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Содержание

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THE PRICE OF BLOOD

Ab irâ et odio, et omni malâ voluntate,
Libera nos, Domine.
A fulgure et tempestate,
Libera nos, Domine.
A morte perpetuâ,
Libera nos, Domine.

So rang forth the supplication, echoing from rock and fell, as the people of Claudiodunum streamed forth in the May sunshine to invoke a blessing on the cornlands, olives, and vineyards that won vantage-ground on the terraces carefully kept up on the slopes of the wonderful needle-shaped hills of Auvergne.

Very recently had the Church of Gaul commenced the custom of going forth, on the days preceding the Ascension feast, to chant Litanies, calling down the Divine protection on field and fold, corn and wine, basket and store. It had been begun in a time of deadly peril from famine and earthquake, wild beast and wilder foes, and it had been adopted in the neighbouring dioceses as a regular habit, as indeed it continued throughout the Western

Church during the fourteen subsequent centuries.

One great procession was formed by different bands. The children were in two troops, a motley collection of all shades; the deep olive and the rolling black eye betraying Ethiopian or Moorish slave ancestry, the soft dark complexion and deep brown eye showing the Roman, and the rufous hair and freckled skin the lower grade of Cymric Kelt, while a few had the more stately pose, violet eye, and black hair of the Gael. The boys were marshalled with extreme difficulty by two or three young monks; their sisters walked far more orderly, under the care of some consecrated virgin of mature age. The men formed another troop, the hardy mountaineers still wearing the Gallic trousers and plaid, though the artisans and mechanics from the town were clad in the tunic and cloak that were the later Roman dress, and such as could claim the right folded over them the white, purple-edged scarf to which the toga had dwindled.

Among the women there was the same scale of decreasing nationality of costume according to rank, though the culmination was in resemblance to the graceful classic robe of Rome instead of the last Parisian mode. The poorer women wore bright, dark crimson, or blue in gown or wrapping veil; the ladies were mostly in white or black, as were also the clergy, excepting such as had officiated at the previous Eucharist, and who wore their brilliant priestly vestments, heavy with gold and embroidery.

Beautiful alike to eye and ear was the procession, above all from a distance, now filing round a delicate young green

wheatfield, now lost behind a rising hill, now glancing through a vineyard, or contrasting with the gray tints of the olive, all that was incongruous or disorderly unseen, and all that was discordant unheard, as only the harmonious cadence of the united response was wafted fitfully on the breeze to the two elderly men who, unable to scale the wild mountain paths in the procession, had, after the previous service in the basilica and the blessing of the nearer lands, returned to the villa, where they sat watching its progress.

It was as entirely a Roman villa as the form of the ground and the need of security would permit. Lying on the slope of a steep hill, which ran up above into a fantastic column or needle piercing the sky, the courts of the villa were necessarily a succession of terraces, levelled and paved with steps of stone or marble leading from one to the other. A strong stone wall enclosed the whole, cloistered, as a protection from sun and storm. The lowest court had a gateway strongly protected, and thence a broad walk with box-trees on either side, trimmed into fantastic shapes, led through a lawn laid out in regular flower-beds to the second court, which was paved with polished marble, and had a fountain in the midst, with vases of flowers, and seats around. Above was another broad flight of stone steps, leading to a portico running along the whole front of the house, with the principal chambers opening into it. Behind lay another court, serving as stables for the horses and mules, as farmyard, and with the quarters of the slaves around it, and higher up there

stretched a dense pine forest protecting the whole establishment from avalanches and torrents of stones from the mountain peak above.

Under the portico, whose pillars were cut from the richly-coloured native marbles, reposed the two friends on low couches.

One was a fine-looking man, with a grand bald forehead, encircled with a wreath of oak, showing that in his time he had rescued a Roman's life. He also wore a richly-embroidered purple toga, the token of high civic rank, for he had put on his full insignia as a senator and of consular rank to do honour to the ceremonial. Indeed he would not have abstained from accompanying the procession, but that his guest, though no more aged than himself, was manifestly unequal to the rugged expedition, begun fasting in the morning chill and concluded, likewise fasting, in the noonday heat. Still, it would scarcely have distressed those sturdy limbs, well developed and preserved by Roman training, never permitted by him to degenerate into effeminacy. And as his fine countenance and well-knit frame testified, Marcus Æmilius Victorinus inherited no small share of genuine Roman blood. His noble name might be derived through clientela, and his lineage had a Gallic intermixture; but the true Quirite predominated in his character and temperament.

The citizenship of his family dated back beyond the first establishment of the colony, and rank, property, and personal qualities alike rendered him the first man in the district, its chief magistrate, and protector from the Visigoths, who claimed it as

part of their kingdom of Aquitania.

So much of the spirit of Vercingetorix survived among the remnant of his tribe that Arvernia had never been overrun and conquered, but had held out until actually ceded by one of the degenerate Augusti at Ravenna, and then favourable terms had been negotiated, partly by Æmilius the Senator, as he was commonly called, and partly by the honoured friend who sat beside him, another relic of the good old times when Southern Gaul enjoyed perfect peace as a favoured province of the Empire.

This guest was a man of less personal beauty than the Senator, and more bowed and aged, but with care and ill-health more than years, for the two had been comrades in school, fellow-soldiers and magistrates, working simultaneously, and with firm, mutual trust all their days.

The dress of the visitor was shaped like that of the senator, but of somewhat richer and finer texture. He too wore the *toga prætextata*, but he had a large gold cross hanging on his breast and an episcopal ring on his finger; and instead of the wreath of bay he might have worn, and which encircled his bust in the Capitol, the scanty hair on his finely-moulded head showed the marks of the tonsure. His brow was a grand and expansive one; his gray eyes were full of varied expression, keen humour, and sagacity; a lofty devotion sometimes changing his countenance in a wonderful manner, even in the present wreck of his former self, when the cheeks showed furrows worn by care and suffering, and the once flexible and resolute mouth had fallen in from loss of

teeth. For this was the scholar, soldier, poet, gentleman, letter-writer, statesman, Sidonius Apollinaris, who had stood on the steps of the Imperial throne of the West, had been crowned as an orator in the Capitol, and then had been called by the exigences of his country to give up his learned ease and become the protector of the Arvernii as a patriot Bishop, where he had well and nobly served his God and his country, and had won the respect, not only of the Catholic Gauls but of the Arian Goths. Jealousy and evil tongues had, however, prevailed to cause his banishment from his beloved hills, and when he repaired to the court of King Euric to solicit permission to return, he was long detained there, and had only just obtained license to go back to his See. He had arrived only a day or two previously at the villa, exhausted by his journey, and though declaring that his dear mountain breezes must needs restore him, and that it was a joy to inhale them, yet, as he heard of the oppressions that were coming on his people, the mountain gales could only 'a momentary bliss bestow,' and Æmilius justly feared that the decay of his health had gone too far for even the breezes and baths of Arvernia to reinvigorate him.

His own mountain estate, where dwelt his son, was of difficult access early in the year, and Æmilius hoped to persuade him to rest in the villa till after Pentecost, and then to bless the nuptials of Columba Æmilia, the last unwedded daughter of the house, with Titus Julius Verronax, a young Arvernian chief of the lineage of Vercingetorix, highly educated in all Latin and Greek culture, and a Roman citizen much as a Highland chieftain is an

Englishman. His home was on an almost inaccessible peak, or *puy*, which the Senator pointed out to the Bishop, saying—

"I would fain secure such a refuge for my family in case the tyranny of the barbarians should increase."

"Are there any within the city?" asked the Bishop. "I rejoice to see that thou art free from the indignity of having any quartered upon thee."

"For which I thank Heaven," responded the Senator. "The nearest are on the farm of Deodatus, in the valley. There is a stout old warrior named Meinhard who calls himself of the King's Trust; not a bad old fellow in himself to deal with, but with endless sons, followers, and guests, whom poor Deodatus and Julitta have to keep supplied with whatever they choose to call for, being forced to witness their riotous orgies night after night."

"Even so, we are far better off than our countrymen who have the heathen Franks for their lords."

"That Heaven forbid!" said Æmilius. "These Goths are at least Christians, though heretics, yet I shall be heartily glad when the circuit of Deodatus's fields is over. The good man would not have them left unblest, but the heretical barbarians make it a point of honour not to hear the Blessed Name invoked without mockery, such as our youths may hardly brook."

"They are unarmed," said the Bishop.

