

Harold, Book 8. The Last Of The Saxon Kings

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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BOOK VIII.

FATE.

CHAPTER I.

Some days after the tragical event with which the last chapter closed, the ships of the Saxons were assembled in the wide waters of Conway; and on the small fore-deck of the stateliest vessel, stood Harold, bareheaded, before Aldyth, the widowed Queen. For the faithful bard had fallen by the side of his lord; . . . the dark promise was unfulfilled, and the mangled clay of the jealous Gryffyth slept alone in the narrow bed. A chair of state, with dossel and canopy, was set for the daughter of Algar, and behind stood maidens of Wales, selected in haste for her attendants.

But Aldyth had not seated herself; and, side by side with her dead lord's great victor, thus she spoke:

"Woe worth the day and the hour when Aldyth left the hall of her fathers and the land of her birth! Her robe of a queen has been rent and torn over an aching heart, and the air she has breathed has reeked as with blood. I go forth, widowed, and homeless, and lonely; but my feet shall press the soil of my sires, and my lips draw the breath which came sweet and pure to my childhood. And thou, O Harold, standest beside me, like the shape of my own youth, and the dreams of old come back at the sound of thy voice. Fare thee well, noble heart and true Saxon. Thou hast twice saved the child of thy foe--first from shame, then from famine. Thou wouldst have saved my dread lord from open force, and dark murder; but the saints were wroth, the blood of my kinsfolk, shed by his hand, called for vengeance, and the shrines he had pillaged and burned murmured doom from their desolate altars. Peace be with the dead, and peace with the living! I shall go back to my father and brethren; and if the fame and life of child and sister be dear to them, their swords will never more leave their sheaths against Harold. So thy hand, and God guard thee!"

Harold raised to his lips the hand which the Queen extended to him; and to Aldyth now seemed restored the rare beauty of her youth; as pride and sorrow gave her the charm of emotion, which love and duty had failed to bestow.

"Life and health to thee, noble lady," said the Earl. "Tell thy kindred from me, that for thy sake, and thy grandsire's, I would fain be their brother and friend; were they but united with me, all England were now safe against every foe, and each peril. Thy daughter already awaits thee in the halls of Morcar; and when time has scarred the wounds of the past, may thy joys re-bloom in the face of thy child. Farewell, noble Aldyth!"

He dropped the hand he had held till then, turned slowly to the side

of the vessel, and re-entered his boat. As he was rowed back to shore, the horn gave the signal for raising anchor, and the ship, righting itself, moved majestically through the midst of the fleet. But Aldyth still stood erect, and her eyes followed the boat that bore away the secret love of her youth.

As Harold reached the shore, Tostig and the Norman, who had been conversing amicably together on the beach, advanced towards the Earl.

"Brother," said Tostig, smiling, "it were easy for thee to console the fair widow, and bring to our House all the force of East Anglia and Mercia." Harold's face slightly changed, but he made no answer.

"A marvellous fair dame," said the Norman, "notwithstanding her cheek be somewhat pinched, and the hue sun-burnt. And I wonder not that the poor cat-king kept her so close to his side."

"Sir Norman," said the Earl, hastening to change the subject, "the war is now over, and, for long years, Wales will leave our Marches in peace.--This eve I propose to ride hence towards London, and we will converse by the way."

"Go you so soon?" cried the knight, surprised. "Shall you not take means utterly to subjugate this troublesome race, parcel out the lands among your thegns, to hold as martial fiefs at need, build towers and forts on the heights, and at the river mouths?--where a site, like this, for some fair castle and vawmure? In a word, do you Saxons merely overrun, and neglect to hold what you win?"

"We fight in self-defence, not for conquest, Sir Norman. We have no skill in building castles; and I pray you not to hint to my thegns the conceit of dividing a land, as thieves would their plunder. King Gryffyth is dead, and his brothers will reign in his stead. England has guarded her realm, and chastised the aggressors. What need England do more? We are not like our first barbarous fathers, carving out homes with the scythe of their saexes. The wave settles after the flood, and the races of men after lawless convulsions."

Tostig smiled, in disdain, at the knight, who mused a little over the strange words he had heard, and then silently followed the Earl to the fort.

But when Harold gained his chamber, he found there an express, arrived in haste from Chester, with the news that Algar, the sole enemy and single rival of his power, was no more. Fever, occasioned by neglected wounds, had stretched him impotent on a bed of sickness, and his fierce passions had aided the march of disease; the restless and profitless race was run.

The first emotion which these tidings called forth was that of pain. The bold sympathise with the bold; and in great hearts, there is always a certain friendship for a gallant foe. But recovering the shock of that first impression, Harold could not but feel that England was free from its most dangerous subject--himself from the only obstacle apparent to the fulfilment of his luminous career.

"Now, then, to London," whispered the voice of his ambition. "Not a foe rests to trouble the peace of that empire which thy conquests, O Harold, have made more secure and compact than ever yet has been the

realm of the Saxon kings. Thy way through the country that thou hast henceforth delivered from the fire and sword of the mountain ravager, will be one march of triumph, like a Roman's of old; and the voice of the people will echo the hearts of the army; those hearts are thine own. Verily Hilda is a prophetess; and when Edward rests with the saints, from what English heart will not burst the cry, 'LONG LIVE HAROLD THE KING?'"

CHAPTER II.

The Norman rode by the side of Harold, in the rear of the victorious armament. The ships sailed to their havens, and Tostig departed to his northern earldom.

"And now," said Harold, "I am at leisure to thank thee, brave Norman, for more than thine aid in council and war;--at leisure now to turn to the last prayer of Sweyn, and the often-shed tears of Githa my mother, for Wolnoth the exile. Thou seest with thine own eyes that there is no longer pretext or plea for thy Count to detain these hostages. Thou shalt hear from Edward himself that he no longer asks sureties for the faith of the House of Godwin; and I cannot think that Duke William would have suffered thee to bring me over this news from the dead if he were not prepared to do justice to the living."

"Your speech, Earl of Wessex, goes near to the truth. But, to speak plainly and frankly, I think William, my lord, hath a keen desire to welcome in person a chief so illustrious as Harold, and I guess that he keeps the hostages to make thee come to claim them." The knight, as he spoke, smiled gaily; but the cunning of the Norman gleamed in the quick glance of his clear hazel eye.

