

Harold, Book 5. The Last Of The Saxon Kings

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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BOOK V.

DEATH AND LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

Harold, without waiting once more to see Edith, nor even taking leave of his father, repaired to Dunwich [124], the capital of his earldom. In his absence, the King wholly forgot Algar and his suit; and in the mean while the only lordships at his disposal, Stigand, the grasping bishop, got from him without an effort. In much wrath, Earl Algar, on the fourth day, assembling all the loose men-at-arms he could find around the metropolis, and at the head of a numerous disorderly band, took his way into Wales, with his young daughter Aldyth, to whom the crown of a Welch king was perhaps some comfort for the loss of the fair Earl; though the rumour ran that she had long since lost her heart to her father's foe.

Edith, after a long homily from the King, returned to Hilda; nor did her godmother renew the subject of the convent. All she said on parting, was, "Even in youth the silver cord may be loosened, and the golden bowl may be broken; and rather perhaps in youth than in age, when the heart has grown hard, wilt thou recall with a sigh my counsels."

Godwin had departed to Wales; all his sons were at their several lordships; Edward was left alone to his monks and relic-venders. And so months passed.

Now it was the custom with the old kings of England to hold state and wear their crowns thrice a year, at Christmas, at Easter, and at Whitsuntide; and in those times their nobles came round them, and there was much feasting and great pomp.

So, in the Easter of the year of our Lord 1053, King Edward kept his court at Windshore [125], and Earl Godwin and his sons, and many others of high degree, left their homes to do honour to the King. And Earl Godwin came first to his house in London--near the Tower Palatine, in what is now called the Fleet--and Harold the Earl, and Tostig, and Leofwine, and Gurth, were to meet him there, and go thence, with the full state of their sub-thegns, and cnechts, and house-carles, their falcons, and their hounds, as become men of such rank, to the court of King Edward.

Earl Godwin sate with his wife, Githa, in a room out of the Hall, which looked on the Thames,--awaiting Harold, who was expected to arrive ere nightfall. Gurth had ridden forth to meet his brother, and Leofwine and Tostig had gone over to Southwark, to try their band-dogs on the great bear, which had been brought from the north a few days

before, and was said to have hugged many good hounds to death, and a large train of thegns and house-carles had gone with them to see the sport; so that the old Earl and his lady the Dane sate alone. And there was a cloud upon Earl Godwin's large forehead, and he sate by the fire, spreading his hands before it, and looking thoughtfully on the flame, as it broke through the smoke which burst out into the cover, or hole in the roof. And in that large house there were no less than three "covers," or rooms, wherein fires could be lit in the centre of the floor; and the rafters above were blackened with the smoke; and in those good old days, ere chimneys, if existing, were much in use, "poses, and rheumatisms, and catarrhs," were unknown, so wholesome and healthful was the smoke. Earl Godwin's favourite hound, old, like himself, lay at his feet, dreaming, for it whined and was restless. And the Earl's old hawk, with its feathers all stiff and sparse, perched on the dossal of the Earl's chair and the floor was pranked with rushes and sweet herbs--the first of the spring; and Githa's feet were on her stool, and she leaned her proud face on the small hand which proved her descent from the Dane, and rocked herself to and fro, and thought of her son Wolnoth in the court of the Norman.

"Githa," at last said the Earl, "thou hast been to me a good wife and a true, and thou hast borne me tall and bold sons, some of whom have caused us sorrow, and some joy; and in sorrow and in joy we have but drawn closer to each other. Yet when we wed thou wert in thy first youth, and the best part of my years was fled; and thou wert a Dane and I a Saxon; and thou a king's niece, and now a king's sister, and I but tracing two descents to thegn's rank."

Moved and marvelling at this touch of sentiment in the calm earl, in whom indeed such sentiment was rare, Githa roused herself from her musings, and said, simply and anxiously:

"I fear my lord is not well, that he speaks thus to Githa!"

The Earl smiled faintly.

"Thou art right with thy woman's wit, wife. And for the last few weeks, though I said it not to alarm thee, I have had strange noises in my ears, and a surge, as of blood, to the temples."

"O Godwin! dear spouse," said Githa, tenderly, "and I was blind to the cause, but wondered why there was some change in thy manner! But I will go to Hilda to-morrow; she hath charms against all disease."

"Leave Hilda in peace, to give her charms to the young; age defies Wigh and Wicca. Now hearken to me. I feel that my thread is nigh spent, and, as Hilda would say, my Fylgia forewarns me that we are about to part. Silence, I say, and hear me. I have done proud things in my day; I have made kings and built thrones, and I stand higher in England than ever thegn or earl stood before. I would not, Githa, that the tree of my house, planted in the storm, and watered with lavish blood, should wither away."

The old Earl paused, and Githa said, loftily:

"Fear not that thy name will pass from the earth, or thy race from power. For fame has been wrought by thy hands, and sons have been born to thy embrace; and the boughs of the tree thou hast planted shall live in the sunlight when we its roots, O my husband, are buried

in the earth."

"Githa," replied the Earl, "thou speakest as the daughter of kings and the mother of men; but listen to me, for my soul is heavy. Of these our sons, or first-born, alas! is a wanderer and outcast--Sweyn, once the beautiful and brave; and Wolnoth, thy darling, is a guest in the court of the Norman, our foe. Of the rest, Gurth is so mild and so calm, that I predict without fear that he will be warrior of fame, for the mildest in hall are ever the boldest in field. But Gurth hath not the deep wit of these tangled times; and Leofwine is too light, and Tostig too fierce. So wife mine, of these our six sons, Harold alone, dauntless as Tostig, mild as Gurth, hath his father's thoughtful brain. And, if the King remains as aloof as now from his royal kinsman, Edward the Atheling, who"--the Earl hesitated and looked round--"who so near to the throne when I am no more, as Harold, the joy of the ceorls, and the pride of the thegns?--he whose tongue never falters in the Witan, and whose arm never yet hath known defeat in the field?"