"True; but, as none knows better than thou dost, dear father and friend, the Arvernian blood has not cooled since the days of

Caius Julius Caesar, and offences are frequent among the young men. So often has our community had to pay 'wehrgeld,' as the barbarians call the price they lay upon blood, that I swore at last that I would never pay it again, were my own son the culprit."

"Such oaths are perilous," said Sidonius. "Hast thou never had cause to regret this?"

"My father, thou wouldst have thought it time to take strong measures to check the swaggering of our young men and the foolish provocations that cost more than one life. One would stick a peacock's feather in his cap and go strutting along with folded arms and swelling breast, and when the Goths scowled at him and called him by well-deserved names, a challenge would lead to a deadly combat. Another such fight was caused by no greater offence than the treading on a dog's tail; but in that it was the Roman, or more truly the Gaul, who was slain, and I must say the 'wehrgeld' was honourably paid. It is time, however, that such groundless conflicts should cease; and, in truth, only a barbarian could be satisfied to let gold atone for life."

"It is certainly neither Divine law nor human equity," said the Bishop. "Yet where no distinction can be made between the deliberate murder and the hasty blow, I have seen cause to be thankful for the means of escaping the utmost penalty. Has this oath had the desired effect?"

"There has been only one case since it was taken," replied Æmilius. "That was a veritable murder. A vicious, dissolute lad stabbed a wounded Goth in a lonely place, out of vengeful spite.

I readily delivered him up to the kinsfolk for justice, and as this proved me to be in earnest, these wanton outrages have become much more rare. Unfortunately, however, the fellow was son to one of the widows of the Church—a holy woman, and a favourite of my little Columba, who daily feeds and tends the poor thing, and thinks her old father very cruel."

"Alas! from the beginning the doom of the guilty has struck the innocent," said the Bishop.

"In due retribution, as even the heathen knew." Perfect familiarity with the great Greek tragedians was still the mark of a gentleman, and then Sidonius quoted from Sophocles—

Compass'd with dazzling light,
Throned on Olympus's height,
His front the Eternal God uprears
By toils unwearied, and unaged by years;
Far back, through ages past,
Far on, through time to come,
Hath been, and still must last,
Sin's never-changing doom.

Æmilius capped it from Æschylus—

But Justice holds her equal scales
With ever-waking eye;
O'er some her vengeful might prevails
When their life's sun is high;
On some her vigorous judgments light

In that dread pause 'twixt day and night,
Life's closing, twilight hour.
But soon as once the genial plain
Has drunk the life-blood of the slain,
Indelible the spots remain,
And aye for vengeance call.

"Yea," said the Bishop, "such was the universal law given to Noah ere the parting of the nations—blood for blood! And yet, where should we be did not Mercy rejoice against Justice, and the Blood of Sprinkling speak better things than the blood of Abel?

Nay, think not that I blame thee, my dear brother. Thou art the judge of thy people, and well do I know that one act of stern justice often, as in this instance, prevents innumerable deeds of senseless violence."

"Moreover," returned the Senator, "it was by the relaxing of the ancient Roman sternness of discipline and resolution that the horrors of the Triumvirate began, and that, later on, spirit decayed and brought us to our present fallen state."

By this time the procession, which had long since passed from their sight, was beginning to break up and disperse. A flock of little children first appeared, all of whom went aside to the slaves' quarters except one, who came running up the path between the box-trees. He was the eldest grandson and namesake of the Senator, a dark-eyed, brown-haired boy of seven, with the golden bulla hanging round his neck. Up he came to the old man's knee, proud to tell how he had scaled every rock, and never needed any

help from the pedagogue slave who had watched over him.

"Sawest thou any barbarians, my Victorinus?" asked his grandfather.

"They stood thickly about Deodatus's door, and Publius said they were going to mock; but we looked so bold and sang so loud that they durst not. And Verronax is come down, papa, with Celer; and Celer wanted to sing too, but they would not let him, and he was so good that he was silent the moment his master showed him the leash."

"Then is Celer a hound?" asked the Bishop, amused.

"A hound of the old stock that used to fight battles for Bituitus," returned the child. "Oh, papa, I am so hungry."

He really did say 'papa,' the fond domestic name which passed from the patriarch of the household to the Father of the Roman Church.

"Thy mother is watching for thee. Run to her, and she will give thee a cake—aye, and a bath before thy dinner. So Verronax is come. I am glad thou wilt see him, my father. The youth has grown up with my own children, and is as dear to me as my own son. Ah, here comes my Columba!"

For the maidens were by this time returning, and Columba, robed in white, with a black veil, worn mantilla fashion over her raven hair, so as to shade her soft, liquid, dark eyes, came up the steps, and with a graceful obeisance to her father and the Bishop, took the seat to which the former drew her beside them.

"Has all gone well, my little dove?" asked her father.

"Perfectly well so far, my father," she replied; but there was anxiety in her eyes until the gate again opened and admitted the male contingent of the procession. No sooner had she seen them safely advancing up the box avenue than she murmured something about preparing for the meal, and, desiring a dismissal from her father, disappeared into the women's apartments, while the old man smiled at her pretty maidenly modesty.

Of the three men who were advancing, one, Marcus Æmilius, about seven or eight and twenty years of age, was much what the Senator must have been at his age—sturdy, resolute, with keen eyes, and crisp, curled, short black hair. His younger brother, Lucius, was taller, slighter, more delicately made, with the same pensive Italian eyes as his sister, and a gentle, thoughtful countenance. The tonsure had not yet touched his soft, dark brown locks; but it was the last time he would march among the laity, for, both by his own desire and that of his dead mother, he was destined to the priesthood. Beside these two brothers came a much taller figure. The Arvernii seem to have been Gael rather than Cymri, and the mountain chief, Titus Julius Verronax, as the Romans rendered his name of Fearnagh, was of the purest descent. He had thick, wavy chestnut hair, not cut so short as that of the Romans, though kept with the same care. His eyebrows were dark, his eyes, both in hue and brightness, like a hawk's, his features nobly moulded, and his tall form, though large and stately, was in perfect symmetry, and had the free bearing and light springiness befitting a mountaineer. He wore the toga as an

official scarf, but was in his national garb of the loose trousers and short coat, and the gold torq round his neck had come to him from prehistoric ages. He had the short Roman sword in his belt, and carried in his hand a long hunting-spear, without which he seldom stirred abroad, as it served him both as alpenstock and as defence against the wolves and bears of the mountains. Behind him stalked a magnificent dog, of a kind approaching the Irish wolfhound, a perfect picture of graceful outline and of strength, swiftness, and dignity, slightly shaggy, and of tawny colouring—in all respects curiously like his master.

In language, learning, and manners Verronax the Arvernian was, however, a highly cultivated Roman, as Sidonius perceived in the first word of respectful welcome that he spoke when presented to the Bishop.

All had gone off well. Old Meinhard had been on the watch, and had restrained any insult, if such had been intended, by the other Goths, who had stood watching in silence the blessing of the fields and vineyards of Deodatus.

The peril over, the Æmilian household partook cheerfully of the social meal. Marina, the wife of Marcus, and Columba sat on carved chairs, the men of the family reclining on the couches constructed to hold three. The bright wit of Sidonius, an eminent conversationalist, shone the more brightly for his rejoicing at his return to his beloved country and flock, and to the friend of his youth. There were such gleams in the storms that were overwhelming the tottering Empire, to which indeed these men

belonged only in heart and in name.

The meal was for a fast day, and consisted of preparations of eggs, milk, flour, and fish from the mountain streams, but daintily cooked, for the traditions of the old Roman gastronomy survived, and Marina, though half a Gaul, was anxious that her housekeeping should shine in the eyes of the Bishop, who in his secular days had been known to have a full appreciation of the refinements of the table.

When the family rose and the benediction had been pronounced, Columba was seen collecting some of the remnants in a basket.

"Thou surely dost not intend going to that widow of thine to-day," exclaimed her sister-in-law, Marina, "after such a walk on the mountain?"

"Indeed I must, sister," replied Columba; "she was in much pain and weakness yesterday, and needs me more than usual."

"And it is close to the farm of Deodatus," Marina continued to object, "where, the slaves tell me, there are I know not how many fresh barbarian guests!"

"I shall of course take Stentor and Athenais," said Columba.

"A pair of slaves can be of no use. Marcus, dost thou hear? Forbid thy sister's folly."

"I will guard my sister," said Lucius, becoming aware of what was passing.