"Fain must I feel pride at such wish, if you flatter me not," said Harold; "and I would gladly myself, now the land is in peace, and my presence not needful, visit a court of such fame. I hear high praise from cheapman and pilgrim of Count William's wise care for barter and trade, and might learn much from the ports of the Seine that would profit the marts of the Thames. Much, too, I hear of Count William's zeal to revive the learning of the Church, aided by Lanfranc the Lombard; much I hear of the pomp of his buildings, and the grace of his court. All this would I cheerfully cross the ocean to see; but all this would but sadden my heart if I returned without Haco and Wolnoth."

"I dare not speak so as to plight faith for the Duke," said the Norman, who, though sharp to deceive, had that rein on his conscience that it did not let him openly lie; "but this I do know, that there are few things in his Countdom which my lord would not give to clasp the right hand of Harold and feel assured of his friendship."

Though wise and farseeing, Harold was not suspicious;--no Englishman, unless it were Edward himself, knew the secret pretensions of William to the English throne; and he answered simply:

"It were well, indeed, both for Normandy and England, both against foes and for trade, to be allied and well-liking. I will think over

your words, Sire de Graville, and it shall not be my fault if old feuds be not forgotten, and those now in thy court be the last hostages ever kept by the Norman for the faith of the Saxon."

With that he turned the discourse; and the aspiring and able envoy, exhilarated by the hope of a successful mission, animated the way by remarks--alternately lively and shrewd--which drew the brooding Earl from those musings, which had now grown habitual to a mind once clear and open as the day.

Harold had not miscalculated the enthusiasm his victories had excited. Where he passed, all the towns poured forth their populations to see and to hail him; and on arriving at the metropolis, the rejoicings in his honour seemed to equal those which had greeted, at the accession of Edward, the restoration of the line of Cerdic.

According to the barbarous custom of the age, the head of the unfortunate sub-king, and the prow of his special war-ship, had been sent to Edward as the trophies of conquest: but Harold's uniform moderation respected the living. The race of Gryffyth [174] were re-established on the tributary throne of that hero, in the persons of his brothers, Blethgent and Rigwatle, "and they swore oaths," says the graphic old chronicler, "and delivered hostages to the King and the Earl that they would be faithful to him in all things, and be everywhere ready for him, by water, and by land, and make such renders from the land as had been done before to any other king."

Not long after this, Mallet de Graville returned to Normandy, with gifts for William from King Edward, and special requests from that prince, as well as from the Earl, to restore the hostages. But Mallet's acuteness readily perceived, that in much Edward's mind had been alienated from William. It was clear, that the Duke's marriage and the pledges that had crowned the union were distasteful to the asceticism of the saint king: and with Godwin's death, and Tostig's absence from the court, seemed to have expired all Edward's bitterness towards that powerful family of which Harold was now the head. Still, as no subject out of the House of Cerdic had ever yet been elected to the Saxon throne, there was no apprehension on Mallet's mind that in Harold was the true rival to William's cherished aspirations. Though Edward the Atheling was dead, his son Edgar lived, the natural heir to the throne; and the Norman, (whose liege had succeeded to the Duchy at the age of eight,) was not sufficiently cognisant of the invariable custom of the Anglo-Saxons, to set aside, whether for kingdoms or for earldoms, all claimants unfitted for rule by their tender years. He could indeed perceive that the young Atheling's minority was in favour of his Norman liege, and would render him but a weak defender of the realm, and that there seemed no popular attachment to the infant orphan of the Germanised exile: his name was never mentioned at the court, nor had Edward acknowledged him as heir,--a circumstance which he interpreted auspiciously for William. Nevertheless, it was clear that, both at court and amongst the people, the Norman influence in England was at the lowest ebb; and that the only man who could restore it, and realise the cherished dreams of his grasping lord, was Harold the all-powerful.

CHAPTER III.

Trusting, for the time, to the success of Edward's urgent demand for the release of his kinsmen, as well as his own, Harold was now detained at the court by all those arrears of business which had accumulated fast under the inert hands of the monk-king during the prolonged campaigns against the Welch; but he had leisure at least for frequent visits to the old Roman house; and those visits were not more grateful to his love than to the harder and more engrossing passion which divided his heart.

The nearer he grew to the dazzling object, to the possession of which Fate seemed to have shaped all circumstances, the more he felt the charm of those mystic influences which his colder reason had disdained. He who is ambitious of things afar, and uncertain, passes at once into the Poet-Land of Imagination; to aspire and to imagine are yearnings twin-born.

When in his fresh youth and his calm lofty manhood, Harold saw action, how adventurous soever, limited to the barriers of noble duty; when he lived but for his country, all spread clear before his vision in the sunlight of day; but as the barriers receded, while the horizon extended, his eye left the Certain to rest on the Vague. As self, though still half concealed from his conscience, gradually assumed the wide space love of country had filled, the maze of delusion commenced: he was to shape fate out of circumstance,--no longer defy fate through virtue; and thus Hilda became to him as a voice that answered the questions of his own restless heart. He needed encouragement from the Unknown to sanction his desires and confirm his ends. But Edith, rejoicing in the fair fame of her betrothed, and content in the pure rapture of beholding him again, reposed in the divine credulity of the happy hour; she marked not, in Harold's visits, that, on entrance, the Earl's eye sought first the stern face of the Vala--she wondered not why those two conversed in whispers together, or stood so often at moonlight by the Runic grave. Alone, of all womankind, she felt that Harold loved her, that that love had braved time, absence, change, and hope deferred; and she knew not that what love has most to dread in the wild heart of aspiring man, is not persons, but things,--is not things, but their symbols.

So weeks and months rolled on, and Duke William returned no answer to the demands for his hostages. And Harold's heart smote him, that he neglected his brother's prayer and his mother's accusing tears.

