

CÆDWALLA

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CÆDWALLA ***

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Cover art

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*How they ran ashore on ye Pole Sand at ye bar of Cissanceaster
haven*

Cædwalla

OR

THE SAXONS IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT

A Tale

BY

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QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

With Illustrations by the Author

SECOND EDITION

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TO

H.R.H. PRINCE HENRY OF BATTENBERG, K.G.
*Hon. Colonel 5th (Isle of Wight "Princess Beatrice's")
Volunteer Battalion. The Hants Regiment.*

THIS TALE

OF THE DEEDS OF TEUTONIC WARRIORS IN OLDEN TIME
IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT

IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR

PREFACE.

In writing a story of the Isle of Wight in the seventh century, which shall at the same time be suitable for young people as well as historically truthful, there are many difficulties. The authorities for this period are Bede and the Saxon Chronicle. The former obtained his information of the South Saxons and the Wihtwaras from Daniel, Bishop of Winchester, who was evidently well-informed of the state of the southern people during the later half of the seventh century. Eddius, Asser, Ethelweard, Florence of Worcester, and Henry of Huntingdon all supply information, more or less accurate, as they are nearer to or more remote from the time of which they treat; and the valuable remarks of the modern specialists Dr. Guest, Kemble, and Lappenberg, are useful in leading the student to a right judgment of the facts. The historians, Dr. Milman, Dr. Lingard, and Mr. Freeman are also important helps, especially the first-named writer. Neander's "Memorials of Christian Life" and Montalembert's "Monks of the West," have been consulted, with a view to becoming acquainted with the theology and religious fervour of the times; and Mallet's "Northern Antiquities" has been largely laid under contribution for a clue to the mythology of the period, although properly belonging to a later time, and to the Scandinavian form of Teutonic religion. The author has also had the learned assistance of the Rev. J. Boucher James, M.A., Vicar of Carisbrooke, and late Fellow and Tutor of Queen's College, Oxford, whose antiquarian knowledge of the Isle of Wight is accurate and profound.

The scenes are all well known to the writer, who has many times threaded the channels at the entrance to Chichester Harbour, and climbed the steep slopes of Bembridge and Brading Downs.

As the story has been written for young people, sentiment has been entirely omitted, the ideas of the author differing from those of other writers who make their youthful heroes and heroines suffer the sentimental pangs of a Juliet and a Romeo.

The mode of spelling the Saxon names has been carefully thought over, and the most commonly received method has been generally adopted.

The name of the outlaw, West Saxon King, and enthusiastic convert to Christianity, Cædwalla, himself, has offered considerable difficulties, since there

are many ways of writing his name, and probably not a few of pronouncing it. Cæadwalla, Cædwalla, Cadwalla, are the most common forms; while perhaps the most correct pronunciation would be represented by Kadwalla.*

* The name of Cædwalla bears a singular resemblance to that of Cadwalla, the British prince who made war upon Ædwin, king of Northumbria. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Cadwalla was succeeded by Cadwallader, who died at Rome AD. 689, the very place and date of Cædwalla's death, according to Bede. Could Cædwalla have really been of British descent?

His brother, Mollo, Wulf, or Mul, as he is indifferently called, is also a very ambiguous personage as regards nomenclature, and it has even been suggested that his name was "Mauler," as though he were an awkward man to deal with in a personal encounter!

A few simple foot-notes have been appended; not that they were necessary to students of history, into whose hands the author hardly ventures to hope the little book will fall, but because it seemed some explanation was required for younger readers.

That the state of the south of England during the latter half of the seventh century was a very dismal one, is sufficiently clear from all contemporary evidence, and the author has not attempted to give a more *couleur de rose* view of it than his materials justified.

It is, however, quite evident from Bede and other authorities that the English or Saxons had already developed great intellectual powers, and where law and order were more firmly established than in the south of England, general culture and the arts of peace were making steady progress.

Such learning as that of Bede, such architecture as that introduced by St. Wilfrid at Ripon and Hexham, such artistic work as that of the Royal MS. preserved in the British Museum, which may have been the very one presented by Wilfrid to his church of York, show that the Saxons, who are so often described as mere jovial, hard fighting, hard drinking, blustering dullards, had in many instances reached a comparatively high standard of civilization.

Lisle Court, Wootton, I.W., July, 1887.

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CÆDWALLA
OR, THE SAXONS IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT

CHAPTER I.

STRANDED.

"How much longer, thinkest thou, must we be here, Biggun?"

To this question no answer was returned, and after a moment the same voice spoke again rather more feebly.

"Biggun, why answerest thou not? What ails thee? Oh, how she does bump!" And the child's voice became tremulous with pain.

"It won't be a long time now, Ædric, before she floats, I'm thinking; the tide is making up fast—only if she don't go to pieces first I'm a weala,"[1] added the speaker, under his breath.

[1] The general name for foreigners, but applied especially to the conquered, and therefore despised, British. The words Wales and Welsh are the modern equivalents.

"Art thou much in pain, Eddie?" said another younger and brighter voice.

"Oh! Wulf, it does hurt here so much. It wouldn't hurt like this, I think, if the weary old boat wouldn't bump so dreadfully—oh!—" exclaimed the boy, as a rolling wave came in and raised up the large, awkwardly-built boat; and then, as the white crest of the wave passed on to break in a long frothy cataract over the shallow sand-bank beyond, the boat fell back with a bump that made every timber in her strain and creak and work as though she would go to pieces.

The old man addressed as "Biggun," whose real name was Ceolwulf, but who was always called Biggun by reason of his height and breadth of chest, had gone to the bows of the boat as he saw the wave coming, and, calling to the boy who was addressed as Wulf to take his pole and push hard, had leant with all his might on his own long pole; and, as the wave lifted the awkward craft, their united efforts made her give a little.

"There she goes, there she goes; her head is coming round. Ah, now she's aground again! Well, never mind, the next roller is coming, and she'll come off then. There, have a care not to overstrain thyself, Wulfstan," said the old man cheerily. "Wait for the next swell; we want all our strength, and it is not much either that we've got."

The position of the boat was not a very safe one, considering the condition she was in. She was lying aground on a sand-bank at the entrance of a harbour which was then, as it is now, very difficult for a stranger to find his way into.

The boat had got aground fortunately at the time when the tide was just beginning to rise, and there was, therefore, every hope that she would float off again as the tide rose; but there was also the great danger of her breaking up first, considering how old she was and how badly built, and the difficulty of getting her off was considerably increased by the long rollers that came in, with their green and glassy swirl, and lifted her farther and farther on. Had there been more strength in the crew it would have been an easy matter to get her off, or had the boat drawn less water; but she was such a heavy, clumsy, thing, drawing quite four feet of water, that it would have done no good to get overboard and push, for her weight would have only been imperceptibly lightened, while the depth of the water would have prevented any great strength being applied by pushing her. There was nothing to be done, therefore, but stand in the bows and push with all their might against the sand with two long poles they had with them.

It was early in the morning of an October day, and owing to the dim light of the hour before sunrise they had got aground; for although Ceolwulf, or Biggun, had never been in here before, yet he was accustomed to find his way into creeks and out-of-the-way harbours, and would have avoided this bank could he have seen the long rollers breaking ahead; but in the white mist of the early morning he could not make them out. It was true that their dull sound in the still morning air should have told him there were dangers near; yet the waves were breaking all around on many similar sand-banks, and it was difficult to tell how near they were. As the glow of the coming sun spread over the sky they could make out their position better. About two hundred yards on their right was a high bank of shingle, with nothing whatever to be seen above it; this bank stretched away to the west until it was lost in the mist, but immediately ahead of the boat it ended in a point of shingle, steeply sloping down to the sea; beyond this point nothing could yet be seen but the oily sea blending with the grey mist; directly under the bows of the boat the sea was breaking in long glassy rollers, while beyond them a low and shingly beach stretched away into the mist again; overhead the grey fog was rolling off in ever-changing wreaths, and towards the east a warm rosy light told of the rising sun; behind them the impalpable mist and sea faded into one, only now and then a dark ridge would rise up and come majestically rolling onwards, the boat would give a gentle heave, then come down with a heavy bump, and the wave would pass on to curl over in a sounding deluge of foam, and spread out in white froth over the bank to join the eddying current on the other side.

The occupants of the boat were two boys, about ten and twelve years of age, and the old man. The eldest boy, who was addressed as Eddie, and whose name was Ædric, was lying down in the most comfortable position he could obtain in

the bottom of the boat. He was covered up with a few skins, and from time to time moved in a feverish, restless way. His head was all that could be seen, and showed a pale, handsome countenance, with blue eyes and yellow hair; but the evident expression of pain made the face look older than it was. The unkempt hair lay in curling masses on a pillow of rough cow-hide, and it would have been difficult to tell if the figure were that of a boy or girl.

Beside him lay a bow and some arrows, a couple of spears, and a formidable-looking axe. There were no other articles in the boat, and the only means of propelling her were three long and very rude oars, a mast, and one old and patched sail bent to a yard, and hoisted like a lug-sail, only quite incapable of being set properly, both by reason of its shape and the weakness of its material. The halyards which hauled the sail up were old and worn, and they would have given way at the least strain put upon them.

There had been a light draught of air from the south during the night, but it had blown rather heavily from the south-west for two or three days previously.

The old man called Biggun was a hard, weather-beaten, grim-looking fellow, his reddish-grey beard and stubbly moustache surrounded a sunburnt face seamed with wrinkles, and two sharp grey eyes looked out from under heavy, bushy eyebrows. He wore no covering on his head, and his dress chiefly consisted of a leathern coat or jacket, covering a rough woollen kind of jersey, which formed a kilt below his waist. On his legs he wore pieces of leather with the hair on, strapped round with thongs of hide, and rough leather sandals protected his feet. He was armed with a sharp knife at his waist-belt.

The other boy was a bright-looking little fellow, of about ten years of age, fine and well-made; his hair, like that of his brother, hung in thick masses round his neck, and would have been all the better for a little brushing and combing. He was fair, like his brother, and gave promise of developing great strength in later life. He was dressed in a tight-fitting tunic of coarse woollen stuff, and wore short drawers of the same material, and bare legs. He also carried a small dagger suspended from a leathern belt, and leather sandals, strapped on to his feet and round his ankles, completed his equipment.

"Now, Wulf, hold on to thy pole," called out Biggun, as a dark ridge rose up silently astern and came rolling on. The stern of the boat lifted, and as the wave passed under her, the old man and the boy leant with all their might on their poles, and Ædric called out: "That's it, I feel her moving—there she goes; that's right, keep her going. Ah! now we are off," as Biggun and Wulfstan kept pushing with their poles as the boat moved astern.

"Well, Wulfstan, thou didst that well, I will say; and thou wilt grow up yet to pay off the debts of last night upon that nothing Arwald. Ah, the robber! I wish I had got my axe into him, that I do. That's right, keep her head round; the

tide will swing us in now, and we can see all the banks.”

The boat was now fairly afloat, and was, as Biggun said, being rapidly carried into the narrow channel of deep water that led between the steep shingle point and the outlying spit of sand on which they had bumped.

The sun had risen over the mist, and the grey bank ahead gradually resolved itself into a low island, covered with bushes and a few wind-blown trees, which all looked as if a violent gale was then blowing, although everything was perfectly still. Their branches stretched away to the north-east, and all the side towards the south-west was bare and branchless. On each side of the island the sea flowed up in winding channels, with wide reaching mudbanks between the water and the shore; beyond the lowland and water, rose thickly-wooded hills, standing back some distance from the immediate foreground.

Slowly the boat passed the shingle point, and was paddled with difficulty towards the channel on the right. They had now got into perfectly still water, and Wulfstan was amused to see how curious the waves looked as they stood up astern like a low dark wall, and then suddenly broke up into foam, followed by a dull, heavy sound like distant thunder.

”Thou art in less pain now, Eddie?” said Wulfstan.

”Yes, Wulf; but the leg hurts a good deal—it aches so. I wonder what became of father? Think of our home all burnt down! and father killed. Dost thou think he was killed, Biggun?”

”I am greatly afraid of it. He wasn’t the man to let his goods go without a fight, and we know how the fight went.”

It was an age when men did not sorrow long; they were so accustomed to slaughter, and robbery, and misery, that the loss even of the nearest and dearest relations stirred more the feelings of revenge than the softer emotions.

The South of England in the latter part of the 7th century was not a place where sentiment could flourish; men had no time then for the luxury of sorrow. Hard knocks and little pity was the order of the day. Ninety, or rather eighty-four years ago, Augustine the Monk had set foot in the Island. But that part of it where the events just related were taking place had not yet heard the Gospel tidings, or, if a faint rumour had reached the leading Eorldomen, the common people knew little of it. Quite recently, a few strange men, speaking an unknown tongue, had come to the inlet, the entrance of which has just been described; they had come by land, and had forced their way through the vast impenetrable forest that separated the South Seaxa, or Sussex, from the rest of England. There were but four of these men, and their habits were very simple and harmless, and the rude men of the country saw nothing to gain by doing them harm. They let them live therefore; and they had settled at a convenient spot at the head of a creek that had its outlet to the sea, upon the sandy bar of which the boat had struck.

This place was called Boseam, or Boseham, and is known to-day by the very little altered name of Bosham.

There had also lately arrived a wonderful man, a Skald or Priest, as Biggun had heard, who had all sorts of charms and spells, and who had come from foreign parts. He, like the strange men of Bosheam, never fought; he wore splendid clothes, and talked in a wonderful way. Edilwalch, the king of the South Saxons, stood greatly in awe of him, and so did all the country round.

"But what tongue does he talk?" said Ædric, who was greatly interested in what Biggun was telling them about this wonderful man.

"He talks English, only in a different way to what we do; rather more like those men who were wrecked on our coast last year."

"What, those men who came from Bernicia, as they called it, and wanted to go across the sea? But, Biggun, what's that thing standing up in the water there?" added the boy with eagerness.

Biggun looked, and saw a thing that seemed like a man's head and shoulders standing out above the water. But the face was very flat and badly formed, with large bristles over the mouth, and bright eyes the skin nearly black and covered with long hair. For the first moment or so he was puzzled, not being a man of quick apprehension, but directly afterwards he called out: "Why, it's a seal! You have seen many of them off our point at the Foreland, Wulf."

The creature did not seem at all afraid of them, but was presently joined by another, who rose awkwardly up on the shallow sandbank and flapped its fins at them. They were approaching the Isle of Seals, or Sealsea.

Wulfstan picked up the bow from beside his brother, and was going to let an arrow fly at the creatures, when Biggun stopped him, saying: "We may want all our arrows, and we can't pick up the beast if thou dost hit it. Hark! there's somebody hallooing," and Biggun rested on his oar to listen.

A loud voice from the shingly promontory they were passing hailed them. Old Biggun looked leisurely round, and saw a tall, well-made young man. He was armed with a long bow, and a quiver, full of arrows, hung over his shoulder by a broad leather strap, and carried a stout boar spear in his hand, while a bright two-edged battle-axe hung in another belt, and balanced a long, straight sword that hung at his left hip. He wore a loose tunic of leather, covered with little steel rings, sewn one over the other in a careful manner, and in such a way that the upper ring lapped over the one below at the spot where it was attached to the leather tunic; he wore a close-fitting cap on his head, protected by steel plates and ornamented with a heron's crest; his legs were encased in tight leather leggings and stout leathern boots. Altogether he looked a thoroughly well armed and gallant young fellow—one who would help a friend, and be likely to make himself respected by a foe. His fair, curling hair and laughing blue eyes added to his free

and handsome appearance.

Wulfstan, boy-like, was instantly taken with him, and admired him immensely. He thought he must be Balder the Beautiful, or perhaps Thor himself—at least, they could not be finer looking; and he insensibly let his oar dip into the water, which, as he was rowing on the port or left side of the boat, had the effect of holding the water and turning the boat towards the shore.

"What art thou doing that for, Wulf?" growled old Ceolwulf, or Biggun. "We don't want to take that stripling on board, and we don't want to get too near him neither, until we know who he is and what he wants."

"Ho, there! put me across, will you?" shouted the stranger.

"Aye, aye; but we must know thy business first," bawled Ceolwulf in return, resting on his oar.

"I want to go to Cymenesora. Thy crew seems weak. I might lend thee a hand at an oar if thou art bound for the same place."

"Maybe we are, and maybe we aren't," said the cautious Ceolwulf; "but I don't see how we're going to get thee in. See how the tide is setting us up?"

"Yes; but, Biggun, if I back water and thou pullest we shall swing round, and not many strokes will bring us ashore, thou knowest well," said Wulfstan.

"That's all very fine, Wulf; but how am I to know if it's safe to take him on board? We're strangers in a strange land, seest thou, and it's better to keep to ourselves until we know who's who. That young man there is too fine a bird not to be somebody, and he may not be friends with them who have the rule in these parts, dost understand? or he might take a fancy to our boat perhaps. There's no knowing."

"Now, old man, art going to put me across or not?"

"Do, Biggun, row ashore. If he is somebody important, we shall be all the better for having done him a good turn; and, besides, he can get us to Boseham, or wherever we are going, all the quicker, and then poor Eddie can be attended to. And I am dying of hunger, too."

"Well, I don't much like it, but I don't see that we can come to much harm anyway. Let me paddle a bit, Wulf; she will come round into the slack water under that point. There—that's it."

The tide had already carried them close to the point, and a few strokes brought the bow of the boat grating against the steep shingle, but not sufficiently near for the stranger to get in without wetting his feet. However, taking a run, and using his spear as a leaping pole, he sprang lightly on board without touching the water at all.

"Well, old man, I don't see what thou would'st have gained by going off without me, and thou mayest get some good by taking me with thee. Hollo, my fine boy! what's thy name? and what's the matter with thee?" he added, seeing

Ædric in the bottom of the boat.

Ædric now for the first time saw the well-armed handsome stranger, and, like Wulfstan, he thought him the most splendid man he had ever seen, and, boy-like, never connecting any thoughts of suspicion with so frank and prepossessing an outside, did not hesitate a moment to answer him.

"My name is Ædric, and I broke my leg last night when our house was burnt down."

"And how was that?"

"Ah! that's a long tale," said Ceolwulf, who did not at all like this way of telling all about themselves while he knew nothing of the new comer. "We can be telling all we know when we are a little nearer the place we want to go to. Come, lend us a hand, and let's get off this point."

"Why, we are off already," cried Wulfstan. "How the tide is rising!"

"Here, my boy, let me have thy oar, and go thou and sit down by that poor fellow there. Thou art a brave lad, I can see, but thou must not overdo thyself," said the stranger, with a smile. "Where dost want to go, old man?" he added, turning to Ceolwulf.

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't much care as long as I can find some shelter and food for those boys. They want it. They've had none since last evening, and one has had a deal of pain, poor weakling," said Ceolwulf, grimly and sadly.