Githa's heart swelled, and her cheek grew flushed.

"But what I fear the most," resumed the Earl, "is, not the enemy without, but the jealousy within. By the side of Harold stands Tostig, rapacious to grasp, but impotent to hold--able to ruin, strengthless to save."

"Nay, Godwin, my lord, thou wrongest our handsome son."

"Wife, wife," said the Earl, stamping his foot, "hear me and obey me; for my words on earth may be few, and while thou gainsayest me the blood mounts to my brain, and my eyes see through a cloud."

"Forgive me, sweet lord," said Githa, humbly.

"Mickle and sore it repents me that in their youth I spared not the time from my worldly ambition to watch over the hearts of my sons; and thou wert too proud of the surface without, to look well to the workings within, and what was once soft to the touch is now hard to the hammer. In the battle of life the arrows we neglect to pick up, Fate, our foe, will store in her quiver; we have armed her ourselves with the shafts--the more need to beware with the shield. Wherefore, if thou survivest me, and if, as I forebode, dissension break out between Harold and Tostig, I charge thee by memory of our love, and reverence for my grave, to deem wise and just all that Harold deems just and wise. For when Godwin is in the dust, his House lives alone in Harold. Heed me now, and heed ever. And so, while the day yet lasts, I will go forth into the marts and the guilds, and talk with the burgesses, and smile on their wives, and be, to the last, Godwin the smooth and the strong."

So saying; the old Earl arose, and walked forth with a firm step; and his old hound sprang up, pricked its ears, and followed him; the blinded falcon turned its head towards the clapping door, but did not stir from the dossel.

Then Githa again leant her cheek on her hand, and again rocked herself to and fro, gazing into the red flame of the fire,--red and fitful through the blue smoke,--and thought over her lord's words. It might be the third part of an hour after Godwin had left the house, when the

door opened, and Githa, expecting the return of her sons, looked up eagerly, but it was Hilda, who stooped her head under the vault of the door; and behind Hilda came two of her maidens, bearing a small cyst, or chest. The Vala motioned to her attendants to lay the cyst at the feet of Githa, and that done, with lowly salutation they left the room.

The superstitions of the Danes were strong in Githa; and she felt an indescribable awe when Hilda stood before her, the red light playing on the Vala's stern marble face, and contrasting robes of funereal black. But, with all her awe, Githa, who, not educated like her daughter Edith, had few feminine resources, loved the visits of her mysterious kinswoman. She loved to live her youth over again in discourse on the wild customs and dark rites of the Dane; and even her awe itself had the charm which the ghost tale has to the child;--for the illiterate are ever children. So, recovering her surprise, and her first pause, she rose to welcome the Vala, and said:

"Hail, Hilda, and thrice hail! The day has been warm and the way long; and, ere thou takest food and wine, let me prepare for thee the bath for thy form, or the bath for thy feet. For as sleep to the young, is the bath to the old."

Hilda shook her head.

"Bringer of sleep am I, and the baths I prepare are in the halls of Valhalla. Offer not to the Vala the bath for mortal weariness, and the wine and the food meet for human guests. Sit thee down, daughter of the Dane, and thank thy new gods for the past that hath been thine. Not ours is the present, and the future escapes from our dreams; but the past is ours ever, and all eternity cannot revoke a single joy that the moment hath known."

Then seating herself in Godwin's large chair, she leant over her seid-staff, and was silent, as if absorbed in her thoughts.

"Githa," she said at last, "where is thy lord? I came to touch his hands and to look on his brow."

"He hath gone forth into the mart, and my sons are from home; and Harold comes hither, ere night, from his earldom."

A faint smile, as of triumph, broke over the lips of the Vala, and then as suddenly yielded to an expression of great sadness.

"Githa," she said, slowly, "doubtless thou rememberest in thy young days to have seen or heard of the terrible hell-maid Belsta?"

"Ay, ay," answered Githa shuddering; "I saw her once in gloomy weather, driving before her herds of dark grey cattle. Ay, ay; and my father beheld her ere his death, riding the air on a wolf, with a snake for a bridle. Why askest thou?"

"Is it not strange," said Hilda, evading the question, that Belsta, and Heidr, and Hulla of old, the wolf-riders, the men-devourers, could win to the uttermost secrets of galdra, though applied only to purposes the direst and fellest to man, and that I, though ever in the future,--I, though tasking the Nornas not to afflict a foe, but to shape the careers of those I love,--I find, indeed, my predictions

fulfilled; but how often, alas! only in horror and doom!"

"How so, kinswoman, how so?" said Githa, awed yet charmed in the awe, and drawing her chair nearer to the mournful sorceress. "Didst thou not foretell our return in triumph from the unjust outlawry, and, lo, it hath come to pass? and hast thou not" (here Githa's proud face flushed) "foretold also that my stately Harold shall wear the diadem of a king?"

"Truly, the first came to pass," said Hilda; "but----" she paused, and her eye fell on the cyst; then breaking off she continued, speaking to herself rather than to Githa--"And Harold's dream, what did that portend? the runes fail me, and the dead give no voice. And beyond one dim day, in which his betrothed shall clasp him with the arms of a bride, all is dark to my vision--dark--dark. Speak not to me, Githa; for a burthen, heavy as the stone on a grave, rests on a weary heart!"

A dead silence succeeded, till, pointing with her staff to the fire, the Vala said, "Lo, where the smoke and the flame contend--the smoke rises in dark gyres to the air, and escapes, to join the wrack of clouds. From the first to the last we trace its birth and its fall; from the heart of the fire to the descent in the rain, so is it with human reason, which is not the light but the smoke; it struggles but to darken us; it soars but to melt in the vapour and dew. Yet, lo, the flame burns in our hearth till the fuel fails, and goes at last, none know whither. But it lives in the air though we see it not; it lurks in the stone and waits the flash of the steel; it coils round the dry leaves and sere stalks, and a touch re-illuminates it; it plays in the marsh--it collects in the heavens--it appals us in the lightning--it gives warmth to the air--life of our life, and the element of all elements. O Githa, the flame is the light of the soul, the element everlasting; and it liveth still, when it escapes from our view; it burneth in the shapes to which it passes; it vanishes, but its never extinct."