Now Githa, since the death of her husband, had lived in seclusion and apart from town; and one day Harold was surprised by her unexpected arrival at the large timbered house in London, which had passed to his possession. As she abruptly entered the room in which he sat, he sprang forward to welcome and embrace her; but she waved him back with a grave and mournful gesture, and sinking on one knee, she said thus:

"See, the mother is a suppliant to the son for the son. No, Harold, no--I will not rise till thou hast heard me. For years, long and lonely, have I lingered and pined,--long years! Will my boy know his mother again? Thou hast said to me, 'Wait till the messenger returns.' I have waited. Thou hast said, 'This time the Count cannot resist the demand of the King.' I bowed my head and submitted to thee as I had done to Godwin my lord. And I have not till now claimed thy promise; for I allowed thy country, thy King, and thy fame to have

claims more strong than a mother. Now I tarry no more; now no more will I be amused and deceived. Thine hours are thine own--free thy coming and thy going. Harold, I claim thine oath. Harold, I touch thy right hand. Harold, I remind thee of thy troth and thy plight, to cross the seas thyself, and restore the child to the mother."

"Oh, rise, rise!" exclaimed Harold, deeply moved. "Patient hast thou been, O my mother, and now I will linger no more, nor hearken to other voice than your own. I will see the King this day, and ask his leave to cross the sea to Duke William."

Then Githa rose, and fell on the Earl's breast weeping.

CHAPTER IV.

It so chanced, while this interview took place between Githa and the Earl, that Gurth, hawking in the woodlands round Hilda's house, turned aside to visit his Danish kinswoman. The prophetess was absent, but he was told that Edith was within; and Gurth, about to be united to a maiden who had long won his noble affections, cherished a brother's love for his brother's fair betrothed. He entered the gynoeceum, and there still, as when we were first made present in that chamber, sate the maids, employed on a work more brilliant to the eye, and more pleasing to the labour, than that which had then tasked their active hands. They were broidering into a tissue of the purest gold the effigy of a fighting warrior, designed by Hilda for the banner of Earl Harold: and, removed from the awe of their mistress, as they worked their tongues sang gaily, and it was in the midst of song and laughter that the fair young Saxon lord entered the chamber. The babble and the mirth ceased at his entrance; each voice was stilled, each eye cast down demurely. Edith was not amongst them, and in answer to his inquiry the eldest of the maidens pointed towards the peristyle without the house.

The winning and kindly thegn paused a few moments, to admire the tissue and commend the work, and then sought the peristyle.

Near the water-spring that gushed free and bright through the Roman fountain, he found Edith, seated in an attitude of deep thought and gloomy dejection. She started as he approached, and, springing forward to meet him, exclaimed:

"O Gurth, Heaven hath sent thee to me, I know well, though I cannot explain to thee why, for I cannot explain it to myself; but know I do, by the mysterious bodements of my own soul, that some great danger is at this moment encircling thy brother Harold. Go to him, I pray, I implore thee, forthwith; and let thy clear sense and warm heart be by his side."

"I will go instantly," said Gurth, startled. "But do not suffer, I adjure thee, sweet kinswoman, the superstition that wraps this place, as a mist wraps a marsh, to infect thy pure spirit. In my early youth I submitted to the influence of Hilda; I became man, and outgrew it. Much, secretly, has it grieved me of late, to see that our kinswoman's Danish lore has brought even the strong heart of Harold under his

spell; and where once he only spoke of duty, I now hear him speak of fate."

"Alas! alas!" answered Edith, wringing her hands; "when the bird hides its head in the brake, doth it shut out the track of the hound? Can we baffle fate by refusing to heed its approaches? But we waste precious moments. Go, Gurth, dear Gurth! Heavier and darker, while we speak, gathers the cloud on my heart."

Gurth said no more, but hastened to remount his steed; and Edith remained alone by the Roman fountain, motionless and sad, as if the nymph of the old religion stood there to see the lessening stream well away from the shattered stone, and know that the life of the nymph was measured by the ebb of the stream.

Gurth arrived in London just as Harold was taking a boat for the palace of Westminster, to seek the King; and, after interchanging a hurried embrace with his mother, he accompanied Harold to the palace, and learned his errand by the way. While Harold spoke, he did not foresee any danger to be incurred by a friendly visit to the Norman court; and the interval that elapsed between Harold's communication and their entrance into the King's chamber, allowed no time for mature and careful reflection.

Edward, on whom years and infirmity had increased of late with rapid ravage, heard Harold's request with a grave and deep attention, which he seldom vouchsafed to earthly affairs. And he remained long silent after his brother-in-law had finished;--so long silent, that the Earl, at first, deemed that he was absorbed in one of those mystic and abstracted reveries, in which, more and more as he grew nearer to the borders of the World Unseen, Edward so strangely indulged. But, looking more close, both he and Gurth were struck by the evident dismay on the King's face, while the collected light of Edward's cold eye showed that his mind was awake to the human world. In truth, it is probable that Edward, at that moment, was recalling rash hints, if not promises, to his rapacious cousin of Normandy, made during his exile. And, sensible of his own declining health, and the tender years of the young Edgar, he might be musing over the terrible pretender to the English throne, whose claims his earlier indiscretion might seem to sanction.

Whatever his thoughts, they were dark and sinister, as at length he said, slowly:

"Is thine oath indeed given to thy mother, and doth she keep thee to it?"

"Both, O King," answered Harold, briefly.

"Then I can gainsay thee not. And thou, Harold, art a man of this living world; thou playest here the part of a centurion; thou sayst 'Come,' and men come--'Go,' and men move at thy will. Therefore thou mayest well judge for thyself. I gainsay thee not, nor interfere between man and his vow. But think not," continued the King in a more solemn voice, and with increasing emotion, "think not that I will charge my soul that I counselled or encouraged this errand. Yea, I foresee that thy journey will lead but to great evil to England, and sore grief or dire loss to thee." [175]

"How so, dear lord and King?" said Harold, startled by Edward's unwonted earnestness, though deeming it but one of the visionary chimeras habitual to the saint. "How so? William thy cousin hath ever borne the name of one fair to friend, though fierce to foe. And foul indeed his dishonour, if he could meditate harm to a man trusting his faith, and sheltered by his own roof-tree."

"Harold, Harold," said Edward, impatiently, "I know William of old. Nor is he so simple of mind, that he will cede aught for thy pleasure, or even to my will, unless it bring some gain to himself [176]. I say no more.--Thou art cautioned, and I leave the rest to Heaven."