"If that's all thy want, there's naught better to do than go to Boseham, and it will do as well for me as Cymenesora; or, better still," he added, "thou canst put me out just opposite, it's all in the way to Boseham."

The old boat went along much faster now, propelled by the vigorous arm of the young man, and the entrance to the creek was entirely shut out, the two banks of shingle appearing to join; but before this happened Wulfstan had turned his head and called out, "There it is. There's the island; good-bye, dear home," and then he burst into tears.

"Don't cry, Wulfy, perhaps father wasn't killed; we don't know, and we can always go back and see," said Eddie, manfully. But the tears were welling up in his eyes too.

"Poor little fellows," said the stranger, looking at them with pity. "If thou wert to tell me all about them, I might be able to help them one of these days; what sayest thou, old man?"

"Well, I don't rightly know; thou seemest a good sort of young fellow, and I don't see it can do much harm. Well, thou must know that these boys' father is, or was—for I fear he was knocked on the head last night—Ælfhere the Eorldoman, who owns all the land at the east end of Wihtea,[2] where the Wihtwaras dwell, has had a quarrel with Arwald who held the land round Wihtgarsbyryg,[3] and who has been wanting for some time to get the upper hand among us Wihtwaras.

Last night, when all were sleeping, we were roused by smoke, and rushing out, we found Arwald and his men ready to receive us. My lord Ælfhere, seeing that matters were likely to go hard with us, bid me take his two sons here and place them in a boat, and get what help I could to bring them over to his wife's sister's people, who dwell about Portaceaster.[4] But all the men were eager for the fight, and I could only manage this boat, and the drift of the tide carried us during the night to this harbour, and now thou knowest our story."

[2] Now Isle of Wight.

[3] Now Carisbrooke.

[4] Porchester.

"But how came the boy to break his leg?"

"In running for the boat in the dark, and as he was turning to look at the blazing house, he was struck by a spear, and, falling, broke his leg. I picked him up as tenderly as I could, but he has suffered a great deal, poor little one."

"The best thing thou canst do is to take him to the good monks at Boseham; they will take care of him, and cure him too. They are wonderful men at healing, but they are no good at fighting. So these are the sons of Ælfhere the Eorldoman, are they? They come of good stock; I know their mother's family too. Their blood is the same as mine, for their grandfather was Cynegils, and I am a great grandson of Ceawlin."

"What, the great Bretwalda of the house of Cerdic?" said Ceolwulf, with awe.

"Even so; and since thou hast been so open to me I will return thy faith. I am Cædwalla; and now if thou wilt rest on thy oar, I will just push the boat to the shore, for I must get out here."

In a few minutes more the boat neared the beach, and, using his spear as a leaping pole again, Cædwalla sprang to the land, and, waving his hand, disappeared among the scrub on the top of the shingle bank.

CHAPTER II.

"FREELY YE HAVE RECEIVED—FREELY GIVE."

"So that's Cædwalla, is it! I have heard tell of him many a time! And if, poor youth, he had his due, he'd be King of Wessex and Bretwalda[1] to boot. And who is king now? Centwine is it, or Æscuin? Well, that I don't rightly know. Gytha, the old nurse who came from Readbryg,[2] now she told me that one of them had been killed at a fight with the king of Mercia. Anyhow, Cædwalla is the rightful heir, that I do know; but what's he doing here? Well, he can't do any harm to me and my boys, that's certain; and if he gets his own he may help us to pay out that Arwald over there. Well, well, we shall see. Here, Wulf, come and see what thou canst do with that oar again; we can't be far from Boseham now. It's a very good thing the tide hasn't covered the mud, or we should never see all these lakes[3] hereabouts. Let me see, that's the way to Boseham, down there. Why, there's a man fishing! he'll tell us the way. But he's a mighty odd-looking man. What's the matter with his head? Look, Wulf, he's got his hair cut off like a half moon on the top of his head."

[1] The title conferred on, or assumed by, the most powerful among the various Saxon kings, from Ælla of Sussex to Egbert of Wessex. The word occurs first in the "Chronicles" under the year 827, and probably meant "Wielder, of Britain." See Freeman's "Norman Conquest," note B in the Appendix, vol. i.

[2] Now Redbridge, at the head of Southampton Water.

[3] A lake is the local word for a creek running in among the mud banks.

As the boat passed slowly through the water, it took them some minutes before they came up to the fisherman, who was seated on three or four logs rudely nailed together with two cross planks, and moored by a rope to a stick stuck in the mud. The man had long hair, cut or shaved in a peculiar half moon on the top of his head, and wore a long loose robe made of coarse frieze and fastened round his waist by a cord. His feet were bare, and he was sitting on his raft placidly, feeling his line from time to time, and muttering to himself a low, monotonous chant.

"What's he saying, Biggun?"

"That's more than I know. It isn't English; it's a saga of some kind. Listen!"

"Verbum caro, panem verum verbo carnem efficit;
Fitque sanguis Christi merum, et si sensus deficit,
Ad firmandum cor sincerum sola fides sufficit."

These words the man on the raft sang in a low, deep, melodious voice, and

Eddie longed to know what they meant.

"Ho! there; are we in the right track for Boseham?" called Biggun.

The man paused in his chant and looked up, showing a wistful, anxious countenance, that made Biggun form a poor opinion of him; but Wulfstan took directly to him, because of his honest, fearless, trustful eyes.

"Thou art in the right way. There it is, round that point on thy left, among those trees," he answered, with a peculiar accent and foreign way of expressing himself.

"Ask him if he knows where those men live whom that man told us about. He called them some name I never heard before," said Wulfstan.

"Canst tell me where some men live who know how to cure wounds?"

"Meanest thou the monks of Boseham, or, as some call us, the Irish?"

"Those are the men. I met a youth who said they could cure a poor lad I have here who is wounded."

"Row alongside of me and let me look at him. I am one of the monks myself."

"Praise be to Thor," said old Biggun, "but the gods seem determined to make up for their treatment of us last night. Easy, Wulf, and let the old boat come alongside."

Gently they glided up to the rude raft, and the monk, who had cast off his moorings, made his rope fast to their boat, and got over the side into it. They now observed that he had a few fish lying on his raft, and Wulfstan was much delighted at the sight.

"My son," said the monk, stooping over Ædric, "where is the hurt?"

"Here, in this leg," said Ædric, uncovering the skins with difficulty.

"Let me do it, my child," said the monk, gently rolling them back and exposing a large and deep wound in the fleshy part of the calf, which had now become very stiff from cold and loss of blood.

"Ah! we will soon put that right," he said, cheerfully, "if there are no bones broken. It is only about a mile to our huts, and Brother Dicoll knows what herbs soothe wounds of body, as well as of mind."

"Shall we find food there? We are all hungry, and I could eat a bit of wolf and say thank-you if you would give it me."

"There is not much, but such as we have is freely thine, for what saith holy Peter: '*Hospitalitas invicem sinemurmuratione.*'"

"What curious words he does use, Eddie, doesn't he?" said Wulf, in an undertone, to his brother.

"Yes; but I like him. He's quite as tender as Nurse Gytha, and does not make so much fuss; and I am sure he can tell us lots of sagas and stories."

"And he can show me how to fish and make lines," said Wulfstan.

They were now nearing the little settlement on the banks of the creek or

inlet that has existed from these early days—the year 680—down to our own, and without much change; in fact, since Harold, about 320 years afterwards, started from Boseham on his luckless expedition to Normandy, the addition to the number of houses has probably been very small, although all have, of course, been frequently rebuilt. But the church is, in all likelihood, the one in which Harold worshipped, and, if tradition is correct, the great king Knut, or Canute, himself.[4] The piece of sharp practice by which Earl Godwine obtained it from the Archbishop of Canterbury is hardly worthy of credence or mention.[5] A few roofs scattered here and there could be seen nestling among thick woods which came down from the great Andredesweald, or Forest, which then spread from where Lewes now is to the borders of Dorset. This vast wilderness of trees and bush and scrub was then a great and impenetrable barrier, which shut off the little kingdom of the South Saxons, founded by the first Bretwalda Ælla, from the rest of their kin.

[4] According to a well sustained theory the church of Bosham is built on the site, and its walls partly consist of those, of a Roman basilica erected by Vespasian. The tower of the church, tradition says, was founded by St. Wilfrid. Thus this obscure Sussex village has been trodden by Vespasian, Titus, Wilfrid, Canute, Harold.

[5] Walter Mapes (quoted by Camden in his "Britannia," translated by Philemon Holland, edit. 1637) says:—"This Boseam, underneath Chichester, Goodwin saw, and had a minde to it. Being accompanied therefore with a great traine of gentlemen, he comes smiling unto the Archbishop of Canterburie, whose towne then it was. 'My lord,' sayth he, 'give you me Boseam.' The Archbishop, marvelling what he demanded by that question answered, 'I give you Boseam.' Then he, with his company of knights and soldiers, fell down, and, kissing his feet with many thanks, went back to Boseam and kept it." The point appears to be in the play upon the word Boseam and Basium, kiss or "buss" which was used in performing homage—so says Camden.

The abode of the wild boar, the wolf, and all other game that then roamed free in England, it was also the legendary home of the pixies, the gnomes, the wehrwolves, and the witches, in all of whom the Saxons firmly believed. It also afforded a secure shelter for all outlaws and robbers, and had protected Cædwalla from the jealousy of his kinsman, Centwine.

"There are our poor huts, and there is our Dominus, or Abbas," said the monk, pointing to a small cottage built of wooden logs, before which stood a tall and gaunt man, with hollow eyes and sunken checks, but with the same patient, wistful look that the other monk had. He was dressed in exactly the same way, and had his head shaven also.

There were one or two children playing about, and a few men were helping to push down an unmanageable boat, not unlike the one now arriving. These all stopped to gaze at the new comers, and before they got much nearer one of the men called out to know who they were and how many they had on board. The monk replied, and the answer appearing satisfactory, no further notice was taken of their arrival, except that the children crowded down to the landing-place, and stood open-mouthed with curiosity to see the strangers get out.

There was a rude kind of quay, made of rough logs laid one on the top of the other, and kept in their places by piles driven into the mud. The tide had now risen sufficiently to allow the boat to come alongside this, and as she glided up the tall monk came down to meet them. He spoke a few words in a language Biggun could not understand to the monk who had been fishing; and he then said to one of the children:

"Call brother Corman, and bid him bring down a bench, or settle."

Meanwhile Ceolwulf had got on shore, and made the boat fast, and then slung the axe over his shoulder by a thong, and told Wulfstan to take one of the spears. But the monk advised him to put them down again, as no one was disposed to hurt them, and any signs of suspicion or defiance might arouse angry feelings.

"What is thy name, my boy?" said the superior monk to Eddie, whom he was now examining with the other monk, whom they had first met.

Ædric told his name, and the rank of his father, and what had happened. Such events in that lawless time were far too frequent to cause much surprise; but the monk seemed distressed nevertheless, more apparently at this fresh instance of the treachery, rapacity, and cruelty of man, than by reason of the actual circumstances related to him; for he sighed and murmured: "*O generatio incredula et perversa quousque ero vobiscum!*"

By this time another monk had joined the party, and now, under the directions of the abbot or superior, they carefully lifted Ædric out of the boat and up to the hut, before which the monk had been standing. They took him inside, and laid him down on a rough couch, in one corner, and then they gave him some bread and a little water.

"We will get better food presently," said the superior; "but there is great difficulty in getting food here at all now, and the people suffer much."

"Ah! thou mayst well say that," said the first monk, whom the superior addressed by the name of Malachi. "Ever since that fearsome summer, when everything died for want of water, after the sun was darkened, the dearth has been dreadful; and after the dearth and drought came the plague. Verily God hath visited us! but what we have ye are welcome to; for did not our blessed Master say: '*Beati misericordes quoniam ipsi misericordiam consequentur.*'"

In attending to Ædric, the good monks had not forgotten Ceolwulf and Wulfstan, but had given them some of the same coarse fare they had set before Eddie.

"It strikes me," said Ceolwulf, "that these woods ought to produce something better than this; and, after we've had enough to satisfy our hunger, we will go out and see if we can't kill something."

"Oh, do let us, Biggun; they will think much more of us if we can bring them something we have killed."

The abbot of the little community, whose name was Dicoll, having finished his attention to Ædric's leg for the present, came and stood by Wulfstan, and, stroking him kindly on the head, said that now he knew who he was, and what accident had driven them on their shore, he should like to ask him what he was going to do. "Did they know that Edilwalch, the king, had an alliance with Arwald, and had received Wihtea[6] as a grant from King Wulfhere,[6] of Mercia, as a reward for his having been christened?"

[6] Isle of Wight.

This was news to Biggun, and he did not understand how Wulfhere could give away what he had not got. However, it was quite clear if Edilwalch was a friend of Arwald, he could not well be anything else but an enemy to Ælfhere, who had always supported the West Saxon domination, and had fought at Pontisbyryg, by the side of Coinwalch, the last powerful West Saxon king, when Wulfhere, of Mercia, defeated him. Biggun began to think they had only got from the frying-pan into the fire.

"As soon as possible it will be well to go to Wilfrid the Bishop, who has lately come to Sealchea,[7] and has received eighty-seven hides of land, and a great number of slaves, all of whom, I hear, he has set at liberty. Truly, although he does observe Easter at a different time to us, and also shaves his head in a way that would have vexed the soul of the blessed Columba, yet he hath wrought a good work among these rude and pagan South Saxons, and may the Lord pardon him for his other irregularities."

[7] Selsea.

"But how can we take the boy there? he has already had enough journeying."

"Leave him with us. Edilwalch is now engaged on an expedition against the men of Kent; at least, I know that two of his chief Thanes, Berethune and Andhune, have set out, and I understood he was to follow; so that, busied as he is, he will not have occasion to inquire about the sons of Ælfhere, even if he should hear that they have come. It is not, my sons, that I wish to be inhospitable, but we are poor people, and cannot treat our guests as we should like, nor could we protect the boys if Edilwalch were to demand them."

"Well, I think that will be the best thing to do, and may Woden and Thor shield thee for thy kindness. If ever Ædric there gets his own again, he will give thee land over at Wiltea, where thou canst worship Thor in thine own way, and eat plenty and drink more."

"Heathen, may the Holy One grant thee His blessing, and bring thee out of the darkness of iniquity wherein thou dwellest, and guide thee to a knowledge of His most blessed faith. And in that I doubt if thou ever heardest the name of our blessed Lord, there is much hope that thou mayest yet be saved. The Bishop Wilfrid will do much to lead thee to the right way; but be not led astray as to the time thou shouldest keep the holy feast of Easter. And, above all, reverence not the way in which that proud and erring man would have the servants of God to shave the crowns of their heads. I much mourn that I may not teach thee myself, for I perceive there are many errors thou mayest fall into; but the course I have prescribed I believe to be the best one for the safety of all. Wilfrid is a holy man in most respects, but I have cautioned thee beforehand of his errors."

"Well, Wulf, we will go and get these good people something to eat. There's no danger of meeting any who will do us harm, is there, Father?" said Biggun, yawning.

"Not if thou goest into the forest behind us, and I have heard there are plenty of four-footed beasts there; but beware of wolves and boars, for men say they have increased much of late, since all the land has been withered and wasted under the heavy hand of the Almighty, who has visited these poor people for their heathenish ways, I doubt not. We will care for Ædric here till thy return, and then brother Malachi shall show thee the road to Wilfrid to-morrow morning, after thou hast had a good night's rest."

"Oh, Biggun! I am so tired of all this talk, let's go to the forest. Good-bye, Eddie; we won't be gone long, and we shall be sure to bring back something better than they have got here."

"I wish I could go too," said Ædric, wistfully; "it seems such a long time since I walked, and, really, it is only yesterday that I was all right. Oh, what things have happened since yesterday!"

He watched the two figures out of the door, and the tears would well up in his eyes in spite of himself.

Brother Corman, who was just like the other two monks, except that he was not quite so sad-looking, came and sat down by him, while Malachi proceeded to prepare the fish he had caught, singing to himself the while, and occasionally exchanging a gentle remark with the children that came to look on as he scraped and cleaned the fish.

The tide had now risen to its full, and the scene was pretty. The still grey tones of the autumn day, the silent water, and the falling leaves, were all in harmony with the monkish chaunt, and the listless forms of the half-starved children. For, as Malachi had well said, the times were dreadful. Such a sore disease had followed the terrible famine, that men in these South Saxon marshes had begun to despair of life altogether, and many times he had seen as many as forty or fifty men, women, and children, drowning themselves for very weariness. They had no strength to till the land, and the land would not produce if they did till it. Their condition had become very desperate and pitiful. They did not seem to know how to fish, and, until Wilfrid had come, they had never attempted to get any food out of the sea. They were able to catch eels, but had become so utterly weary of life that they had rather perish than take any trouble to support themselves.

The worthy monks, who, as some men said, came from Scotland, and others from Ireland, had been doing a noble work. In the true spirit of missionaries, taking their life in their hands, they had left their lonely, but to them dearly loved, island home of Hii, or Iona, hallowed to them by the life and teaching of Columba, and had gone penniless and with nothing but the clothes they wore to teach the Gospel of Christ. "Freely ye have received, freely give," was their motto. "Humility and the fear of the Lord" were their weapons, and they did not seek the blessings attached to these, viz., "riches, and honour, and strength," except as they would redound to the glory of Him whom they served. Simple men they were as regards worldly affairs, naturally clinging to that wherein they were instructed; they put implicit faith in the precepts of their predecessors, who had professed and taught Christianity long before Augustine the Monk had set foot in England. They felt and believed that their Spiritual Father had been a Martyr for the Faith centuries before the hated Saxon, or Jute, or Angle, had left his swampy shore; and that they had received the faith from St. John, from Anatolius, and from Columba. While all Europe was overrun with the waves of barbarism, they had kept the pure light of the Gospel shining in the Western Islands, and it was gall and bitterness that now they were to change their customs and their fashions at the bidding of the emissary of the Bishop of Rome. Were these matters trifles? they urged. Be it so, then; and why make all this disturbance about them? Trifles, alas! in the poor mind of humanity, are very frequently more fought over than essentials. And to both Augustine and Wilfrid after him, zealous for the visible

unity of the Church, it seemed a ridiculous thing, as well as pernicious, that these lowly monks, whom they affected to despise, should obstinately cling to their obsolete and unorthodox fashion. Alas! that the charity which suffereth long and is kind was so early forgotten. The poor Irish or Scotch missionaries were worsted in the controversy, because the power of the See of Rome was in the ascendant; but the purity and simplicity of their lives, their utter self-denial, and the piety of their teaching, made the way easier for the more famous men who followed after them, and who combined the fervour of a missionary with the grand ideal of Christian unity.

