

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS – VOLUME 06**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

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Saxon Kings — Volume 06**

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Harold : the Last of the Saxon Kings — Volume 06

BOOK VI. AMBITION

CHAPTER I

There was great rejoicing in England. King Edward had been induced to send Alred the prelate¹ to the court of the German Emperor, for his kinsman and namesake, Edward Atheling, the son of the great Ironsides. In his childhood, this Prince, with his brother Edmund, had been committed by Canute to the charge of his vassal, the King of Sweden; and it has been said (though without sufficient authority), that Canute's design was, that they should be secretly made away with. The King of Sweden, however, forwarded the children to the court of Hungary; they were there honourably reared and received. Edmund died young, without issue. Edward married a daughter of the German Emperor, and during the commotions in England, and the successive reigns of Harold Harefoot, Hardicanute, and the Confessor, had remained forgotten in his exile, until now suddenly recalled to England as the heir presumptive of his childless namesake. He arrived with Agatha his wife, one infant son, Edgar, and two daughters, Margaret and Christina.

Great were the rejoicings. The vast crowd that had followed the royal visitors in their procession to the old London palace (not far from St. Paul's) in which they were lodged, yet swarmed through the streets, when two thegns who had personally accompanied the Atheling from Dover, and had just taken leave of him, now emerged from the palace, and with some difficulty made their way through the crowded streets.

The one in the dress and short hair imitated from the Norman,—was our old friend Godrith, whom the reader may remember as the rebuker of Taillefer, and the friend of Mallet de Graville; the other, in a plain linen Saxon tunic, and the gonna worn on state occasions, to which he seemed unfamiliar, but with heavy gold bracelets on his arms, long haired and bearded, was Vebba, the Kentish thegn, who had served as nuncius from Godwin to Edward.

"Troth and faith!" said Vebba, wiping his brow, "this crowd is enow to make plain roan stark wode. I would not live in London for all the gauds in the goldsmith's shops, or all the treasures in King Edward's vaults. My tongue is as parched as a hay-field in the weyd-month.² Holy Mother be blessed! I see a Cumen-hus³ open; let us in and refresh ourselves with a horn of ale."

"Nay, friend," quoth Godrith, with a slight disdain, "such are not the resorts of men of our rank. Tarry yet awhile, till we arrive near the bridge by the river-side; there, indeed, you will find worthy company and dainty cheer."

"Well, well, I am at your hest, Godrith," said the Kent man, sighing; "my wife and my sons will be sure to ask me what sights I have seen, and I may as well know from thee the last tricks and ways of this burly-burly town."

¹ Chron. Knyghton.

² Weyd-month. Meadow month, June.

³ Cumen-hus. Tavern.

Godrith, who was master of all the fashions in the reign of our lord King Edward, smiled graciously, and the two proceeded in silence, only broken by the sturdy Kent man's exclamations; now of anger when rudely jostled, now of wonder and delight when, amidst the throng, he caught sight of a gleeman, with his bear or monkey, who took advantage of some space near convent garden, or Roman ruin, to exhibit his craft; till they gained a long low row of booths, most pleasantly situated to the left of this side London bridge, and which was appropriated to the celebrated cookshops, that even to the time of Fitzstephen retained their fame and their fashion.

Between the shops and the river was a space of grass worn brown and bare by the feet of the customers, with a few clipped trees with vines trained from one to the other in arcades, under cover of which were set tables and settles. The place was thickly crowded, and but for Godrith's popularity amongst the attendants, they might have found it difficult to obtain accommodation. However, a new table was soon brought forth, placed close by the cool margin of the water, and covered in a trice with tankards of hippocras, pigment, ale, and some Gascon, as well as British wines: varieties of the delicious cake-bread for which England was then renowned; while viands, strange to the honest eye and taste of the wealthy Kent man, were served on spits.

"What bird is this?" said he, grumbling.

"O enviable man, it is a Phrygian attagen⁴ that thou art about to taste for the first time; and when thou hast recovered that delight, I commend to thee a Moorish compound, made of eggs and roes of carp from the old Southweorc stewponds, which the cooks here dress notably."