It is the misfortune of men little famous for worldly lore, that in those few occasions when, in that sagacity caused by their very freedom from the strife and passion of those around, they seem almost prophetically inspired,--it is their misfortune to lack the power of conveying to others their own convictions; they may divine, but they cannot reason: and Harold could detect nothing to deter his purpose, in a vague fear, based on no other argument than as vague a perception of the Duke's general character. But Gurth, listening less to his reason than his devoted love for his brother, took alarm, and said, after a pause:

"Thinkest thou, good my King, that the same danger were incurred if Gurth, instead of Harold, crossed the seas to demand the hostages?"

"No," said Edward, eagerly, "and so would I counsel. William would not have the same objects to gain in practising his worldly guile upon thee. No; methinks that were the prudent course."

"And the ignoble one for Harold," said the elder brother, almost indignantly. "Howbeit, I thank thee, gratefully, dear King, for thy affectionate heed and care. And so the saints guard thee!"

On leaving the King, a warm discussion between the brothers took place. But Gurth's arguments were stronger than those of Harold, and the Earl was driven to rest his persistence on his own special pledge to Githa. As soon, however, as they had gained their home, that plea was taken from him; for the moment Gurth related to his mother Edward's fears and cautions, she, ever mindful of Godwin's preference for the Earl, and his last commands to her, hastened to release Harold from his pledge; and to implore him at least to suffer Gurth to be his substitute to the Norman court. "Listen dispassionately," said Gurth; "rely upon it that Edward has reasons for his fears, more rational than those he has given to us. He knows William from his youth upward, and hath loved him too well to hint doubts of his good faith without just foundation. Are there no reasons why danger from William should be special against thyself? While the Normans abounded in the court, there were rumours that the Duke had some designs on England, which Edward's preference seemed to sanction: such designs now, in the altered state of England, were absurd--too frantic, for a prince of William's reputed wisdom to entertain. Yet he may not unnaturally seek to regain the former Norman influence in these realms. He knows that in you he receives the most powerful man in England; that your detention alone would convulse the country from one end of it to the other; and enable him, perhaps, to extort from Edward some measures dishonourable to us all. But against me he can harbour no ill design --my detention would avail him nothing. And, in truth, if Harold be safe in England, Gurth must be safe in Rouen? Thy presence here at

the head of our armies guarantees me from wrong. But reverse the case, and with Gurth in England, is Harold safe in Rouen? I, but a simple soldier, and homely lord, with slight influence over Edward, no command in the country, and little practised of speech in the stormy Witan,--I am just so great that William dare not harm me, but not so great that he should even wish to harm me."

"He detains our kinsmen, why not thee!" said Harold.

"Because with our kinsmen he has at least the pretext that they were pledged as hostages: because I go simply as guest and envoy. No, to me danger cannot come. Be ruled, dear Harold."

"Be ruled, O my son," cried Githa, clasping the Earl's knees, "and do not let me dread in the depth of the night to see the shade of Godwin,

and hear his voice say, 'Woman, where is Harold?'"

It was impossible for the Earl's strong understanding to resist the arguments addressed to it; and, to say truth, he had been more disturbed that he liked to confess by Edward's sinister forewarnings. Yet, on the other hand, there were reasons against his acquiescence in Gurth's proposal. The primary, and, to do him justice, the strongest, was in his native courage and his generous pride. Should he for the first time in his life shrink from a peril in the discharge of his duty; a peril, too, so uncertain and vague? Should he suffer Gurth to fulfil the pledge he himself had taken? And granting even that Gurth were safe from whatever danger he individually might incur, did it become him to accept the proxy? Would Gurth's voice, too, be as potent as his own in effecting the return of the hostages?

The next reasons that swayed him were those he could not avow. In clearing his way to the English throne, it would be of no mean importance to secure the friendship of the Norman Duke, and the Norman acquiescence in his pretensions; it would be of infinite service to remove those prepossessions against his House, which were still rife with the Normans, who retained a bitter remembrance of their countrymen decimated [177], it was said, with the concurrence if not at the order of Godwin, when they accompanied the ill-fated Alfred to the English shore, and who were yet sore with their old expulsion from the English court at the return of his father and himself.

Though it could not enter into his head that William, possessing no party whatever in England, could himself aspire to the English crown, yet at Edward's death, there might be pretenders whom the Norman arms could find ready excuse to sanction. There was the boy Atheling, on the one side, there was the valiant Norwegian King Hardrada on the other, who might revive the claims of his predecessor Magnus as heir to the rights of Canute. So near and so formidable a neighbour as the Court of the Normans, every object of policy led him to propitiate; and Gurth, with his unbending hate of all that was Norman, was not, at least, the most politic envoy he could select for that end. Add to this, that despite their present reconciliation, Harold could never long count upon amity with Tostig: and Tostig's connection with William, through their marriages into the House of Baldwin, was full of danger to a new throne, to which Tostig would probably be the most turbulent subject: the influence of this connection how desirable to counteract! [178]

Nor could Harold, who, as patriot and statesman, felt deeply the necessity of reform and regeneration in the decayed edifice of the English monarchy, willingly lose an occasion to witness all that William had done to raise so high in renown and civilisation, in martial fame and commercial prosperity, that petty duchy, which he had placed on a level with the kingdoms of the Teuton and the Frank. Lastly, the Normans were the special darlings of the Roman Church. William had obtained the dispensation to his own marriage with Matilda; and might not the Norman influence, duly conciliated, back the prayer which Harold trusted one day to address to the pontiff, and secure to him the hallowed blessing, without which ambition lost its charm, and even a throne its splendour?

All these considerations, therefore, urged the Earl to persist in his original purpose: but a warning voice in his heart, more powerful than all, sided with the prayer of Githa, and the arguments of Gurth. In this state of irresolution, Gurth said seasonably:

"Bethink thee, Harold, if menaced but with peril to thyself, thou wouldst have a brave man's right to resist us; but it was of 'great evil to England' that Edward spoke, and thy reflection must tell thee, that in this crisis of our country, danger to thee is evil to England --evil to England thou hast no right to incur."

