the sea, but then it started to tear apart when I thought that I'd caught a great fish, but something was breaking my net to pieces. I know that I shall lose that fish that I have set my heart upon.'

'Christ and Saint Stephen, let this dream signify nothing!' exclaimed Horn. 'I will never deceive you. I'll never do anything to hurt you. I am yours, to hold and to comfort, and nobody else's; I swear this to you. I give you my word.'

They were both very upset, but Horn managed to quell her tears. 'Darling, this dream will turn out to be nothing, I'm sure, unless someone is plotting to harm us. The fish is someone with bad intentions towards us, I would guess. We will find out who that is very shortly, I imagine.'

King Aylmar was riding beside the river Stour as Horn was speaking with Rymenhild in her chamber. Fikenhild was full of envy and was telling the king a pack of slanderous lies: 'King Aylmar, I warn you,' he was saying, 'Horn is going to do you the greatest harm. I've witnessed him swearing upon his naked sword that he will kill you and take Rymenhild to be his wife. He is lying with your daughter at this very moment, under the bedclothes; he's done this many times before and if you go to her chamber now you'll likely catch him in the act. Get rid of him. Banish him from your land before he kills you.'

Aylmar angrily turned his horse around and returned in a very black mood indeed. He found Horn in his daughter's arms, pressed lovingly against her bosom.

'Get out, you foul thief!' he shouted. 'You're not welcome here any more. Get out of my home and go and break your neck or something! If you don't get going at once, I'll take my sword to you! Get out of my land or it will be the worse for you!'

Horn saddled his steed and laid his armour out, laced on his coat of chainmail, belted on his sword and made ready to set off at once. But first he went eagerly and as quickly as he could to Rymenhild.

'Darling,' he said, 'your bad dream has come true. The fish that tore your net has cast me from you. Goodbye Rymenhild. I can't stay here any longer. I must go into a foreign land to see what I can achieve there. I will stay there for seven years, and when those seven years have passed, if I haven't returned or sent you any word, then take a husband

and forget about me. Now take me into your arms and kiss me long and hard.'

They kissed for a long while, and then Rymenhild fell to the floor in a faint. Horn took his leave; he could stay no longer.

Horn embraced Athulf around the neck. 'My faithful knight, look after my love, watch over Rymenhild for me. You have never let me down. Please look after her for me now.' Then he mounted his horse and rode off. He went to the harbour and found a good ship that would take him westwards, to a western land. Athulf wept as he left, and so did many others.

The wind carried Horn to Ireland. He disembarked, put his feet into the stirrups and soon came across two king's sons; one was called Berild and the other, Harold. Berild asked Horn what his name was and what he was doing there.

'Cutberd is my name,' said Horn. 'I have just come ashore from a boat. I've arrived from a place far in the west to seek my fortune.'

Berild rode up close to him and took his horse by the bridle: 'Sir knight, this is a lucky meeting,' he said. 'Stay with me for a while, my friend. You shall serve the king, for certain! I have never in my whole life seen such a splendid-looking knight as you arrive on these shores.'

They led Cutberd into the hall and he fell to his knees in homage. Berild and Harold knelt and greeted the king. 'Sir king, look at this man,' said Berild. 'Take him into your service and let him defend your lands. No one will be able to give you the slightest trouble if you do, for he is the fairest man who's ever set foot in this country, I'm sure.'

'You are welcome,' said the king to Horn. 'Go quickly now, Berild, make him comfortable and entertain him. And when you go a-wooing, make sure that you don't take him with you. Whoever you intend to marry will soon prefer him to you, so leave him behind, you'll have no chance against Cutberd's good looks!'

One day - it was Christmas Day, early in the afternoon - a giant appeared in the hall.

'Sir king,' said the giant, 'listen to me. Pagans have arrived, a large number of them I must tell you. They are on the beach and on your land. One of them will fight against three of your knights, and if ours is defeated, then this land will remain yours. But if our one overcomes your three, all this land shall be ours. The combat will take place tomorrow, just after dawn.'

'Cutberd will be one of my knights,' replied King Thursdon. 'Berild will be another, and the third will be his brother Alrid. These are the strongest men I have, and the best warriors. But what hope do we have? I think we are all dead men.'

Cutberd was sitting at the table while this was going on. 'Sir king,' he said, 'it is not right that one of them should fight against three of us. Sir, I shall take on this fight by myself and bring three of them to their deaths with the edge of my sword.'