"Moorish!—Holy Virgin!" cried Vebba, with his mouth full of the Phrygian attagen, "how came anything Moorish in our Christian island?"

Godrith laughed outright.

"Why, our cook here is Moorish; the best singers in London are Moors.

Look yonder! see those grave comely Saracens!"

"Comely, quotha, burnt and black as a charred pine-pole!" grunted

Vebba; "well, who are they?"

"Wealthy traders; thanks to whom, our pretty maids have risen high in the market."⁵

"More the shame," said the Kent man; "that selling of English youth to foreign masters, whether male or female, is a blot on the Saxon name."

"So saith Harold our Earl, and so preach the monks," returned Godrith. "But thou, my good friend, who art fond of all things that our ancestors did, and hast sneered more than once at my Norman robe and cropped hair, thou shouldst not be the one to find fault with what our fathers have done since the days of Cerdic."

"Hem," said the Kent man, a little perplexed, "certainly old manners are the best, and I suppose there is some good reason for this practice, which I, who never trouble myself about matters that concern me not, do not see."

"Well, Vebba, and how likest thou the Atheling? he is of the old line," said Godrith.

Again the Kent man looked perplexed, and had recourse to the ale, which he preferred to all more delicate liquor, before he replied:

"Why, he speaks English worse than King Edward! and as for his boy Edgar, the child can scarce speak English at all. And then their German carles and cnechts!—An I had known what manner of folk they were, I had not spent my mancuses in running from my homestead to give them the welcome. But they told me that Harold the good Earl had made the King send for them: and whatever the Earl counselled must, I thought, be wise, and to the weal of sweet England."

⁴ Fitzstephen.

⁵ William of Malmesbury speaks with just indignation of the Anglo-Saxon custom of selling female servants, either to public prostitution, or foreign slavery.

"That is true," said Godrith with earnest emphasis, for, with all his affectation of Norman manners, he was thoroughly English at heart, and now among the staunchest supporters of Harold, who had become no less the pattern and pride of the young nobles than the darling of the humbler population,— "that is true—and Harold showed us his noble English heart when he so urged the King to his own loss."

As Godrith thus spoke, nay, from the first mention of Harold's name, two men richly clad, but with their bonnets drawn far over their brows, and their long gonnas so worn as to hide their forms, who were seated at a table behind Godrith and had thus escaped his attention, had paused from their wine-cups, and they now listened with much earnestness to the conversation that followed.

"How to the Earl's loss?" asked Vebba.

"Why, simple thegn," answered Godrith, "why, suppose that Edward had refused to acknowledge the Atheling as his heir, suppose the Atheling had remained in the German court, and our good King died suddenly,— who, thinkest thou, could succeed to the English throne?"

"Marry, I have never thought of that at all," said the Kent man, scratching his head.

"No, nor have the English generally; yet whom could we choose but Harold?"

A sudden start from one of the listeners was checked by the warning finger of the other; and the Kent man exclaimed:

"Body o' me! But we have never chosen king (save the Danes) out of the line of Cerdic. These be new cranks, with a vengeance; we shall be choosing German, or Saracen, or Norman next!"

"Out of the line of Cerdic! but that line is gone, root and branch, save the Atheling, and he thou seest is more German than English. Again I say, failing the Atheling, whom could we choose but Harold, brother-in-law to the King: descended through Githa from the royalties of the Norse, the head of all armies under the Herr-ban, the chief who has never fought without victory, yet who has always preferred conciliation to conquest—the first counsellor in the Witan—the first man in the realm—who but Harold? answer me, staring Vebba?"

"I take in thy words slowly," said the Kent man, shaking his head, "and after all, it matters little who is king, so he be a good one. Yes, I see now that the Earl was a just and generous man when he made the King send for the Atheling. Drink-hael! long life to them both!"

"Was-hael," answered Godrith, draining his hippocras to Vebba's more potent ale. "Long life to them both! may Edward the Atheling reign, but Harold the Earl rule! Ah, then, indeed, we may sleep without fear of fierce Algar and still fiercer Gryffyth the Walloon—who now, it is true, are stilled for the moment, thanks to Harold—but not more still than the smooth waters in Gwyned, that lie just above the rush of a torrent."