So saying, the Vala's lips again closed; and again both the women sate silent by the great fire, as it flared and flickered over the deep lines and high features of Githa, the Earl's wife, and the calm, unwrinkled, solemn face of the melancholy Vala.

CHAPTER II.

While these conferences took place in the house of Godwin, Harold, on his way to London, dismissed his train to precede him to his father's roof, and, striking across the country, rode fast and alone towards the old Roman abode of Hilda. Months had elapsed since he had seen or heard of Edith. News at that time, I need not say, was rare and scarce, and limited to public events, either transmitted by special nuncius or passing pilgrim, or borne from lip to lip by the talk of the scattered multitude. But even in his busy and anxious duties, Harold had in vain sought to banish from his heart the image of that young girl, whose life he needed no Vala to predict to him was interwoven with the fibres of his own. The obstacles which, while he yielded to, he held unjust and tyrannical, obstacles allowed by his reluctant reason and his secret ambition--not sanctified by

conscience--only inflamed the deep strength of the solitary passion his life had known; a passion that, dating from the very childhood of Edith, had, often unknown to himself, animated his desire of fame, and mingled with his visions of power. Nor, though hope was far and dim, was it extinct. The legitimate heir of Edward the Confessor was a prince living in the Court of the Emperor, of fair repute, and himself wedded; and Edward's health, always precarious, seemed to forbid any very prolonged existence to the reigning king. Therefore, he thought that through the successor, whose throne would rest in safety upon Harold's support, he might easily obtain that dispensation from the Pope which he knew the present king would never ask--a dispensation rarely indeed, if ever, accorded to any subject, and which, therefore, needed all a king's power to back it.

So in that hope, and fearful lest it should be quenched for ever by Edith's adoption of the veil and the irrevocable vow, with a beating, disturbed, but joyful heart he rode over field and through forest to the old Roman house.

He emerged at length to the rear of the villa, and the sun, fast hastening to its decline, shone full upon the rude columns of the Druid temple. And there, as he had seen her before, when he had first spoken of love and its barriers, he beheld the young maiden.

He sprang from his horse, and leaving the well-trained animal loose to browse on the waste land, he ascended the knoll. He stole noiselessly behind Edith, and his foot stumbled against the grave-stone of the dead Titan-Saxon of old. But the apparition, whether real or fancied, and the dream that had followed, had long passed from his memory, and no superstition was in the heart springing to the lips, that cried "Edith" once again.

The girl started, looked round, and fell upon his breast. It was some moments before she recovered consciousness, and then, withdrawing herself gently from his arms, she leant for support against the Teuton altar.

She was much changed since Harold had seen her last: her cheek had grown pale and thin, and her rounded form seemed wasted; and sharp grief, as he gazed, shot through the soul of Harold.

"Thou hast pined, thou hast suffered," said he, mournfully: "and I, who would shed my life's blood to take one from thy sorrows, or add to one of thy joys, have been afar, unable to comfort, perhaps only a cause of thy woe."

"No, Harold," said Edith, faintly, "never of woe; always of comfort, even in absence. I have been ill, and Hilda hath tried rune and charm all in vain. But I am better, now that Spring hath come tardily forth, and I look on the fresh flowers, and hear the song of the birds."

But tears were in the sound of her voice, while she spoke.

"And they have not tormented thee again with the thoughts of the convent?"

"They? no;--but my soul, yes. O Harold, release me from my promise; for the time already hath come that thy sister foretold to me; the

silver cord is loosened, and the golden bowl is broken, and I would fain take the wings of the dove, and be at peace."

"Is it so?--Is there peace in the home where the thought of Harold becomes a sin?"

"Not sin then and there, Harold, not sin. Thy sister hailed the convent when she thought of prayer for those she loved."

"Prate not to me of my sister!" said Harold, through his set teeth. "It is but a mockery to talk of prayer for the heart that thou thyself rendest in twain. Where is Hilda? I would see her."

"She hath gone to thy father's house with a gift; and it was to watch for her return that I sate on the green knoll."

The Earl then drew near and took her hand, and sate by her side, and they conversed long. But Harold saw with a fierce pang that Edith's heart was set upon the convent, and that even in his presence, and despite his soothing words, she was broken-spirited and despondent. It seemed as if her youth and life had gone from her, and the day had come in which she said, "There is no pleasure."

Never had he seen her thus; and, deeply moved as well as keenly stung, he rose at length to depart; her hand lay passive in his parting clasp, and a slight shiver went over her frame.

"Farewell, Edith; when I return from Windshore, I shall be at my old home yonder, and we shall meet again."

Edith's lips murmured inaudibly, and she bent her eyes to the ground.

Slowly Harold regained his steed, and as he rode on, he looked behind and waved oft his hand. But Edith sate motionless, her eyes still on the ground, and he saw not the tears that fell from them fast and burning; nor heard he the low voice that groaned amidst the heathen ruins, "Mary, sweet mother, shelter me from my own heart!"

The sun had set before Harold gained the long and spacious abode of his father. All around it lay the roofs and huts of the great Earl's special tradesmen, for even his goldsmith was but his freed ceorl. The house itself stretched far from the Thames inland, with several low courts built only of timber, rugged and shapeless, but filled with bold men, then the great furniture of a noble's halls.

Amidst the shouts of hundreds, eager to hold his stirrup, the Earl dismounted, passed the swarming hall, and entered the room, in which he found Hilda and Githa, and Godwin, who had preceded his entry but a few minutes.

In the beautiful reverence of son to father, which made one of the loveliest features of the Saxon character [126] (as the frequent want of it makes the most hateful of the Norman vices), the all-powerful Harold bowed his knee to the old Earl, who placed his hand on his head in benediction, and then kissed him on the cheek and brow.