Corman, who was sitting by Ædric's side, talked to him from time to time if he appeared restless, but tried chiefly to get him to go to sleep. The boy, however, was too much excited by the rapidity of the past events, and the fever caused by his wound, to be able to sleep, and an occasional restless sigh showed that he was thinking of his father and his home.

"When I grow up," he burst out impatiently, "I will wreak full vengeance on that nothing Arwald, for all that he has done to my house and father. I swear by Wod—"

"Hush! Ædric, hush!" broke in Corman, interrupting him, and putting his cool hand upon the boy's fevered brow. "Swear not, my son, by anything; least of all by the false gods of the heathen. And when thou hast lived longer with us, thou wilt not, I hope, wish to avenge thyself on any being, whatever may be the wrongs he has done thee."

Ædric stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

"What, not make those suffer who have made me suffer? Why, I have always heard it is the first duty of a hero to deal starkly with his foe!" exclaimed the boy, indignantly. "What would my father say when I meet him in Valhalla if I have not cleft the head of Arwald or died in the attempt?"

"My son, I trust thou wilt meet him in a better Valhalla; but thou must not talk too much now. Thou wilt make thy leg worse. Drink this cooling drink, and I will tell thee tales which may, perchance, lull thee to sleep."

Then Corman began to tell in soft, melodious words, a wondrous tale, the like of which Ædric had never heard before, but which is now so well known that its very familiarity tends to weaken its beauty. He told how all things were lovely, how all things pleased the Creator, how sin entered in, and then came death, and how death ended in victory. But he told it all so simply, and made it so like a saga, that Ædric thought he was listening to one of old Deva's tales, and gradually sleep stole over him, and he sank into profound slumber.

Corman sat silently by his side, fearing to move, lest he should disturb him.

Presently Dicoll and Malachi came in, and they began the morning service, but in low tones; while outside the door of the hut a few women and children

stood round to listen.

The inherent reverence of the Teutonic nature showed itself strongly in these rude, suffering, untaught South Saxons, and the monks already saw promise of future good.

By the welcome aid of healing arts they had gradually obtained a hold on the little settlement; and as their practical sympathy with physical suffering found ready scope in their power to deal with it, so the purity of their worship attracted the gentler natures of the more reflecting among the people.

The religion of the South Saxons, like that of all the Teutonic tribes, was calculated to promote reverence, and was yet so vague in its teaching as to oppose but slight obstacles to the approaches of Christianity. Their deities were the elements, and, like the Greeks, they worshipped a divinity in every object of nature. Rude temples they seem to have had, which, as in the story of Coifi, appear to have had but little hold on the people; and as there were no material advantages at stake, so the opposition offered to the Christian missionary was much less envenomed than is usually the case where vested interests are at hazard.

Indeed, the Christian missionaries found, in one very important particular, a decided gain in dealing with the Teutonic peoples as compared with the Christian but Romance nations. The sanctity of domestic life contrasted strongly with the habits and customs of the laxer peoples of the South, habituated to vice in all its forms, and among whom the pursuit of pleasure had become almost a science as well as a passion.

The spirit of scoffing, of ridicule, was absent. Such a spirit seems inconsistent with the gloom of the vast primeval forest, of the solitudes of the hunter, and the earnestness produced by the stern fight for existence. Luxury, laziness, the energy of the body directed to the amusement of a debased intellect, and an intellect pandering to the unwholesome passions of the body, all these were absent, and the Christian missionaries found themselves confronted with an almost primitive state of life.

CHAPTER III.

"UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE."

Ceolwulf and Wulfstan, after leaving the hut of the kind monks, went first to look to the boat, and moored her securely. Then they walked into the thick wood,

which was immediately behind the little settlement, and which stretched without intermission right up to the great Andredesweald. There were occasional clearings here and there, especially to the east of Boseham towards Cissanceaster, but owing to the dreadful drought and consequent famine, and demoralisation of the inhabitants resulting from it, most of these clearings had relapsed into a wilderness again.

They had not gone far when Biggun remarked that they had better take a look at the sun, and see how they were to find their way back again; and while he was taking a careful look round Wulfstan noticed a rustling noise amongst the dry leaves on his right, and directly afterwards an old pig and several little ones came grunting through the wood followed by a miserable, unhealthy-looking boy, who instantly stopped on seeing the two strangers, and stared at them with suspicion.

"Whose pigs are those?" said Biggun.

The young swineherd only stared at him the more, and especially eyed Wulfstan with curiosity, as though such a healthy-looking boy were quite surprising. At last, on the question being repeated two or three times, he shook his head to intimate that he did not understand.

"Come along, Wulf, we've no time to lose; let us go down this glade and keep thy spear ready. That boy is a Weala."

They now reached a long and natural glade in the forest, and as they got farther away from the sea the trees grew larger and straighter, and the view under the branches was more extended, being only interrupted by clumps of brushwood here and there. There was no sign of any road or track whatever, only the vast forest stretched in endless solitude to right and left, and as far ahead as the eye could see.

Wulfstan was delighted with the size of the forest, and eagerly looked on each side for the chance of some game appearing. They had now walked about four miles from Boseham, and were going in a north-westerly direction, when a gleam through the trees ahead told them they were approaching some water, and in a few minutes more they had reached a long winding pool, or lake, from which a large heron rose slowly as they came out of the forest.

"Biggun, look! Take a shot at that heron! I can swim for him if he does drop in the water."

"He's too far off, Wulf; we must not waste our arrows. Wait till we get a sure mark; we shan't have to wait long. If this is salt water, animals won't come to drink, but I doubt not we shall find a fresh brook running into it farther on; and if we find the marks where the beasts come down to water, we can hide in the bushes, as we used to do at home, and then we shan't miss."

They had hardly gone three steps more when a large hare darted out of a

thicket by the side of the water and ran into the wood; but Biggun was too quick for him, carefully watching as he passed behind a tree, the instant he appeared on the other side of it, an arrow whizzed from his bow and rolled the hare over on the ground.

"By Woden, Biggun, that was a good shot; thou timedst it well," cried Wulf admiringly, as he ran up to the hare and pulled the arrow out, carefully wiping the shaft and point, and smoothing the feathers; then taking the animal up by his hind legs he hit it behind the neck to kill it, for it was not quite dead, then he ran back to Biggun and gave him his arrow again.

"Be still, my son, and hurry not, if thou wouldst hit anything," said Biggun complacently, as he put the arrow back in the quiver. They then went on again, Wulf carrying the hare and looking with sharp glances all round him. Presently they came to a very marshy place and had to leave the side of the water and enter the forest again. Skirting the marsh they came to a kind of track that led them to a deep pool which was trodden all round and was evidently a place where animals came down to water.

"We ought to come here to-night, Wulf, but we ought to come in a large gang, for here be marks we don't see in our island," said Biggun, stooping down and examining the "spoor" of the animals that frequented this place to quench their thirst.

"Hark, Biggun, there is something coming!" whispered Wulfstan, as a crackling of twigs was heard a little way off.

"Quick, Wulf, climb up that tree there; up with thee!" cried Biggun, as he hurried the boy hastily to a wide-spreading oak, whose large and low branching limbs stretched over the pool. In an instant Wulfstan was ensconced among the branches, and Biggun had handed him up his spear, and was just pulling himself up after him, when, with a crash and a squeal, a huge wild boar rushed through the brushwood, and charged at poor Biggun, who, old and stiff, was with difficulty getting up into the first low fork of the old tree.

"Oh, Biggun, get thy legs out of the way!" shrieked Wulfstan in terror, and without pausing a moment he hurled the boar spear he held right at the advancing beast. He threw it with such good aim that it struck the animal in the shoulder, and although it did not stop his charge, by reason of the wound it caused, it yet pulled the beast up by catching in one of the overhanging boughs, and the shaft being made of stout ash did not break, but widened the wound in the shoulder, and caused the poor animal to squeal aloud with pain. Biggun had now got his legs over the first branch, and, taking steady aim, he shot an arrow into the animal's eye. Such was the vitality and courage of the brute that, although it had the spear still sticking in its shoulder, and was pierced in one eye with an arrow, it yet charged home to the trunk of the tree, and buried its tusks in

the bark. Then it stood looking round for its enemy, and grunting and squealing fiercely. Biggun drew another arrow up to its head, and the shaft went home to the boar's heart, and he fell over dead.

"Well, I think we have got enough game now, Wulf, for the monks and ourselves, and we had better make the best of our way home, and carry as much as we can of this beast with us," said Biggun, scrambling out of the tree again, followed by Wulfstan, who was very delighted at the death of the big animal, and greatly admired his formidable tusks and the thick crest of bristles which grew down his strong neck and shoulders.

Ceolwulf proceeded to cut up the body with his long hunting knife, and slinging the two hind quarters over his shoulders, and replacing the arrows in the quiver, they hung the rest of the quartered boar on the lowest bough of the oak that had saved their lives, and started to make their way home again.

Suddenly Ceolwulf pulled his young companion behind a tree, and then, before Wulf could ask him the reason, he had whispered to him to be perfectly still, as he saw some men a little way ahead of them. Very cautiously Biggun and Wulf crouched down, and crawled to the cover of some bushes that were near, and from this shelter they saw several men coming in their direction. They were all armed, and looked a strong and formidable body of men. There were about thirty or forty in all, and most wore iron helmets, and two or three had hawberks, or jackets of mail, like that which the young man wore whom they had met in the morning. Some carried stout spears, and others large clubs, with a heavy ball of metal attached by a short piece of chain to the head of the club, and studded with spikes. Most had shields of a round shape, and nearly all carried, in addition to the arms already mentioned, long swords and battle axes. The men who had not got jackets of mail wore leathern tunics, which appeared to be of double thickness over the chest and shoulders, and which were no doubt sufficiently tough to ward off a sword cut or spear thrust. Many of the men appeared to be quite young: none of them seemed over forty, and the youngest might have been between eighteen and twenty. They were a handsome and picturesque-looking set of men, with their bushy hair flowing out from under their helmets, their bronzed faces and martial appearance. Some wore close-cut beards, and some were shaved, with the exception of the "knightly fringe that clothed the upper lip," and Ceolwulf knew that they must be the body-guard of some powerful Thane or Eorldoman, and he crouched all the closer, for the times were very perilous. They did not seem to be in any hurry, for they sauntered along, talking among themselves, and appearing to be under no leadership. Suddenly one of them uttered a cry, and walked hastily to the tree where the remains of the wild boar were hanging, fresh and bleeding from the knife of Ceolwulf.

"Ah, they will track us by the drops of blood from the joints I have over my

shoulders!" said Biggun. "Well, I must even drop them here, and perchance they won't find them," he added, with a sigh, as he unstrung the quarters, and hung them on a bough above him. He then took Wulfstan by the hand, and pulled him into the thickest of the bushes, and crouched down again. They could hear the men talking about the boar, and laughing at the unexpected piece of good luck they had fallen in with.

"This will just do," said one. "I was getting very hungry, and here we are where he told us to wait for him. Let us make a fire and roast some of these joints."

"That we will," cried another. "Here's water to drink and flesh to eat. What more do we want? Why the heroes in Valhalla can't have much more! This boar, I warrant, is every bit as good as Sæhrimnir[1] the everlasting, and we can do for once without mead."

[1] The author has put into the mouths of the Saxons the mythological allusions of the Scandinavian sagas, thinking that probably the same tales were common to the Scandinavian and Jutland peninsula, as well as to the Saxons and Frisians.

"Aye, and we can cut our enemies to pieces after our dinner just as well as before; so waste no more time, but get some sticks and make a fire," rejoined a third.

"Well, thou canst begin making afire," said the man who had first seen the pieces of boar's flesh. "I shall follow this trail of blood, and see where they are who have killed the boar. They can't be far off, or the track wouldn't be so fresh, and they can't be many, or they wouldn't let us take their game so easily. But, after all, there's no knowing; these South Saxons, since the plague, have lost all heart."

Hearing these words, several others began to follow on the trail, and it was not long before they came to the bushes, where Ceolwulf and Wulfstan lay hid. A loud shout soon told that they had found the rest of the animal, and then they were apparently baffled. But not for long, for a keen-eyed man saw where a twig had recently been broken off, and then another where dead leaves had been trodden on and the damp side turned up, and in another moment Biggun and Wulfstan rose to their feet, face to face with a bronzed and powerful man peering through the bushes at them.

"Hark, here! So! so! my masters. Here's the game come to bay!" he cried merrily, and all the others broke through the bushes to get a view. Ceolwulf saw instantly it was no use showing fight, and he and Wulfstan came out and gave themselves up.

They were led to where the others were making a fire, and all crowded round to look at the captives.

"Well, and who are ye?" said the oldest-looking man.

Biggun had no idea who these men were, and after what he had heard from Father Dicoll about Edilwalch and his friendship for Arwald, he thought it better to conceal as long as possible who he was and where he came from.

"My name is Ceolwulf."

"Where dost come from?"

"From Boseham."

"Why, we know every one who lives in Boseham, and we never saw thee before, so that won't pass."

"Nevertheless I come from Boseham."

"Look here, old man, thou hadst better tell us at once all about thyself and the boy there, both for thy sake and his. We are not used to be trifled with, and thou art old enough to know what being made a spread eagle means."

Ceolwulf scratched his head and looked at Wulfstan, who, boy-like, could not see what there was to hide, for if they knew every one in Boseham they must know the kind monks who had so befriended them.

"Now, old man, be quick," said his questioner.

"Well, we come from Wihtea, over there, and have been in a good deal of trouble," said Ceolwulf, hoping to mollify his interrogator; "and when we got to Boseham we found some queer sort of men, who gave us some bread, and we thought we would go out and get something better to eat, for there seems no heart left in those South Saxons to help themselves."

"Thou art in the right there, my man. Since the yellow plague all spirit has gone out of them, and they care to do nothing now but die—which, after all, isn't so bad, if thou diest with thine axe in the skull of thine enemy, but any other way is disgraceful," from which remark it was clear that this man was a philosopher in his way, although somewhat crude in his ideas.

"And whose boy is this? He isn't thy son, I'll be bound. An old wooden head like thee couldn't have a son like that," said another man.

"Let me stand out there with my axe, and I'll soon show thee whether my head is any more wooden than thine, thou young Weala!"

"He has called me a Weala," cried the young man to the others. "He belongs to me to punish; let me have him out here, that I may split his old timber skull."

"No, no," said the older man. "We have got to have our dinner first, and, I think, as he has provided it, he ought to be asked to share it."

"But thou hast not told us who the boy is, old man."

"He is the son of a noble eorldoman in Wihtea."

"What, Arwald's son?" cried the man with eagerness.

"Now I wish I knew whether he wanted him to be his son or not," thought Ceolwulf. Then he added, "Dost thou know Arwald, then?"

"It is not thy business to ask me questions, but to answer mine, and take care thou doest it," said the man, sternly.

"No, he's not Arwald's son."

"All the better for him, then," muttered his interrogator.

But at this moment a most delicious smell of fragrant roast pork floated past their nostrils, and neither Biggun nor the man could avoid sniffing it admiringly.

"Well, we can ask thee these questions presently quite as well as now, and if we are not quick the others will have all the best bits. Now promise me thou wilt not attempt to escape, and I will let thee sit down and eat with us."

Biggun was very hungry, and so was Wulfstan, and they both promised at once, and then they all sat down, while three of the youngest were told to divide the joints and distribute them to the others.

It was a picturesque scene: the blue smoke from the fire curled up among the fast falling leaves of the great forest trees; beyond, fading into grey dimness, was the forest, while the sinking sun cast its warm rays aslant the stems of the trees, and turned the red bracken to golden sprays; the men lay about in careless attitudes, their flashing weapons gleaming in the setting sun, and above all were the ruddy leaves and great limbs of the wide-spreading oaks.

Merrily the talk went on, and coarse jest and practical joke made the echoes of the forest ring, until the noise reminded the man who had questioned Ceolwulf of the errand they were upon, and which apparently demanded some measure of secrecy, for he told four of the young men who had eaten enough to go some distance off and act as scouts, and he also tried to get the others to be a little less boisterous. Wulfstan enjoyed the whole feast immensely, and had won universal applause when old Ceolwulf told how he had speared the boar, and they all vowed he should be one of them, and should live to be a hero and do great deeds, to all which Wulfstan listened complacently; but at times he thought of Ædric, and longed to take him the hare, and he would have liked the good monks to have had some of that delicious boar, for he thought he never had tasted anything so good, as he held the end of a chop in his fingers and munched the juicy flesh. This was the fourth he had eaten, and he felt that the world was much more pleasant than it had been lately.

The others were now nearly satisfied, and little of the boar remained, which, fortunately for the happiness of the party, was a full grown animal, and in very good condition. As the men leant back with dreamy faces, and meditatively gave themselves up to the joys of tranquil digestion, there came a desire for amusement, and it occurred to the younger and more mischievous among them to think of the reproach cast by Biggun on the young man he had called a

"Weala," which was regarded as an insult by the conquering Saxons.

"I say, Beornwulf, I wouldn't be called a Weala by that old red beard," said one, throwing a bone at the young man he addressed, which alighted on his hand just as he was putting a choice morsel into his mouth, and knocked the piece of flesh out of his hand on to the ground.

A loud and general burst of laughter greeted this practical joke, which did not add to the young man's good humour, and he, being of a fiery disposition, and so the very fittest subject for a practical joker, rose up in a rage and hurled the bone back at his aggressor, who, being prepared for it, ducked his head, and it passed harmlessly over him.

"There, Beorney, don't get angry. If thou wantest to fight, fight the old man there, and then, after he has thrashed thee, thou canst come and fight us. We shan't be afraid of thee then, but thou'rt too strong a man now, and aimest too straight."

"What is all this about, boys?" said the older man, who had been comfortably stretched on his back with Ceolwulf and Wulfstan on each side of him, placidly enjoying the pleasant reminiscences of that estimable boar. "What's all this about? Why can't ye enjoy the blessings the gods give ye without wanting to make a disturbance?"

"Beornwulf here wants to fight that old red beard we caught in the bushes, who called him a Weala."

"Well, and Beornwulf called him a wooden head first, so I think they are quits."

"Let them fight, Athelhune. We've nothing to amuse us, and they might just as well have a round."

"Why, what's the good, boys? We want all our strength for to-night's work, and he might be here any moment. Ye see the sun is sinking fast."

"Then they can leave off when he comes."

Athelhune, who really did not much care one way or the other, made no answer, and this being taken as a consent, the young men, now that they had roused Beornwulf, set to work to get old Ceolwulf excited, who had gone tranquilly off to sleep.

They proceeded therefore to pitch a chop bone neatly on to his nose, and when he started up full of bewilderment at the unexpected shock, another bone, adroitly thrown, though not very hard, struck him on the mouth. Boiling with rage, old Biggun got up and glared round for his assailant.