"Dear mother, and generous Gurth," said Harold, then joining the two in one embrace, "ye have well nigh conquered. Give me but two days to ponder well, and be assured that I will not decide from the rash promptings of an ill-considered judgment."

Farther than this they could not then move the Earl; but Gurth was pleased shortly afterwards to see him depart to Edith, whose fears, from whatever source they sprang, would, he was certain, come in aid of his own pleadings.

But as the Earl rode alone towards the once stately home of the perished Roman, and entered at twilight the darkening forest-land, his thoughts were less on Edith than on the Vala, with whom his ambition had more and more connected his soul. Perplexed by his doubts, and left dim in the waning lights of human reason, never more involuntarily did he fly to some guide to interpret the future, and decide his path.

As if fate itself responded to the cry of his heart, he suddenly came in sight of Hilda herself, gathering leaves from elm and ash amidst the woodland.

He sprang from his horse and approached her.

"Hilda," said he, in a low but firm voice, "thou hast often told me that the dead can advise the living. Raise thou the Scin-laeca of the hero of old--raise the Ghost, which mine eye, or my fancy, beheld before, vast and dim by the silent bautastein, and I will stand by thy side. Fain would I know if thou hast deceived me and thyself; or if, in truth, to man's guidance Heaven doth vouchsafe saga and rede from those who have passed into the secret shores of Eternity."

"The dead," answered Hilda, "will not reveal themselves to eyes uninitiate save at their own will, uncompelled by charm and rune. To me their forms can appear distinct through the airy flame; to me, duly

prepared by spells that purge the eye of the spirit, and loosen the walls of the flesh. I cannot say that what I see in the trance and the travail of my soul, thou also wilt behold; or even when the vision hath passed from my sight, and the voice from my ear, only memories, confused and dim, of what I saw and heard, remain to guide the waking and common life. But thou shalt stand by my side while I invoke the phantom, and hear and interpret the words which rush from my lips, and the runes that take meaning from the sparks of the charmed fire. I knew ere thou camest, by the darkness and trouble of Edith's soul, that some shade from the Ash-tree of Life had fallen upon thine."

Then Harold related what had passed, and placed before Hilda the doubts that beset him.

The Prophetess listened with earnest attention; but her mind, when not under its more mystic influences, being strongly biassed by its natural courage and ambition, she saw at a glance all the advantages towards securing the throne predestined to Harold, which might be effected by his visit to the Norman court, and she held in too great disdain both the worldly sense and the mystic reveries of the monkish king (for the believer in Odin was naturally incredulous of the visitation of the Christian saints) to attach much weight to his dreary predictions.

The short reply she made was therefore not calculated to deter Harold from the expedition in dispute. But she deferred till the following night, and to wisdom more dread than her own, the counsels that should sway his decision.

With a strange satisfaction at the thought that he should, at least, test personally the reality of those assumptions of preternatural power which had of late coloured his resolves and oppressed his heart, Harold then took leave of the Vala, who returned mechanically to her employment; and, leading his horse by the reins, lowly continued his musing way towards the green knoll and its heathen ruins. But ere he gained the hillock, and while his thoughtful eyes were bent on the ground, he felt his arm seized tenderly--turned--and beheld Edith's face full of unutterable and anxious love.

With that love, indeed, there was blended so much wistfulness, so much fear, that Harold exclaimed:

"Soul of my soul, what hath chanced? what affects thee thus?"

"Hath no danger befallen thee?" asked Edith falteringly, and gazing on his face with wistful, searching eyes. "Danger! none, sweet trembler," answered the Earl, evasively.

Edith dropped her eager looks, and clinging to his arm, drew him on silently into the forest land. She paused at last where the old fantastic trees shut out the view of the ancient ruins; and when, looking round, she saw not those grey gigantic shafts which mortal hand seemed never to have piled together, she breathed more freely.

"Speak to me," then said Harold, bending his face to hers; "why this silence?"

"Ah, Harold!" answered his betrothed, "thou knowest that ever since we have loved one another, my existence hath been but a shadow of thine;

by some weird and strange mystery, which Hilda would explain by the stars or the fates, that have made me a part of thee, I know by the lightness or gloom of my own spirit when good or ill shall befall thee. How often, in thine absence, hath a joy suddenly broke upon me; and I felt by that joy, as by the smile of a good angel, that thou hast passed safe through some peril, or triumphed over some foe! And now thou askest me why I am so sad;--I can only answer thee by saying, that the sadness is cast upon me by some thunder gloom on thine own destiny."

Harold had sought Edith to speak of his meditated journey, but seeing her dejection he did not dare; so he drew her to his breast, and chid her soothingly for her vain apprehensions. But Edith would not be comforted; there seemed something weighing on her mind and struggling to her lips, not accounted for merely by sympathetic forebodings; and at length, as he pressed her to tell all, she gathered courage and spoke:

"Do not mock me," she said, "but what secret, whether of vain folly or of meaning fate, should I hold from thee? All this day I struggled in vain against the heaviness of my forebodings. How I hailed the sight of Gurth thy brother! I besought him to seek thee--thou hast seen him."

"I have!" said Harold. "But thou wert about to tell me of something more than this dejection."

"Well," resumed Edith, "after Gurth left me, my feet sought involuntarily the hill on which we have met so often. I sate down near the old tomb, a strange weariness crept on my eyes, and a sleep that seemed not wholly sleep fell over me. I struggled against it, as if conscious of some coming terror; and as I struggled, and ere I slept, Harold,--yes, ere I slept,--I saw distinctly a pale and glimmering figure rise from the Saxon's grave. I saw--I see it still! Oh, that livid front, those glassy eyes!"

"The figure of a warrior?" said Harold, startled.

"Of a warrior, armed as in the ancient days, armed like the warrior that Hilda's maids are working for thy banner. I saw it; and in one hand it held a spear, and in the other a crown."

"A crown!--Say on, say on."

"I saw no more; sleep, in spite of myself, fell on me, a sleep full of confused and painful--rapid and shapeless images, still at last this dream rose clear. I beheld a bright and starry shape, that seemed as a spirit, yet wore thine aspect, standing on a rock; and an angry torrent rolled between the rock and the dry safe land. The waves began to invade the rock, and the spirit unfurled its wings as to flee. And then foul things climbed up from the slime of the rock, and descended from the mists of the troubled skies, and they coiled round the wings and clogged them."