"Thy kiss, too, dear mother," said the younger Earl; and Githa's embrace, if more cordial than her lord's, was not, perhaps, more fond.

"Greet Hilda, my son," said Godwin, "she hath brought me a gift, and she hath tarried to place it under thy special care. Thou alone must heed the treasure, and open the casket. But when and where, my kinswoman?"

"On the sixth day after thy coming to the King's hall," answered Hilda, not returning the smile with which Godwin spoke,--"on the sixth day, Harold, open the chest, and take out the robe which hath been spun in the house of Hilda for Godwin the Earl. And now, Godwin, I have clasped thine hand, and I have looked on thy brow, and my mission is done, and I must wend homeward."

"That shalt thou not, Hilda," said the hospitable Earl; "the meanest wayfarer hath a right to bed and board in this house for a night and a day, and thou wilt not disgrace us by leaving our threshold, the bread unbroken, and the couch unpressed. Old friend, we were young together, and thy face is welcome to me as the memory of former days."

Hilda shook her head, and one of those rare, and for that reason most touching, expressions of tenderness of which the calm and rigid character of her features, when in repose, seemed scarcely susceptible, softened her eye, and relaxed the firm lines of her lips.

"Son of Wolnoth," said she, gently, "not under thy roof-tree should lodge the raven of bode. Bread have I not broken since yestere'en, and sleep will be far from my eyes to-night. Fear not, for my people without are stout and armed, and for the rest there lives not the man whose arm can have power over Hilda."

She took Harold's hand as she spoke, and leading him forth, whispered in his ear, "I would have a word with thee ere we part." Then, reaching the threshold, she waved her hand thrice over the floor, and muttered in the Danish tongue a rude verse, which, translated, ran somewhat thus:

"All free from the knot
Glide the thread of the skein,
And rest to the labour,
And peace to the pain!"

"It is a death-dirge," said Githa, with whitening lips, but she spoke inly, and neither husband nor son heard her words.

Hilda and Harold passed in silence through the hall, and the Vala's attendants, with spears and torches, rose from the settles, and went before to the outer court, where snorted impatiently her black palfrey.

Halting in the midst of the court, she said to Harold, in a low voice:

"At sunset we part--at sunset we shall meet again. And behold, the star rises on the sunset; and the star, broader and brighter, shall rise on the sunset then! When thy hand draws the robe from the chest, think on Hilda, and know that at that hour she stands by the grave of the Saxon warrior, and that from the grave dawns the future. Farewell to thee!"

Harold longed to speak to her of Edith, but a strange awe at his heart chained his lips; so he stood silent by the great wooden gates of the

rude house. The torches flamed round him, and Hilda's face seemed lurid in the glare. There he stood musing long after torch and ceorl had passed away, nor did he wake from his reverie till Gurth, springing from his panting horse, passed his arm round the Earl's shoulder, and cried:

"How did I miss thee, my brother? and why didst thou forsake thy train?"

"I will tell thee anon. Gurth, has my father ailed? There is that in his face which I like not."

"He hath not complained of misease," said Gurth, startled; "but now thou speakest of it, his mood hath altered of late, and he hath wandered much alone, or only with the old hound and the old falcon."

Then Harold turned back, and, his heart was full; and, when he reached the house, his father was sitting in the hall on his chair of state; and Githa sate on his right hand, and a little below her sate Tostig and Leofwine, who had come in from the bear-hunt by the river-gate, and were talking loud and merrily; and thegns and cnechts sate all around, and there was wassail as Harold entered. But the Earl looked only to his father, and he saw that his eyes were absent from the glee, and that he was bending his head over the old falcon, which sate on his wrist.

CHAPTER III.

No subject of England, since the race of Cerdic sate on the throne, ever entered the courtyard of Windshore with such train and such state as Earl Godwin.--Proud of that first occasion, since his return, to do homage to him with whose cause that of England against the stranger was bound, all truly English at heart amongst the thegns of the land swelled his retinue. Whether Saxon or Dane, those who alike loved the laws and the soil, came from north and from south to the peaceful banner of the old Earl. But most of these were of the past generation, for the rising race were still dazzled by the pomp of the Norman; and the fashion of English manners, and the pride in English deeds, had gone out of date with long locks and bearded chins. Nor there were the bishops and abbots and the lords of the Church,--for dear to them already the fame of the Norman piety, and they shared the distaste of their holy King to the strong sense and homely religion of Godwin, who founded no convents, and rode to war with no relics round his neck. But they with Godwin were the stout and the frank and the free, in whom rested the pith and marrow of English manhood; and they who were against him were the blind and willing and fated fathers of slaves unborn.

Not then the stately castle we now behold, which is of the masonry of a prouder race, nor on the same site, but two miles distant on the winding of the river shore (whence it took its name), a rude building partly of timber and partly of Roman brick, adjoining a large monastery and surrounded by a small hamlet, constituted the palace of the saint-king.

So rode the Earl and his four fair sons, all abreast, into the courtyard of Windshore [127]. Now when King Edward heard the tramp of the steeds and the hum of the multitudes, as he sate in his closet with his abbots and priests, all in still contemplation of the thumb of St. Jude, the King asked:

"What army, in the day of peace, and the time of Easter, enters the gates of our palace?"

Then an abbot rose and looked out of the narrow window, and said with a groan:

"Army thou mayst well call it, O King!--and foes to us and to thee head the legions----"

"Inprinis," quoth our abbot the scholar; "thou speakest, I trow, of the wicked Earl and his sons."

The King's face changed. "Come they," said he, "with so large a train? This smells more of vaunt than of loyalty; naught--very naught."

"Alack!" said one of the conclave, "I fear me that the men of Belial will work us harm; the heathen are mighty, and----"

"Fear not," said Edward, with benign loftiness, observing that his guests grew pale, and himself, though often weak to childishness, and morally wavering and irresolute,--still so far king and gentleman, that he knew no craven fear of the body. "Fear not for me, my fathers; humble as I am, I am strong in the faith of heaven and its angels."