"So little news hear I," said Vebba, "and in Kent so little are we plagued with the troubles elsewhere, (for there Harold governs us, and the hawks come not where the eagles hold eyrie!)— that I will thank thee to tell me something about our old Earl for a year⁶, Algar the restless, and this Gryffyth the Welch King, so that I may seem a wise man when I go back to my homestead."

"Why, thou knowest at least that Algar and Harold were ever opposed in the Witan, and hot words thou hast heard pass between them!"

"Marry, yes! But Algar was as little match for Earl Harold in speech as in sword play."

Now again one of the listeners started, (but it was not the same as the one before,) and muttered an angry exclamation.

"Yet is he a troublesome foe," said Godrith, who did not hear the sound Vebba had provoked, "and a thorn in the side both of the Earl and of England; and sorrowful for both England and Earl was it, that Harold refused to marry Aldyth, as it is said his father, wise Godwin, counselled and wished."

⁶ It will be remembered that Algar governed Wessex, which principality included Kent, during the year of Godwin's outlawry.

"Ah! but I have heard scops and harpers sing pretty songs that Harold loves Edith the Fair, a wondrous proper maiden, they say!"

"It is true; and for the sake of his love, he played ill for his ambition."

"I like him the better for that," said the honest Kent man: "why does he not marry the girl at once? she hath broad lands, I know, for they run from the Sussex shore into Kent."

"But they are cousins five times removed, and the Church forbids the marriage; nevertheless Harold lives only for Edith; they have exchanged the true-lofa⁷, and it is whispered that Harold hopes the Atheling, when he comes to be King, will get him the Pope's dispensation. But to return to Algar; in a day most unlucky he gave his daughter to Gryffyth, the most turbulent sub-king the land ever knew, who, it is said, will not be content till he has won all Wales for himself without homage or service, and the Marches to boot. Some letters between him and Earl Algar, to whom Harold had secured the earldom of the East Angles, were discovered, and in a Witan at Winchester thou wilt doubtless have heard, (for thou didst not, I know, leave thy lands to attend it,) that Algar⁸ was outlawed."

"Oh, yes, these are stale tidings; I heard thus much from a palmer— and then Algar got ships from the Irish, sailed to North Wales, and beat Rolf, the Norman Earl, at Hereford. Oh, yes, I heard that, and," added the Kent man, laughing, "I was not sorry to hear that my old Earl Algar, since he is a good and true Saxon, beat the cowardly Norman,—more shame to the King for giving a Norman the ward of the Marches!"

"It was a sore defeat to the King and to England," said Godrith, gravely. "The great Minster of Hereford built by King Athelstan was burned and sacked by the Welch; and the crown itself was in danger, when Harold came up at the head of the Fyrd. Hard is it to tell the distress and the marching and the camping, and the travail, and destruction of men, and also of horses, which the English endured⁹ till Harold came; and then luckily came also the good old Leofric, and Bishop Alred the peacemaker, and so strife was patched up—Gryffyth swore oaths of faith to King Edward, and Algar was inlawed; and there for the nonce rests the matter now. But well I ween that Gryffyth will never keep troth with the English, and that no hand less strong than Harold's can keep in check a spirit as fiery as Algar's: therefore did I wish that Harold might be King."

"Well," quoth the honest Kent man, "I hope, nevertheless, that Algar, will sow his wild oats, and leave the Walloons to grow the hemp for their own halters; for, though he is not of the height of our Harold, he is a true Saxon, and we liked him well enow when he ruled us. And how is our Earl's brother Tostig esteemed by the Northmen? It must be hard to please those who had Siward of the strong arm for their Earl before."

"Why, at first, when (at Siward's death in the wars for young Malcolm) Harold secured to Tostig the Northumbrian earldom, Tostig went by his brother's counsel, and ruled well and won favour. Of late I hear that the Northmen murmur. Tostig is a man indeed dour and haughty."