"Then a voice cried in my ear,--'Seest thou not on the perilous rock the Soul of Harold the Brave?--seest thou not that the waters engulf it, if the wings fail to flee? Up, Truth, whose strength is in purity, whose image is woman, and aid the soul of the brave!' I sought to spring to thy side; but I was powerless, and behold, close

beside me, through my sleep as through a veil, appeared the shafts of the ruined temple in which I lay reclined. And, methought, I saw Hilda sitting alone by the Saxon's grave, and pouring from a crystal vessel black drops into a human heart which she held in her hands: and out of that heart grew a child, and out of that child a youth, with dark mournful brow. And the youth stood by thy side and whispered to thee: and from his lips there came a reeking smoke, and in that smoke as in a blight the wings withered up. And I heard the Voice say, 'Hilda, it is thou that hast destroyed the good angel, and reared from the poisoned heart the loathsome tempter!' And I cried aloud, but it was too late; the waves swept over thee, and above the waves there floated an iron helmet, and on the helmet was a golden crown--the crown I had seen in the hand of the spectre!"

"But this is no evil dream, my Edith," said Harold, gaily.

Edith, unheeding him, continued:

"I started from my sleep. The sun was still high--the air lulled and windless. Then through the shafts and down the hill there glided in that clear waking daylight, a grisly shape like that which I have heard our maidens say the witch-hags, sometimes seen in the forest, assume; yet in truth, it seemed neither of man nor woman. It turned its face once towards me, and on that hideous face were the glee and hate of a triumphant fiend. Oh, Harold, what should all this portend?"

"Hast thou not asked thy kinswoman, the diviner of dreams?"

"I asked Hilda, and she, like thee, only murmured, 'The Saxon crown!' But if there be faith in those airy children of the night, surely, O adored one, the vision forebodes danger, not to life, but to soul; and the words I heard seemed to say that thy wings were thy valour, and the Fylgia thou hadst lost was,--no, that were impossible--"

"That my Fylgia was TRUTH, which losing, I were indeed lost to thee. Thou dost well," said Harold, loftily, "to hold that among the lies of the fancy. All else may, perchance, desert me, but never mine own free soul. Self-reliant hath Hilda called me in mine earlier days, and wherever fate casts me,--in my truth, and my love, and my dauntless heart, I dare both man and the fiend."

Edith gazed a moment in devout admiration on the mien of her hero-lover, then she drew closer and closer to his breast, consoled and believing.

CHAPTER V.

With all her persuasion of her own powers in penetrating the future, we have seen that Hilda had never consulted her oracles on the fate of Harold, without a dark and awful sense of the ambiguity of their responses. That fate, involving the mightiest interests of a great race, and connected with events operating on the farthest times and the remotest lands, lost itself to her prophetic ken amidst omens the most contradictory, shadows and lights the most conflicting, meshes

the most entangled. Her human heart, devotedly attached to the Earl, through her love for Edith,--her pride obstinately bent on securing to the last daughter of her princely race that throne, which all her vaticinations, even when most gloomy, assured her was destined to the man with whom Edith's doom was interwoven, combined to induce her to the most favourable interpretation of all that seemed sinister and doubtful. But according to the tenets of that peculiar form of magic cultivated by Hilda, the comprehension became obscured by whatever partook of human sympathy. It was a magic wholly distinct from the malignant witchcraft more popularly known to us, and which was equally common to the Germanic and Scandinavian heathens.

The magic of Hilda was rather akin to the old Cimbrian Alirones, or sacred prophetesses; and, as with them, it demanded the priestess--that is, the person without human ties or emotions, a spirit clear as a mirror, upon which the great images of destiny might be cast untroubled.

However the natural gifts and native character of Hilda might be perverted by the visionary and delusive studies habitual to her, there was in her very infirmities a grandeur, not without its pathos. In this position which she had assumed between the earth and the heaven, she stood so solitary and in such chilling air,--all the doubts that beset her lonely and daring soul came in such gigantic forms of terror and menace!--On the verge of the mighty Heathenesse sinking fast into the night of ages, she towered amidst the shades, a shade herself; and round her gathered the last demons of the Dire Belief, defying the march of their luminous foe, and centering round their mortal priestess, the wrecks of their horrent empire over a world redeemed.

All the night that succeeded her last brief conference with Harold, the Vala wandered through the wild forest land, seeking haunts or employed in collecting herbs, hallowed to her dubious yet solemn lore; and the last stars were receding into the cold grey skies, when, returning homeward, she beheld within the circle of the Druid temple a motionless object, stretched on the ground near the Teuton's grave; she approached, and perceived what seemed a corpse, it was so still and stiff in its repose, and the face upturned to the stars was so haggard and death-like;--a face horrible to behold; the evidence of extreme age was written on the shrivelled livid skin and the deep furrows, but the expression retained that intense malignity which belongs to a power of life that extreme age rarely knows. The garb, which was that of a remote fashion, was foul and ragged, and neither by the garb, nor by the face, was it easy to guess what was the sex of this seeming corpse. But by a strange and peculiar odour that rose from the form [179], and a certain glistening on the face, and the lean folded hands, Hilda knew that the creature was one of those witches, esteemed of all the most deadly and abhorred, who, by the application of certain ointments, were supposed to possess the art of separating soul from body, and, leaving the last as dead, to dismiss the first to the dismal orgies of the Sabbat. It was a frequent custom to select for the place of such trances, heathen temples and ancient graves. And Hilda seated herself beside the witch to await the waking. The cock crowed thrice, heavy mists began to arise from the glades, covering the gnarled roots of the forest trees, when the dread face on which Hilda calmly gazed, showed symptoms of returning life! a strong convulsion shook the vague indefinite form under its huddled garments, the eyes opened, closed,--opened again; and what had a few moments before seemed a dead thing sat up and looked round.

"Wicca," said the Danish prophetess, with an accent between contempt and curiosity, "for what mischief to beast or man hast thou followed the noiseless path of the Dreams through the airs of Night?"