"Here he is, old man; here's the Weala that did it!" cried several voices, pushing Beornwulf forward.

"Thou didst, thou nithing thou? I'll teach thee to insult a free born Wihtwara!" cried old Ceolwulf, whose blood was now thoroughly up.

"There, Beornwulf, he has called thee a nithing. Nothing but blood can wipe out that," called out the others, delighted at the success of their stratagem.

Ceolwulf was going at once to strike the young man with his boar-spear, but two or three young men knocked up the point, and told him he must wait until they had made a ring, and he must have the same arms as his antagonist.

They proceeded, therefore, to cut wands of hazel and fix them round in a circle, leaving ample room in the middle for the two combatants, and then they explained to Ceolwulf that whosoever drew first blood or drove his opponent out of the ring was to be considered conqueror. They then gave Ceolwulf the choice of several battle-axes, and allowed him to have a helmet like Beornwulf and a shield, and then they led the two combatants into the ring.

All had now risen from their recumbent position, and were showing much interest in the approaching fray. Opinion was divided as to which of the two was likely to win. Most inclined to Beornwulf, who was younger far and likely to be much more active. The older men, however, augured well from Ceolwulf's size and experience that victory might declare for him.

Wearing their shields on their left arms, and holding their battle-axes in their right, the two men eyed each other steadily, and in order to rouse them to greater animosity, several young men called out: "Remember, Beorny, he called thee a Weala." "And worse than that, he called thee a nithing," added others.

While to provoke Ceolwulf they called out: "He called thee a wooden head, and threw bones in thy face."

Poor little Wulfstan looked on with anxious eyes. He did not much fear for Ceolwulf, in whom he had always had unbounded confidence, but the thought would occur to him that were anything to happen to their old servant what would become of himself and Ædric? He was their only friend left in the whole world now. So he thought, and looked on, angry-eyed and wistful.

And now the fight began. Beornwulf stepped up close to Ceolwulf and made a feint at his right arm, which Ceolwulf parried with his axe, and caught the next blow, aimed with all the young man's might at his head, with his round shield. The force of the blow split the shield and exposed the arm, so that all thought the old man was wounded, but Ceolwulf at the moment that the blow descended, struck slanting at the exposed right side of his opponent, and cut through his leathern jerkin, causing a crimson stream to flow down his armour.

"A hit! a hit!" they all cried, and then, forgetting their own rules in their excitement, they called out to Beornwulf to revenge himself. But Ceolwulf parried every blow, and called out that the victory was his. He was very anxious the combat should have a speedy termination, for he did not wish to kill his opponent, foreseeing that if he did his position and that of Wulfstan would be rendered much more unpleasant, and he naturally had no wish to be killed himself. While

all were excited at the contest a voice suddenly called out, "Why, men, what is all this to do? Haven't ye work enough in hand to-night that ye must needs be splitting each other's heads now?"

All turned round astonished, and a universal cry of "Cædwalla!" told Wulfstan that his handsome friend of the morning was among them.

CHAPTER IV. THE SURPRISE.

The arrival of Cædwalla put an end to the combat, to the great joy of Wulfstan, who ran up to Ceolwulf with eager congratulations.

"I knew that fellow couldn't do thee any harm, Biggun; he didn't know thee as well as I do, or he wouldn't have dared to stand up to thee; but I am glad thou gavest it him as thou didst."

"Aye, Wulf, they will respect us all the more after this. I thought I should give him a good trouncing," said Ceolwulf complacently.

"Why, whom have we here?" cried Cædwalla, now for the first time seeing Ceolwulf and Wulfstan. "Why, it's the old greybeard I met this morning, and the stout little son of Ælfhere! And what art thou doing here?"

The whole of the circumstances were quickly narrated to him, and, patting Wulfstan on the head, he told him he should make him one of his Huscarles, or body-guard, which delighted the boy much. He reprov'd Beornwulf for being so quarrelsome, and advised old Ceolwulf not to call people "nithings" again, or worse would come of it. As it had turned out he had drawn Beornwulf's blood first, and therefore, according to the laws of the Holmgang, or duel, Beornwulf ought to pay the fine of the conquered; but, considering how great a provocation Ceolwulf had given, he should decide that the two were now quits, and there the matter had better end. "And now, my men, we must be up and doing. I have learnt that the greater part of Edilwalch's men have gone with the two eorldomen to Kent, and the king is spending the night at Cissanceaster; we are now about six miles off, and it will take us till near midnight to get there and arrange our plans. Beornwulf, as thou art wounded, thou hadst best take this boy back to his brother at Boseham, and take care of him until I come. Bid the monks treat him well, or, by Freja, I will skin the shavelings; but they are good men," he added, "and will do that without my bidding. And as to thee, old man, thou hadst best take

Beornwulf's place, and make good the damage thou hast done. And now, men, fall in. Athelhune, you will take command of the rear, I will lead the advance, and do thou, old man, take Beornwulf's arms and give him thine to take back to Boseham; after to-night I trust thou wilt have some of thine own, or else that there will be no want of any. Remember all of ye that in worsting Edilwalch we are winning a victory for Wessex, and each victory for Wessex is a step towards my rightful crown. Ye have feasted on the flesh of the wild boar which Woden has put before ye as an omen of victory; remember the sagas, and how he who dies in battle will feast for ever on Sæhrimnir the Eternal, and quaff mead from the never-dying Heidrun, and shall for ever and for ever hack his enemies in pieces. Who would not rather go there than live here? But to obtain honour there we must kill our enemies here, and the more we kill, the greater our joy hereafter. Up, men, and earn an undying name!"

Excited by this speech, and eager for the fray, each warrior clashed his axe against his shield, and the wild din caused the birds, that were going to roost, to fly screaming out of the branches, and scared the beasts of the forest in their distant lair.

"See, the wild ravens there,
Woden's wild birds of air,
Call us to Nastrond's fare,
Call us to battle!"

shouted a warrior, whose eyes glowed with the joy of approaching fight.

"Hark to the wolves' wild cry,
Baying towards the sky,
Knowing the prey is nigh,
Hearing death's rattle!"

cried another answering, tossing his battle-axe high in the air, and catching it again; for every warrior who wished to be distinguished affected a talent for verse, and all leaders who desired fame surrounded themselves with "Skalds," or gleemen, as they were called, who should proclaim their doughty deeds.

Wulfstan longed to go with the expedition, but Cædwalla would not hear of it, and he was sent off with Beornwulf, both sulky at their dismissal, but Beornwulf especially enraged, and vowing vengeance on Ceolwulf when he got the chance.

"Never mind, Beorney, thou canst practice fighting with the monks, they won't hurt thee," shouted some of the young men.

”And thou canst throw stones at the seals, they won’t run away,” called another, as they went off laughing; while Beornwulf, grinding his teeth with rage, and having no retort ready, disappeared with Wulfstan in the direction of Boseham.

The others directed their march through the forest towards Cissanceaster, proceeding at a rapid pace; all noise had now ceased, and each man settled down to his step with the air of men accustomed to long expeditions, and who all knew their business thoroughly. Ceolwulf wished much his master Ælfhere had had a few dozen men like these the night before, and he hoped if he could only induce Cædwalla to take up the cause of his young lords, that they might recover their lands and revenge themselves on Arwald; he had seen therefore Wulfstan go off with Beornwulf less reluctantly than he otherwise would have done.

The sun had set, and the mists of the forest rendered it a difficult matter to see their way, but Cædwalla led them on without pausing or appearing to be once in doubt as to which way to go. After they had gone on in almost absolute silence for about a couple of miles they came to a circular clearing in the forest; in the centre of this clearing was a large stone, and Cædwalla went up to it, and, raising his battle-axe aloft, chanted the following verses:—

”To Woden, great god, I vow
Victims to slay enow
If he to us allow
 Victory to-night.

Here in the forest glade,
Under the oaks’ dark shade,
On my keen axe’s blade,
 Oaths do I plight.

By the last earthly pang
Men felt as high priests sang
When the wild death-cry rang
 Speeding souls’ flight.

Grant us to win the fight!
Grant us death’s fires to light!
Favour the cause of right!
 Woden, all bright!”

Again the dull clang of the axes striking against the shields gave token of the

warriors' assent, and, once more putting himself at the head of his men, Cædwalla pursued his march in silence. That grim stone in the solemn forest ring had seen many a horrid sacrifice, and had been stained with the blood of many victims long before the Saxons or the Romans came into the Island; and if any places could be haunted that surely ought to have been, considering the horrors that had taken place there, the cruel and detestable custom of offering human sacrifices being common to Teuton and Celt alike.

And now it was clear, from the extreme care the advance guard took not to make any noise, that they were approaching the object of their expedition. After a few minutes more the column halted, and Cædwalla directed the band to divide into four equal companies. He then ordered three of them to march round the dim cluster of houses, or cottages rather, which were scarcely distinguishable in a clearing of the forest, which had been getting less dense for the last mile or two. Cædwalla ordered Athelhune to take command of the company that had farthest to go, and bid them raise the battle-cry, and clash their axes and shields together as soon as they were ready for the attack. At this signal all were to fall on and slay whom they met. Cædwalla reserved for himself the right of attacking Edilwalch, and directed that such prisoners as should be taken should be brought to the altar of sacrifice, and there be offered up to Woden and the shades of their ancestors.

Silently in the darkness of the night the men disappeared, and Cædwalla led his party cautiously and in single file closer to the village. As they got nearer Ceolwulf could make out that the work before them was rather more formidable than a mere night surprise on a cluster of undefended houses. Before him was a wall about twelve feet high and a ditch outside the wall. Supposing none were on the wall to oppose them it would not be a serious obstacle to active and resolute men; but should there be a determined foe behind it, the assault would be a serious affair. Cædwalla ordered a young man to creep as close up to the wall as he could, and then, if all were favourable, to climb up it and reconnoitre the place. Ceolwulf could see that there was a gate a little further to the right of where they were, but he concluded that this would probably be guarded, and that was why Cædwalla had not selected it for attack.

Stealthily the figure descended the bank of the ditch; they could just hear the sloshing sound made by his feet as he got into the mud, then a slight splashing, sounding to those listening very loud, then silence, which was suddenly broken by a wild, unearthly cry, causing them all to start, and they could hear the young man slip down, and then the splashing sounds were repeated, and soon after he appeared.

"Well, what was it?" impatiently asked Cædwalla.

"A witch!" said the young man, shuddering. "I saw her eyes of fire glaring

at me, and I heard her spit—listen!”

Again the strange cry rang out, ending in a kind of sputtering snarl.

”Why, man, it’s only a cat! Art afraid of a cat? Here, Eadwin, I can trust to thee; go thou and see if any one is on the other side.”

But these young men, all as brave as lions in fight, firmly believed in supernatural powers, and nothing terrified them more than the idea of witches and demons; and when they heard that their comrade had seen a great witch, all covered with fur and a long streaming broomstick wrapped round with bristles flourishing above her head, and glaring, fiery eyes staring right at him and uttering fearful cries, which they had all heard, not one was daring enough to go.

”Out upon ye, men, for a pack of spiritless hinds!” cried Cædwalla, disdainfully. ”I shall have to go myself; but, mind, as soon as ye hear me call, or the signal from Athelhune is given, up with ye, witches or no witches, or ye will go to Nifleheim quicker than ye like.”

He was just starting to go on the perilous work when he felt his arm held, and the voice of Ceolwulf arrested him.

”Atheling, I will go, I have no fear of witches; I have a wolf’s snout hung round my neck, and no witch can hurt me, be her charms never so powerful.”

”Well, old man, thou teachest these boys a lesson; a stranger and an old man, thou darest what my carles, young and bound to me by every tie, dare not. When I am king of Wessex, as I shall be, I will not forget thee. Here’s my hand on it.”

Cautiously old Ceolwulf went down into the ditch, and again the sounds of his progress seemed dangerously loud, then silence, broken by the wild din of shouting and the clash of arms which suddenly arose.

”There it is,” cried Cædwalla, rushing forward, followed by the men behind him. ”Strike for the golden dragon! Strike for the house of Cerdic! The Valkyrior claim their own! Tyr scents the battle.” Shouting wildly such war cries, the band plunged into the ditch, splashed through it, and dashed at the wall. Old Ceolwulf had by this time got to the top, and, kneeling down, he helped Cædwalla up. The two sprang boldly down into the open space inside scattering a party of cats[1] that rushed screaming, with their tails in the air, towards the nearest houses. Cædwalla instantly seized the omen, and shouted:

”See how the witches fly,
Scared by our battle-cry,
Follow to do or die,
Follow Cædwalla!”

[1] These domestic cats were most probably the descendants of some which had accompanied the Roman colonists. The native wild cat is untamable.

And now an answering cry arose within the town. Lights flashed here and there, and all seemed confusion. Shouts of defiance could be heard on all sides, showing that the attack was completely successful as far as simultaneousness of action went. The difficulty was to avoid attacking each other. Cædwalla made for the nearest house, and, smashing in the door with his axe, cut down the first man that came to meet him. The terrified women and children rushed out by a back door, and Cædwalla instantly called for some straw to be brought him, and, lighting it from the fire that was burning on the hearth, soon set the cottage in a blaze. The flames spread from one building to another, and the affrighted inhabitants rushed out into the street screaming in terror. The followers of Cædwalla cut down all the men that offered any resistance, but pursued their way to the palace of the king. Edilwalch was now aware of what was happening, and having hastily armed himself, accompanied by a few devoted adherents, rushed out to meet his assailants.

The other bands had not yet made their appearance, and the position of Cædwalla was rather critical. His little party only numbered fourteen in all, and although the flames of the burning houses, which were all made of wood and thatched, allowed him to see where to direct his attack, yet they at the same time served to expose the fewness of his numbers. Edilwalch was no coward. He was fully alive to the importance of crushing this handful of men before the others, whose battle-cries could be heard drawing nearer and nearer, could join their companions; and, leaving a few men to guard the palace—which was no more than a rather larger house than the other cottages, and thatched like them—he shouted his battle-cry, and attacked Cædwalla's party. Nominally Edilwalch was a Christian, having been christened at the request of Wulfhere of Mercia, and had received the Isle of Wight as a reward for his conversion. His battle-cry, therefore, should have been different to that of Cædwalla, but in his excitement he forgot his new faith, and invoked the Teutonic deities to his aid.

The first to encounter Edilwalch was Eadwine, who was anxious to show his leader that if he was afraid of witches he was not afraid of men. But the voice of Cædwalla shouted to him to remember his orders, and Eadwine turned aside to attack a stout eorldoman who fought by the side of Edilwalch. Down came his axe at the headpiece of his foe, who parried it with his shield, and struck furiously back at Eadwine. The blow was given with such good will that it shored away his shield above the elbow, and broke the arm which held it. Plying his axe vigorously with his right arm, Eadwine gave the eorldoman a cut across the

cheek, but directly afterwards was knocked down by a terrific blow on his helmet. Striding across his fallen antagonist, the eorldoman cut at Cædwalla, who was engaged in vigorous fight with Edilwalch, already wounded and giving ground; but Ceolwulf caught the blow with his axe, shivering the handle and sending the splinters flying, one of which pierced the eorldoman in the eye, and caused him to stagger back with the pain. But he was not destined to feel pain long, for another crashing blow of Ceolwulf's axe avenged the fall of Eadwine, and tumbled the South Saxon to the ground. The fighting had now become general, and the din of weapon striking weapon, the crash of falling buildings, the crackling of the flames as they leaped high in air, the fierce shouts of the combatants or the deep groans of the dying, made a wild and fearful uproar that produced a mad intoxication in the fighting mass. High above all rang the stentorian voice of Cædwalla as he plied his blows, now right, now left, at the devoted body-guard of Edilwalch, who was badly wounded, and was being led off to his palace. The small party who fought round Cædwalla, inspired by his wild chant and furious blows, pressed on after the retreating king, and each of their axes seemed endowed with ceaseless life. Several had fallen on both sides, and fearful were the wounds made by these two-edged axes; but now the affrighted townspeople—if the inhabitants of Cissanceaster deserved the name at that time—seeing the small numbers of their assailants, came to the assistance of their king, whom they did not much love, but in whose success they saw at least safety for themselves and their families. Cædwalla—who, in the midst of all this wild turmoil and in spite of his personal part in the fight, never lost the presence of mind essential to a leader—saw that unless he slew Edilwalch before the people rallied, he would lose the whole object of the expedition, pressed harder and harder upon those who opposed him, till at last, with a spring, he dashed upon the group who were leading the king away. With hair streaming behind him, his helmet battered, but the heron's plume still erect, his eyes gleaming with wild excitement, his armour stained with blood, and his shield in pieces, Cædwalla rushed upon the king. One flash, one groan, and his competitor was no more. Right through the axe of the faithful guard who tried to parry the blow the triumphant weapon of Cædwalla sank into the brain of Edilwalch, and the king of the South Saxons was numbered with Ælla, Cissa and his ancestors. But not unavenged shall he die, for wildly the henchmen turn upon the slayer, and three axes gleam in the air together. Ill would it have fared with the son of Ceawlin had not watchful eyes and stout hands been by: axe meets axe, and blow answers blow, and the death of all the immediate supporters of Edilwalch assures Cædwalla the victory.

But where are the other bands? Where is Athelhune? Where are the house-carles? Where is Cædwalla's brother Wulf?

"Quick, Cædwalla, retreat while yet there is time," shouted Ceolwulf, who

saw the ominously increasing crowds of hostile faces pressing up behind them. Their own numbers were very few. Three were lying on the ground either dead or dying; two more were so desperately wounded that they could hardly offer any resistance, and reeled as they stood round Cædwalla, and only two or three had escaped without a wound.

But the chieftain's eye instantly took in the situation, and without a moment's hesitation he ordered all to advance on the palace. He could hear the cry of Athelhune, and at last saw by a movement among the crowd that the other bands were coming up.

With a rush, therefore, they sprang towards the palace gate. The defenders were few, for in the excitement of the fight round their king the men had disregarded Edilwalch's orders, and had come out to join the fray.

Daunted by the fierce onslaught, they fled into the interior, and Cædwalla's men rushed in, closely followed by a yelling mass of infuriated townspeople. But two of Cædwalla's men kept these at bay until the doors were shut.

The position now was somewhat curious. Edilwalch was killed, and Cædwalla occupied his palace—at least some part of it—and was himself besieged in his enemy's stronghold; but in the rear of his assailants he could hear his own men pressing up, and he had little doubt of the victory in the end.

But now Cædwalla was to feel the effects of that element he had invoked to his own aid. A stifling smoke rolling through the rooms where he and his party had taken refuge told them that the house was on fire, and the shrieks of terrified women behind them showed how far it had spread, and how useless it was to seek for shelter by going further into the house.

