

# **The Locked Crowns**

by Marion Garthwaite

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## Also by Marion Garthwaite

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To E.L.G.

“He was the stalworthest man at nede  
That may riden on ani stede.”  
—The Lay of Havelok the Dane

## Foreword

The name of Havelok is not on any list of English or Danish kings. Havelok the Dane is a legendary figure like Arthur and Robin Hood. An English version of the story appeared in epic verse about 1280 A.D., in the reign of Edward the First. There are other English versions and also a French variant called *Le Lai d'Haveloc*. These differ in details, but the essential story is the same. The several versions make it fairly certain that the story was told and sung for many years, centuries probably, before it was written down.

The Rev. Walter W. Skeat says in the preface to his re-editing from 'the unique manuscript of the Lay of Havelok the Dane' in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, "On the whole let us place Havelok in the sixth century at *some* period of his life."

These early folk of the north are part of our American history through the voyages of Leif the Lucky. They were a sturdy, enduring race, not always brutal and barbaric. Their restlessness drove them as far south as the Mediterranean, as far west as the North American continent, centuries before Columbus. Both pagan and Christian, they feared death and yet were unafraid to die. They were lawmakers, and set and held to the penalties for the breach of law. Their jewels and woodcarvings were of fine workmanship, rich in design. Their women's weaving was firm and beautifully patterned.

They had an innate and abiding love for poetry and a well-told tale, and the music that went with these.

They were skilled boat-builders of graceful, seaworthy craft that skimmed the wave-ways like seabirds.

They wielded a strong sword, a swift stone, and kept their battle axes keen.



# Contents

[Foreword](#)

[1. Athelwold](#)

[2. Havelok](#)

[3. Jarl Godard](#)

[4. Pakkanen](#)

[5. Horda, Godard's Man](#)

[6. The Flight](#)

[7. The Death Ship](#)

[8. The New Land](#)

[9. The Fledgling Hawks](#)

[10. The Return of Horda](#)

[11. The Famine](#)

[12. Goldborough](#)

[13. Grimsby](#)

[14. Horda and Godrich](#)

[15. Denmark](#)

[16. Two Crowns](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[About the Author](#)

# 1. Athelwold

THE STORY of Havelok the Dane is a tale of treachery and the wickedness of men who wanted two rich kingdoms for themselves, and so betrayed the royal children in their care.

In the beginning there was a princess. She was a very small princess, too young to walk or talk. Her father was King Athelwold, overlord of Britain, but the tale tells us nothing of the queen who was her mother.

The princess was named Goldborough. She was dearer to King Athelwold than all of his kingdom, or even his life. Because of her his last few days were full of dread.

Before his death Athelwold lay sore-stricken, in a high wall bed at one end of the king's hall at Winchester. He raised himself on one elbow to let his steward stuff some blue and violet pillows behind his head. He sank back into them with a groan, his face gray with the effort it cost.

"Edwy," he said to the steward, "send Solvi here to me."

The steward smoothed the soft fur coverlet of the high bed. "And the leech, Sire?"

"No, Edwy." The King raised his hand and let it drop. "I have no more need of leeches."

Before he made his way out of the hall, the steward laid a chunk of wood on top of the glowing coals in the hearth pit. He pushed open the heavy iron-studded door. He stopped by a group of men standing in the garth between the hall built of well-chinked logs and the kitchen built of wattles and mud.

"Is he better, Edwy?" asked one of the men hopefully.

"He is worse," the steward answered heavily. "He can neither eat nor sleep. Have you seen Solvi, Harald?"

"He is polishing the King's war gear. He is certain that Athelwold will want it when he is well again."

Edwy turned away. "He will want it whether he lives or dies. It will be needed for the funeral pyre."

"It will be a sorry time for England, if he dies now," said Harald, "with only a baby girl as heir." He stared down at the dagger in his hand. "Who will rule us until she can?"