The creature gazed hard upon the questioner, from its bleared but fiery eyes, and replied slowly, "Hail, Hilda, the Morthwyrtha! why art thou not of us, why comest thou not to our revels? Gay sport have we had to-night with Faul and Zabulus [180]; but gayer far shall our sport be in the wassail hall of Senlac, when thy grandchild shall come in the torchlight to the bridal bed of her lord. A buxom bride is Edith the Fair, and fair looked her face in her sleep on yester noon, when I sate by her side, and breathed on her brow, and murmured the verse that blackens the dream; but fairer still shall she look in her sleep by her lord. Ha! ha! Ho! we shall be there, with Zabulus and Faul; we shall be there!"

"How!" said Hilda, thrilled to learn that the secret ambition she cherished was known to this loathed sister in the art. "How dost thou pretend to that mystery of the future, which is dim and clouded even to me? Canst thou tell when and where the daughter of the Norse kings shall sleep on the breast of her lord?"

A sound that partook of laughter, but was so unearthly in its malignant glee that it seemed not to come from a human lip, answered the Vala; and as the laugh died the witch rose, and said:

"Go and question thy dead, O Morthwyrtha! Thou deemest thyself wiser than we are; we wretched hags, whom the ceorl seeks when his herd has the murrain, or the girl when her false love forsakes her; we, who have no dwelling known to man; but are found at need in the wold or the cave, or the side of dull slimy streams where the murderess-mother hath drowned her babe. Askest thou, O Hilda, the rich and the learned, askest thou counsel and lore from the daughter of Faul?"

"No," answered the Vala, haughtily, "not to such as thou do the great Nornas unfold the future. What knowest thou of the runes of old, whispered by the trunkless skull to the mighty Odin? runes that control the elements, and conjure up the Shining Shadows of the grave. Not with thee will the stars confer; and thy dreams are foul with revelries obscene, not solemn and haunted with the bodements of things to come! Only I marvelled, while I beheld thee on the Saxon's grave, what joy such as thou can find in that life above life, which draws upward the soul of the true Vala."

"The joy," replied the Witch, "the joy which comes from wisdom and power, higher than you ever won with your spells from the rune or the star. Wrath gives the venom to the slaver of the clog, and death to the curse of the Witch. When wilt thou be as wise as the hag thou despisest? When will all the clouds that beset thee roll away from thy ken? When thy hopes are all crushed, when thy passions lie dead, when thy pride is abased, when thou art but a wreck, like the shafts of this temple, through which the starlight can shine. Then only, thy soul will see clearly the sense of the runes, and then, thou and I will meet on the verge of the Black Shoreless Sea!"

So, despite all her haughtiness and disdain, did these words startle the lofty Prophetess, that she remained gazing into space long after that fearful apparition had vanished, and up from the grass, which

those obscene steps had profaned, sprang the lark carolling.

But ere the sun had dispelled the dews on the forest sward, Hilda had recovered her wonted calm, and, locked within her own secret chamber, prepared the seid and the runes for the invocation of the dead.

CHAPTER VI.

Resolving, should the auguries consulted permit him to depart, to entrust Gurth with the charge of informing Edith, Harold parted from his betrothed, without hint of his suspended designs; and he passed the day in making all preparations for his absence and his journey, promising Gurth to give his final answer on the morrow,—when either himself or his brother should depart for Rouen. But more and more impressed with the arguments of Gurth, and his own sober reason, and somewhat perhaps influenced by the forebodings of Edith (for that mind, once so constitutionally firm, had become tremulously alive to such airy influences), he had almost predetermined to assent to his brother's prayer, when he departed to keep his dismal appointment with the Morthwyrtha. The night was dim, but not dark; no moon shone, but the stars, wan though frequent, gleamed pale, as from the farthest deeps of the heaven; clouds grey and fleecy rolled slowly across the welkin, veiling and disclosing, by turns, the melancholy orbs.

The Morthwyrtha, in her dark dress, stood within the circle of stones. She had already kindled a fire at the foot of the bautastein, and its glare shone redly on the grey shafts; playing through their forlorn gaps upon the sward. By her side was a vessel, seemingly of pure water, filled from the old Roman fountain, and its clear surface flashed blood-red in the beams. Behind them, in a circle round both fire and water, were fragments of bark, cut in a peculiar form, like the head of an arrow, and inscribed with the mystic letters; nine were the fragments, and on each fragment were graven the runes. In her right hand the Morthwyrtha held her seid-staff, her feet were bare, and her loins girt by the Hunnish belt inscribed with mystic letters; from the belt hung a pouch or gipsire of bearskin, with plates of silver. Her face, as Harold entered the circle, had lost its usual calm—it was wild and troubled.

She seemed unconscious of Harold's presence, and her eye fixed and rigid, was as that of one in a trance. Slowly, as if constrained by some power not her own, she began to move round the ring with a measured pace, and at last her voice broke low, hollow, and internal, into a rugged chaunt, which may be thus imperfectly translated--

"By the Urdar-fount dwelling,
Day by day from the rill,
The Nornas besprinkle
The ash Ygg-drassill, [181]
The hart bites the buds,
And the snake gnaws the root,
But the eagle all-seeing
Keeps watch on the fruit.

These drops on thy tomb
From the fountain I pour;
With the rune I invoke thee,
With flame I restore.
Dread Father of men,
In the land of thy grave,
Give voice to the Vala,
And light to the Brave."

As she thus chaunted, the Morthwyrtha now sprinkled the drops from the vessel over the bautastein,--now, one by one, cast the fragments of bark scrawled with runes on the fire. Then, whether or not some glutinous or other chemical material had been mingled in the water, a pale gleam broke from the gravestone thus sprinkled, and the whole tomb glistened in the light of the leaping fire. From this light a mist or thin smoke gradually rose, and took, though vaguely, the outline of a vast human form. But so indefinite was the outline to Harold's eye, that gazing on it steadily, and stilling with strong effort his loud heart, he knew not whether it was a phantom or a vapour that he beheld.

The Vala paused, leaning on her staff, and gazing in awe on the glowing stone, while the Earl, with his arms folded on his broad breast, stood hushed and motionless. The sorceress recommenced:

"Mighty dead, I revere thee,
Dim-shaped from the cloud,
With the light of thy deeds
For the web of thy shroud.