"There is no help for it, my men—our safety lies in our own hands. With them let us hew us out a path; we cannot fight with fire. I hear the shout of Wulf, my brother, and Athelhune is pressing on. Let us all make ready; the moment I give the word and the door is opened, rush out upon the yelling curs. Are ye all ready? Throw open the gate. Follow me!" and with a fierce shout of fury the eight desperate men sprang upon the mob.

Then once more began the wild cut and thrust. Scarcely one of Cædwalla's men had any of his shield left. Regardless of their own safety, they now only thought of selling their lives as dearly as possible, and each man hewed and stabbed, and struggled, and pushed in the seething, furious crowd. Woe to him who fell! there was no hope of his ever rising again.

All the while the shout of Athelhune's men grew nearer, and the flames of the burning palace waxed hotter and hotter, and the whole place and scene resembled Pandemonium let loose. Shrieking women, with dishevelled hair, stood on the outskirts of the mass, and as they saw their friends fall, seized them by their limbs, and tried to pull them out of the fray. But nearer and nearer came Cæd-

walla's bands, until, with a wild rush and shout of triumph, they burst through the men who were opposing them, and, cutting through the crowd that thronged about their chieftain, rescued him from his perilous position.

They had not come a moment too soon. Cædwalla's axe was broken; he had received a cut across his arm; not a bit of his shield was left but a small piece to which the thong was attached that served to strap it on: his heron crest was shorn off; and his right arm was stiff and weary with the fight. Ceolwulf was wounded, and not a man but had some hurt, and the heat from the burning palace behind was growing unendurable. At Cædwalla's feet lay the dead body of Edilwalch, and around lay heaped up the bodies of the slain. Truly, the feast for the Valkyrior maidens was enough.

[image]

Cædwalla heweth a way out of a burning palace of Edilwalch

When the men of Cissanceaster saw the companies of Cædwalla now all united, they drew off, and stood sullenly looking at the carnage they had made, or else went off to put out the fires which were blazing around them, or to see that no more houses took fire.

Then Cædwalla, seeing that none had any longer a mind for the fight, stepped forward, and, addressing the inhabitants, said:

"Men of Cissanceaster, and all good South Saxon folk, I came not to war with ye. Ye are all my kith and kin, and I would rule ye as well as my ancestors did; but Edilwalch, who lies here dead, revolted, as ye all know, from the kindly sway of my kinsmen, and joined the enemies of my race and yours, the tyrannous Mercians. Would ye prefer Mercia to Wessex? the wicked Penda[2] and his son, with their many deeds of bloodshed, to the wise Ceawlin and his noble descendants? If ye prefer war, here am I, and my faithful followers; our arms are not yet weary, nor is our soul yet low; let us decide the issue now. If any claim the crown for Edilwalch or his descendants, either I will fight any man single-handed, or we will choose man for man and fight it out, and Woden shall choose the victor. Shall we be friends or foes?"

[2] Penda died in the flight from Winwidfield A.D. 655, but the memory of his power and ruthlessness remained long after him.

A low murmur of applause greeted this speech, and Cædwalla went on:

"If, my friends, ye prefer peace, and think enough hail has fallen to Woden, and the Valkyrior should rest appeased, let us then ratify our friendship and our rule by feasting. Bring us here such food as ye have, and we will sup together, and drink to the brave slain who are now entering Valhalla."

The leading men who were left of the followers of Edilwalch talked apart, and the rest of the people went off to look after their property. Cædwalla seeing no one inclined to answer him, again spoke.

"Come, my men, let us be friends, and bring us what we want, that all may end in peace and pleasure. We care not to await much longer."

One of the oldest of the South Saxons stepped forward, and said that if Cædwalla would give Edilwalch a funeral becoming his rank, and would treat all men as well as Edilwalch had done, they would accept him for their king.

Cædwalla having accepted these conditions all hostilities were laid aside, the new king's followers helped to put the fires out, and, the bodies being carried away and torches brought, preparations were made for feasting the conquerors. The carcasses of some oxen were found ready roasted in the burnt stalls, and beer and milk were brought out from the stores belonging to Edilwalch, and which now belonged to his conqueror; all sat down on rough benches quickly improvised from the ruins of some of the cottages, and tables were made in the same rough-and-ready way.

Soon all was laughter and merriment: gaily the jugs of ale went round, and the half-roasted flesh was devoured with avidity. Coarse jest and practical joke accompanied the feast, and when all were satisfied the warriors slept round the remains of the repast. Only Cædwalla and his two lieutenants, Wulf and Athelhune, retired to a room in the half-burnt palace; a few of the more responsible of their soldiers were left to guard the door in turns, with orders to rouse every one if any cause for alarm should arise.

CHAPTER V.

ST. WILFRID.

The next morning found Cædwalla and his followers all astir at an early hour. The scene as the sun rose was a busy one. The inhabitants were clearing away the rubbish of their burnt dwellings, an occupation that did not make them look

with very favourable eyes on the authors of the destruction; while the armed men of Cædwalla's party were carrying in the dead body of Edilwalch, whose arms and shield were already stripped off him, to become the spoils of his slayer, and were picking up the weapons and arms of the rest of the body-guard and of their own comrades.

Some of the leading inhabitants, anxious to be on good terms with their future king—for most men who could forecast the future augured from his success in the past night, and from the courage and ability he had shown, that it would not be long before he recovered the throne of Wessex, now occupied by his distant relative Centwine—were sending food for the young prince and his followers.

Cædwalla himself, as he came from the palace, was thanking these men, and inviting them to stop and share their own hospitality. The wound he had received was slight, and the arm was bound round with a bandage. His helmet was no longer the small steel cap he wore yesterday, but was one of Edilwalch's that had been discovered in the palace; it was encircled by a small wreath of oak leaves, which one of his followers had made for him in token of his victory. The shirt of mail that he had worn the night before was changed for another and more gorgeous one, the rings of which were gilt. A new battle-axe hung in a gold chain across his left shoulder, and his sword was suspended in a broad leather belt that crossed his right; his muscular arms were bare from the elbows, and two gold bangles adorned each wrist, inscribed with Runic characters. A young and handsome henchman carried a new shield, Wulf and Athelhune were on each side, and Ceolwulf came close behind him.

The moment of his appearance was the signal for all his followers to raise a shout of triumph, clashing their weapons together. Two of the men, who laid claim to being skalds, or poets, and whose business it was to celebrate every great occasion by extempore verse, and who had therefore been racking their brains all the night before to think of what they should say on the spur of the moment, now came forward, and the eldest of the two began in a loud voice to shout the following verses:—

”See as the sun doth rise,
Comes he to glad our eyes,
Winner of battles' prize!
Victor Cædwalla!

Who in the shock of shields,
Keen axe or broad sword wields,
Fights till his foeman yields
More than Cædwalla?

Surely the Norns[1] have said,
 Through hail of Woden reel,
 Crowns shall adorn his head,
 Crowned be Cædwalla!

Then, O my comrades, raise,
 To the All-Father praise,
 Pray for him length of days,
 Long live Cædwalla!"

[1] The Norns were the Scandinavian equivalent of the Latin *Parcæ*, or Fates, who wove the destinies of men.

At the end of each verse the assembled warriors shouted the refrain with wild excitement, and clashed their arms with frantic glee; and at the last line the frenzy became so great that the other skald had no chance of being heard; for they made a rush for Cædwalla, and, raising him on the shield which they took from his esquire or henchman, they raised him on their shoulders and bore him through the principal street of the town, shouting the last verses over and over again, and every time they reached the line "Long live Cædwalla," their enthusiasm knew no bounds; the population of Cissanceaster were quite carried away with the excitement, which is always infectious, and joined in the chorus. At last they came back to the space in front of the palace, and, order being somewhat restored, they sat down to their breakfast. The other skald was determined not to be deprived of his turn, and had only joined in the excitement of the others with a well-bred and *nonchalant* air, as much as to say, "It's not bad; but if this can evoke your enthusiasm, wait till you hear my verses, and then see if you can keep the hair on your heads."

But he was not destined to have his innings yet, for, directly after breakfast was finished, Cædwalla rose, and gracefully thanked all for their brave deeds, especially mentioning Ceolwulf, and said that the property of those killed should be shared among the victors, and that he would relinquish to them, in addition, the spoils of the palace, only reserving a fit proportion for the service of the gods. He then added that all the people of Cissanceaster and the neighbourhood might go about their daily avocations as usual; and that they would always find in him a jealous protector of their interests and defender of their honour. He also added that any young men who were desirous of adventure and wished to mend their fortunes might join his Huscarles, or bodyguard, after being duly inspected by

his brother Wulf and Athelhune; and he would promise that it should not be long before they enjoyed the bath of blood that Woden so well loved.

Loud shouts greeted this speech, and the skald now rose to electrify the assembly, when he was destined to a fresh interruption.

A movement among the bystanders who were looking on at the banquet and listening to the speeches showed that some one of importance was approaching, and as the crowd gave way a tall and remarkable-looking man, accompanied by two other men, who also differed very considerably from the warriors and country people who crowded the open space in front of the palace, advanced quietly towards the end of the table where Cædwalla sat.

The face of the man who now interrupted the skald, in so provoking a manner would have been remarkable at all times, both from its peculiar power as well as a certain self-asserting kind of sweetness, if we may use the expression, which pervaded the whole countenance. His face was long and thin, and seamed with many furrows; his eyes were deep-set, and were very dark and piercing; a clear-cut and slightly aquiline nose; a thin, firm, and, at the same time, beautifully-formed mouth, sharply defined at each corner by deep lines; a narrow chin, but broad, wrinkled forehead, above which rose a loose and peculiarly-shaped dome-like cap, embroidered in front with a Latin cross, worked elaborately with gold thread. Such was the head of this celebrated man.

His dress was rich for those times, and Ceolwulf certainly had never seen anything like it before. A large, loose, and comfortable hood surmounted a long and handsomely adorned cloak, which was fastened below his neck and across his chest by a large, jewelled buckle, or clasp. This ample cloak reached down almost to his feet, and concealed a white linen robe which he wore beneath, and which was fastened round his waist by a silken cord. His shoes were of scarlet leather, and marked with a black and peculiarly shaped cross. The cloak was made of a gorgeously-coloured purple cloth, and bordered with gold thread. On his hand he wore a large and valuable ring, and some beads, with a cross, hung down from his girdle. A few grey hairs peeped out from under his mitre, made of the same coloured cloth as his cloak.

Such was the celebrated St. Wilfrid, Bishop of York, and now an exile from his see owing to the animosity of the King and Queen of Northumbria.

Such a man in such a community was sure either to command great respect or provoke great animosity. Driven from one kingdom to another, he at last found refuge in the only part of England that was not yet Christian, impelled, perhaps, by a desire to do good to his enemies; for he had been shipwrecked on the coast of Sussex many years before, and had nearly lost his life through the barbarity of the savage inhabitants, whom he now came to win to the fold of the Church; but also, perhaps, because there was really no other safe place for him in Eng-

land, seeing that the Queen of Mercia was sister to the King of Northumbria, and the Queen of Wessex sister to the Queen of Northumbria, while, for some reason, Theodorus, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Metropolitan, was opposed to him, and had already helped to depose him from the See of York. To a man of Wilfrid's disposition it was better to be loved by Pagans than treated as an equal by Christians. His great fault seems to have been his dislike to all authority, except the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Whenever he found a difficulty at home he appealed to Rome, and this may explain the opposition which he met with from Theodorus, Archbishop of Canterbury.

The early Church in England was very nearly in the position of a missionary establishment in a newly opened up country in our own day. As clergymen sent out from England naturally look to the parent church as their authority for all they do, so the missionaries sent by Gregory the Great looked to Rome for guidance in all points of doubt; and this natural habit the astute churchmen at Rome soon saw how to turn to their own profit, and canons were framed which made it indispensable that every higher functionary in the church should proceed to Rome for the symbol of his authority. When once the simple barbarian, accustomed to the squalor and rude manners of his own country, saw the magnificence of the buildings, the refinement of life, and the order of the Roman ritual existing in the everlasting city, he was soon won to its grandeur, and henceforth believed that whatever was done at Rome ought to be done elsewhere. This force of early habit was not easily lost; indeed, it was only when the corruptions, the pretensions, and the extortions of the Roman curia became unbearable, that men began to consider whether they were not paying too high a price for an antiquated idea, and too great a respect to the doubtful authority of the self-styled successors of St. Peter.

It was this very claim—early recognised even by legal authority, as expressed in Imperial edicts—to be the successors of St. Peter, that gave them so much power; for if it was to St. Peter that our Lord gave the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and if He had delegated this power to his successors, it was difficult for the superstitious and simple mind of a barbarian to refuse him obedience when once he had accepted this fact.[2]

[2] For the effect of this argument, as brought forward by St. Wilfrid in his discussion with Colman, before King Oswy, at Streaneshalch (now Witby), A.D. 664, see Bede, book iii., c. 25.

At this period the arrogance of the Roman Pontificate had assumed scarcely any of its objectionable features, and the tone of equality with which St. Columban[3]

addressed Boniface IV. upon the subjects in dispute, reminding him of the peaceful intercourse of Anicetus and Polycarp, although they could not agree upon the disputed points, shows that men were not yet crushed into the lifeless mass of religious formality which they subsequently became, until roused by the trumpet call of indignation, sounded by Wickliffe, by Huss, by Savonarola, and by Luther.

[3] St. Columban, founder of the Monastery of Bobbio, in the Apennines, who lived from 543 to 615, must not be confounded with St. Columba, founder of Icolmkill, who was born 521 and died 597.

Wilfrid had been early captivated by the glamour of the Roman name. With an intense love of art, religion, and discipline, he had been flattered and caressed at the fountain-head of all. Returning to his native land, he had received the admiration due to his character for holiness; and a churchman who had been held in such favour by the foreign bishops seemed to all the most suitable to fill an English see. Accordingly he was elected Bishop of York; but, convinced as he was that the Irish or Scottish missionaries who had converted Northumbria were stubborn sectaries, he refused to be ordained by them, and, crossing to France, received a perfect ovation from the bishops there, who saw in him a determined asserter of the rights of Rome. Returning, he was shipwrecked on the Sussex shore, and at length reaching his own land, he found his see occupied by one of the Scottish missionaries, the holy Ceadda; and he retired to a monastery until called from it by Theodore, who annulled the appointment of Ceadda, and invested Wilfrid with the see of York, while Ceadda was consoled by the see of Lichfield. The grandeur of Wilfrid's ideas is shown in his magnificent buildings and the pomp of his ceremonial. It is true, it is an enemy that accuses him of the splendour of his dress and the number of his attendants, "adorned as they were with royal robes and weapons"; but the accusation seems accepted by the men of his own time, and certainly Archbishop Theodore is found subsequently among his opponents. Once more he went to Rome, and returning with a Papal decree confirming his election to York, he was thrown into prison, and only escaped through the superstition of his persecutress, Queen Ercemburga, of Northumbria. And now he had taken refuge in heathen Sussex, where all his virtues were displayed and little of his faults. His personal life appears to have been blameless, and his labours for the conversion and material well-being of the heathen most unremitting. To find this great Church dignitary, the forerunner of Dunstan, of Becket, and of Wolsey, teaching the miserable natives to fish, himself going out with them and letting down the nets with his own hands, contrasts refreshingly with his polemical disputes with Colman and the Scottish monks, or

his later apology before the Synod of Æastanfled, from whose decisions he once more appealed to Rome. As a missionary bishop—freeing his slaves, cultivating and improving the land, teaching useful arts, and social order, and all the time winning souls to God—he stands as an admirable type, and as such the thinking laymen of his own times admired and loved him. No man received such prodigal grants of land. Edilwalch gave him all the Isle of Selsea, and Cædwalla would have given him all the Isle of Wight, had he not refused to accept more than the fourth part of it; truly, he might be called the Bishop of the Isles!

As Wilfrid approached Cædwalla, the latter rose to receive him; for although Cædwalla was a heathen, yet he was far too politic not to recognise the great importance of securing the support of such a man as Wilfrid. Not only was there the moral support of his great reputation for sanctity which would react upon Cædwalla, but there was the direct assistance to be got from Wilfrid as a landowner, and the wielder of supernatural powers, which had already proved superior to the magic of the local priests or sorcerers—a fact known to all in those parts at the time of his shipwreck; for while a sorcerer was singing incantations for the success of the attack of the wreckers, and Wilfrid was praying for deliverance from them, a stone had killed the sorcerer, but Wilfrid's ship had floated off, and he had sailed away in safety.

"Welcome, noble Wilfrid, welcome to our feast—make room there for the Holy Bishop and his wise men," cried Cædwalla, and places were instantly vacated, not without a sort of superstitious dread of contact with such distinguished and powerful beings.

"My son, the Lord has been merciful to thee, and I pray that thou mayest be guided aright; it is a great duty thou hast taken upon thee, and thou wilt need much wisdom, but mayest thou be led to the Wisdom from on high without which earthly wisdom is but dross."

"I thank thee, father, for all thy kind wishes, and doubtless since I can have more open intercourse with thee now, I shall learn many things I know not; but to what am I to attribute the honour of a visit so soon? for I can hardly venture to think that it was to grace my first banquet as successor to Edilwalch that the all-learned Wilfrid has come."

"Thou art right, my son, I came not to rejoice that Edilwalch is dead. He has gone to God, and must give an account of his works; whether they be good or whether they be evil, peace be with him. I come not to condemn or to approve; he did me good, and received the cross of Christ; how far the faith entered into his heart I know not—if his faith was to be shown by his works, I fear not far; but in that he is dead, I trust he is dead in the Lord. I came to ask for his body, that I may bear it off for Christian burial."

"My father, happy am I that I can so readily and happily grant thy first

request to me as prince of this land. May it be a fair omen of our future relations. I will see that it is duly performed, and the body carried whithersoever thou mayest appoint.”

”I thank thee, my son. I felt sure I should find in thee a generous foe and a noble heart; such soil ought to be watered by the fount of the spirit of the Almighty. But my presence longer now would only hinder the merriment of these young men, and thou must have need of much rest, after thy fatigues of the past night.”

”Not so, my father; many cares I have, it is true, but I shall feel them much lightened if I might have thy powerful and wise advice. If, therefore, thou couldest spare the time, I would fain talk with thee in private. And the young men can in the meanwhile amuse themselves.”

”Such aid as I can give, which I feel thou prizest more than at its just worth, is freely thine, my son. What is done cannot be undone, and if thy right to the crown was better than that of Edilwalch—about which I am not capable of forming an opinion, seeing I am only a stranger and a sojourner in the land—the God of battles will uphold thy right; but if I can in any way help to make this land happy, such services as I can offer are thine. And I would, my son, that thou wouldest give heed to my words, and learn of Him who was meek and lowly in heart, that thou mightest find rest for thy soul.”