The king arose the next morning in a state of despair. Cutberd got out of bed and armed himself. He put on his coat of chainmail, laced it tightly and then went to see the king as he was just emerging from his chamber.

‘King,’ he said, ‘come onto the field of combat. See how easily I will overcome these enemies of yours. We’ll go together.’

As the sun rose, they made ready to ride out. On a grassy open space they found a bold and eager giant. His companions were beside him, waiting for the slaughter. The battle commenced. Cutberd gave enough blows, that’s for sure! The knights soon fell senseless to the ground. He began to lessen his strokes and stay his hand, for he had nearly killed them all.

‘Knights, rest for a while if you like,’ he said.

They said that they had never before, in all their lives, suffered such hard blows from a knight, except when they had fought King Murry, the father of Horn who was born in Suddene. He had been very strong as well.

Horn shuddered in recollection and his blood began to boil. In front of him, he suddenly realised, were some of those who had driven him from his land and killed his father. He drew his sword, looked at his ring, thought of Rymenhild and then stabbed the pagan in front of him through the heart, giving him a dreadful wound. Those who had been so confident and belligerent now turned tail in terror and ran. Horn and his companions went after them as fast as they could and killed all the dogs before they could make it back to their ships. Horn killed them all. They paid a high price for his father’s death.

All the king’s knights were completely unharmed except for his two sons, whom the king had seen die before his very eyes. The king wept for them; the tears trickled down his cheeks. Men laid them on biers and buried them at once.

The king went into his hall and sat amongst all his knights. ‘Horn, I ask that you do as I shall advise, which is that, since both my heirs have been killed and you are a knight of immense worth, and very tall and strong, that you shall govern my lands after me and take my daughter Reynild to be your wife.’

‘Sir King, it would be very wrong of me to marry your daughter and to rule over your lands. There are many more years of rule left in you before you die. When seven years have passed and your sorrow has abated, then, sir King, let me have my reward. When I ask for your daughter, you must let me marry her.’

Cutberd lived there for a full seven years. In all that time, he didn’t send Rymenhild any word by messenger or visit her at all. Rymenhild remained in Westernness and was very sad. A king arrived with a proposal of marriage. Rymenhild’s father was very keen on the idea. Rymenhild dared not refuse the offer because the seven years were very nearly up. She decided to send a message to Horn and Athulf wrote it for her, for he was fond of Horn himself. She sent this communication to every country she knew of, making

it known that she was seeking the knight Horn, if men could find him anywhere; but Horn knew nothing of this, and saw no messenger until one day, when he was out hunting in the forest, a young man approached him.

‘My dear fellow, what are you looking for?’ asked Cutberd.

‘Knight, if it pleases to you, I’ll tell you: I’m from a land far to the west and I’m looking for Horn of Westerness on behalf of a maiden whose name is Rymenhild. A king intends to marry her and to take her to his bed; his name is King Modi of Raynes and he is one of Horn’s greatest enemies. I have searched every shore, but I haven’t found him yet. Alas, there is little time left. It looks as though she’s been deceived.’

Horn listened to all this and replied through bitter tears: ‘Young man, may good fortune smile upon you. Horn is standing right next to you! Go back to Rymenhild and tell her not to worry, for I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’ll be there early on the seventh day, on Sunday morning.’

The young man was overjoyed to hear this and turned for home immediately. But much to Rymenhild’s misfortune, the sea began to get rough, the troughs between the waves grew deeper and deeper and the young man drowned. The sea threw his dead body up against the wall of her chamber.

Rymenhild undid the bolt on the door into her quarters to go outside to see if she could see any sign of Horn. There she found the drowned young man, the one she had sent to find Horn and who should have been bringing him back to her. She wrung her hands in despair.

Horn went to see King Thurston and told him everything: that Rymenhild was his betrothed, that he was the son of the king of Suddene and how he had taken revenge upon the men who had killed his father. ‘King, you still owe me for the service I have given you,’ he said. ‘Help me to win Rymenhild, and I will find a good husband for your daughter. She shall marry my good friend Athulf; he is a good and faithful knight, one of the very best.’

The king replied, softly: ‘Horn, whatever you desire.’