The Churchmen looked at each other, sly yet abashed; it was not precisely for the King that they feared.

Then spoke Alred, the good prelate and constant peacemaker--fair column and lone one of the fast-crumbling Saxon Church. "It is ill in you, brethren to arraign the truth and good meaning of those who honour your King; and in these days that lord should ever be the most welcome who brings to the halls of his king the largest number of hearts, stout and leal."

"By your leave, brother Alred," said Stigand, who, though from motives of policy he had aided those who besought the King not to peril his crown by resisting the return of Godwin, benefited too largely by the abuses of the Church to be sincerely espoused to the cause of the strong-minded Earl; "By your leave, brother Alred, to every leal heart is a ravenous mouth; and the treasures of the King are well-nigh drained in feeding these hungry and welcomeless visitors. Durst I counsel my lord I would pray him, as a matter of policy, to baffle this astute and proud Earl. He would fain have the King feast in public, that he might daunt him and the Church with the array of his friends."

"I conceive thee, my father," said Edward, with more quickness than habitual, and with the cunning, sharp though guileless, that belongs to minds undeveloped, "I conceive thee; it is good and most politic. This our orgulous Earl shall not have his triumph, and, so fresh from his exile, brave his King with the mundane parade of his power. Our

health is our excuse for our absence from the banquet, and, sooth to say, we marvel much why Easter should be held a fitting time for feasting and mirth. Wherefore, Hugoline, my chamberlain, advise the Earl that to-day we keep fast till the sunset, when temperately, with eggs, bread, and fish, we will sustain Adam's nature. Pray him and his sons to attend us--they alone be our guests." And with a sound that seemed a laugh, or the ghost of a laugh, low and chuckling--for Edward had at moments an innocent humour which his monkish biographer disdained not to note [128],--he flung himself back in his chair. The priests took the cue, and shook their sides heartily, as Hugoline left the room, not ill pleased, by the way, to escape an invitation to the eggs, bread, and fish.

Alred sighed; and said, "For the Earl and his sons, this is honour; but the other earls, and the thegns, will miss at the banquet him whom they design but to honour, and----"

"I have said," interrupted Edward, drily, and with a look of fatigue.

"And," observed another Churchman, with malice, "at least the young Earls will be humbled, for they will not sit with the King and their father, as they would in the Hall, and must serve my lord with napkin and wine."

"Inprinis," quoth our scholar the abbot, "that will be rare! I would I were by to see. But this Godwin is a man of treachery and wile, and my lord should beware of the fate of murdered Alfred, his brother!"

The King started, and pressed his hands to his eyes.

"How darest thou, Abbot Fatchere," cried Alred, indignantly; "How darest thou revive grief without remedy, and slander without proof?"

"Without proof?" echoed Edward, in a hollow voice. "He who could murder, could well stoop to forswear! Without proof before man; but did he try the ordeals of God?--did his feet pass the ploughshare?--did his hand grasp the seething iron? Verily, verily, thou didst wrong to name to me Alfred my brother! I shall see his sightless and gore-dropping sockets in the face of Godwin, this day, at my board."

The King rose in great disorder; and, after pacing the room some moments, disregarding of the silent and scared looks of his Churchmen, waved his hand, in sign to them to depart. All took the hint at once save Alred; but he, lingering the last, approached the King with dignity in his step and compassion in his eyes.

"Banish from thy breast, O King and son, thoughts unmeet, and of doubtful charity! All that man could know of Godwin's innocence or guilt--the suspicion of the vulgar--the acquittal of his peers--was known to thee before thou didst seek his aid for thy throne, and didst take his child for thy wife. Too late is it now to suspect; leave thy doubts to the solemn day, which draws nigh to the old man, thy wife's father!"

"Ha!" said the king, seeming not to heed, or wilfully to misunderstand the prelate, "Ha! leave him to God;--I will!"

He turned away impatiently; and the prelate reluctantly departed.

CHAPTER IV.

Tostig chafed mightily at the King's message; and, on Harold's attempt to pacify him, grew so violent that nothing short of the cold stern command of his father, who carried with him that weight of authority never known but to those in whom wrath is still and passion noiseless, imposed sullen peace on his son's rugged nature. But the taunts heaped by Tostig upon Harold disquieted the old Earl, and his brow was yet sad with prophetic care when he entered the royal apartments. He had been introduced into the King's presence but a moment before Hugoline led the way to the chamber of repast, and the greeting between King and Earl had been brief and formal.

Under the canopy of state were placed but two chairs, for the King and the Queen's father; and the four sons, Harold, Tostig, Leofwine, and Gurth, stood behind. Such was the primitive custom of ancient Teutonic kings; and the feudal Norman monarchs only enforced, though with more pomp and more rigour, the ceremonial of the forest patriarchs--youth to wait on age, and the ministers of the realm on those whom their policy had made chiefs in council and war.

The Earl's mind, already embittered by the scene with his sons, was chafed yet more by the King's unloving coldness; for it is natural to man, however worldly, to feel affection for those he has served, and Godwin had won Edward his crown; nor, despite his warlike though bloodless return, could even monk or Norman, in counting up the old Earl's crimes, say that he had ever failed in personal respect to the King he had made; nor over-great for subject, as the Earl's power must be confessed, will historian now be found to say that it had not been well for Saxon England if Godwin had found more favour with his King, and monk and Norman less. [129]

So the old Earl's stout heart was stung, and he looked from those deep, impenetrable eyes, mournfully upon Edward's chilling brow.

And Harold, with whom all household ties were strong, but to whom his great father was especially dear, watched his face and saw that it was very flushed. But the practised courtier sought to rally his spirits, and to smile and jest.

From smile and jest, the King turned and asked for wine. Harold, starting, advanced with the goblet; as he did so, he stumbled with one foot, but lightly recovered himself with the other; and Tostig laughed scornfully at Harold's awkwardness.