”At present, my father, I have not leisure to go into such deep questions, but when all is at peace here, then I trust I may be favoured with thy instruction. Shall we go into the palace?”

The bishop assenting, he and Cædwalla, accompanied by the other two churchmen, retired from the banquet, and their departure was the signal for the free flow of merriment. The skald eyed the departing Wilfrid with a fiery eye, but satisfaction got the better of his revengeful feelings; for now the long-wished-for time had come, and he knew he should win endless praise. Rising therefore to his feet, he rapped loudly on the boards that formed the temporary table, and having procured silence, he began, in an affected, sing-song voice, to chant the following verses:—

”What said the God of war
 He who lost arm in maw,
 Wolf’s maw that bit him sore,
 Tyr the stouted-hearted?
 What thought the mighty Thor
 When he from Asgard saw
 How we did yell and roar,
 When we——”

but he was not destined to meet with the success he deserved, for the last word was lost in a most unmelodious braying set up by a donkey near. Whether it were that he was attracted by the similarity of the tones and words of the skald to his own discordant language, or whether he simply wished to express his approval, history knoweth not; the fact remains, however, that the donkey continued to bray "He-haw, He-haw," in a most pertinacious and obstinate way, and the skald, at last losing all patience, hurled his axe, with a wild malediction on the whole race of donkeys, at the misguided brute's head; but the axe unfortunately missed the donkey, and buried itself in a muddy ditch, near which the donkey was standing. This abortive attempt at revenge was greeted by loud laughter, and one of the young men, jumping up, said he didn't see why he shouldn't try his hand at verses, since the donkey and the skald had been having their innings.

"Once I knew a fine skald
 And he sang a lay,
 But a donkey near stall'd,
 Beat him with his bray.
 Now which is greater poet—
 The skald or donkey, tell?
 When the first began the song
 The latter sang as well.

Loud applause followed this doggerel outburst, which had, at least, the merit of being impromptu, which is more than could be said for the skald's untimely production. The skald, however, was very angry, and shouted to the young man to sit down, for he had not finished; but the latter was now also fired with poetical ardour; he had no idea of his latent talent until he found how well his doggerel was received, and attributing this to the success of his wit, and not to the amusement caused by the discomfiture of his rival, he felt he had as much right to be heard as the skald, and having once got on his feet he felt all the delight of a young orator who has made a successful *début*, and, unfortunately for himself, does not know when to sit down. He refused, therefore, to give way, and proceeded to string some epithets together more forcible than elegant, the poetry of which chiefly consisted in vigorous metaphor, but whose charms were completely lost on the skald, who thundered back rhymes of a more classical kind, but breathing none the less bitter scorn for this miserable upstart who dared to pollute the pure regions of poesy, and contaminate the rich drink of Woden with his ditch-water doggerel. The wordy war waxed fast and furious, and the other competitor for poetical honours, the donkey, added to it from time to time by

giving vent to a self-asserting bray, which for the moment silenced the other two completely.

"Look here," shouted Athelhune, "I am getting tired of this; if ye can't settle it to your satisfaction this way I'll show ye another and a better method; ye have bothered us long enough. It is only fair ye should afford us some fun now; catch that donkey one of ye, he's the author of all this. Now drive a stake into the centre of that clear place there, and do ye, old skald and young skald, come out here."

All were now eager to know what Athelhune was going to do, and the two men were inclined to refuse to come out; but the jeers of the others, who accused them of cowardice, at last overcame their disinclinations, and they both came up to Athelhune.

"Give me a couple of bandages," he cried; and when these were soon brought from a neighbouring cottage, he proceeded to tie the bandages tightly round their eyes, thus blindfolding them; he was not able to do this, however, without assuring them that no harm would happen to them. When they were completely blindfolded they were led up to the stake, and each was fastened to it by one ankle with a strong cord about ten yards long. The donkey was also made fast in the same way, and its two hind legs were hobbled. When all these arrangements were completed, two stout sticks were given to the rival poets, and they were told to punish the donkey for its utterly uncalled for interruption. The one who kept on beating longest was to have the right of finishing his improvisation.[4]

[4] This blindfolded encounter was suggested by the account of a contest that took place in Paris, in 1425, between four blindfolded men. Indeed, all through the middle ages such contests were very frequent, horse-play being greatly admired at all times.

A large crowd had by this time assembled, and Cædwalla's followers had all risen from their feast and stood round, and with the sporting instincts of their race were backing the three competitors: for the donkey was to have his share in the contest, and he had been muzzled to prevent his taking an unfair advantage of his vocal powers.

"Is all ready?" called Athelhune. "Then in the name of Woden begin." At this order the two poets cautiously approached the spot where they supposed the donkey was.

The younger man, whose name was Oswald, was not so anxious to hit the donkey as to get a blow at the skald, for this he knew would amuse the bystanders;

so after he had gone a few paces he stopped and listened, in order to judge where the others were. The skald, who was a prudent fellow, fearing he might come upon the donkey, and so fall over it, or get tripped over its rope, put his stick in the manner of a feeler in front of him, and came gently groping his way towards the animal. This latter, after a series of violent plunges and kicks, when he found himself first made fast, had since stood perfectly still, gazing upon the crowd in a stupid way, and was suddenly roused from his reverie by feeling the skald's stick poke him in the ribs. Giving a squeal of surprise he jumped to one side, and in so doing came violently against Oswald, who, not expecting this, was instantly thrown down. The skald, thinking the donkey was where he had poked it, rained a storm of blows upon the empty air, and as there was no object for his blows to fall upon, he overbalanced himself, and fell forward on his face.

[image]

How ye Skald, ye Yokel, and Ye Jackass strove for a prize of poesie

Loud shouts of "The donkey for ever; give it him, Ikey!" rose from the crowd, who were convulsed with laughter at the ludicrous scene. Oswald had now picked himself up, and hearing a scuffling near him, supposed it was the donkey, and belaboured the spot where the noise came from with hearty good will. A roar of rage greeted this manoeuvre, for Oswald's stick fell on the miserable skald, who, burning with mortified pride and desire for revenge, rolled over out of reach of the stick, which Oswald continued to ply, unconscious that his victim had gone, until he was suddenly propelled violently forward by the donkey's heels, which caught him behind.

Vowing revenge upon the author of their misfortunes and smarting with pain, the two luckless poets rose to their feet and groped about for the donkey, which was lazily rubbing its head against the post. Oswald was the first to find out where it was, and raising his stick in the air, brought it down with tremendous force on the poor animal. Squealing at the blow, the donkey gave a violent plunge forward and pulled the stick out of the ground, and instantly upset both the competitors; for their legs were made fast to it, and the sudden and unexpected jerk threw both to the ground. Such was the terror of the animal that it dragged the poor skalds among the crowd, overturning many of the bystanders, and throwing the whole place into a perfect uproar. The captured skalds, dragged in the train of their victor, clutched at the legs of the nearest bystanders, and thus brought them down too, who, in their turn, caught at whatever was nearest to them, until at last the excessive strain upon the rope fortunately caused it to

break, and the donkey went off with the honours of war.

The uproar and confusion caused by this event brought Cædwalla hastily from the palace, fearing that some cause of difference had arisen between his men and the townspeople. It was, therefore, with relief he saw the real state of the case; but, in order to prevent merriment from degenerating into strife, he directed Wulf and Athelhune to call the men together for the purpose of distributing the spoils they had won. At Wilfrid's suggestion also, he set the idle hands among the townspeople to clear away the wreck of the palace and to commence rebuilding it, promising all who would take part in this work remuneration in proportion to their services; for Wilfrid, foreseeing the advantage it would be to the cause of Christianity to gain over this young and noble nature, for whom there was every prospect of a bright future, had told him that if he were in want of ready means to fit him for his position, he would advance him the necessary funds, thus preventing the extortion which would otherwise follow if Cædwalla had to take it by violence, and the unpopularity which would consequently ensue. He well knew that the warmhearted youth would never forget this assistance.

When order had been once more restored, Cædwalla gave directions to have the funeral of Edilwalch conducted with suitable splendour, and a procession set out in the afternoon to carry the body to the stone church that was now rising in Selsea under the direction and from the plans of Wilfrid, whose taste for building had already been exhibited in the churches of Hexham and Ripon.

CHAPTER VI. EXTREMES MEET.

A few days after the events narrated in the last chapter, Ceolwulf, or, as Ædric and Wulfstan loved to call him, Biggun, having obtained leave from Cædwalla, with whom he had become a great favourite, to return to look after his young "eorls," was engaged in overhauling the boat that had brought them to Boseham, and which had been the means of introducing them to such stirring events.

With the inhabitants of the little settlement, Ceolwulf had become an important personage. Cædwalla had for some time rendered his name respected; for being at the head of a formidable band of outlaws, all intrepid and well-disciplined men, accustomed to act together, and sure to revenge an injury suffered by any one of their number, the population on each side of the Andredesweald were very

careful not to give any cause for offence to so troublesome an enemy. Cædwalla, with the true policy of all outlawed aspirants to regal dignity in semi-organised societies, had carefully directed his followers to molest only the immediate adherents of Edilwalch or Centwine, and as far as possible to treat the other inhabitants bordering on the forest with courtesy. Any man, therefore, who was in favour with Cædwalla was sure of a certain amount of respect from the people in the immediate vicinity of the Andresesweald.

The reputation which Ceolwulf had won on the night of the surprise of Cissanceaster had already spread round the district, and the poor thralls of Boseham, as well as the few ceorls or yeomen of the neighbourhood, were eager to stand well with one who was likely to be influential when Cædwalla established his power more firmly.

Beornwulf's wound was nearly healed, but he was still somewhat sullen with Ceolwulf, and had not entirely given up the idea of taking revenge on him when he was quite strong again. The conversation of the worthy monks was not at all interesting to him, and, except when they went out fishing, or told him stories from the Old Testament of the fights of the Israelites and the Canaanites, life was very dull; and he was all the more disgusted with Ceolwulf because it was owing to him that he had been deprived of his share in the booty and the glory of the night attack upon Cissanceaster, and he was now for the twentieth time grumbling over this grievance. However, there was a novelty about a boat that caused him to forget his wrongs for a short time. Born in the neighbourhood of Deorham[1], he had never seen the sea, excepting a distant glimpse of the Bristol Channel, until, joining the band of discontented and landless men under Cædwalla, he had made occasional visits to the seashore near Selsea, or to the land of the Meanwaras. Curiously enough, the art of boat or shipbuilding appears to have fallen into disuse very soon after the arrival of the first Angle and Saxon invaders, arising, no doubt, from the fact that, as they had plenty to do in conquering the Britons, the sons of the first conquerors never learnt how to build boats, and very rapidly changed from a seafaring to a partly agricultural, partly warlike people. One great merit of the early monks was that they did all they could to improve the condition of the people. They taught them gardening, building, fishing, and agriculture, as well as imbuing them with the softening and intellectual light of the Gospel, and by their gentle ways and purity of life they shed a halo of refinement round them, whose brightness, from the contrast it afforded with that dark and gross age, can scarcely be too highly estimated.

[1] Now Derham, in Gloucestershire, where Ceawlin, the west Saxon king, slew three British princes, "Commeail, Condidan and Fariemeiol."

"Biggun, why dost thou put so many places for oars?" asked Wulfstan.

"Because she's a heavy boat to row."

"Art thou going out in her then? And if thou art, who are going with thee?"

"Maybe I am and maybe I am not, Wulf."

"Thou never wilt go without my going too, Biggun?"

"That is as may be," cautiously replied old Ceolwulf.

"Why, Biggun, what's the matter with thee this morning? Thou'rt as difficult to make out as old Mother Deva was on a washing morning. Ah! I should like to see old Deva again. What thinkest thou has become of her?"

"That I cannot say; but I don't suppose that Arwald would do her any harm—leastways if she kept a civil tongue in her head. No, not that way, Beornwulf, thou art fixing that "knee" the wrong way up, seest thou?" added Ceolwulf, testily, as Beornwulf, who really was not to blame, seeing he had never seen a boat before this one in his life, was fixing a three-cornered piece of wood which was intended to strengthen the gunwale, or side of the boat, by being nailed both to it, and also to the thwart or seat. Not understanding the object of it, he was about to nail it on flat with the seat instead of on end and edgeways. Brother Corman was assisting also, and gave a very intelligent hand and eye to the work.

Ædric was lying on the bank above, stretched on a board covered with a wolf skin, and brother Malachi and Father Dicoll were looking on; as usual, a few children were playing around, and one or two untidy-looking women were sitting at the doors of their cottages spinning flax and talking gossip. The tide was nearly low, and a flock of oxy birds were settled on the mud-banks, occasionally rising and wheeling round in flickering flight, uttering their shrill cry, only to settle a few yards farther on; while a solemn heron sat motionless on the edge of the water, and from time to time stretched out its long neck and dipped its beak in the sludge; some wild ducks were skimming the surface of the glassy water, and the distant cry of the curlew and the bittern dreamily piped across the creek.

At times a dull and heavy thud, followed by a distant roar, boomed upon the silence as the ground swell of the sea outside rolled upon the shallow beach telling of some far-off storm away down channel.

In that sequestered nook and sheltered creek all was still save for the birds and the children, the chatter of the women, or the occasional remarks of the men.

It was a lovely autumn day, and the warmth of the sun was considerable on that southerly sloping bank. The golden shadows of the oak trees were mirrored in the glass-like water, and the distorted shadow of the heron came wavering across the channel in the eddies caused by its own beak. No sound could be heard from the far-reaching forest behind. There all was silent, mysterious, and profound.

There is no mystery so profound as the depth of a vast forest. The occa-

sional rustle of a leaf flickering to the ground, the absolute silence, the dim glories of the misty blue vistas, athwart which a ray of sunlight falls upon some gnarled and twisted branch. That which is seen as well as that which is not seen alike serve to enhance the awe.

"There is one thing the Saxons can't do," said brother Corman, as he neatly fitted a new plank into the bilge of the boat, which had become leaky and was cracked from her heavy bumping on the Pole sand at the entrance to the harbour.

"What's that?" said Beornwulf.

"Why, they can't make those light fishing boats which the Wealas, as thou callest them, make. What sayest thou to a boat that one can fish from with ease, then paddle ashore, and on getting out can put upon one's back and carry home?"

"Oh, I wish I had a boat like that!" cried Wulfstan; "how are they made so light? What are they made of?"

"Thou couldest make one if thou mindest to, Wulf; only patience is needful."

"Could I? Dost really think I could? Then I could go out fishing without asking any one!" cried Wulfstan, delighted, who already in his imagination saw endless lines of fish coming ashore. "When shall we make it, Corman?"

"The first thing to do is to cut down a great many withies, then wattle them into the form of a large basket, and then thou must get a large skin, dress it well with fat, and stretch it all over the basket-work. Thou must make the basket rather longer than it is wide, and more pointed at one end. Then put a stick across the middle, and thou canst either sit in the bottom of the boat and lean back against this stick, or thou mayst sit upon the stick itself; and then if thou needst to carry the boat, thou must put thy head inside the basket, between the stick and the inside, and rest the stick against the chest. In this way it can be carried some distance without feeling much weight."

"That does sound well; let's begin making it at once; there are some withy trees, come along, Corman," cried Wulfstan, rushing off.

But brother Corman shouted after him that he had plenty to do, and when he had cut as many of the longest withies as he could carry, he had better come back with them and then go and get some more. However, several of the children of the village, with whom Wulfstan had become a great favourite, rushed off after him, and a great cutting down of withies instantly took place.

Ædric, who was watching all the proceedings with an amused and interested eye, uttered a sigh of regret that he could not go with the others, whose merry babble harmonised with the still melody of the other peaceful sounds. Ædric had been learning a good many things during the many hours he lay upon his couch; the kind monks seldom left him alone, unless he were asleep, and he was gradually beginning to understand the beauty of a life that cared nothing for itself, but gave up its whole existence for others.

He was a very affectionate boy, and as he thought over his lost home, and his noble father, almost certainly killed, he could not help crying sadly to himself. If Father Dicoll were by at such times, or came in while the sad fit was on, he would lead the conversation to the delightful assurance of ever-lasting life which those who believed on our Saviour had to console them. And as he talked on these solemn but comforting subjects, Ædric would listen with wondering curiosity, and gradually feel comforted in spite of himself.

"And after all," the worthy monk would say, "what are affections? If we loved our Lord as He loved us, our whole thoughts would be so full of Him, and the desire to do His work, that we should have no room to think of earthly affections, or earthly sufferings."

"Must not I then love my father, or my brother? My mother died before I could remember her, so I could not love her, thou knowest; but I liked old Deva, when she was not cross, which, by the way, she was often enough."

"Certainly, my son, thou shouldest love thy relations; and, indeed, it is difficult enough not to do so," added Father Dicoll, with a sigh, as he thought of his own father and mother, away in the lovely, sunny home, near the beautiful Vale of Avoca, where he had been brought up; and the bright eyes, and winsome smile of his sister. "But what I mean is, we should attain to the heavenly calm which allows us to love all mankind as brothers in the Lord, being sons of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Sorrowing when our nearest and dearest go, or we go from them; but not sorrowing overmuch, for we know it is but a little time and we shall be with them. Some day I will tell thee the story of my own life, and thou wilt then see how hard it is to die to the world when once thou hast known its evil passions and wild affections. But, thanks be to the Lord who giveth us the victory, even these are overcome by prayer and fasting, and that faith without which all else is profitless.

"Who knows, my son, but that the Almighty, in His mercy, has so ordered matters that thine accident was sent that thou mightest be plucked as a brand from the burning, and in thy boyhood might turn to Him, and, like the blessed Timothy, 'follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness,' and being led by the Spirit to this wilderness, that thou mightest learn to 'flee youthful lusts which war against the soul.' Does the life of one who from youth devotes himself to the Lord seem to thee, with thy roving northern instincts, devoid of adventure? Many, far too many for thy weak strength, are the dangers thou wilt have to encounter. Dost thou enjoy the wild pleasure of a fierce wolf hunt? The devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Attack and kill him if thou canst. Wishest thou for weapons in the combat? The King we serve will give thee the best, and such as have never been known to fail; there is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, the shield of Faith,

the helmet of Salvation, and the hawberk of Righteousness. Dost thou wish for a reward for thy toilsome fight? When the day's work is over, and thou art wearied with thy strife, a clarion call will sound, and thou wilt hear a gentle Voice say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' 'Be thou faithful unto death, and thou shalt receive the crown of life.'"