"Who should escort her save myself?" said the graceful Verronax, turning at the same moment from replying to some

inquiries from the Bishop.

"I doubt whether his escort be not the most perilous thing of all," sighed Marina.

"Come, Marina," said her husband good-humouredly, "be not always a boder of ill. Thou deemest a Goth worse than a gorgon or hydra, whereas, I assure you, they are very good fellows after all, if you stand up to them like a man, and trust their word. Old Meinhard is a capital hunting comrade."

Wherewith the worthy Marcus went off with his little son at his heels to inspect the doings of the slaves in the farm-court in the rear, having no taste for the occupation of his father and the Bishop, who composed themselves to listen to a MS. of the letters of S. Gregory Nazianzen, which Sidonius had lately acquired, and which was read aloud to them by a secretary slave.

Some time had thus passed when a confused sound made the Senator start up. He beheld his daughter and her escort within the lower court, but the slaves were hastily barring the gates behind them, and loud cries of "Justice! Vengeance!" in the Gothic tongue, struck his only too well-accustomed ears.

Columba flung herself before him, crying—

"O father, have pity! It was for our holy faith."

"He blasphemed," was all that was uttered by Verronax, on whose dress there was blood.

"Open the gates," called out the Senator, as the cry outside waxed louder. "None shall cry for justice in vain at the gate of an Æmilius. Go, Marcus, admit such as have a right to enter and

be heard. Rise, my daughter, show thyself a true Roman and Christian maiden before these barbarians. And thou, my son, alas, what hast thou done?" he added, turning to Verronax, and taking his arm while walking towards the tribunal, where he did justice as chief magistrate of the Roman settlement.

A few words told all. While Columba was engaged with her sick widow, a young stranger Goth strolled up, one who had stood combing his long fair hair, and making contemptuous gestures as the Rogation procession passed in the morning. He and his comrades began offensively to scoff at the two young men for having taken part in the procession, uttering the blasphemies which the invocation of our Blessed Lord was wont to call forth.

Verronax turned wrathfully round, a hasty challenge passed, a rapid exchange of blows; and while the Arvernian received only a slight scratch, the Goth fell slain before the hovel. His comrades were unarmed and intimidated. They rushed back to fetch weapons from the house of Deodatus, and there had been full time to take Columba safely home, Verronax and his dog stalking statelily in the rear as her guardians.

"Thou shouldst have sought thine impregnable crag, my son," said the Senator sadly.

"To bring the barbarian vengeance upon this house?" responded Verronax.

"Alas, my son, thou know'st mine oath."

"I know it, my father."

"It forbids not thy ransoming thyself."

Verronax smiled slightly, and touched the collar at his throat. "This is all the gold that I possess."

The Senator rapidly appraised it with his eye. There was a regular tariff on the lives of free Romans, free Goths, guests, and trusted men of the King; and if the deceased were merely a *lite*, or freeman of the lowest rank, it was just possible that the gold collar might purchase its master's life, provided he were not too proud to part with the ancestral badge.

By this time the tribunal had been reached—a special portion of the peristyle, with a curule chair, inlaid with ivory, placed on a tesselated pavement, as in the old days of the Republic, and a servant on each side held the lictor's axe and bundle of rods, which betokened stern Roman justice, wellnigh a mockery now. The forum of the city would have been the regular place, but since an earthquake had done much damage there, and some tumults had taken place among the citizens, the seat of judgment had by general consent been placed in the Æmilian household as the place of chief security, and as he was the accredited magistrate with their Gothic masters, as Sidonius had been before his banishment.

As Sidonius looked at the grave face of the Senator, set like a rock, but deadly pale, he thought it was no unworthy representative of Brutus or Manlius of old who sat on that seat.

Alas! would he not be bound by his fatal oath to be only too true a representative of their relentless justice?

On one side of the judgment-seat stood Verronax, towering

above all around; behind him Marina and Columba, clinging together, trembling and tearful, but their weeping restrained by the looks of the Senator, and by a certain remnant of hope.

To the other side advanced the Goths, all much larger and taller men than any one except the young Gaulish chieftain. The foremost was a rugged-looking veteran, with grizzled locks and beard, and a sunburnt face. This was Meinhard, the head of the garrison on Deodatus's farm, a man well known to Æmilius, and able to speak Latin enough to hold communication with the Romans. Several younger men pressed rudely behind him, but they were evidently impressed by the dignity of the tribunal, though it was with a loud and fierce shout that they recognised Verronax standing so still and unmoved.

"Silence!" exclaimed the Senator, lifting his ivory staff.

Meinhard likewise made gestures to hush them, and they ceased, while the Senator, greeting Meinhard and inviting him to share his seat of authority, demanded what they asked.

"Right!" was their cry. "Right on the slayer of Odorik, the son of Odo, of the lineage of Odin, our guest, and of the King's trust."

"Right shall ye have, O Goths," returned Æmilius. "A Roman never flinches from justice. Who are witnesses to the deed? Didst thou behold it, O Meinhard, son of Thorulf?"

"No, noble Æmilius. It had not been wrought had I been present; but here are those who can avouch it. Stand forth, Egilulf, son of Amalrik."

"It needs not," said Verronax. "I acknowledge the deed. The Goth scoffed at us for invoking a created Man. I could not stand by to hear my Master insulted, and I smote him, but in open fight, whereof I bear the token."

"That is true," said Meinhard. "I know that Verronax, the Arvernian, would strike no coward blow. Therefore did I withhold these comrades of Odorik from rushing on thee in their fury; but none the less art thou in feud with Odo, the father of Odorik, who will require of thee either thy blood or the wehrgeld."

"Wehrgeld I have none to pay," returned Verronax, in the same calm voice.

"I have sworn!" said Æmilius in a clear low voice, steady but full of suppressed anguish. A shriek was heard among the women, and Sidonius stepped forth and demanded the amount of wehrgeld.

"That must be for King Euric to decide," returned Meinhard. "He will fix the amount, and it will be for Odo to choose whether he will accept it. The mulct will be high, for the youth was of high Baltic blood, and had but lately arrived with his father from the north!"

"Enough," said Verronax. "Listen, Meinhard. Thou knowest me, and the Arvernian faith. Leave me this night to make my peace with Heaven and my parting with man. At the hour of six to-morrow morning, I swear that I will surrender myself into thine hands to be dealt with as it may please the father of this

young man."

"So let it be, Meinhard," said Æmilius, in a stifled voice.

"I know Æmilius, and I know Verronax," returned the Goth.

They grasped hands, and then Meinhard drew off his followers, leaving two, at the request of Marcus, to act as sentinels at the gate.

The Senator sat with his hands clasped over his face in unutterable grief, Columba threw herself into the arms of her betrothed, Marina tore her hair, and shrieked out—

"I will not hold my peace! It is cruel! It is wicked! It is barbarous!"

"Silence, Marina," said Verronax. "It is just! I am no ignorant child. I knew the penalty when I incurred it! My Columba, remember, though it was a hasty blow, it was in defence of our Master's Name."

The thought might comfort her by and by; as yet it could not.

The Senator rose and took his hand.

"Thou dost forgive me, my son?" he said.

"I should find it hard to forgive one who lessened my respect for the Æmilian constancy," returned Verronax.

Then he led Marcus aside to make arrangements with him respecting his small mountain estate and the remnant of his tribe, since Marina was his nearest relative, and her little son would, if he were cut off, be the sole heir to the ancestral glories of Vercingetorix.

"And I cannot stir to save such a youth as that!" cried the

Senator in a tone of agony as he wrung the hand of Sidonius.

"I have bound mine own hands, when I would sell all I have to save him. O my friend and father, well mightest thou blame my rashness, and doubt the justice that could be stern where the heart was not touched."

"But I am not bound by thine oath, my friend," said Sidonius. "True it is that the Master would not be served by the temporal sword, yet such zeal as that of this youth merits that we should strive to deliver him. Utmost justice would here be utmost wrong. May I send one of your slaves as a messenger to my son to see what he can raise? Though I fear me gold and silver is more scarce than it was in our younger days."