After a few more questions and answers on the news of the day, Vebba rose and said:

"Thanks for thy good fellowship; it is time for me now to be jogging homeward. I left my ceorls and horses on the other side the river, and must go after them. And now forgive me my bluntness,

⁷ Trulofa, from which comes our popular corruption "true lover's knot;" a vetere Danico trulofa, i.e., fidem do, to pledge faith. — HICKE's Thesaur. "A knot, among the ancient northern nations, seems to have been the emblem of love, faith, and friendship." — BRANDE's Pop. Antiq.

⁸ The Saxon Chronicle contradicts itself as to Algar's outlawry, stating in one passage that he was outlawed without any kind of guilt, and in another that he was outlawed as swike, or traitor, and that he made a confession of it before all the men there gathered. His treason, however, seems naturally occasioned by his close connection with Gryffyth, and proved by his share in that King's rebellion. Some of our historians have unfairly assumed that his outlawry was at Harold's instigation. Of this there is not only no proof, but one of the best authorities among the chroniclers says just the contrary— that Harold did all he could to intercede for him; and it is certain that he was fairly tried and condemned by the Witan, and afterwards restored by the concurrent articles of agreement between Harold and Leofric. Harold's policy with his own countrymen stands out very markedly prominent in the annals of the time; it was invariably that of conciliation.

⁹ Saxon Chron., verbatim.

fellow- thegn, but ye young courtiers have plenty of need for your mancuses, and when a plain countryman like me comes sight-seeing, he ought to stand payment; wherefore," here he took from his belt a great leathern purse, "wherefore, as these outlandish birds and heathenish puddings must be dear fare—"

"How!" said Godrith, reddening, "thinkest thou so meanly of us thegns of Middlesex as to deem we cannot entertain thus humbly a friend from a distance? Ye Kent men I know are rich. But keep your pennies to buy stuffs for your wife, my friend."

The Kent man, seeing he had displeased his companion, did not press his liberal offer,—put up his purse, and suffered Godrith to pay the reckoning. Then, as the two thegns shook hands, he said:

"But I should like to have said a kind word or so to Earl Harold—for he was too busy and too great for me to come across him in the old palace yonder. I have a mind to go back and look for him at his own house."

"You will not find him there," said Godrith, "for I know that as soon as he hath finished his conference with the Atheling, he will leave the city; and I shall be at his own favourite manse over the water at sunset, to take orders for repairing the forts and dykes on the Marches. You can tarry awhile and meet us; you know his old lodge in the forest land?"

"Nay, I must be back and at home ere night, for all things go wrong when the master is away. Yet, indeed, my good wife will scold me for not having shaken hands with the handsome Earl."

"Thou shalt not come under that sad infliction," said the good-natured Godrith, who was pleased with the thegn's devotion to Harold, and who, knowing the great weight which Vebba (homely as he seemed) carried in his important county, was politically anxious that the Earl should humour so sturdy a friend,— "Thou shalt not sour thy wife's kiss, man. For look you, as you ride back you will pass by a large old house, with broken columns at the back."

"I have marked it well," said the thegn, "when I have gone that way, with a heap of queer stones, on a little hillock, which they say the witches or the Britons heaped together."

"The same. When Harold leaves London, I trow well towards that house will his road wend; for there lives Edith the swan's-neck, with her awful grandam the Wicca. If thou art there a little after noon, depend on it thou wilt see Harold riding that way."

"Thank thee heartily, friend Godrith," said Vebba, taking his leave, "and forgive my bluntness if I laughed at thy cropped head, for I see thou art as good a Saxon as e'er a franklin of Kent—and so the saints keep thee."

Vebba then strode briskly over the bridge; and Godrith, animated by the wine he had drunk, turned gaily on his heel to look amongst the crowded tables for some chance friend with whom to while away an hour or so at the games of hazard then in vogue.

Scarce had he turned, when the two listeners, who, having paid their reckoning, had moved under shade of one of the arcades, dropped into a boat which they had summoned to the margin by a noiseless signal, and were rowed over the water. They preserved a silence which seemed thoughtful and gloomy until they reached the opposite shore; then one of them, pushing back his bonnet, showed the sharp and haughty features of Algar.