Ædric used to listen, charmed by the flow of words, as well as by the earnestness of the speaker; for, after all, earnestness and manifest conviction go far more to persuade than many subtle arguments that appeal merely to reason, and are delivered only as the cold syllogisms of a faultless logic. Instinctively the youngest intelligence that deserves such a name feels there is so much that can never be explained, that facts which would stagger a mind accustomed to approach all subjects from the standpoint of human reason are accepted without demur, just as they know the sun gives heat and the countless stars are hung in the firmament; but who can explain the one or know anything about the other?

Ædric loved to hear the wonderful stories out of the Bible, all quite new to him: the glimpses he got of other lands; the marvellous deeds of Samson, of David, and of Gideon; the magnificence of Solomon; the weird awfulness of the wonders of the Red Sea, and that strange land of Ham—all came to him with the interest of novelty, and many times he could not understand what the monks were telling him.

It took him a long time to grasp the beauty of such a sacrifice as that of our Lord; the voluntary offering of Himself to such keen physical and mental suffering for the sake of those who in countless numbers would reject Him, astonished him. He could understand that no man hath greater love than to lay down his life for his *friend*; but it was incomprehensible that he should do so for an *enemy*.

But gradually, as the beauty of forgiveness dawned upon him, he came to see that if one really forgives, there comes with the sense of forgiveness a desire to benefit the forgiven one, and, the crowning triumph of all, to make him feel one in thought and action with Him who forgives. Slowly but surely the "Beauty of Holiness" was entering his soul; and as the monk talked to him of the objects and duties of life, and of how little worth was earthly wealth or station, or pleasure, compared to the eternity of existence, and the necessity of our fitting ourselves for it, Ædric, with the ardour of youthful impressions, longed to consecrate his life to God, and to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, in the only really earnest way that seemed possible to the most religious minds of that age—by vowing himself solemnly to God from his youth.

But Dicoll, to whom he one day timidly ventured to talk upon the subject, very wisely told him he must first prove himself; he could not tell yet whether the wish for a holy life were merely the passing sentiment of an imaginative temperament, intensified by the physical exhaustion of a serious wound and acted upon

by the beauty of an entirely new set of ideas; for there would be great danger to his lasting happiness if, after solemnly dedicating himself to God, he was then to cast longing looks at the world and sigh after its pleasures and its vanities.

[image]

How they talked of many things as they mended a boat at Boseham

Such thoughts as these were passing through Ædric's mind as he lay on the wolf-skin and watched the boat being mended, or listened to Wulfstan as he chattered to the children, who were helping him carry the cut withies to a place near brother Corman, who was going to show him how to make his boat, or coracle as he called it.

Corman was improving the occasion, as he helped Ceolwulf and Beornwulf to mend the boat, by telling them the story of the making of the ark, in which his hearers were much interested.

"Why, that reminds me of what our gleeman used to tell us of Bergelmir the giant, who, when the sons of Bor slew Ymir, and his blood drowned all the race of Frost Giants, went on board his boat with his wife, and so floated away when everyone else was drowned," said Ceolwulf; "but I have heard of two larger boats than that. One was Skidbladnir, which was built for the gods by the dwarfs, the sons of Ivaldi, and it was so big that it could take all of them on board at once with their war stores and weapons; and it was a very useful boat, for when it was not wanted, Frey, for whom it was made, could fold it up like a piece of cloth and put it in her pocket."

"That must have been a wonderful boat, truly," said Beornwulf, "and must have had many spells and enchantments used over her, doubtless. But what was the other boat thou saidest thou knewest of that was larger than Bergelmir's!"

"I can't say I know much about that boat, but they call it Naglfar, and it is made of dead men's nails; and thus if men's nails are short when they die, the ship will take a long time to be finished, and so I was told we always ought to keep our nails short, for we cannot tell when we may die."

"And that's true enough, Ceolwulf," said Corman, "and the sooner thou ceasest to believe all those old wives' tales the better thou wilt be. 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good;' make preparation with the heart for the hour that all must pass through, and think not of the body, excepting in so far as it may be presented faultless before its Maker, which could never be by our means," added brother Corman.

At this moment Wulfstan ran up with a large bundle of withies, saying,

"See here, brother Corman, we have surely got enough now, haven't we?"

"Well, yes, I think thou hast, to make a beginning with, anyhow. Thou must have a great deal of patience, or else success will not come. Now lay the longest and stoutest withies on the ground, at about a hand's breadth apart. That's right. A little closer those on the left; you have not got the spaces quite regular. Now peg them all down on the ground in the middle. Aye, that will do. But, Beate Columba! whatever is that noise about?" broke off Corman in astonishment, as a distant roar of men's voices, mingled with the clash of metal, was borne over the forest from the direction of Cissanceaster.

All stopped to listen. The noise and tumult went on for some minutes, and then gradually died away.

"*Quare fremuerunt gentes!*" murmured Father Dicoll.

"What thinkest thou it is, Ceolwulf?" asked Wulfstan.

"That I can't say, rightly speaking, but I should say that there was something going on," oracularly replied Biggun. "But, anyhow, we had better get on with this boat; so, Beornwulf, just help me to lift her a bit more over on her bilge, and then I can drive in these plugs a bit better. There, that will do."

"Look!" said Ædric, "there's brother Malachi coming round the point. I wonder if he's caught many fish?"

"He doesn't come very fast," said Wulfstan.

"How can three logs pushed by a monk get along fast?" said Biggun contemptuously, who, ever since the first time of their meeting, had formed a very poor opinion of brother Malachi. He did not think much of any of the monks, whom he regarded as poor-spirited fellows. He thought Corman had the makings of a good sort of man in him, for he seemed to know a few practical things, but Malachi he looked upon as not being "all there," he appeared so dreamy and abstracted.

However, brother Malachi approached, slowly but surely carried by the tide, which was now rising rapidly. A few fish could be seen lying on the board in front of him, which caused Beornwulf to take much more interest in him.

"There now, Corman, I do believe she's quite fit for sea again," said Biggun, complacently viewing the result of their shipbuilding efforts. "The next thing is to overhaul her gear and see if we can't get that sail to set a bit stiffer."

Certainly the poor old tattered sail did look as if it wanted a little attention as it lay upon the grassy slope. However, Ceolwulf, by dint of hard bargaining induced one of the women who appeared most handy with the needle to patch it up with various scraps of home-spun cloth, and at last it looked as though it really would hold the wind fairly well.

By this time Malachi had come ashore, and all the children had crowded down to the raft to see his catch. He had got a few eels, two or three of a very

good size, a few whiting, and one good-sized bass. As soon as the success of his fishing was known, it was obvious how very much he went up in the estimation of the bystanders, even Ceolwulf condescending to say in a patronising way that he really hadn't done badly for a monk.

Ædric was always irritated at old Ceolwulf for his treatment of the good monks, whom he knew to be infinitely cleverer and a very great deal better than poor ignorant old Biggun; and even supposing they had not been, they had so hospitably taken care of them, at the risk of possibly making enemies, when they came to them in the most absolute need and helplessness, that it seemed a very great absence of courtesy, to say the least of it, to show the slightest want of respect to them.

But courteous manners were not a characteristic of the early English settlers, with whom the main idea was the "simple rule, the good old plan, that he shall take who has the power, and he shall keep who can."

However, none of the worthy monks showed the least resentment at Ceolwulf's manner; indeed, Ædric could not tell that they saw it.

In the excitement caused by the arrival of the fish no one had heard the hurried steps of three men who were rapidly approaching, and it was not until Ceolwulf heard himself called by name that he was aware of their presence.

"Why, Athelhune," he cried in astonishment, "what brings thee here? Thou seemest, truly, as though matters were pressing thee somewhat."

The eyes of all were now turned upon the new comers, who certainly did look as though they had come fast. They were fully armed, but their armour bore traces of rough and recent usage. Athelhune's shield was cleft nearly through, his axe was notched and stained, and he was in a violent state of heat. His two companions were in much the same condition, and one was badly wounded, for blood was slowly welling from a deep cut in the neck.

As soon as Corman saw the condition he was in he led him to his hut and staunched the wound, applying healing herbs and a bandage.

"Ceolwulf, we have been surprised in our turn at Cissanceaster by the two eorls, Berchthune and Andhune, who returned suddenly from Kent. We have been driven out of the town, and Cædwalla is once more a wanderer. He sent me to thee because he remembered the expedition thou wast to undertake, and he was afraid thou mightest wait here until thou mightest fall into the hands of the South Saxon eorls. Thou art to start to-night, and I and as many others as we can collect, or the boat will hold, are to go with thee. Thou wilt take the direction of the expedition, as thou knowest the country. The two boys are to go to Wilfrid, with whom they will be safe. Cædwalla does not in the least despair of recovering his rights, and hopes to be able to follow us himself before long."

So said Athelhune, and the astonishing nature of the news produced a pro-

found silence, broken by Father Dicoll saying:

"See, my children, the mutability of earthly affairs. *Vanitas vanitatum*," saith the Preacher, "*omnia est vanitas*."

"I don't know what that means," said Athelhune. "but if it means I am very hungry, that's quite true. I could eat some of those fish, I think."

CHAPTER VII.

"HO! WATCHMAN; WHAT OF THE NIGHT!"

"Well, there's plenty to be done, anyway," growled old Biggun, as he gradually took in the full extent of the news Athelhune had brought, "and the worst of it is there's not many of us to do it. Well, well, we shall see. The tide don't cease flowing till a little before dusk; if we can get away somewhere before that we shall have daylight to take us over that bar, and when once we are outside we shall be all right then. Let me see, how's the wind? Why, there is not much, but what little draught of air there is comes from the right quarter. It's about north-east to easterly, I'm thinking, and that's why we heard all that to do at Cissanceaster so clearly."

So saying, the old man, putting a few articles into the boat, went off to join the others, who were all busy cleaning the fish and cooking them on an iron plate placed over the fire, which had been hastily lighted outside Father Dicoll's hut.

There was a great deal to be done before Ceolwulf could start on the expedition, which was a very dangerous one. While he was with Cædwalla he had obtained that prince's consent to the despatching of some of his followers with Ceolwulf to see what had become of Ælfhere, and how matters were going on in Wittea, and if he found that there were many who were discontented with the way Arwald was conducting affairs, Cædwalla promised to come over and help him; and if Ælfhere were alive, he would reinstate him in his possessions and authority, or, if he were dead, he would appoint someone to look after matters in his interest, and until Ædric and Wulfstan were old enough to look after themselves. Now that matters had taken this unhappy turn for Cædwalla, Ceolwulf thought it would have been more prudent if he had gone to join the prince and had sent the boys to St. Wilfrid; but he did not like to act contrary to Cædwalla's orders, especially as he depended upon him for supporting them all later on. "After all," he thought, "I can but go across and see how the land lies, and then come back

again. The boys will be quite safe meanwhile with Wilfrid, for they will go there, anyhow."

After they had had their dinner, Ceolwulf and Athelhune walked apart and decided what was to be done. The boat would take eight persons easily: could they muster eight? There were only Beornwulf and the other man, whose name was Osborn, for the wounded man was too badly hurt to be of any use; that only made four. "Would any of the people of Boseham go?" said Athelhune. "By the way, I forgot to give thee this gold which Cædwalla bid me give thee. It might be useful to induce some of them to go."

"Well, we can try," said Ceolwulf. "But thou wilt get on better with them than I shall; do thou go and have a talk with a few while I get Beornwulf and Osborn to get down what we want for the undertaking."

Under Ceolwulf's directions, all the arms were put into the boat. The shields and linked mail shirts were carefully stowed out of the way of any sea water, and then such pieces of pork and bread as Ceolwulf was able to obtain by hard bargaining from the richer ceorls' wives were put in, and, finally, a tub, or beaker, of water completed the preparations. Everything was put very securely in its place, and every care taken against damage by the movement of the sea.

Meanwhile, Athelhune had induced three fairly stalwart young men to accompany them, promising them some weapons and a small sum of money as a recompense.

It was now nearly high water, and the boat was floating alongside of the quay. She looked in very much better condition than when she arrived, and Wulfstan was helping Biggun to hoist the sail.

"I say, Biggun, where art thou going to?"

"Well, Wulfstan, I am going over to Wihtea."

"Oh! art thou truly? And, of course, I am going too?"

"Why, no, Wulf. Thou seest it is a little dangerous, and there would be no use in thy going. We shan't be long gone; only I know that thou and Ædric would like to know what's going on over there, and so we shall go out with the tide this evening, and return, maybe, the day after to-morrow."

"Oh, Biggun, do let me go! I will be quite good and do all thou tellest me; I promise I will."

"No, Wulf, no; it's no good asking me. There, we've got the sail well set, and the sooner we get off the better. Now, let's see where are our crew? Athelhune, let's have a look at them altogether."

The five men were accordingly called up, and Athelhune briefly told them that Cædwalla, whose generosity they all knew, and whose vengeance also it was as well to avoid, had decided to find out how matters were going on in Wihtea, and for this purpose had determined to send Ceolwulf and himself as eorl-

domen to explore the east end of the island, and having found out the state of affairs to come back and report to him; that he had chosen those five men for this honourable occupation, and that all would be well remembered and suitably rewarded when Cædwalla's power was firmly established; and the more they contributed to this end the sooner would their own position be secured. There was little or no danger, for which, no doubt, as brave fellows, they would be sorry; for in Ceolwulf they had a first-rate guide, and one who knew every inch of the ground, and was well known by all the inhabitants; he would show them a good harbour, and they were sure of a good welcome.

To this speech Wulfstan listened open-eared, and when it was over he ran up to Ceolwulf and said:

"Thou heardest what he said? He said there was no danger, and that thou wouldest have a sure welcome; well, then, why can't I go? Do let me go, Biggun?"

"No, Wulfstan, I can't! Who is to take care of Ædric?"

"Oh, he won't mind; and, besides, we are to be away such a short time."

"No, no, don't bother me so. Seest thou not how busy I am?" and to avoid further entreat, Ceolwulf walked off to talk to Father Dicoll, whom he found in earnest converse with brother Malachi.

"I trust, Father Dicoll, thou wilt have the boys sent over to Wilfrid if there is any danger from the South Saxon eorls," said Ceolwulf.

"We will do what we can, my son, and I was talking to brother Malachi about it as thou camest up. Our best way will be to let Wilfrid know, and then, no doubt, as he has men, to whom he can say 'come' and they come, and to others 'go' and they go, he will send over and have them taken under safe conduct to his house at Selsea. This we will have done. But there is another matter brother Malachi here wants to speak to thee about. He is urgent with me to let him go with thee to Wihtea; he says he has been urged by the Spirit to carry the Gospel of good tidings to that benighted spot. When I urged him that the Lord had work enough for him here, he said that here were many instruments of God. That there was brother Corman and myself, and Wilfrid and all his clergy; and that he had seen in a vision of the night, like the blessed Paul, a man of Wihtea standing by, and saying, 'Come over and help us.' I told him of the dangers, but I am glad to say that, like a true follower of our Lord, these only made him all the more earnest to be gone——"

"There, Father Dicoll, thou hast said enough; if the poor creature wants to get killed it is not for me to prevent him. Ye have been good and hospitable men to us, and taken care of Ædric and Wulfstan right manfully, and if I can do anything to help thee or thine, I'm only too glad to have the opportunity. Let him come."

Brother Malachi had been listening to all that was said, and going up to

Father Dicoll he knelt down and asked his blessing, much to the astonishment of the Saxons, who all began to laugh; and they laughed still more when he rose up and kissed Dicoll and Corman, who returned the salutation, saying as they did so, "*I, frater, in pace et Dominus tecum.*"

"These be odd men," said Athelhune, who, not quite so utterly uncultivated as the other Saxons standing by, was yet amused at their singular habits; for to the Teutonic mind outward and practical evidence of affection always appeared effeminate.

Malachi now turned to Eddie and Wulfstan, and took a kind farewell of both of them, especially of Ædric, who returned his affectionate greeting, and struggled hard to restrain his emotion, which he would not for the world have shown before all those men; but he longed for his home and news of his father, and it seemed hard that a stranger could go and he could not. "My son, our home is not here, nor there, but our home is in heaven," whispered Malachi, as Ædric murmured his regret in his ear.

As for Wulfstan, he was very sulky; he was particularly angry to find that a monk was allowed to go and he was not.

"Why, isn't he in the way far more than I am? He doesn't know how to row, and I do; and he can't fight nearly so well as I can. What's the good of him if he can't fight? I call it a shame, Ædric. I used to like old Biggun, but now I hate him. He's got so proud since Cissanceaster, and forgets he was our father's herdsman. I hate him, I do!"

"Hush, Wulfstan, thou oughtest not to be so ungrateful. Thou forgettest he lost everything just as much as we did, and he might have saved it all, by making friends with Arwald. And think how he has taken care of us, and what trouble he took in bringing us over here, and he only fought so well—and thou oughtest to be proud of him for it—in order to get Cædwalla to take an interest in us, and send us some men to help us. What good couldest thou do? and, of course, thou wouldest be very much in the way."

"Oh, Ædric, thou art as bad as the monks! Thou only sayest all this because thou art not able to go too. Thou knowest if thou wert well enough to go thou wouldest only be too ready to talk evil of Ceolwulf. Oh, I hate it all—but I will go! Thou shalt see!" added Wulfstan, with a determined look.

The preparations for departure were nearly all ready; the men were carrying down a few last articles that might be necessary, and Ceolwulf and Athelhune were bidding good-bye to Father Dicoll and brother Corman. Most of the women and children of the place had gathered round, and there was much confusion of noise and bustle. Such an event as the departure of a boat full of eight men all armed, and one an eorldoman and another a distinguished warrior, for so Ceolwulf was now regarded, was too important not to create considerable ex-

citement. Brother Malachi too going! How would the poor monks get on for fish? how would the poor man fare amid those rough men of war?

"Well, good-bye, Ædric; keep up thy spirits till I come back, and get well as quickly as thou canst. Why, where's Wulfstan? I wanted to say good-bye to him; but perhaps I had better not; he'll only bother me over again to take him, and that I won't do. So do thou say that I looked for him, but couldn't see him; that will do quite as well."

So saying, Ceolwulf went down to the boat, and then found that he really had plenty to do, for only the three Boseham men had any idea of rowing. Fortunately, there was a little wind, and by setting one of the Boseham men to pull each oar, and one of the others to push, they were likely in this way to get into the swing of the art.

He had also to explain the use of the ropes; but this did not take long, only Ædric was convulsed with laughter at the sail coming down quite suddenly on Ceolwulf's head, as he was showing one of the men how to make fast the sheet or rope which pulls in the sail. In order to see if the man quite knew where it was and what he ought to do, he had told him to let the rope go, with the result that the sail came down with a run. The man had already confused it with the main-halyard or rope that pulled the sail—which was a lug-sail—up to the top of the mast.