This was done, and young Lucius also took a summons from the Bishop to the deacons of the Church in the town, authorising the use of the sacred vessels to raise the ransom, but almost all of these had been already parted with in the time of a terrible famine which had ravaged Arvernia a few years previously, and had denuded all the wealthy and charitable families of their plate and jewels. Indeed Verronax shrank from the treasure of the Church being thus applied. Columba might indeed weep for him exultingly as a martyr, but, as he well knew, martyrs do not begin as murderers, and passion, pugnacity, and national hatred had been uppermost with him. It was the hap of war, and he was ready to take it patiently, and prepare himself for death as a brave Christian man, but not a hero or a martyr; and there was little hope either that a ransom so considerable as the rank of

the parties would require could be raised without the aid of the Æmilii, or that, even if it were, the fierce old father would accept it. The more civilised Goths, whose families had ranged Italy, Spain, and Aquitaine for two or three generations, made murder the matter of bargain that had shocked Æmilius; but this was an old man from the mountain cradle of the race, unsophisticated, and but lately converted.

In the dawn of the summer morning Bishop Sidonius celebrated the Holy Eucharist for the mournful family in the oratory, a vaulted chamber underground, which had served the same purpose in the days of persecution, and had the ashes of two tortured martyrs of the Æmilian household, mistress and slave, enshrined together beneath the altar, which had since been richly inlaid with coloured marble.

Afterwards a morning meal was served for Verronax and for the elder Æmilius, who intended to accompany him on his sad journey to Bordigala, where the King and the father of Odorik were known to be at the time. Sidonius, who knew himself to have some interest with Euric, would fain have gone with them, but his broken health rendered a rapid journey impossible, and he hoped to serve the friends better by remaining to console the two women, and to endeavour to collect the wehrgeld in case it should be accepted.

The farewells, owing to the Roman dignity of Æmilius and the proud self-respect of the Arvernian, were more calm than had been feared. Even thus, thought Sidonius, must Vercingetorix

have looked when he mounted his horse and rode from his lines at Alesia to save his people, by swelling Cæsar's triumph and dying beneath the Capitol. Oh, *absit omen*! Columba was borne up by hopes which Verronax would not dash to the ground, and she received his embrace with steadfast, though brimming eyes, and an assurance that she would pray without ceasing.

Lucius was not to be found, having no doubt gone forward, intending to direct his friend on his journey, and there part with him; but the saddest part of the whole was the passionate wailings and bemoanings of the remnants of his clan. One of his attendants had carried the tidings; wild Keltic men and women had come down for one last sight of their Fearnagh MacFearccadorigh, as they called him by his true Gaulish name —passionately kissing his hands and the hem of his mantle, beating their breasts amid howls of lamentation, and throwing themselves in his path, as, with the high spirit which could not brook to be fetched as a criminal, he made his way to the gate.

Mounted on two strong mules, the only animals serviceable in the mountain paths, the Senator and Verronax passed the gate, Marcus walking beside them.

"We are beforehand with the Goth," said Verronax, as he came out.

"Lazy hounds!" said Marcus. "Their sentinels have vanished. It would serve them right if thou didst speed over the border to the Burgundians!"

"I shall have a laugh at old Meinhard," said Verronax. "Little

he knows of discipline."

"No doubt they have had a great lyke wake, as they barbarously call their obsequies," said the Senator, "and are sleeping off their liquor."

"We will rouse them," said the Arvernian; "it will be better than startling poor Columba."

So on they moved, the wildly-clad, barefooted Gauls, with locks streaming in the wind, still keeping in the rear. They reached the long, low farm-buildings belonging to Deodatus, a half-bred Roman Gaul, with a large vineyard and numerous herds of cattle. The place was wonderfully quiet. The Goths seemed to be indulging in very sound slumbers after their carouse, for nothing was to be seen but the slaves coming in with bowls of milk from the cattle. Some of them must have given notice of the approach of the Senator, for Deodatus came to his door with the salutation, "*Ave clarissime*!" and then stood staring at Verronax, apparently petrified with wonder; and as the young chief demanded where was Meinhard, he broke forth—

"Does his nobility ask me? It is two hours since every Goth quitted the place, except the dead man in the house of the widow Dubhina, and we are breathing freely for once in our lives. Up they went towards the Æmilian villa with clamour and threats enough to make one's blood run cold, and they must be far on their way to Bordigala Gergovia by this time."

"His nobility must have passed through their midst unseen and unheard!" cried old Julitta, a hardworking, dried-up woman,

clasping her sinewy, wrinkled hands; "a miracle, and no wonder, since our holy Bishop has returned."

The excitable household was on the point of breaking out into acclamation, but Verronax exclaimed: "Silence, children! Miracles are not for the bloodguilty. If it be, as I fear, they have met Lucius and seized him in my stead, we must push on at once to save him."

"Meinhard could not mistake your persons," returned Æmilius; but while he was speaking, a messenger came up and put into his hand one of the waxen tablets on which notes were written—

L. ÆM. VIC. TO M. ÆM. VIC. S. Q.,—Pardon and bless thy son. Meinhard assures me that I shall be accepted as equal in birth and accessory to the deed. Remember Columba and the value of Verronax's life, and let me save him. Consent and hold him back. Greet all the dear ones.—*Vale.*

The little tablet could hold no more than this—almost every word curtailed. The Senator's firm lip quivered at last as he exclaimed, "My brave son. Thus does he redeem his father's rash oath!"

Verronax, whose Roman breeding had held his impulsive Keltic nature in check as long as it was only himself that was in danger, now broke into loud weeping—

"My Lucius! my brother beloved! and didst thou deem Arvernian honour fallen so low that I could brook such a sacrifice? Let us hasten on instantly, my father, while yet it is

time!"

It would have been impossible to withhold him, and Marcus returned with the strange tidings, while his father and Verronax set forth with a few servants, mounted like themselves on mules, to reach the broad Roman road that led from Gergovia to Bordigala. Three wild, barefooted Gauls of Verronax's clan shook their heads at all his attempts to send them home, and went running along after him with the same fidelity as poor Celer, whom he had left tied up at the villa as his parting gift to little Victorinus, but who had broken loose, and came bounding to his master, caressing him with nose and tongue at their first halt.

There had been, as in all Roman roads, regular posting stations at intervals along the way, where horses and mules could be hired, but the troubles of the Empire, invasion, and scarcity had greatly disturbed the system. Many of the stations were deserted, and at others either the whole of the animals, or all the fleeter ones, had been taken up by Meinhard and his convoy. Indeed it almost seemed that not only Lucius was anxious not to be overtaken, but that Meinhard was forwarding his endeavours to consummate his sacrifice before the Arvernian could prevent it.

Hotly did Verronax chafe at each hindrance. He would have dashed onwards with feverish head-long speed, using his own fleet limbs when he could not obtain a horse, but Æmilius feared to trust him alone, lest, coming too late to rescue Lucius, he should bring on himself the fury of the Goths, strike perhaps in revenge, and not only lose his own life and render the sacrifice

vain, but imperil many more.

So, while making all possible speed, he bound the young Arvernian, by all the ties of paternal guardianship and authority, to give his word not to use his lighter weight and youthful vigour to outstrip the rest of the party.

The Senator himself hardly knew what was his own wish, for if his fatherly affection yearned over his gentle, dutiful, studious Lucius, yet Columba's desolation, and the importance of Verronax as a protector for his family, so weighed down the other scale, that he could only take refuge in 'committing his way unto the Lord.'

The last halting-place was at a villa belonging to a Roman, where they heard that an assembly was being held in the fields near Bordigala for judgment on the slaughter of a young Goth of high rank. On learning how deeply they were concerned, their host lent them two horses, and rode with them himself, as they hastened on in speechless anxiety.

These early Teutonic nations all had their solemn assemblies in the open air, and the Goths had not yet abandoned the custom, so that as the Senator and the chieftain turned the summit of the last low hill they could see the plain beneath swarming like an ant-hill with people, and as they pressed onward they could see a glittering tent, woven with cloth of gold, a throne erected in front, and around it a space cleared and guarded by a huge circle of warriors (*lites*), whose shields joined so as to form a wall.

Near the throne stood the men of higher degree, all alike

to join the King in his judgment, like the Homeric warriors of old, as indeed Sidonius had often said that there was no better comment on the *Iliad* than the meetings of the barbarians.

By the time Æmilius and Verronax had reached the spot, and gained an entrance in virtue of their rank and concern in the matter, Euric sat enthroned in the midst of the assembly. He was far removed from being a savage, though he had won his crown by the murder of his brother. He and the counts (comrades) around him wore the Roman garb, and used by preference the Latin speech, learning, arms, and habits, just as European civilisation is adopted by the Egyptian or Japanese of the present day. He understood Roman jurisprudence, and was the author of a code for the Goths, but in a case like this he was obliged to conform to national customs.