The king had messengers with letters sent all over Ireland to recruit warriors. A large number of Irishmen responded, all of them willing to go overseas to fight. Horn secured a good ship, and they set off and soon found a favourable wind. They crossed the sea into Westerness, pulled down the sails and the mast and cast anchor before the sun had risen, and before any bell was heard calling folk to church.

As the sun rose, everyone was talking about Rymenhild’s wedding, but Horn was still on the water. There was no time to waste! He left his ship floating there and they all made their way onto the shore. Horn instructed his men to wait at the edge of a forest, and he went off by himself, completely alone, as though he had sprung from a stone. Shortly, he met a pilgrim and greeted him in a friendly way:

‘Palmer, tell me all your news,’ he said.

‘I’ve just come from a wedding feast,’ replied the palmer. ‘I was at the marriage of a maiden called Rymenhild. She didn’t seem to be able to hide her tears of sorrow, though. She claimed that she already had a husband, although he was overseas, and she didn’t want to be married again. Then they went into the hall in the castle, behind its strong walls, and I was left at the castle gate because they wouldn’t let me in. Modi had ordered that she be taken to a bed chamber. I slipped away, I couldn’t stand any more. The bride was weeping bitterly, I found it very upsetting.’

‘May Christ help me, we will exchange clothes!’ exclaimed Horn. ‘Have my clothes here, and I’ll take your shabby cloak. I’ll go to toast the bride in a way that will bring great anguish to some.’

The palmer laid his mantle down and Horn put it on his back. The pilgrim picked up Horn’s clothes and wasn’t displeased with them at all! Horn took up the pilgrim’s stick and satchel and changed the look of his face, screwing up his lip, dirtying his neck and giving himself an appearance that he had never had before.

Horn came before the castle gate and received a stern warning for his trouble from the gatekeeper. He asked very politely if he might be let in, he asked many times, but to no avail. At last, he went up to the gate and broke his way in. Thinking that the gatekeeper deserved everything coming to him, he threw him over the bridge and broke all his ribs. Then he went into the castle and took his place, very meekly, on beggar’s row.

Horn looked around with his filthy nose and saw Rymenhild sitting in a state of utter distress, weeping uncontrollably. He looked carefully about, into every corner, but couldn’t see Athulf anywhere, as far as he could see.

Athulf was in the tower looking desperately to see if there was any sign of Horn. He could see the sea, but no ship. ‘Horn, it’s getting to be too late,’ he sighed. ‘You placed Rymenhild into my care, to look after for you, and I’ve done all that you asked of me, but now it’s up to you. It’s now or never, I’ve done all that I can do.’

Rymenhild arose from the bench to pour wine and ale after the meal in the hall. She held a drinking horn in her hand, as the law of the land required. Knights and squires all had a share of the beer, but Horn wasn’t given any. Horn sat on the ground; he may as well have been tied up in chains, he thought. ‘Queen!’ he cried. ‘Honourable lady, please come here! You are supposed to serve us as well. We are very thirsty.’

Rymenhild put the horn down and filled his drinking cup with a gallon of ale from her earthenware bowl, for she imagined that the man was fond of his drink. ‘Have this cupful, and take the bowl as well. I’ve never seen a beggar so keen to quench his thirst.’

Horn gave the bowl to his companion. ‘My dear queen,’ he said. ‘I only like my wine in a drinking horn. You think I’m a beggar, but I’m a fisherman and I’ve come here from a long distance away, from far in the west, to fish at your wedding. My net is nearby,

beside a beautiful shore. It has lain there for seven whole years and I've come to see if it has caught any fish yet. I've come to go fishing so I won't drink from a bowl, I'll drink from a Horn, for I've come a long way. Here's to Horn!

Rymenhild looked at him and her heart froze. She knew nothing about this man's fishing, and didn't recognise him at all, but she marvelled at why he said he wanted to drink to Horn. She filled the horn with wine and drank a toast to the pilgrim.

'Drink as much of this as you want,' she said, 'and then tell me if you have ever seen Horn out in the woods or on the road.'

Horn drank the wine for a short while, and then he threw a ring into the vessel. 'Now queen, look to see what is in your drink,' he said.

The queen went off to her chamber with her four maidens, carrying the horn, and when she looked inside she found the gold ring, engraved, the one that she had given to Horn. She was very frightened now, fearing that this sudden appearance of the ring meant that Horn was dead. She sent a damsel off to speak to the palmer.