"Well, friend of Gryffyth," said he, with a bitter accent, "thou hearest that Earl Harold counts so little on the oaths of thy King, that he intends to fortify the Marches against him; and thou hearest also, that nought save a life, as fragile as the reed which thy feet are trampling, stands between the throne of England and the only Englishman who could ever have humbled my son-in-law to swear oath of service to Edward."

"Shame upon that hour," said the other, whose speech, as well as the gold collar round his neck, and the peculiar fashion of his hair, betokened him to be Welch. "Little did I think that the great son of Llewellyn, whom our bards had set above Roderic Mawr, would ever have acknowledged the sovereignty of the Saxon over the hills of Cymry."

"Tut, Meredydd," answered Algar, "thou knowest well that no Cymrian ever deems himself dishonoured by breaking faith with the Saxon; and we shall yet see the lions of Gryffyth scaring the sheepfolds of Hereford."

"So be it," said Meredydd, fiercely. "And Harold shall give to his Atheling the Saxon land, shorn at least of the Cymrian kingdom."

"Meredydd," said Algar, with a seriousness that seemed almost solemn, no Atheling will live to rule these realms! Thou knowest that I was one of the first to hail the news of his coming—I hastened to Dover to meet him. Methought I saw death writ on his countenance, and I bribed the German leach who attends him to answer my questions; the Atheling knows it not, but he bears within him the seeds of a mortal complaint. Thou wottest well what cause I have to hate Earl Harold; and were I the only man to oppose his way to the throne, he should not ascend it but over my corpse. But when Godrith, his creature, spoke, I felt that he spoke the truth; and, the Atheling dead, on no head but Harold's can fall the crown of Edward."

"Ha!" said the Cymrian chief, gloomily; "thinkest thou so indeed?"

"I think it not; I know it. And for that reason, Meredydd, we must wait not till he wields against us all the royalty of England. As yet, while Edward lives, there is hope. For the King loves to spend wealth on relics and priests, and is slow when the mancuses are wanted for fighting men. The King too, poor man! is not so ill-pleased at my outbursts as he would fain have it thought; he thinks, by pitting earl against earl, that he himself is the stronger¹⁰. While Edward lives, therefore, Harold's arm is half crippled; wherefore, Meredydd, ride thou, with good speed, back to King Gryffyth, and tell him all I have told thee. Tell him that our time to strike the blow and renew the war will be amidst the dismay and confusion that the Atheling's death will occasion. Tell him, that if we can entangle Harold himself in the Welch defiles, it will go hard but what we shall find some arrow or dagger to pierce the heart of the invader. And were Harold but slain—who then would be king in England? The line of Cerdic gone—the House of Godwin lost in Earl Harold, (for Tostig is hated in his own domain, Leofwine is too light, and Gurth is too saintly for such ambition)—who then, I say, can be king in England but Algar, the heir of the great Leofric? And I, as King of England, will set all Cymry free, and restore to the realm of Gryffyth the shires of Hereford and Worcester. Ride fast, O Meredydd, and heed well all I have said."

"Dost thou promise and swear, that wert thou king of England, Cymry should be free from all service?"

"Free as air, free as under Arthur and Uther: I swear it. And remember well how Harold addressed the Cymrian chiefs, when he accepted Gryffyth's oaths of service."

"Remember it—ay," cried Meredydd, his face lighting up with intense ire and revenge; "the stern Saxon said, 'Heed well, ye chiefs of Cymry, and thou Gryffyth the King, that if again ye force, by ravage and rapine, by sacrilege and murder, the majesty of England to enter your borders, duty must be done: God grant that your Cymrian lion may leave us in peace—if not, it is mercy to Human life that bids us cut the talons, and draw the fangs.'"

"Harold, like all calm and mild men, ever says less than he means," returned Algar; "and were Harold king, small pretext would he need for cutting the talons and drawing the fangs."