There he sat, a small, light-complexioned man, of slighter make than those around him, holding in his hand a scroll. It was a letter from Sidonius, sent beforehand by a swift-footed mountaineer, and containing a guarantee for 1200 soldi, twice the price for a Goth of ordinary rank. On the one side stood, unbound and unguarded, the slender form of Lucius; on the other a gigantic old Visigoth, blind, and with long streaming snowy hair and beard, his face stern with grief and passion, and both his knotted hands crossed upon the handle of a mighty battle-axe.

The King had evidently been explaining to him the terms of the Bishop's letter, for the first words that met the ear of Æmilius were—

"Nay, I say nay, King Euric. Were I to receive treble the weight of gold, how should that enable me to face my son in the halls of Odin, with his blood unavenged?"

There was a murmur, and the King exclaimed—

"Now, now, Odo, we know no more of Odin."

"Odin knows us no more," retorted the old man, "since we have washed ourselves in the Name of another than the mighty Thor, and taken up the weakly worship of the conquered. So my son would have it! He talked of a new Valhal of the Christian; but let him meet me where he will, he shall not reproach me that he only of all his brethren died unavenged. Where is the slayer? Set him before me that I may strike him dead with one blow!"

Lucius crossed himself, looked upwards, and was stepping forwards, when Verronax with a shout of 'Hold!' leapt into the midst, full before the avenger's uplifted weapon, crying—

"Slay me, old man! It was I who killed thy son, I, Fearnagh the Arvernian!"

"Ho!" said Odo. "Give me thine hand. Let me feel thee. Yea, these be sinews! It is well. I marvelled how my Odorik should have fallen by the soft Roman hand of yonder stripling; but thou art a worthy foe. What made the priestling thrust himself between me and my prey?"

"His generous love," returned Verronax, as Lucius flung himself on his neck, crying—

"O my Verronax, why hast thou come? The bitterness of death was past! The gates were opening."

Meanwhile Æmilius had reached Euric, and had made him understand the substitution. Old Odo knew no Latin, and it was the King, an able orator in both tongues, who expounded all in Gothic, showing how Lucius Æmilius had offered his life in the stead of his friend, and how Verronax had hurried to prevent the sacrifice, reiterating, almost in a tone of command, the alternative of the wehrgeld.

The lites all burst into acclamations at the nobility of the two young men, and some muttered that they had not thought these Romans had so much spirit.

Euric made no decision. He did full justice to the courage and friendship of the youths, and likewise to the fact that Odorik had provoked the quarrel, and had been slain in fair fight; but the choice lay with the father, and perhaps in his heart the politic Visigoth could not regret that Arvernia should lose a champion sure to stand up for Roman or national claims.

Odo listened in silence, leaning on his axe. Then he turned his face to the bystanders, and demanded of them—

"Which of them is the bolder? Which of them flinched at my axe?"

The spectators were unanimous that neither had blenched. The slender lad had presented himself as resolutely as the stately warrior.

"It is well," said Odo. "Either way my son will be worthily avenged. I leave the choice to you, young men."

A brief debate ended in an appeal to the Senator, who, in

spite of all his fortitude, could not restrain himself from groaning aloud, hiding his face in his hands, and hoarsely saying, "Draw lots."

"Yes," said Euric; "commit the judgment to Heaven."

It was hailed as a relief; but Lucius stipulated that the lots should be blessed by a Catholic priest, and Verronax muttered impatiently—

"What matters it? Let us make an end as quickly as may be!"

He had scarcely spoken when shouts were heard, the throng made way, the circle of lites opened, as, waving an olive branch, a wearied, exhausted rider and horse appeared, and staggering to the foot of the throne, there went down entirely spent, the words being just audible, "He lives! Odorik lives!"

It was Marcus Æmilius, covered with dust, and at first unable to utter another word, as he sat on the ground, supported by his brother, while his father made haste to administer the wine handed to him by an attendant.

"Am I in time?" he asked.

"In time, my son," replied his father, repeating his announcement in Gothic. "Odorik lives!"

"He lives, he will live," repeated Marcus, reviving. "I came not away till his life was secure."

"Is it truth?" demanded the old Goth. "Romans have slippery ways."

Meinhard was quick to bear testimony that no man in Arvernia doubted the word of an Æmilius; but Marcus, taking a small

dagger from his belt, held it out, saying—

"His son said that he would know this token."

Odo felt it. "It is my son's knife," he said, still cautiously; "but it cannot speak to say how it was taken from him."

"The old barbarian heathen," quoth Verronax, under his breath; "he would rather lose his son than his vengeance."

Marcus had gathered breath and memory to add, "Tell him Odorik said he would know the token of the red-breast that nested in the winged helm of Helgund."

"I own the token," said Odo. "My son lives. He needs no vengeance." He turned the handle of his axe downwards, passed it to his left hand, and stretched the right to Verronax, saying, "Young man, thou art brave. There is no blood feud between us. Odo, son of Helgund, would swear friendship with you, though ye be Romans."

"Compensation is still due according to the amount of the injury," said the Senator scrupulously. "Is it not so, O King?"

Euric assented, but Odo exclaimed—

"No gold for me! When Odo, son of Helgund, forgives, he forgives outright. Where is my son?"

Food had by this time been brought by the King's order, and after swallowing a few mouthfuls Marcus could stand and speak.

Odorik, apparently dead, had been dragged by the Goths into the hut of the widow Dubhina to await his father's decision as to the burial, and the poor woman had been sheltered by her neighbour, Julitta, leaving the hovel deserted.

Columba, not allowing her grief and suspense to interfere with her visits of mercy to the poor woman, had come down as usual on the evening of the day on which her father and her betrothed had started on their sad journey. Groans, not likely to be emitted by her regular patient, had startled her, and she had found the floor occupied by the huge figure of a young Goth, his face and hair covered with blood from a deep wound on his head, insensible, but his moans and the motion of his limbs betraying life.

Knowing the bitter hatred in Claudiodunum for everything Gothic, the brave girl would not seek for aid nearer than the villa. Thither she despatched her male slave, while with her old nurse she did all in her power for the relief of the wounded man, with no inconsiderable skill. Marcus had brought the Greek physician of the place, but he had done nothing but declare the patient a dead man by all the laws of Galen and Hippocrates. However, the skull and constitution of a vigorous young Goth, fresh from the mountains, were tougher than could be imagined by a member of one of the exhausted races of the Levant. Bishop Sidonius had brought his science and sagacity to the rescue, and under his treatment Odorik had been restored to his senses, and was on the fair way to recovery.

On the first gleam of hope, Marcus had sent off a messenger, but so many of his household and dependents were absent that he had no great choice; so that as soon as hope had become security, he had set forth himself; and it was well he had done so, for he

had overtaken the messenger at what was reckoned as three days' journey from Bordigala. He had ridden ever since without rest, only dismounting to change his steed, scarcely snatching even then a morsel of food, and that morning neither he nor the horse he rode had relaxed for a moment the desperate speed with which he rode against time; so that he had no cause for the shame and vexation that he felt at his utter collapse before the barbarians. King Euric himself declared that he wished he had a Goth who could perform such a feat of endurance.

While Marcus slept, Æmilius and the two young men offered their heartfelt thanks in the Catholic church of Bordigala, and then Euric would not be refused their presence at a great feast of reconciliation on the following day, two of Verronax's speedy-footed followers having been sent off at once to bear home tidings that his intelligence had been in time.

The feast was served in the old proconsular house, with the Roman paraphernalia, arranged with the amount of correct imitation that is to be found at an English dinner-party in the abode of an Indian Rajah. It began with Roman etiquette, but ended in a Gothic revel, which the sober and refined Æmilii could hardly endure.

They were to set off on their return early on the morrow, Meinhard and Odo with them; but when they at length escaped from the barbarian orgies, they had little expectation that their companions would join them in the morning.

However, the two Goths and their followers were on the alert

as soon as they, and as cool-headed as if they had touched no drop of wine.

Old Odo disdained a mule, and would let no hand save his own guide his horse. Verronax and Lucius constituted themselves his guides, and whenever he permitted the slightest assistance, it was always from the Arvernian, whom he seemed to regard as a sort of adopted son.