As Odin consulted
Mimir's skull hollow-eyed, [182]
Odin's heir comes to seek
In the Phantom a guide."

As the Morthwyrtha ceased, the fire crackled loud, and from its flame flew one of the fragments of bark to the feet of the sorceress:--the runic letters all indented with sparks.

The sorceress uttered a loud cry, which, despite his courage and his natural strong sense, thrilled through the Earl's heart to his marrow and bones, so appalling was it with wrath and terror; and while she gazed aghast on the blazing letters, she burst forth:

"No warrior art thou,
And no child of the tomb;
I know thee, and shudder,
Great Asa of Doom.

Thou constrainest my lips
And thou crushest my spell;
Bright Son of the Giant
Dark Father of Hell!" [183]

The whole form of the Morthwyrtha then became convulsed and agitated, as if with the tempest of frenzy; the foam gathered to her lips, and her voice rang forth like a shriek:

"In the Iron Wood rages

The Weaver of Harm,
The giant Blood-drinker
Hag-born MANAGARM. [184]

A keel nears the shoal;
From the slime and the mud
Crawl the newt and the adder,
The spawn the of flood.

Thou stand'st on the rock
Where the dreamer beheld thee.
O soul, spread thy wings,
Ere the glamour hath spell'd thee.

O, dread is the tempter,
And strong the control;
But conquer'd the tempter,
If firm be the soul"

The Vala paused; and though it was evident that in her frenzy she was still unconscious of Harold's presence, and seemed but to be the compelled and passive voice to some Power, real or imaginary, beyond her own existence, the proud man approached, and said:

"Firm shall be my soul, nor of the dangers which beset it would I ask the dead or the living. If plain answers to mortal sense can come from these airy shadows or these mystic charms, reply, O interpreter of fate; reply but to the questions I demand. If I go to the court of the Norman, shall I return unscathed?"

The Vala stood rigid as a shape of stone while Harold thus spoke; and her voice came so low and strange as if forced from her scarce-moving lips:

"Thou shalt return unscathed."

"Shall the hostages of Godwin, my father, be released"

"The hostages of Godwin shall be released," answered the same voice;
"the hostages of Harold be retained."

"Wherefore hostage from me?"

"In pledge of alliance with the Norman."

"Ha! then the Norman and Harold shall plight friendship and troth?"

"Yes!" answered the Vala; but this time a visible shudder passed over her rigid form.

"Two questions more, and I have done. The Norman priests have the ear of the Roman Pontiff. Shall my league with William the Norman avail to win me my bride?"

"It will win thee the bride thou wouldst never have wedded but for thy league with William the Norman. Peace with thy questions, peace!" continued the voice, trembling as with some fearful struggle; "for it is the demon that forces my words, and they wither my soul to speak them."

"But one question more remains; shall I live to wear the crown of England; and if so, when shall I be a king?"

At these words the face of the Prophetess kindled, the fire suddenly leapt up higher and brighter; again, vivid sparks lighted the runes on the fragments of bark that were shot from the flame; over these last the Morthwyrtha bowed her head, and then, lifting it, triumphantly burst once more into song.

"When the Wolf Month [185], grim and still,
Heaps the snow-mass on the hill;
When, through white air, sharp and bitter,
Mocking sunbeams freeze and glitter;
When the ice-gems, bright and barbed,
Deck the boughs the leaves had garbed
Then the measure shall be meted,
And the circle be completed.
Cerdic's race, the Thor-descended,
In the Monk-king's tomb be ended;
And no Saxon brow but thine
Wear the crown of Woden's line.

Where thou wendest, wend unfearing,
Every step thy throne is nearing.
Fraud may plot, and force assail thee,--
Shall the soul thou trusteth fail thee?
If it fail thee, scornful hearer,
Still the throne shines near and nearer.
Guile with guile oppose, and never
Crown and brow shall Force dis sever:
Till the dead men unforgiving
Loose the war steeds on the living;
Till a sun whose race is ending
Sees the rival stars contending;
Where the dead men, unforgiving,
Wheel the war steeds round the living.

Where thou wendest, wend unfearing;
Every step thy throne is nearing.
Never shall thy House decay,
Nor thy sceptre pass away,
While the Saxon name endureth
In the land thy throne secureth;
Saxon name and throne together,
Leaf and root, shall wax and wither;
So the measure shall be meted,
And the circle close completed.

Art thou answer'd, dauntless seeker?
Go, thy bark shall ride the breaker,
Every billow high and higher,
Waft thee up to thy desire;
And a force beyond thine own,
Drift and strand thee on the throne.

When the Wolf Month, grim and still,
Piles the snow-mass on the hill,
In the white air sharp and bitter

Shall thy kingly sceptre glitter:
When the ice-gems barb the bough
Shall the jewels clasp thy brow;
Winter-wind, the oak uprending,
With the altar-anthem blending;
Wind shall howl, and mone shall sing,
'Hail to Harold--HAIL THE KING!'"

An exultation that seemed more than human, so intense it was and so solemn,--thrilled in the voice which thus closed predictions that seemed signally to belie the more vague and menacing warnings with which the dreary incantation had commenced. The Morthwyrtha stood erect and stately, still gazing on the pale blue flame that rose from the burial stone, still slowly the flame waned and paled, and at last died with a sudden flicker, leaving the grey tomb standing forth all weatherworn and desolate, while a wind rose from the north and sighed through the roofless columns. Then as the light over the grave expired, Hilda gave a deep sigh, and fell to the ground senseless.

Harold lifted his eyes towards the stars and murmured:

"If it be a sin, as the priests say, to pierce the dark walls which surround us here, and read the future in the dim world beyond, why gavest thou, O Heaven, the reason, ever resting, save when it explores? Why hast thou set in the heart the mystic Law of Desire, ever toiling to the High, ever grasping at the Far?"

Heaven answered not the unquiet soul. The clouds passed to and fro in their wanderings, the wind still sighed through the hollow stones, the fire shot with vain sparks towards the distant stars. In the cloud and the wind and the fire couldst thou read no answer from Heaven, unquiet soul?

The next day, with a gallant company, the falcon on his wrist [186], the sprightly hound gamboling before his steed, blithe of heart and high in hope, Earl Harold took his way to the Norman court.

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