"It is well," said Meredydd, with a fierce smile. "I will now go to my men who are lodged yonder; and it is better that thou shouldst not be seen with me."

"Right; so St. David be with you—and forget not a word of my message to Gryffyth my son-in-law."

"Not a word," returned Meredydd, as with a wave of his hand he moved towards an hostelry, to which, as kept by one of their own countrymen, the Welch habitually resorted in the visits to the capital which the various intrigues and dissensions in their unhappy land made frequent.

¹⁰ Hume.

The chief's train, which consisted of ten men, all of high birth, were not drinking in the tavern—for sorry customers to mine host were the abstemious Welch. Stretched on the grass under the trees of an orchard that backed the hostelry, and utterly indifferent to all the rejoicings that animated the population of Southwark and London, they were listening to a wild song of the old hero-days from one of their number; and round them grazed the rough shagged ponies which they had used for their journey. Meredydd, approaching, gazed round, and seeing no stranger was present, raised his hand to hush the song, and then addressed his countrymen briefly in Welch—briefly, but with a passion that was evident in his flashing eyes and vehement gestures. The passion was contagious; they all sprang to their feet with a low but fierce cry, and in a few moments they had caught and saddled their diminutive palfreys, while one of the band, who seemed singled out by Meredydd, sallied forth alone from the orchard, and took his way, on foot, to the bridge. He did not tarry there long; at the sight of a single horseman, whom a shout of welcome, on that swarming thoroughfare, proclaimed to be Earl Harold, the Welchman turned, and with a fleet foot regained his companions.

Meanwhile Harold, smilingly, returned the greetings he received, cleared the bridge, passed the suburbs, and soon gained the wild forest land that lay along the great Kentish road. He rode somewhat slowly, for he was evidently in deep thought; and he had arrived about half-way towards Hilda's house when he heard behind quick pattering sounds, as of small unshod hoofs: he turned, and saw the Welchmen at the distance of some fifty yards. But at that moment there passed, along the road in front, several persons bustling into London to share in the festivities of the day. This seemed to disconcert the Welch in the rear, and, after a few whispered words, they left the high road and entered the forest land. Various groups from time to time continued to pass along the thoroughfare. But still, ever through the glades, Harold caught glimpses of the riders; now distant, now near. Sometimes he heard the snort of their small horses, and saw a fierce eye glaring through the bushes; then, as at the sight or sound of approaching passengers, the riders wheeled, and shot off through the brakes.

The Earl's suspicions were aroused; for (though he knew of no enemy to apprehend, and the extreme severity of the laws against robbers made the high roads much safer in the latter days of the Saxon domination than they were for centuries under that of the subsequent dynasty, when Saxon thegns themselves had turned kings of the greenwood,) the various insurrections in Edward's reign had necessarily thrown upon society many turbulent disbanded mercenaries.

Harold was unarmed, save the spear which, even on occasions of state, the Saxon noble rarely laid aside, and the ateghar in his belt; and, seeing now that the road had become deserted, he set spurs to his horse, and was just in sight of the Druid temple, when a javelin whizzed close by his breast, and another transfixing his horse, which fell head foremost to the ground.

The Earl gained his feet in an instant, and that haste was needed to save his life; for while he rose ten swords flashed around him. The Welchmen had sprung from their palfreys as Harold's horse fell. Fortunately for him, only two of the party bore javelins, (a weapon which the Welch wielded with deadly skill,) and those already wasted, they drew their short swords, which were probably imitated from the Romans, and rushed upon him in simultaneous onset. Versed in all the weapons of the time, with his right hand seeking by his spear to keep off the rush, with the ateghar in his left parrying the strokes aimed at him, the brave Earl transfixing the first assailant, and sore wounded the next; but his tunic was dyed red with three gashes, and his sole chance of life was in the power yet left him to force his way through the ring. Dropping his spear, shifting his ateghar into the right hand, wrapping round his left arm his gonna as a shield, he sprang fiercely on the onslaught, and on the flashing swords. Pierced to the heart fell one of his foes—dashed to the earth another—from the hand of a third (dropping his own ateghar) he wrenched the sword. Loud rose Harold's cry for aid, and swiftly he strode towards the hillock, turning back, and striking as he turned; and again fell a foe, and again new blood oozed through his own garb. At that moment his cry was echoed by a shriek so sharp and so piercing that it startled the assailants, it arrested the assault; and, ere the unequal

strife could be resumed, a woman was in the midst of the fray; a woman stood dauntless between the Earl and his foes.