He felt over his weapons, and told him long stories, of which Verronax understood only a word or two here and there, though the old man seemed little concerned thereat. Now and then he rode along chanting to himself an extemporary song, which ran somewhat thus—

Maids who choose the slain,
Disappointed now.
The Hawk of the Mountain,
The Wolf of the West,
Meet in fierce combat.
Sinks the bold Wolf-cub,
Folds his wing the Falcon!
Shall the soft priestling
Step before him to Valhal,
Cheating Lok's daughter
Of weak-hearted prey?
Lo! the Wolf wakens.
Valkyr relaxes,
Waits for a battlefield,
Wolf-cub to claim.

Friendly the Falcon,
Friendly the Gray-Wolf.

So it ran on, to the great scandal of Lucius, who longed for better knowledge of the Gothic tongue to convince the old man of the folly of his heathen dreams. Meinhard, who was likewise rather shocked, explained that the father and son had been recent arrivals, who had been baptized because Euric required his followers to embrace his faith, but with little real knowledge or acceptance on the part of the father. Young Odorik had been a far more ardent convert; and, after the fashion of many a believer, had taken up the distinctions of sect rather than of religion, and, zealous in the faith he knew, had thought it incumbent on him to insult the Catholics where they seemed to him idolatrous.

A message on the road informed the travellers that they would find Odorik at the villa. Thither then they went, and soon saw the whole household on the steps in eager anticipation. A tall young figure, with a bandage still round his fair flowing locks, came down the steps as Verronax helped the blind man to dismount; and Odo, with a cry of 'My son!' with a ring of ecstasy in the sound, held the youth to his breast and felt him all over.

"Are we friends?" said Odorik, turning to Verronax, when his father released him.

"That is as thou wiliest," returned the Arvernian gravely.

"Know then," said Odorik, "that I know that I erred. I knew not thy Lord when I mocked thine honour to Him. Father, we

had but half learnt the Christian's God. I have seen it now. It was not thy blow, O Arvernian! that taught me; but the Master who inspired yonder youth to offer his life, and who sent the maiden there to wait upon her foe. He is more than man. I own in him the Eternal Creator, Redeemer, and Lord!"

"Yea," said Sidonius to his friend Æmilius, "a great work hath been wrought out. Thus hath the parable of actual life led this zealous but half-taught youth to enter into the higher truth. Lucius will be none the worse priest for having trodden in the steps of Him who was High-priest and Victim. Who may abide strict Divine Justice, had not One stood between the sinner and the Judge? Thus 'Mercy and Truth have met together; Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other.'"

THE CAT OF CAT COPSE

A HAMPSHIRE TRADITION

I

The Dane! the Dane! The heathen Dane
Is wasting Hampshire's coast again—
From ravaged church and plundered farm
Flash the dread beacons of alarm—
  Fly, helpless peasants, fly!
Ytene's green banks and forest shades,
Her heathery slopes and gorse-clad glades
  Re-echo to the cry—
Where is the King, whose strong right hand
Hath oft from danger freed the land?
Nor fleet nor covenant avails
To drive aloof those pirate sails,
  In vain is Alfred's sword;
Vain seems in every sacred fane
The chant—'From fury of the Dane,
  Deliver us, good Lord.'

II

The long keels have the Needles past,
Wight's fairest bowers are flaming fast;
From Solent's waves rise many a mast,
With swelling sails of gold and red,
Dragon and serpent at each head,
Havoc and slaughter breathing forth,
Steer on these locusts of the north.
Each vessel bears a deadly freight;
Each Viking, fired with greed and hate,
His axe is whetting for the strife,
And counting how each Christian life
Shall win him fame in Skaldic lays,
And in Valhalla endless praise.
For Hamble's river straight they steer;
Prayer is in vain, no aid is near—
Hopeless and helpless all must die.
Oh, fainting heart and failing eye,
Look forth upon the foe once more!
Why leap they not upon the shore?
Why pause their keels upon the strand,
As checked by some resistless hand?
The sail they spread, the oars they ply,
Yet neither may advance nor fly.

III

Who is it holds them helpless there?
'Tis He Who hears the anguished prayer;
'Tis He Who to the wave
Hath fixed the bound—mud, rock, or sand—
To mark how far upon the strand
Its foaming sweep may rave.
What is it, but the ebbing tide,
That leaves them here, by Hamble's side,
So firm embedded in the mud
No force of stream, nor storm, nor flood,
Shall ever these five ships bear forth
To fiords and islets of the north;
A thousand years shall pass away,
And leave those keels in Hamble's bay.

IV

Ill were it in my rhyme to tell
The work of slaughter that befell;
In sooth it was a savage time—
Crime ever will engender crime.
Each Viking, as he swam to land,

Fell by a Saxon's vengeful hand;
Turn we from all that vengeance wild—
Where on the deck there cowered a child,
And, closely to his bosom prest,
A snow-white kitten found a nest.
That tender boy, with tresses fair,
Was Edric, Egbert's cherished heir;
The plaything of the homestead he,
Now fondled on his grandame's knee;
Or as beside the hearth he sat,
Oft sporting with his snow-white cat;
Now by the chaplain taught to read,
And lisp his Pater and his Creed;
Well nurtured at his mother's side,
And by his father trained to ride,
To speak the truth, to draw the bow,
And all an English Thane should know,
His days had been as one bright dream—
As smooth as his own river's stream!
Until, at good King Alfred's call,
Thane Egbert left his native hall.

V

Then, five days later, shout and yell,
And shrieks and howls of slaughter fell,

Upon the peaceful homestead came.
'Mid flashing sword, and axe, and flame,
Snatched by a Viking's iron grasp,
From his slain mother's dying clasp,
Saved from the household's flaming grave,
Edric was dragged, a destined slave,
Some northern dame to serve, or heed
The flocks that on the Sæter feed.
Still, with scarce conscious hold he clung
To the white cat, that closely hung
Seeking her refuge in his arm,
Her shelter in the wild alarm—
And who can tell how oft his moan
Was soothed by her soft purring tone?
Time keeping with retracted claw,
Or patting with her velvet paw;
Although of home and friends bereft,
Still this one comforter was left,
So lithe, so swift, so soft, so white,
She might have seemed his guardian sprite.
  The rude Danes deemed her such;
And whispered tales of 'disir' bound
To human lords, as bird or hound.
Nor one 'mid all the fleet was found
  To hurt one tender paw.
And when the captive knelt to pray
None would his orisons gainsay;
For as they marked him day by day,
  Increased their wondering awe.

VI

Crouched by the mast, the child and cat,
Through the dire time of slaughter sat,
  By terror both spellbound;
But when night came, a silence drear
Fell on the coast; and far or near,
No voice caught Edric's wakeful ear,
  Save water's lapping sound.
He wandered from the stern to prow,
Ate of the stores, and marvelled how
  He yet might reach the ground;
Till low and lower sank the tide,
Dark banks of mud spread far and wide
  Around that fast-bound wreck.
Then the lone boy climbed down the ship,
To cross the mud by bound and skip,
  His cat upon his neck.
Light was his weight and swift his leap,
Now would he softly tread, now creep,
For treacherous was the mud, and deep
From stone to weed, from weed to plank,
Leaving a hole where'er he sank;
With panting breath and sore taxed strength
The solid earth he felt at length.

Sheltered within the copse he lay,
When dawn had brightened into day,
For when one moment there was seen,
His red cap glancing 'mid the green,
  A fearful cry arose—
"Here lurks a Dane!" "The Dane seek out"
With knife and axe, the rabble rout
Made the copse ring with yell and shout
  To find their dreaded foes.
And Edric feared to meet a stroke,
Before they knew the tongue he spoke.
Hid 'mid the branches of an oak,
  He heard their calls and blows.
Of food he had a simple store,
And when the churls the chase gave o'er,
And evening sunk upon the vale,
With rubbing head and upright tail,
Pacing before him to and fro,
Puss lured him on the way to go—
Coaxing him on, with tender wile,
O'er heath and down for many a mile.
Ask me not how her course she knows.
He from Whom every instinct flows
Hath breathed into His creatures power,
Giving to each its needful dower;
And strive and question as we will,
We cannot trace the inborn skill,
Nor fathom how, where'er she roam,
The cat ne'er fails to find her home.