'Palmer,' the damsel said, 'please tell me, that ring that you threw into the drinking horn, where did you find it and why are you here?'

'By Saint Giles,' he replied, 'I have journeyed a long distance from far beyond the west, seeking my fortune. I found Horn Child boarding a ship; he said that it was his intention to travel to Westernness. The ship sailed on the tide, with me and the good Horn aboard. But Horn was sick and he died. He asked me to take the ring I gave you to young Rymenhild, and he kissed it often, may God rest his soul.'

'Heart, now you may burst!' exclaimed Rymenhild, overhearing this. 'The man for whom you have longed for so long will never be yours.' She fell onto her bed, where she had secreted a knife that she intended to use on her hateful new husband and on herself if it should come to that, if Horn hadn't arrived in time. She set the point of it, now, to her heart.

Horn ran over and swept her up into his arms, then wiped the black off his neck.

'Queen, sweet, dear queen,' he said, 'I am Horn, your own Horn! Can you not recognise me? I am Horn of Westernness. Let me take you into my arms and kiss you.'

They hugged and kissed and were joyful beyond words.

'Rymenhild,' said Horn, 'I will go down to the edge of the forest. I have knights waiting there, wearing full armour under their clothes and ready for battle. They're going to make King Modi and all his guests very angry, I think, for today I'm going to teach them all a lesson and take my revenge.'

Horn hurried out of the hall and let his beggar's garb fall to the ground. The queen rushed into her private quarters and found Athulf in the tower. 'Athulf,' she said, 'hurry up! Go to Horn as quickly as you can. He is out in the forest with a great army of knights.'

Athulf jumped at the news. He galloped after Horn as fast as his horse would go, and soon overtook him. They greeted one another with great affection, and then Horn gathered all his men and set them on the road.

They all arrived very quickly at the castle, fully armed from neck to foot, the gates were open and all those who were gathered inside for the wedding were quickly given a great deal to fret about: all except for Horn's twelve former companions and King Aylmar. Everybody else was killed. Horn took no revenge for Fikenhild's treachery, however, but he made them all swear an oath that they would never, ever, betray Horn, even if he lay dying.

The bell was rung for a wedding . Horn went with all his men to King Aylmar's palace, where the food was laid out in great quantity. It was magnificent, and no tongue can express the joy that was to be had there, nor the music and the entertainment. Horn sat on his chair and told everybody that he wanted to say a few words:

'King, listen to a good story, if you will. I don't tell it to cast any blame on you. My name is Horn. You made me a knight, and I proved to you that I was worthy of this honour, but men said that I had betrayed you and you drove me from your lands and sent me into exile. You imagined that I had done things that I have never done, that have never even crossed my mind to do; you thought that I had slept with your daughter Rymenhild, which I flatly deny. And I won't now either, until I have won back Suddene. Keep her with you while I win back my lands and my inheritance. I shall regain that land and avenge my father's death. I will shortly be king and bear a king's crown, and then Rymenhild can be married to a king.'

Horn took ship with his Irish companions; his friend Athulf went with him, he wanted nobody else. The wind blew loudly, the ship made good passage and within five days it had arrived on the shores of Suddene. It was the middle of the night, and Horn went quickly ashore with Athulf. They found a knight lying near the beach with his shield over him, and on his shield was depicted a Christian cross. The knight was asleep beside the path. Horn shook him and said:

'Knight, wake up! Why are you here? Why are you sleeping in this place? By the cross on your shield I would say that you are a Christian, but unless you explain yourself, I will kill you.'

The knight woke up in terror. 'I serve the pagans wholly against my will,' he pleaded. 'I was once a Christian, but then Saracens came to this island and made me renounce my faith. I wanted to believe in Christ, but they made me deny him and they've set me to guard this shore against Horn who is now a man, and who lives in the west and is the best of all knights. They killed the king of this country and many hundreds with him; it is a wonder that Horn hasn't appeared yet to seek revenge for his father's death. May God do the right thing and send him here with a fair wind so that he can kill them all! They killed King Murry, Horn's valiant father, and sent Horn away along with twelve friends, one of whom was my dear son, Athulf. He loves Horn so much and they are so

close that if I saw the two of them now, I would die with happiness, if Horn Child is alive and well and Athulf fit and healthy too.’

‘Knight, be happy, as happy as you have ever been, because Horn and his friend Athulf are both here!’