"Back! Edith. Oh, God! Back, back!" cried the Earl, recovering all his strength in the sole fear which that strife had yet stricken into his bold heart; and drawing Edith aside with his strong arm, he again confronted the assailants.

"Die!" cried, in the Cymrian tongue, the fiercest of the foes, whose sword had already twice drawn the Earl's blood; "Die, that Cymry may be free!"

Meredydd sprang, with him sprang the survivors of his band; and, by a sudden movement, Edith had thrown herself on Harold's breast, leaving his right arm free, but sheltering his form with her own.

At that sight every sword rested still in air. These Cymrians, hesitating not at the murder of the man whose death seemed to their false virtue a sacrifice due to their hopes of freedom, were still the descendants of Heroes, and the children of noble Song, and their swords were harmless against a woman. The same pause which saved the life of Harold, saved that of Meredydd; for the Cymrian's lifted sword had left his breast defenceless, and Harold, despite his wrath, and his fears for Edith, touched by that sudden forbearance, forbore himself the blow.

"Why seek ye my life?" said he. "Whom in broad England hath Harold wronged?"

That speech broke the charm, revived the suspense of vengeance. With a sudden aim, Meredydd smote at the head which Edith's embrace left unprotected. The sword shivered on the steel of that which parried the stroke, and the next moment, pierced to the heart, Meredydd fell to the earth, bathed in his gore. Even as he fell, aid was at hand. The ceorls in the Roman house had caught the alarm, and were hurrying down the knoll, with arms snatched in haste, while a loud whoop broke from the forest land hard by; and a troop of horse, headed by Vebba, rushed through the bushes and brakes. Those of the Welch still surviving, no longer animated by their fiery chief, turned on the instant, and fled with that wonderful speed of foot which characterised their active race; calling, as they fled, to their Welch pigmy steeds, which, snorting loud, and lashing out, came at once to the call. Seizing the nearest at hand, the fugitives sprang to selle, while the animals unchosen paused by the corpses of their former riders, neighing piteously, and shaking their long manes. And then, after wheeling round and round the coming horsemen, with many a plunge, and lash, and savage cry, they darted after their companions, and disappeared amongst the bushwood. Some of the Kentish men gave chase to the fugitives, but in vain; for the nature of the ground favoured flight. Vebba, and the rest, now joined by Hilda's lithsmen, gained the spot where Harold, bleeding fast, yet strove to keep his footing, and, forgetful of his own wounds, was joyfully assuring himself of Edith's safety. Vebba dismounted, and recognising the Earl, exclaimed:

"Saints in heaven! are we in tine? You bleed—you faint!—Speak, Lord Harold. How fares it?"

"Blood enow yet left here for our merrie England!" said Harold, with a smile. But as he spoke, his head drooped, and he was borne senseless into the house of Hilda.

CHAPTER II

The Vala met them at the threshold, and testified so little surprise at the sight of the bleeding and unconscious Earl, that Vebba, who had heard strange tales of Hilda's unlawful arts, half-suspected that those wild-looking foes, with their uncanny diminutive horses, were imps conjured by her to punish a wooer to her grandchild—who had been perhaps too successful in the wooing. And fears so reasonable were not a little increased when Hilda, after leading the way up the steep ladder to the chamber in which Harold had dreamed his fearful dream, bade them all depart, and leave the wounded man to her care.

"Not so," said Vebba, bluffly. "A life like this is not to be left in the hands of woman, or wicca. I shall go back to the great town, and summon the Earl's own leach. And I beg thee to heed, meanwhile, that every head in this house shall answer for Harold's."