The old Earl observed both stumble and laugh, and willing to suggest a lesson to both his sons, said--laughing pleasantly--"Lo, Harold, how the left foot saves the right!--so one brother, thou seest, helps the other!" [130]

King Edward looked up suddenly.

"And so, Godwin, also, had my brother Alfred helped me, hadst thou permitted."

The old Earl, galled to the quick, gazed a moment on the King, and his cheek was purple, and his eyes seemed bloodshot.

"O Edward!" he exclaimed, "thou speakest to me hardly and unkindly of thy brother Alfred, and often hast thou thus more than hinted that I caused his death."

The King made no answer.

"May this crumb of bread choke me," said the Earl, in great emotion, "if I am guilty of thy brother's blood!" [131] But scarcely had the bread touched his lips, when his eyes fixed, the long warning symptoms were fulfilled. And he fell to the ground, under the table, sudden and heavy, smitten by the stroke of apoplexy.

Harold and Gurth sprang forward; they drew their father from the ground. His face, still deep-red with streaks of purple, rested on Harold's breast; and the son, kneeling, called in anguish on his father: the ear was deaf.

Then said the King, rising:

"It is the hand of God: remove him!" and he swept from the room, exulting.

CHAPTER V.

For five days and five nights did Godwin lie speechless [132]. And Harold watched over him night and day. And the leaches [133] would not bleed him, because the season was against it, in the increase of the moon and the tides; but they bathed his temples with wheat flour boiled in milk, according to a prescription which an angel in a dream [134] had advised to another patient; and they placed a plate of lead on his breast, marked with five crosses, saying a paternoster over each cross; together with other medical specifics in great esteem [135]. But, nevertheless, five days and five nights did Godwin lie speechless; and the leaches then feared that human skill was in vain.

The effect produced on the court, not more by the Earl's death-stroke than the circumstances preceding it, was such as defies description. With Godwin's old comrades in arms it was simple and honest grief; but with all those under the influence of the priests, the event was regarded as a direct punishment from Heaven. The previous words of the King, repeated by Edward to his monks, circulated from lip to lip, with sundry exaggerations as it travelled: and the superstition of the day had the more excuse, inasmuch as the speech of Godwin touched near upon the defiance of one of the most popular ordeals of the accused,--viz. that called the "corsned," in which a piece of bread was given to the supposed criminal; if he swallowed it with ease he was innocent; if it stuck in his throat, or choked him, nay, if he shook and turned pale, he was guilty. Godwin's words had appeared to invite the ordeal, God had heard and stricken down the presumptuous perjurer!

Unconscious, happily, of these attempts to blacken the name of his dying father, Harold, towards the grey dawn succeeding the fifth

night, thought that he heard Godwin stir in his bed. So he put aside the curtain, and bent over him. The old Earl's eyes were wide open, and the red colour had gone from his cheeks, so that he was pale as death.

"How fares it, dear father?" asked Harold.

Godwin smiled fondly, and tried to speak, but his voice died in a convulsive rattle. Lifting himself up, however, with an effort, he pressed tenderly the hand that clasped his own, leant his head on Harold's breast, and so gave up the ghost.

When Harold was at last aware that the struggle was over, he laid the grey head gently on the pillow; he closed the eyes, and kissed the lips, and knelt down and prayed. Then, seating himself at a little distance, he covered his face with his mantle.

At this time his brother Gurth, who had chiefly shared watch with Harold,—for Tostig, foreseeing his father's death, was busy soliciting thegn and earl to support his own claims to the earldom about to be vacant; and Leofwine had gone to London on the previous day to summon Githa who was hourly expected—Gurth, I say, entered the room on tiptoe, and seeing his brother's attitude, guessed that all was over. He passed on to the table, took up the lamp, and looked long on his father's face. That strange smile of the dead, common alike to innocent and guilty, had already settled on the serene lips; and that no less strange transformation from age to youth, when the wrinkles vanish, and the features come out clear and sharp from the hollows of care and years, had already begun. And the old man seemed sleeping in his prime.

So Gurth kissed the dead, as Harold had done before him, and came up and sate himself by his brother's feet, and rested his head on Harold's knee; nor would he speak till, appalled by the long silence of the Earl, he drew away the mantle from his brother's face with a gentle hand, and the large tears were rolling down Harold's cheeks.

"Be soothed, my brother," said Gurth; "our father has lived for glory, his age was prosperous, and his years more than those which the Psalmist allots to man. Come and look on his face, Harold, its calm will comfort thee."

Harold obeyed the hand that led him like a child; in passing towards the bed, his eye fell upon the cyst which Hilda had given to the old Earl, and a chill shot through his veins.

"Gurth," said he, "is not this the morning of the sixth day in which we have been at the King's Court?"

"It is the morning of the sixth day."

Then Harold took forth the key which Hilda had given him, and unlocked the cyst, and there lay the white winding-sheet of the dead, and a scroll. Harold took the scroll, and bent over it, reading by the mingled light of the lamp and the dawn:

"All hail, Harold, heir of Godwin the great, and Githa the king-born! Thou hast obeyed Hilda, and thou knowest now that Hilda's eyes read the future, and her lips speak the dark words of truth. Bow thy heart

to the Vala, and mistrust the wisdom that sees only the things of the daylight. As the valour of the warrior and the song of the scald, so is the lore of the prophetess. It is not of the body, it is soul within soul; it marshals events and men, like the valour--it moulds the air into substance, like the song. Bow thy heart to the Vala. Flowers bloom over the grave of the dead. And the young plant soars high, when the king of the woodland lies low!"

CHAPTER VI.

The sun rose, and the stairs and passages without were filled with the crowds that pressed to hear news of the Earl's health. The doors stood open, and Gurth led in the multitude to look their last on the hero of council and camp, who had restored with strong hand and wise brain the race of Cerdic to the Saxon throne. Harold stood by the bed-head silent, and tears were shed and sobs were heard. And many a thegn who had before half believed in the guilt of Godwin as the murderer of Alfred, whispered in gasps to his neighbour:

"There is no weregeld for manslaying on the head of him who smiles so in death on his old comrades in life!"