The knight got up and went to greet Horn: ‘Children,’ he said, ‘It’s been a long time since I saw you last. How have things been with you? Are you going to conquer this land and kill these pagans? Horn Child,’ he said, ‘your mother Godhild still lives. She would be joyful indeed if she knew that you were still alive.’

‘Blessed be the time that I came back to Suddene with my Irishmen,’ said Horn. ‘We will teach those dogs to speak our language; we’ll kill them all! We’ll skin them alive!’

Horn blew his horn and his folk recognised the sound; they emerged from under Horn’s banner, disembarked and crossed to the land. All that night and the next morning they fought with the Saracens, and very soon there was not a single Saracen left alive in the whole land. Then Horn had churches and chapels built, he allowed bells to be rung and had Masses sung. He went to his mother’s hall, in a rock wall, had bread made and put on a merry feast. He led a comfortable life; but Rymenhild suffered for it. Fikenhild gave bribes and favours to gain the allegiance of young and old. He had stone transported to where he thought it would do him the most good, and had a castle built on an island near the shore where only seagulls could land, and that could only be reached at low tide. Then Fikenhild brought grief to Rymenhild, he pestered her with romantic overtures and with sexual advances and the king dared not intervene. Rymenhild was beside herself with worry and wept tears of blood.



That night, Horn woke drenched in sweat from a nightmare. He’d dreamt that Rymenhild was taken into a ship, the vessel had begun to capsize and Rymenhild was going to drown. She tried to stretch her hand out to find land, but Fikenhild kept pushing her back into the water with the hilt of his sword. Horn woke up with a feeling of urgency:

‘Athulf, my friend,’ he said, ‘we must set sail immediately. Fikenhild has betrayed me and Rymenhild is in great danger. By the five wounds of Christ, I must go at once!’

Horn set off on horseback towards his ship, with his companions alongside him.

Before daybreak, Fikenhild made his way to the king’s palace, intending to kidnap Rymenhild. His plan was that by dawn they would be husband and wife. He led her in the darkness to his new castle and began the festivities before the sun had risen.

Before dawn, Horn's ship was under the tower where Rymanhild was being kept prisoner. Rymanhild had no idea that Horn was still alive even. Nobody on the ship had any idea what the castle was.

Horn saw Athulf's cousin Arnoldin sitting looking out for him. 'Horn knight!' he cried. 'King's son, you're just in time! Your sweetheart Ryumanhild is being married to Firkenhild. I won't lie to you. He's betrayed you twice now. He's made this castle with you in mind. No one can gain entry to it, however ingenious they may be. Horn, may Christ give you his aid, for without it you're going to lose Rymanhild for sure.'

Horn knew all the tricks. He brought out his harp and took a few fellows with him, his most daring knights who were happy to disguise themselves, and they walked along the beach towards the castle, singing to the accompaniment of their instruments. Rymenhild heard the music and asked who they were. They said they were harpers, and that some of them played the fiddle. Horn was let in at the front gate. He positioned himself on the bench, set his harp up to play and gave a rendition of a story in verse, to which Rymenhild could find no solace but only misery. She fell to the floor in a faint. It was nothing to laugh at. Horn's heart ached with pity for her. He looked at the ring, thought of her, then strode up to the table with his sword drawn and cut off Fikenhild's head with a single stroke. Then he cut to the ground every single man who was sitting there, and when they were all dead, he cut Fikenhild's body into pieces.

Horn appointed Arnoldin to be King Aylmar's rightful heir, to rule over Westerness after him, for his honest humility. The king and all his noblemen agreed to this and gave Arnoldin a share of their wealth.

Horn took Rymenhild by the hand and led her to the seashore, and he brought the good steward Athelbrus along with him as well. They sailed to where King Modi had ruled, and Horn made Athelbrus king there, for his wisdom. On Horn's advice, Athelbrus distributed fine gifts and titles to all the knights, to cement their allegiance to him.

Horn sailed to Ireland next, and arranged for Athulf to marry the maiden Reynild, then he sailed to Suddene and in the sight of all his relatives, he made Rymenhild his queen, as was fitting and proper.

It is with great sadness to all those who loved him that they are both now dead, may Christ give them entry to heaven.

Here ends the tale of Horn, who was very handsome. Let us be merry, for the song of Horn has finished, and may Jesus, who is the king of heaven, give us all his sweet blessing.

Amen.