No one answered. Each of them turned the thought over and over in his mind. Who would have the power of life and death over all of them in the long years ahead?

The men were dressed in leather and fur against the sharp fall weather. They stood about beyond the men's door of the hall under the roof of the open porch that had been newly built to hold off the winter snows. One man was honing a dagger, another was braiding some leather thongs. Each man worked at something, but they were waiting. Waiting and talking. Talking about the dying King. Thinking about the baby Princess.

Harald struck his dagger deep in a log and pulled it free again. "I cannot bear to have him gone," he said. "He has been a good king, just and fair in all his dealings."

"My father is a dealer in hides," said the man braiding the leather thongs. "He says that all the merchants bless this king's name, because he has cleared the woods and towns of the robbers and outlaws that plagued them. He has hung the worst of these thieves from the gallows tree, and all the land has been at peace."

And so they talked of him. Of the fierce loyalty this dying king had gained from earl and thane and serf and thrall, because he was righteous and strong, unafraid, and a good Christian king.

"He has hewn a path straight through the trees," said Harald. "He has imprisoned knights and even lords, all of high or low degree who broke his laws."

The steward returned. With him he had Solvi, a short, dark, and stocky man dressed in a leather tunic, belted at his waist. At some time Solvi's nose had been broken, but his black eyes were merry and there was good humor in the three-cornered shape of his lips. Around his neck was a thrall-ring of iron. They passed the men gathered under the eaves of the porch, and went in to the King's bed.

Smoke curled up lazily from the hearth fires, but the long hall was full of shadows. The early light beneath the lowering clouds scarcely lightened the oiled skins that covered the high windows.

"Here is Solvi, Sire," said the steward.

The King opened his eyes. "My thanks to you." He made a slight move with one hand, and Edwy left them.

Solvi stood beside the bed, his sorry eyes on the gaunt figure of Athelwold.



The King looked back at the thrall, his face serene and unafraid. "You have been a good thrall, Solvi," said Athelwold, "and I know you for an honest man. Now I have one more task to lay upon you. It is to guard the Princess with your life. When she is grown and safely married to some strong man who can help her rule England, you will have earned your freedom. At that time you can strike the thrall-ring from your neck. If you choose, you can go back to Wales, where you were captured."

"I would rather stay with you for life, Sire," answered Solvi.

"So you shall," said the King. "So you shall. It will be but a short stay. From the chest that I will leave with Hild, you are to each have ten links of Irish gold. This will bring you land and oxen, and pay you for your years of service."

"Sire, I need no pay for this."

"You may have need of the gold to guard your lady," said the King. Solvi said no more.

The King reached under his pillow and fumbled about until he brought out a roll of parchment. "What I have said is set down here. This will grant your freedom and Hild's. Show it to the Princess when she is old enough to understand. To no one else, unless there is a question of your freedom when your lady is safely wed." The King closed his eyes.

Solvi took the parchment and tucked it inside his tunic. "I will guard the Princess with my life, Sire," he promised.

"Good." The King stirred and groaned. "Fetch Hild to me, and ask her to bring the little maid."

A few minutes later a serving woman in a kirtle of wadmal cloth came to the King's bed. Her long hair was in neat braids, her sandals slapped on the stone floor. She was a plain woman with a wide mouth and steady hazel eyes.

In her arms was a small girl in a long dress of soft blue stuff, embroidered at neck and sleeves and hem with silver thread. The child's fair hair was the silver-gilt of ripened wheat, and lay in shining, silky curls about her face. Her cheeks were flushed with sleep. Her sea-blue eyes were full of wonder as she stared about her at the painted shields and weapons on the walls, at the hound dog that rose, stretching and yawning, his long tail thumping against the wall bed.

Suddenly the baby caught sight of Athelwold. “Da!” she shouted, and held her chubby arms out to the King. Her eyes were alight and all eight teeth were showing as she laughed.



A wave of color stained the cheeks of the King. He started to raise his arms and then dropped them. “I have no strength. Does ‘Da!’ mean me, Hild, do you think? Is this her first word?”