Last of all lingered Leofric, the great Earl of Mercia; and when the rest had departed, he took the pale hand, that lay heavy on the coverlid, in his own, and said:

"Old foe, often stood we in Witan and field against each other; but few are the friends for whom Leofric would mourn as he mourns for thee. Peace to thy soul! Whatever its sins, England should judge thee mildly, for England beat in each pulse of thy heart, and with thy greatness was her own!"

Then Harold stole round the bed, and put his arms round Leofric's neck, and embraced him. The good old Earl was touched, and he laid his tremulous hands on Harold's brown locks and blessed him.

"Harold," he said, "thou succeedest to thy father's power: let thy father's foes be thy friends. Wake from thy grief, for thy country now demands thee,--the honour of thy House, and the memory of the dead. Many even now plot against thee and thine. Seek the King, demand as thy right thy father's earldom, and Leofric will back thy claim in the Witan."

Harold pressed Leofric's hand, and raising it to his lips replied: "Be our Houses at peace henceforth and for ever."

Tostig's vanity indeed misled him, when he dreamed that any combination of Godwin's party could meditate supporting his claims against the popular Harold--nor less did the monks deceive themselves, when they supposed that, with Godwin's death, the power of his family would fall.

There was more than even the unanimity of the chiefs of the Witan, in favour of Harold; there was that universal noiseless impression throughout all England, Danish and Saxon, that Harold was now the sole

man on whom rested the state--which, whenever it so favours one individual, is irresistible. Nor was Edward himself hostile to Harold, whom alone of that House, as we have before said, he esteemed and loved.

Harold was at once named Earl of Wessex; and relinquishing the earldom he held before, he did not hesitate as to the successor to be recommended in his place. Conquering all jealousy and dislike for Algar, he united the strength of his party in favour of the son of Leofric, and the election fell upon him. With all his hot errors, the claims of no other Earl, whether from his own capacities or his father's services, were so strong; and his election probably saved the state from a great danger, in the results of that angry mood and that irritated ambition with which he had thrown himself into the arms of England's most valiant aggressor, Gryffyth, King of North Wales.

To outward appearance, by this election, the House of Leofric--uniting in father and son the two mighty districts of Mercia and the East Anglians--became more powerful than that of Godwin; for, in that last House, Harold was now the only possessor of one of the great earldoms, and Tostig and the other brothers had no other provision beyond the comparatively insignificant lordships they held before. But if Harold had ruled no earldom at all, he had still been immeasurably the first man in England--so great was the confidence reposed in his valour and wisdom. He was of that height in himself, that he needed no pedestal to stand on.

The successor of the first great founder of a House succeeds to more than his predecessor's power, if he but know how to wield and maintain it. For who makes his way to greatness without raising foes at every step? and who ever rose to power supreme, without grave cause for blame? But Harold stood free from the enmities his father had provoked, and pure from the stains that slander or repute cast upon his father's name. The sun of the yesterday had shone through cloud; the sun of the day rose in a clear firmament. Even Tostig recognised the superiority of his brother; and after a strong struggle between baffled rage and covetous ambition, yielded to him, as to a father. He felt that all Godwin's House was centred in Harold alone; and that only from his brother (despite his own daring valour and despite his alliance with the blood of Charlemagne and Alfred, through the sister of Matilda, the Norman duchess,) could his avarice of power be gratified.

"Depart to thy home, my brother," said Earl Harold to Tostig, "and grieve not that Algar is preferred to thee. For, even had his claim been less urgent, ill would it have beseemed us to arrogate the lordships of all England as our dues. Rule thy lordship with wisdom: gain the love of thy liegemen. High claims hast thou in our father's name, and moderation now will but strengthen thee in the season to come. Trust on Harold somewhat, on thyself more. Thou hast but to add temper and judgment to valour and zeal, to be worthy mate of the first earl in England. Over my father's corpse I embraced my father's foe. Between brother and brother shall there not be love, as the best bequest of the dead?"

"It shall not be my fault, if there be not," answered Tostig, humbled though chafed. And he summoned his men and returned to his domains.

CHAPTER VII.

Fair, broad, and calm set the sun over the western woodlands. Hilda stood on the mound, and looked with undazzled eyes on the sinking orb. Beside her, Edith reclined on the sward, and seemed with idle hand tracing characters in the air. The girl had grown paler still, since Harold last parted from her on the same spot, and the same listless and despondent apathy stamped her smileless lips and her bended head.

"See, child of my heart," said Hilda, addressing Edith, while she still gazed on the western luminary, "see, the sun goes down to the far deeps, where Rana and Aegir [136] watch over the worlds of the sea; but with morning he comes from the halls of the Asas--the golden gates of the East--and joy comes in his train. And yet then thinkest, sad child, whose years have scarce passed into woman, that the sun, once set, never comes back to life. But even while we speak, thy morning draws near, and the dunness of cloud takes the hues of the rose!"

Edith's hand paused from its vague employment, and fell drooping on her knee;--she turned with an unquiet and anxious eye to Hilda, and after looking some moments wistfully at the Vala, the colour rose to her cheek, and she said in a voice that had an accent half of anger:

"Hilda, thou art cruel!"

"So is Fate!" answered the Vala. "But men call not Fate cruel when it smiles on their desires. Why callest thou Hilda cruel, when she reads in the setting sun the runes of thy coming joy!"

"There is no joy for me," returned Edith, plaintively; and I have that on my heart," she added, with a sudden and almost fierce change of tone, "which at last I will dare to speak. I reproach thee, Hilda, that thou hast marred all my life, that thou hast duped me with dreams, and left me alone in despair."

"Speak on," said Hilda, calmly, as a nurse to a froward child.