The great Vala, and highborn Hleafdian, little accustomed to be accosted thus, turned round abruptly, with so stern an eye and so imperious a mien, that even the stout Kent man felt abashed. She pointed to the door opening on the ladder, and said, briefly:

"Depart! Thy lord's life hath been saved already, and by woman.

Depart!"

"Depart, and fear not for the Earl, brave and true friend in need," said Edith, looking up from Harold's pale lips, over which she bent; and her sweet voice so touched the good thegn, that, murmuring a blessing on her fair face, he turned and departed.

Hilda then proceeded, with a light and skilful hand, to examine the wounds of her patient. She opened the tunic, and washed away the blood from four gaping orifices on the breast and shoulders. And as she did so, Edith uttered a faint cry, and falling on her knees, bowed her head over the drooping hand, and kissed it with stifling emotions, of which perhaps grateful joy was the strongest; for over the heart of Harold was punctured, after the fashion of the Saxons, a device—and that device was the knot of betrothal, and in the centre of the knot was graven the word "Edith."

CHAPTER III

Whether, owing to Hilda's runes, or to the merely human arts which accompanied them, the Earl's recovery was rapid, though the great loss of blood he had sustained left him awhile weak and exhausted. But, perhaps, he blessed the excuse which detained him still in the house of Hilda, and under the eyes of Edith.

He dismissed the leach sent to him by Vebba, and confided, not without reason, to the Vala's skill. And how happily went his hours beneath the old Roman roof!

It was not without a superstition, more characterised, however, by tenderness than awe, that Harold learned that Edith had been undefinably impressed with a foreboding of danger to her betrothed, and all that morning she had watched his coming from the old legendary hill. Was it not in that watch that his good Fylgia had saved his life? Indeed, there seemed a strange truth in Hilda's assertions, that in the form of his betrothed, his tutelary spirit lived and guarded. For smooth every step, and bright every day, in his career, since their troth had been plighted. And gradually the sweet superstition had mingled with human passion to hallow and refine it. There was a purity and a depth in the love of these two, which, if not uncommon in women, is most rare in men.

Harold, in sober truth, had learned to look on Edith as on his better angel; and, calming his strong manly heart in the hour of temptation, would have recoiled, as a sacrilege, from aught that could have sullied that image of celestial love. With a noble and sublime patience, of which perhaps only a character so thoroughly English in its habits of self-control and steadfast endurance could have been capable, he saw the months and the years glide away, and still contented himself with hope;—hope, the sole godlike joy that belongs to men!

As the opinion of an age influences even those who affect to despise it, so, perhaps, this holy and unselfish passion was preserved and guarded by that peculiar veneration for purity which formed the characteristic fanaticism of the last days of the Anglo-Saxons,—when still, as Aldhelm had previously sung in Latin less barbarous than perhaps any priest in the reign of Edward could command:

"Virginitas castam servans sine crimine carnem
Caetera virtutem vincit praeconia laudi—
Spiritus altithroni templum sibi vindicat almus;"¹¹

when, amidst a great dissoluteness of manners, alike common to Church and laity, the opposite virtues were, as is invariable in such epochs of society, carried by the few purer natures into heroic extremes. "And as gold, the adorning of the world, springs from the sordid bosom of earth, so chastity, the image of gold, rose bright and unsullied from the clay of human desire."¹²

And Edith, though yet in the tenderest flush of beautiful youth, had, under the influence of that sanctifying and scarce earthly affection, perfected her full nature as woman. She had learned so to live in Harold's life, that—less, it seemed, by study than intuition—a knowledge graver than that which belonged to her sex and her time, seemed to fall upon her soul—fall as the sunlight falls on the blossoms, expanding their petals, and brightening the glory of their hues.

¹¹ "The chaste who blameless keep unsullied fame, Transcend all other worth, all other praise. The Spirit, high enthroned, has made their hearts His sacred temple." SHARON TURNER's Translation of Aldhelm, vol. iii. p. 366. It is curious to see how, even in Latin, the poet preserves the alliterations that characterised the Saxon muse.

¹² Slightly altered from Aldhelm.

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