Hild laughed. "I'm sure it is, Sire. She is shy with the rest."

"Does she walk yet, this little one?"

"Almost. Look, Sire." Hild sat down on a painted chest. She stood the little girl on the floor. Hild moved her knees away and the baby stood alone, rocking on her bare feet, curling her toes against the cold of the stone. Then the child plunged forward and buried her face in Hild's lap, gurgling with glee.

The King chuckled. "It has been good to see her. Bring her again and yet again. Now send her away."

Hild took the baby to the women's door and handed her to someone there.

"Stay with her, Hild, when I am gone." The King's voice was worried. "When she is safely married, then you are free to go. The chest you have been sitting on belongs to her. It is her dower. I am putting it in your care. Open it."

Hild opened the lid of the chest. On the top of dry packed moss lay a small circlet of gold with a single blue stone glistening in the front of it. Hild picked it up carefully.

"To crown her Queen of England," said Athelwold, "when the time is come."

Hild lifted the dried moss. Underneath packed in more of the crisp, gray stuff were pins and buckles, the glitter of rings and arm bands. There were links of Irish gold, and a necklace of thick-set, honey-colored amber.

"You will keep the chest with you, Hild, as though it were your own. Let no one know you have it. Stuff the top with linen or toys, whatever you have. It is an old chest and looks to be of little worth." Athelwold leaned back into the pillows, his eyes closed.

Hild packed the moss back with care, and laid the small gold crown on top.

"When the Princess is married, she is to give you ten links of gold for your own marriage portion." The King sighed and winced as pain stabbed through him. "I have put it in writing. Solvi has it. It tells of your freedom and his. Guard her, Hild. I feel I can trust her to you and Solvi."

"Oh, Sire!" Hild's mouth was twisted with grief. "I promise."

The King turned his head away. "Send Solvi for all the earls and lords from Roxborough to Dover. Tell him to bid them make haste on an urgent matter. There is not much time." He drew a ring from

his finger. The red stone was deeply graven and the carved crest had been inlaid with gold. "Tell Solvi to carry this ring with him. It will tell the earls and barons more clearly than his word that I have need of them."

Solvi saddled a horse and rode off into the misty morning. The ring lay heavy in a doeskin bag hung around his neck. The rose hips in the hedges glowed like rubies. The trees were a riot of red and gold. The air was crisp beneath a sky so blue it made Solvi's heart ache for the King, who would not live to see another season all gold and blue like this.

Solvi stopped at Chester where the old Earl heard his news with real grief. When the Earl had sent runners out with the summons to the mead-halls east and west of him, he drew on his ox-hide byrnie all overlaid with rings of iron. He gathered his men about him to ride to Winchester.

"This is a sad day for me," he told Solvi. "And for England as well. A man can travel from one end of the land to the other these days, with no fear of loss. Alas! Who will rule this country now, until the little maid is grown?"

Solvi had no answer to this. He rode on through that night and the next, snatching a few hours of sleep beneath a haycock before he borrowed a fresh horse and left his own behind. He traveled along a paved road built by the Romans that led south through England. Wherever he carried the word and showed the ring, the King's men girt on their swords and made ready to ride.

Even the common folk were sorry when they heard his news. "King Athelwold has pitied the fatherless," said one thrall who met Solvi at the gate of his master's hall. "Even the bread of his own table was not too good to feed the hungry at his door."

Solvi could see where there might be hungry men at this hall. The moat was choked with reeds. The fence of stakes that stood above the earthen wall was broken and rotted. Inside the hall the rushes were rank and muddy and moldy. Beyond the hall the fields lay in uneven strips with weeds along the ditches.

At the sight of the ring this knight too made ready to journey north. "We will have to choose some strong earl as ruler," he said, "until the Princess is grown."

It was late at night when Solvi came to the hall of Earl Godrich of Cornwall.