VII

What pen may dare to paint the woe,
When Egbert saw his home laid low?
Where, by the desolated hearth,
The mother lay who gave him birth,
And, close beside, his fair young wife,
And servants, slain in bootless strife—
  Mournful the King stood near.
Alfred, who came to be his guest,
And deeply rued that his behest
Had all unguarded left that nest,
  To meet such ruin drear.
With hand, and heart, and lip, he gave
All king or friend, both true and brave,
Could give, one pang of grief to save,
  To comfort, or to cheer—
As from the blackened walls they drew
Each corpse, and laid with reverence due;
And then it was that Egbert knew
  All save the child were here.
King Alfred's noble head was bent,
A monarch's pain his bosom rent;
Kindly he wrung Thane Egbert's hand—
"Lo! these have won the blissful land,

Where foeman's shout is heard no more,
Nor wild waves beat upon the shore;
Brief was the pang, the strife is o'er—
  They are at peace, my friend!
Safe, where the weary are at rest;
Safe, where the banish'd and opprest
  Find joys that never end."
Thane Egbert groaned, and scarce might speak
For tears that ploughed his hardy cheek,
  As his dread task was done.
And for the slain, from monk and priest
Rose requiems that never ceased,
  While still he sought his son.
"Oh, would to Heaven!" that father said,
"There lay my darling calmly dead,
Rather than as a thrall be bred—
  His Christian faith undone."
"Nay, life is hope!" bespake the King,
"God o'er the child can spread His wing
And shield him in the Northman's power
Safe as in Alswyth's guarded bower;
Treaty and ransom may be found
To win him back to English ground."

VIII

The funeral obsequies were o'er,
  But lingered still the Thane,
Hanging around his home once more,
  Feeding his bitter pain.
The King would fain with friendly force
Urge him anew to mount his horse,
Turn from the piteous sight away,
And fresh begin life's saddened day,
His loved ones looking yet to greet,
Where ne'er shall part the blest who meet.
Just then a voice that well he knew,
A sound that mixed the purr and mew,
  Went to the father's heart.
On a large stone King Alfred sat
Against his buskin rubbed a cat,
  Snow-white in every part,
Though drenched and soiled from head to tail.
The poor Thane's tears poured down like hail—
"Poor puss, in vain thy loving wail,"
  Then came a joyful start!
A little hand was on his cloak—
"Father!" a voice beside him spoke,
  Emerging from the wood.
All travel-stained, and marked with mire,
With trace of blood, and toil, and fire,
Yet safe and sound beside his sire,
  Edric before them stood.
And as his father wept for joy,
King Alfred blessed the rescued boy,

And thanked his Maker good!
Who doth the captive's prayer fulfil,
Making His creatures work His will
By means not understood.

NOTE.—The remains of the five Danish vessels still lie embedded in the mud of the Hamble River near Southampton, though parts have been carried off and used as wood for furniture in the farm-houses. The neighbouring wood is known as Cat Copse, and a tradition has been handed down that a cat, and a boy in a red cap, escaped from the Danish ships, took refuge there.

DE FACTO AND DE JURE

I. DE FACTO

The later summer sunbeams lay on an expanse of slightly broken ground where purple and crimson heather were relieved by the golden blossoms of the dwarf gorse, interspersed with white stars of stitch-wort. Here and there, on the slopes, grew stunted oaks and hollies, whose polished leaves gleamed white with the reflection of the light; but there was not a trace of human habitation save a track, as if trodden by horses' feet, clear of the furze and heath, and bordered by soft bent grass, beginning to grow brown.

Near this track—for path it could hardly be called—stood a slender lad waiting and watching, a little round cap covering his short-cut brown hair, a crimson tunic reaching to his knee, leggings and shoes of deerhide, and a sword at his side, fastened by a belt of the like skin, guarded and clasped with silver. His features were delicate, though sunburnt, and his eyes were riveted on the distance, where the path had disappeared amid the luxuriant spires of ling.

A hunting-horn sounded, and the youth drew himself together into an attitude of eager attention; the baying of hounds and

trampling of horses' hoofs came nearer and nearer, and by and by there came in view the ends of boar-spears, the tall points of bows, a cluster of heads of men and horses—strong, sturdy, shaggy, sure-footed creatures, almost ponies, but the only steeds fit to pursue the chase on this rough and encumbered ground.

Foremost rode, with ivory and gold hunting-horn slung in a rich Spanish baldrick, and a slender gilt circlet round his green hunting-cap, a stout figure, with a face tanned to a fiery colour, keen eyes of a dark auburn tint, and a shock of hair of the same deep red.

At sight of him, the lad flung himself on his knees on the path, with the cry, "Haro! Haro! Justice, Sir King!"

"Out of my way, English hound!" cried the King. "This is no time for thy Haro."

"Nay, but one word, good fair King! I am French—French by my father's side!" cried the lad, as there was a halt, more from the instinct of the horse than the will of the King. 'Bertram de Maisonforte! My father married the Lady of Boyatt, and her inheritance was confirmed to him by your father, brave King William, my Lord; but now he is dead, and his kinsman, Roger de Maisonforte, hath ousted her and me, her son and lawful heir, from house and home, and we pray for justice, Sir King?'

'Ha, Roger, thou there! What say'st thou to this bold beggar!' shouted the Red King.

'I say,' returned a black, bronzed hunter, pressing to the front, 'that what I hold of thee, King William, on tenure of homage,

and of two good horses and staunch hounds yearly, I yield to no English mongrel churl, who dares to meddle with me.'

'Thou hear'st, lad,' said Rufus, with his accustomed oath, 'homage hath been done to us for the land, nor may it be taken back. Out of our way, or—'

'Sir! sir!' entreated the lad, grasping the bridle, 'if no more might be, we would be content if Sir Roger would but leave my mother enough for her maintenance among the nuns of Romsey, and give me a horse and suit of mail to go on the Holy War with Duke Robert.'

'Ho! ho! a modest request for a beggarly English clown!' cried the King, aiming a blow at the lad with his whip, and pushing on his horse, so as almost to throw him back on the heath. 'Ho! ho! fit him out for a fool's errand!'

'We'll fit him! We'll teach him to take the cross at other men's expense!' shouted the followers, seizing on the boy.

'Nay; we'll bestow his cross on him for a free gift!' exclaimed Roger de Maisonforte.

And Bertram, struggling desperately in vain among the band of ruffians, found his left arm bared, and two long and painful slashes, in the form of the Crusader's cross, inflicted, amid loud laughter, as the blood sprang forth.

'There, Sir Crusader,' said Roger, grinding his teeth over him. 'Go on thy way now—as a horse-boy, if so please thee, and know better than to throw thy mean false English pretension in the face of a gentle Norman.'

Men, horses, dogs, all seemed to trample and scoff at Bertram as he fell back on the elastic stems of the heath and gorse, whose prickles seemed to renew the insults by scratching his face.

When the King's horn, the calls, the brutal laughter, and the baying of the dogs had begun to die away in the distance, he gathered himself together, sat up, and tried to find some means of stanching the blood. Not only was the wound in a place hard to reach, but it had been ploughed with the point of a boar-spear, and was grievously torn. He could do nothing with it, and, as he perceived, he had further been robbed of his sword, his last possession, his father's sword.

The large tears of mingled rage, grief, and pain might well spring from the poor boy's eyes in his utter loneliness, as he clenched his hand with powerless wrath, and regained his feet, to retrace, as best he might, his way to where his widowed mother had found a temporary shelter in a small religious house.

The sun grew hotter and hotter, Bertram's wound bled, though not profusely, the smart grew upon him, his tongue was parched with thirst, and though he kept resolutely on, his breath came panting, his head grew dizzy, his eyes dim, his feet faltered, and at last, just as he attained a wider and more trodden way, he dropped insensible by the side of the path, his dry lips trying to utter the cry, "Lord, have mercy on me!"

II. DE JURE

When Bertram de Maisonforte opened his eyes again cold waters were on his face, wine was moistening his lips, the burning of his wound was assuaged by cooling oil, while a bandage was being applied, and he was supported on a breast and in arms, clad indeed in a hauberk, but as tenderly kind as the full deep voice that spoke in English, "He comes round. How now, my child?"

"Father," murmured Bertram, with dreamy senses.

"Better now; another sup from the flask, David," again said the kind voice, and looking up, he became aware of the beautiful benignant face, deep blue eyes, and long light locks of the man in early middle age who had laid him on his knee, while a priest was binding his arm, and a fair and graceful boy, a little younger than himself, was standing by with the flask of wine in his hand, and a face of such girlish beauty that as he knelt to hold the wine to his lips, Bertram asked—

"Am I among the Angels?"