"Hast thou not told me, from the first dawn of my wondering reason, that my life and lot were inwoven with--with (the word, mad and daring, must out)--with those of Harold the peerless? But for that, which my infancy took from thy lips as a law, I had never been so vain and so frantic! I had never watched each play of his face, and treasured each word from his lips; I had never made my life but part of his life--all my soul but the shadow of his sun. But for that, I had hailed the calm of the cloister--but for that, I had glided in peace to my grave. And now--now, O Hilda--" Edith paused, and that break had more eloquence than any words she could command. "And," she resumed quickly, "thou knowest that these hopes were but dreams--that the law ever stood between him and me--and that it was guilt to love him."

"I knew the law," answered Hilda, "but the law of fools is to the wise as the cobweb swung over the brake to the wing of the bird. Ye are sibbe to each other, some five times removed; and therefore an old man at Rome saith that ye ought not to wed. When the shavelings obey the

old man at home, and put aside their own wives and frillas [137], and abstain from the wine cup, and the chase, and the brawl, I will stoop to hear of their laws,--with disrelish it may be, but without scorn. [138] It is no sin to love Harold; and no monk and no law shall prevent your union on the day appointed to bring ye together, form and heart."

"Hilda! Hilda! madden me not with joy," cried Edith, starting up in rapturous emotion, her young face dyed with blushes, and all her renovated beauty so celestial that Hilda herself was almost awed, as if by the vision of Freya, the northern Venus, charmed by a spell from the halls of Asgard.

"But that day is distant," renewed the Vala.

"What matters! what matters!" cried the pure child of Nature; "I ask but hope. Enough,--oh! enough, if we were but wedded on the borders of the grave!"

"Lo, then," said Hilda, "behold, the sun of thy life dawns again!"

As she spoke, the Vala stretched her arm, and through the intersticed columns of the fane, Edith saw the large shadow of a man cast over the still sward. Presently into the space of the circle came Harold, her beloved. His face was pale with grief yet recent; but, perhaps, more than ever, dignity was in his step and command on his brow, for he felt that now alone with him rested the might of Saxon England. And what royal robe so invests with imperial majesty the form of a man as the grave sense of power responsible, in an earnest soul?

"Thou comest," said Hilda, "in the hour I predicted; at the setting of the sun and the rising of the star."

"Vala," said Harold, gloomily, "I will not oppose my sense to thy prophecies; for who shall judge of that power of which he knows not the elements? or despise the marvel of which he cannot detect the imposture? But leave me, I pray thee, to walk in the broad light of the common day. These hands are made to grapple with things palpable, and these eyes to measure the forms that front my way. In my youth, I turned in despair or disgust from the subtleties of the schoolmen, which split upon hairs the brains of Lombard and Frank; in my busy and stirring manhood entangle me not in the meshes which confuse all my reason, and sicken my waking thoughts into dreams of awe. Mine be the straight path and the plain goal!"

The Vala gazed on him with an earnest look, that partook of admiration, and yet more of gloom; but she spoke not, and Harold resumed:

"Let the dead rest, Hilda,--proud names with glory on earth and shadows escaped from our ken, submissive to mercy in heaven. A vast chasm have my steps overleapt since we met, O Hilda--sweet Edith; a vast chasm, but a narrow grave." His voice faltered a moment, and again he renewed,--"Thou weepest, Edith; ah, how thy tears console me! Hilda, hear me! I love thy grandchild--loved her by irresistible instinct since her blue eyes first smiled on mine. I loved her in her childhood, as in her youth--in the blossom as in the flower. And thy grandchild loves me. The laws of the Church proscribe our marriage, and therefore we parted; but I feel, and thine Edith feels, that the

love remains as strong in absence: no other will be her wedded lord, no other my wedded wife. Therefore, with heart made soft by sorrow, and, in my father's death, sole lord of my fate, I return, and say to thee in her presence, 'Suffer us to hope still!' The day may come when under some king less enthralled than Edward by formal Church laws, we may obtain from the Pope absolution for our nuptials--a day, perhaps, far off; but we are both young, and love is strong and patient: we can wait."

"O Harold," exclaimed Edith, "we can wait!"

"Have I not told thee, son of Godwin," said the Vala, solemnly, "that Edith's skein of life was inwoven with thine? Dost thou deem that my charms have not explored the destiny of the last of my race? Know that it is in the decrees of the fates that ye are to be united, never more to be divided. Know that there shall come a day, though I can see not its morrow, and it lies dim and afar, which shall be the most glorious of thy life, and on which Edith and fame shall be thine,--the day of thy nativity, on which hitherto all things have prospered with thee. In vain against the stars preach the mone and the priest: what shall be, shall be. Wherefore, take hope and joy, O Children of Time! And now, as I join your hands, I betroth your souls."

Rapture unalloyed and unprophetic, born of love deep and pure, shone in the eyes of Harold, as he clasped the hand of his promised bride. But an involuntary and mysterious shudder passed over Edith's frame, and she leant close, close, for support upon Harold's breast. And, as if by a vision, there rose distinct in her memory a stern brow, a form of power and terror--the brow and the form of him who but once again in her waking life the Prophetess had told her she should behold. The vision passed away in the warm clasp of those protecting arms; and looking up into Harold's face, she there beheld the mighty and deep delight that transfused itself at once into her own soul.

Then Hilda, placing one hand over their heads, and raising the other towards heaven, all radiant with bursting stars, said in her deep and thrilling tones:

"Attest the betrothal of these young hearts, O ye Powers that draw nature to nature by spells which no galdra can trace, and have wrought in the secrets of creation no mystery so perfect as love,--Attest it, thou temple, thou altar!--attest it, O sun and O air! While the forms are divided, may the souls cling together--sorrow with sorrow, and joy with joy. And when, at length, bride and bridegroom are one,--O stars, may the trouble with which ye are charged have exhausted its burthen; may no danger molest, and no malice disturb, but, over the marriage-bed, shine in peace, O ye stars!"

Up rose the moon. May's nightingale called its mate from the breathless boughs; and so Edith and Harold were betrothed by the grave of the son of Cerdic. And from the line of Cerdic had come, since Ethelbert, all the Saxon kings who with sword and with sceptre had reigned over Saxon England.

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