"Not yet," said the elder man. "Art thou near thine home?"

"Alack! I have no home, kind sir," said Bertram, now able to raise himself and to perceive that he was in the midst of a small hand of armed men, such as every knight or noble necessarily carried about with him for protection. There was a standard with a dragon, and their leader himself was armed, all save his head, and, as Bertram saw, was a man of massive strength, noble

stature, and kingly appearance.

"What shall we do for thee?" he asked. "Who hath put thee in this evil case?"

Bertram gave his name, and at its Norman sound there was a start of repulsion from the boy. "French after all!" he exclaimed.

"Nay, David," said the leader, "if I mind me rightly, the Lady Elftrud of Boyatt wedded a brave Norman of that name. Art thou her son? I see something of her face, and thou hast an English tongue."

"I am; I am her only son!" exclaimed Bertram; and as he told of his wrongs and the usage he had met with, young David cried out with indignation—

"Uncle, uncle, how canst thou suffer that these things should be? Here are our faithful cnihts. Let us ride to the forest. Wherefore should it not be with Red William and his ruffians as with Scottish Duncan and Donald?"

"Hush thee, David, my nephew. Thou knowest that may not be. But for thee, young Bertram, we will see what can be done. Canst sit a horse now?"

"Yea, my lord, full well. I know not what came over me, even now," said Bertram, much ashamed of the condition in which he had been found.

A sumpter horse was found for him, the leader of the party saying that they would go on to his own home, where the youth's wound should be looked to, and they could then decide what could be done for him.

Bertram was still so far faint, suffering, weak, and weary, that he was hardly awake to curiosity as to his surroundings, and had quite enough to do to keep his seat in the saddle, and follow in the wake of the leader's tall white horse, above which shone his bright chain mail and his still brighter golden locks, so that the exhausted boy began in some measure to feel as if he were following St. Michael on his way to some better world.

Now and then the tall figure turned to see how it was with him, and as he drooped more with fatigue and pain, bade one of the retainers keep beside him and support him.

Thus at length the cavalcade left the heathery expanse and reached a valley, green with meadow-land and waving corn, with silvery beards of barley rippling in the evening light, and cows and sheep being gathered for the night towards a dwelling where the river had been trained to form a moat round low green ramparts enclosing a number of one-storied thatched houses and barns, with one round tower, a strong embattled gateway, and at a little distance a square church tower, and other cottages standing outside.

A shout of ecstasy broke out from the village as the advancing party was seen and recognised. Men, women, and children, rudely but substantially clad, and many wearing the collar of the thrall, ran out from their houses, baring their heads, bowing low, and each in turn receiving some kind word or nod of greeting from the lord whom they welcomed, while one after another of his armed followers turned aside, and was absorbed into a happy

family by wife or parent. A drawbridge crossed the moat, and there was a throng of joyful servants in the archway—foremost a priest, stretching out his hands in blessing, and a foreign-looking old woman, gray-haired and dark-eyed, who gathered young David into her embrace as he sprang from his horse, calling him her heart's darling and her sunshine, and demanding, with a certain alarm, where were his brothers.

"In Scotland, dear Nurse Agnes—even where they should be," was David's answer. "We are conquerors, do you see! Edgar is a crowned and anointed King—seated on the holy stone of Scone, and Alexander is beside him to fight for him!"

"It is even so, nurse," said the elder man, turning from the priest, to whom he had more briefly spoken; "God hath blessed our arms, and young Edgar has his right. God shield him in it! And now, nurse, here is a poor youth who needs thy care, after one of Red William's rough jests."

III. KING AT HOME

Weary, faint, and feverish as Bertram de Maisonforte was, he was past caring for anything but the relief of rest, cool drink, and the dressing of his wound; nor did he even ask where he was until he awoke in broad daylight the next morning, to the sound of church bells, to the sight of a low but spacious chamber, with stone walls, deerskins laid on the floor, and the old nurse standing by him with a cup of refreshing drink, and ready to attend to his

wound.

It was then that, feeling greatly refreshed, he ventured upon asking her in whose house he was, and who was the good lord who had taken pity on him.

"Who should it be save him who should be the good lord of every Englishman," she replied, "mine own dear foster-son, the princely Atheling—he who takes up the cause of every injured man save his own?"

Bertram was amazed, for he had only heard Normans speak of Edgar Atheling, the heir of the ancient race, as a poor, tame-spirited, wretched creature, unable to assert himself, and therefore left unmolested by the conquerors out of contempt. He proceeded to ask what the journey was from which the Atheling was returning, and the nurse, nothing loth, beguiled the tendance on his arm by explaining how she had long ago travelled from Hungary with her charges, Edgar, Margaret, and Christina; how it had come about that the crown, which should have been her darling's, had been seized by the fierce duke from beyond the sea; how Edgar, then a mere child, had been forced to swear oaths of fealty by which he held himself still bound; how her sweetest pearl of ladies, her jewel Margaret, had been wedded to the rude wild King of Scots, and how her gentle sweetness and holiness had tamed and softened him, so that she had been the blessing of his kingdom till he and his eldest son had fallen at Alnwick while she lay a-dying; how the fierce savage Scots had risen and driven forth her young children; and how their uncle

the Atheling had ridden forth, taken them to his home, bred them in all holiness and uprightness and good and knightly courage, and when Edgar and Alexander, the two eldest, were full grown, had gone northward with them once more, and had won back, in fair field, the throne of their father Malcolm.

Truly there might well be rejoicing and triumph on the estate where the Atheling ruled as a father and had been sorely missed.

He was at his early mass of thanksgiving at present, and Bertram was so much better that Nurse Agnes did not withstand his desire to rise and join the household and villagers, who were all collected in the building, low and massive, but on which Edgar Atheling had lavished the rich ornamental work introduced by the Normans. The round arched doorway was set in a succession of elaborate zigzags, birds' heads, lions' faces, twists and knots; and within, the altar-hangings and the priest's robes were stiff with the exquisite and elaborate embroidery for which the English nunneries were famed.

The whole building, with its low-browed roof, circular chancel arch still more richly adorned, and stout short columns, was filled with kneeling figures in rough homespun or sheepskin garments, and with shaggy heads, above which towered the shining golden locks of the Atheling, which were allowed to grow to a much greater length than was the Norman fashion, and beside him was the still fairer head of his young nephew, David of Scotland. It was a thanksgiving service for their victory and safe return; and Bertram was just in time for the *Te Deum* that followed the mass.

The Atheling, after all was over, came forth, exchanging greetings with one after another of his franklins, cnihts, and thralls, all of whom seemed to be equally delighted to see him back again, and whom he bade to a feast in the hall, which would be prepared in the course of the day. Some, meantime, went to their homes near at hand, others would amuse themselves with games at ball, archery, singlestick, and the like, in an open space within the moat—where others fished.

Bertram was not neglected. The Atheling inquired after his health, heard his story in more detail, and after musing on it, said that after setting affairs in order at home, he meant to visit his sister and niece in the Abbey at Romsey, and would then make some arrangement for the Lady of Maisonforte; also he would endeavour to see the King on his return to Winchester, and endeavour to plead with him.

"William will at times hearken to an old comrade," he said; "but it is an ill time to take him when he is hot upon the chase. Meantime, thou art scarce yet fit to ride, and needest more of good Agnes's leech-craft."

Bertram was indeed stiff and weary enough to be quite content to lie on a bearskin in the wide hall of the dwelling, or under the eaves without, and watch the doings with some amusement.

He had been bred in some contempt of the Saxons. His father's marriage had been viewed as a *mésalliance*, and though the knight of Maisonforte had been honourable and kindly, and the Lady Elftrud had fared better than many a Saxon bride,

still the French and the Breton dames of the neighbourhood had looked down on her, and the retainers had taught her son to look on the English race as swine, boors, and churls, ignorant of all gentle arts, of skill and grace.

But here was young David among youths of his own age, tilting as gracefully and well as any young Norman could—making Bertram long that his arm should cease to be so heavy and burning, so that he might show his prowess.

Here was a contention with bow and arrow that would not have disgraced the best men-at-arms of Maisonforte—here again, later in the day, was minstrelsy of a higher order than his father's ears had cared for, but of which his mother had whispered her traditions.

Here, again, was the chaplain showing his brother-priests with the greatest pride and delight a scroll of Latin, copied from a MS. Psalter of the holy and Venerable Beda by the hand of his own dear pupil, young David.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.