As nearly all the men were in the boat, the sudden descent of the sail caused considerable confusion, and some angry exclamations; however, at last all was ready, and Ceolwulf, who was getting impatient to be off, gave the order to cast her off from her moorings, and taking an oar, put it into a deep notch in the boat's stern, and prepared to steer her.

The children all began to shout. Ædric waved his hand. Father Dicoll and brother Corman stood by him, and called a farewell to brother Malachi, who stood near the mast in the bow of the boat. Athelhune stood near Ceolwulf, and the others rowed as they were placed. The boat glided gently away, and long soft ripples from her stern caused all the shadows of the trees and the clouds to tremble in wavering patterns as they rolled to the shore.

[image]

How Dicoll and Ædric saw ye boat depart

"There, they are off," said Father Dicoll to Ædric; "and may the blessing of the Almighty go with brother Malachi, for he goeth as a lamb among wolves. My soul yearneth for his safety."

"Doesn't the boat look pretty as she sails away?" said brother Corman.

"Ah! it reminds me of our sails in the old days at home, when we used to go out on the lough to fish."

It was a pretty scene: the sun was slowly sinking in the west, a grey mist rose over the western horizon, hiding the slushy banks and sedges of the shore; the red light of the sun came in a long flood up the creek, against it the black sail and dark heads of the men stood out in contrast.

"They go up a path of blood," sighed Dicoll. "May it be an omen of a path that leads to glory."

Behind, the clouds were working up in great black masses, that stretched across from north-west to south-east, and the breeze became colder.

The tide had begun to turn, and the boat was disappearing round a distant bend in the creek.

"There! they are gone, and it's time we went to vespers. Let us carry in Ædric, and make ready for the night. It looks black away to the east and north. I trust we are not going to have snow."

"I wonder where Wulfstan is," said Corman. "I didn't see him when the boat went off, and I should have thought he would have been the last to look at them."

"I expect he has gone off after some more withies," said Ædric.

"Well, I daresay he will come in when he's tired; but boys ought to learn discipline while they are young, for it is a harder matter afterwards," said Father Dicoll.

Meanwhile the boat was getting on very well; the novices in the art of rowing were quickly becoming used to the swing and management of the oar; so much so, that Ceolwulf had told the Boseham men to rest and leave the others to go on, as their services might be wanted later. Only one man had caught a crab, and being swung by the violence of the shock against poor brother Malachi, coming in painful contact with the monk's body, causing him to ejaculate with more than usual fervour, "*Ah! quare tristis es venter meus! et quare conturbas me?*" Beyond this little catastrophe, which, by the way, did not increase the good feeling of the man who had caused the monk's discomfort for his victim—for he did not understand the meaning of his ejaculations, and mistook them for condemnatory remarks—nothing else occurred.

A little more breeze had now got up, not sufficient, however, to create any ripple on the water, but just enough to keep the sail full.

They were fast approaching the entrance, and could hear the dull thud of the sea as it broke on the shingle outside.

"We shall have light enough, brother Malachi, I doubt not, to pass out by?" called Ceolwulf.

"The Lord helping us, we shall not run aground," answered Malachi.

The sail was beginning to do its work famously, and Ceolwulf bid the men put their oars in, and suggested to Athelhune that some food would be a good thing. Accordingly, search was made in the boat, when suddenly a man called out:

"Why, in the name of Asgard, whom have we here?"

All looked round, and there, under a skin that sheltered the provisions in the bow of the boat, was Wulfstan.

"Ah! Biggun," the boy shouted, "I told thee I should come, and thou canst not put me out now."

Ceolwulf saw it was no use being angry; so, giving the boy a sharp rating for not doing what he was told, he made up his mind to the inevitable.

And now the sun disappeared behind the low bank of what is at present known as Hayling Island, and the breeze came up fresher behind them.

"It's getting cold," said Athelhune. "We shall have snow, I fear—"

"We shan't be long getting over with this breeze, however. It's dead aft and a smooth sea," replied Ceolwulf.

The boat was just beginning to feel the motion of the sea, and was passing between the narrow entrance where Ceolwulf and the boys had struck when coming in for the first time.

"Look out for the sail as she comes over!" shouted Biggun, as the boat was altering its course to thread the intricate channel.

"There! I knew somebody's cap would be knocked off," added the old man, as Beornwulf's cap was carried over into the sea by the sail.

"Now, look alive, and shift over the sheet, someone. No! not that rope. Here, someone with a head upon his shoulders—that's right, Wulfstan, thou understandest it, and can teach them something."

This was an admission on the part of Ceolwulf which Wulfstan did not allow to pass over without notice.

"Ah, Biggun, thou findest that out now; it's lucky for ye all I shipped myself aboard. Thou seest, Biggun, thou dost not know what's for thine own good."

To this remark Biggun only grunted.

It was now getting too dark to make out objects more than a hundred yards off, and it required a watchful eye in the bows to see where the waves were breaking. The tide was rushing out through the narrow entrance with a swirl and an eddy that caused many small white crested waves, which it was necessary to distinguish from the real breakers on the sand banks. Brother Malachi was standing in the bows keeping a sharp look-out with one of the Boseham men, and Ceolwulf was steering, the rest were having some food.

"Here comes a long wave; keep her head up to it," called the Boseham man,

as a long wall of water rose out of the darkness and seemed to stand right up above the bows of the boat; but Ceolwulf put her head at it, and she rose gently over and plunged down on the other side, while the wave rolled on and thundered behind them on the shore.

"There, we are clear of all banks now, and have nothing but the open sea before us," called Malachi, as he sat down under the lee of the boat's gunwale.

"Thou hadst better come aft, brother Malachi," called Wulfstan, who, now that he had accomplished his object, was glad the good monk was coming too; he always felt comfortable when the kind monk was near, because he never scolded him, or laughed at him, but quietly pointed out where he was wrong very patiently.

Darkness had by this time become complete, and there was nothing for Ceolwulf to steer by except a vague kind of instinct that told him to keep the sail as full as it was when they last saw land; he had then put the head of the boat pointing directly for the spot he wished to make for, and he argued that if he did not draw the wind either too much on her starboard beam, or, on the other hand, let it jibe the sail over, he must make land where he wanted in about three hours' time. He had not calculated that it was possible for the wind to shift.

The men were curling themselves up to go to sleep, and Malachi was murmuring some words to himself.

"What sayest thou, brother Malachi?" asked Wulfstan.

"I was asking the Almighty to preserve us through the dangers of the night, Wulfstan."

"But there are no dangers."

"There are always dangers on the sea."

"Not if thou takest care and keepest a good look-out."

"But thou mayest not know thy way, storms may rise, the boat may spring a leak, or she may strike on a rock."

"How can she spring a leak if she has just been mended? and how can she strike on a rock when she is ever so far from shore? I believe thou art frightened, brother Malachi; but there's no need, there is nothing to be afraid of. Come and sit by me; I will take care of thee."

The rushing, gurgling sound under the bows of the boat showed she was going through the water very fast. As they got further out from the land, the sea got up rather more, and from time to time the boat gave wild rushes ahead, and then sank down in the trough of the waves, only to rise again, lifting her stern up and careering madly forward until her head rose in the air, and the wave curled over in front. It took all Ceolwulf's steering with the oar to keep her from broaching-to, as it is called when the boat in running before the breeze turns broadside to the wind on the top of a rolling wave, a situation which, it is

needless to say, is a very dangerous one.

"Why, the spray is coming in astern, Ceolwulf?"

"No, it's not the sea, it's snow, and it's coming on thick, I'm thinking."

"Wilt thou be able to make out the land?" said Athelhune.

"We are not there yet," growled Ceolwulf, who was not in a very good humour, for he was getting cold, and was beginning to be a little doubtful of their whereabouts.

They had now sailed for about two hours, and they ought to be getting near land; it was very thick, however, and the snow was coming on faster than ever. The sea was getting much heavier, and from time to time Ceolwulf had the greatest difficulty in keeping his oar in the notch.

Wulfstan had coiled himself up, and had now gone to sleep. The others were mostly asleep or dozing, but Malachi and Athelhune felt the uncertainty of their position, and shared Ceolwulf's anxiety.

"We ought to be near land now, ought we not?" asked Malachi.

"We are not far off, I'm thinking," said Ceolwulf. "Lend me a hand with this oar, Athelhune," he added, as a more than ordinarily large wave rose up astern, and sent the boat staggering along with a wild lurch and headlong plunge that took the wind out of the sail, and called for all Ceolwulf's knowledge of steering. He and Athelhune, however, managed it cleverly, and the sea passed under the boat with a seething rush, raising her head high in air.

"The difficulty is in this snow, we can't see breakers ahead," grumbled Ceolwulf. "Go forward, Malachi, and keep a sharp look-out. Sing out the moment thou seest any land."

Malachi did as he was told, and peered anxiously into the grey veil ahead; but he could see nothing, only tumbling waves rising and falling, leaping up like grey shadows, and disappearing in the misty gloom.

Suddenly Malachi felt the boat give a violent lurch, followed by a dizzy rush, and he found himself in water nearly up to his waist. What was it? What had happened?

The oar had broken, and the boat had come round into the trough of the sea, and was in imminent danger of being rolled over or swamped.

All were now aroused, for most were lying in the water, which half filled the boat. However, Ceolwulf had seized another oar the moment the catastrophe happened, and with great quickness had brought her round to the course she was running, and then directed the men to bail the water out.

Once more they rushed wildly on; while poor brother Malachi, murmuring "*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine,*" drenched to the skin, gazed out into the darkness.

For the next quarter of an hour or so nothing disturbed the monotony of

the rushing waters, the creaking mast, the occasionally flapping sail as the boat sank into the trough of the sea, or the whistling of the wind; everything in the boat was getting covered with a white pall, and the discomfort of all was great.

Suddenly Malachi shouted out:

”Land! land! right ahead. I see—”

But his words were lost in a wild crash, that hurled Ceolwulf and Athelhune into the bottom of the boat, and pitched poor Malachi head over heels overboard.

CHAPTER VIII.

NOTHING VENTURE, NOTHING HAVE.

The shock that produced the catastrophe which hurled brother Malachi overboard was caused by the boat striking on a reef of rocks, which lay some little distance out from the land, and, in the blinding snow and darkness, was utterly invisible, although as each wave receded the rocks were uncovered for a few minutes, only to be washed from end to end as a new wave dashed over them.

The boat was lifted by the first wave right on to the top of the reef, and consequently when the reflux of the wave took place, she fell over on her side, and remained exactly as she would have done on a hard beach. The next wave, however, broke right into her, and filled her from end to end, besides smashing the mast and knocking a hole in her as she came down with a tremendous thump. All the men had now jumped overboard, and, under the direction of Ceolwulf, who took in the situation at a glance, scrambled over the rocks before another large wave came, and found on the other side that there was a shallow, sandy pool, where the water came up to their waists, but where they were protected from the extreme violence of the waves by the reef of rocks outside. Ceolwulf had taken the precaution to keep hold of the rope, or warp, which was used for mooring the boat, and, shouting to the others to hold on to this, he watched for another large wave, then, bidding the others haul altogether, they dragged the boat over the rocks into the part where they were, and where they would be able to get the cargo out of the boat before she should break up, which she must inevitably do if the tide were rising.

In the darkness and confusion nobody had thought of seeing whether anyone was missing, but now that all immediate danger was over Ceolwulf began to think he had not seen Malachi.

"Malachi! Malachi!" he shouted, "where art thou?"

A very feeble answer came from behind them:

"Here, Ceolwulf, here."

"Art hurt, man?"

"*Miserere mei*, but I have no whole soundness in my body, all my bones are out of joint, and the floods have gone over my soul."

"Where art thou?"

"I am on dry ground—at least, if that may be called dry which is all wet with snow—but where I am, I know not."

"He's all right," said Ceolwulf, who was holding the rope with one hand and Wulfstan with the other. "He's got ashore, and the sooner we get there the better, it is only a little way off."

"Hadn't we better get our arms out of the boat first? she may be smashed all to pieces before we can get back to her again," suggested Athelhune.

"Right, quite right," answered Ceolwulf. "Let every one take as much as he can carry ashore with him, and follow me." So saying, taking Wulfstan's hand, he waded ashore to where the voice of brother Malachi guided them. The others followed, carrying the armour, shields, spears, and other weapons.

When they were all ashore, they found they were on a steep shingle beach with a low cliff behind, as far as they could make out in the darkness. Malachi was seated, shivering with cold, on a boulder of rock, and Wulfstan ran up to him, and slapping him on the back, said:

"Hullo! brother Malachi, I am very glad thou art not drowned."

"Oh, don't do that! I am very glad too, but don't touch me, I ache all over. Oh!" groaned brother Malachi, shivering, so that his teeth chattered in his head.

"Well, run about then, and thou wilt soon get warm."

But the poor monk was too cold and dispirited for that, and only sat still and shivered. It certainly was a dreary outlook, as far as anything could be seen. A group of half-drowned men, a patch of snow-covered beach, the dim outline of foaming waves, and all else indistinguishable blackness.

"How much longer have we got to wait for daylight thinkest thou?" asked Athelhune.

"It is not midnight yet," answered Ceolwulf gloomily.

"Dost thou know where we are?"

"On the Foreland, I doubt, and we've narrowly missed going out to sea down the channel; but I can't rightly say where we are until I have gone a bit further in-shore."

"We had better all of us get into some shelter if we can. We can't pull the boat up, and turn her over and get under her, can we?"

"No, we haven't got strength enough for that. We had better get up this

cliff, and go inland; we shan't find the wind so keen then."

They all, therefore, clambered over the shingle, and, scrambling up the low cliff, found themselves among a thick growth of brushwood.

"Now, the best thing we can do, boys, is to cut down enough of this to make a clearing for us to lie down in, and we can pile the cut bushes up to the windward of us, and bring ashore the sail and the skins, and such stores as we've got, and make ourselves as snug as we can until daylight breaks. Here, Athelhune, wilt thou set four of them to work with their axes, while I and the others go back to the old boat who has made her last journey, I fear."

This seemed to all a reasonable proposition, and Athelhune began at once to set the men to work. Although it was very dark, yet, as they had become accustomed to it, it was not really so difficult as it would seem to work in the dimness.

"Hullo! who art thou?" called out Ceolwulf, as he fell over the prostrate body of a man. "Why, it's brother Malachi I do believe, and he's gone to sleep; but that won't do. Here, Wulfstan, come and lead him up the shore. Make him walk; if he goes to sleep he will never wake up again. Hi! Malachi, wake up!"

But Malachi was sound asleep, worn out with cold and wretchedness, and it took a great deal of shaking to rouse him up. When at last he was made to understand where he was, he had scarcely any strength left to walk, and it was with extreme difficulty Wulfstan could get him up the beach and on the top of the cliff; and then Athelhune set him to work to carry the bushes, which the others cut, to the windward side of the clearing they were making.

Ceolwulf and the others now returned with the other things, and they very soon made a tolerable shelter from the wind and snow by stretching the sail and other coverings over stakes driven in the ground, and kept up by the masts and oars, which were rested in the forked end of the upright stakes.

"I suppose we can do nothing more for the old boat?" said Athelhune.

"No, she will have to take her chance. I don't think much will be left of her to-morrow; the tide is rising fast, and the wind doesn't show any signs of going down. It's true she will be sheltered a little by the reef outside, but not much, for there will be a good depth of water over it at high tide."

"Dost thou know where we are now?"

"It's where I thought. We are at the end of the Foreland, and have had a near chance of going out to sea," said Ceolwulf.

"Are there any houses near here?"

"No, not nearer than our old home at the head of the haven; but that was burnt down the night we escaped in the boat—at least so it seemed to me as I looked back."

"Canst count on any one helping us if we show ourselves by daylight?"

"Aye, I can count on some if they've not been killed; but I shall have to go to work cautiously, as we have got no boat now to go back with, unless we can capture another one."

"Well, the best thing we can do will be to lie as snug here as we can, and close together, to keep ourselves warm."

As they were now all fairly well warmed by their exertions in making the tent and clearing the ground, there was not much risk to such hardy men from going to rest, and they all lay down under the shelter of the sails and skins, and were soon sound asleep.

The first to wake next morning was Wulfstan, who got up at once, and without waking any one, or at least disturbing them, he went out on to the cliff to see what could be seen of the place where they were wrecked.

The sun had only just risen. It had ceased snowing for some time apparently, for all signs of it had disappeared, and a glorious sight met his eyes. At his feet lay the old boat, lying broadside on to the steep shingle beach, and a large hole in her showed where she had struck the night before. She did not seem to have been any more damaged, and doubtless the reef, which was just beginning to show as the tide receded, had protected her; for the tides were then at neap or nearly so, and consequently the sea had not risen so high or had as much force as it would have had if the spring tides had then prevailed. Beyond the boat the white breakers were tumbling in creamy foam, tinged with the red and gold of the rising sun, which cast a gleaming path of light from the horizon to the feet of Wulfstan; on each side of this path of glory, the sea was deep greeny-grey, ending in a blue and misty purple under the rising sun; above the transparent depths of the exquisite primrose-coloured sky a few fleecy golden clouds floated in the fathomless blue of the heavens, while a gentle but rather keen breeze brought health and vigour to the lungs of the hardy boy. Far on the horizon, towards the north-east, a distant line of grey hills showed where the great Andredesweald stretched away in the distance.

Sniffing the fresh sea air, the boy ran along the beach, and, turning a point a little way to the south-west of him, came upon a long reef of rocks running far out into the sea, and over which the waves were rushing and tumbling in wild confusion as the tide ebbed into the main channel stream.

Out upon these rocks a solitary heron was looking for his morning meal with outstretched neck, while flocks of oxy birds rose in flickering flight, or settled, with shrill cry, on the luxuriant sea-weed that clothed the rocks with sheeny growth.

As Wulfstan went further on, following the shore as it trended towards the west, a great wall of chalk rose suddenly above the low gravel cliff, and shut out all further view in that direction. Above, the magnificent chalk cliff, that went in

sheer descent from a height of some three hundred feet into the blue sea below, crowned with a smooth slope of brown turf, rose in gradual swell to sink again in steeper descent towards the north, while its precipitous sides sloped abruptly to the low ground of the foreland.

"Oh! there's our dear old Binbrigge dune!" [1] cried Wulfstan, who had many a time ridden over those grassy slopes, and been lowered over the cliff to collect the sea-fowls' eggs that were laid in otherwise unapproachable nooks and ledges of the precipice.

[1] Bembridge Down.

The boy had forgotten all the past weeks. He seemed once more at home, and wandered on, forgetful of the shipwreck, the sick brother left on the mainland, and his own burnt home.

He was roused from his dreams by a rustling in the long coarse grass that fringed the low cliff, and directly afterwards a boy's voice called out, in amazement:

"Why, it's the young eorl Wulfstan, I do believe!"

"What, Stuff, is it thou?" cried Wulfstan joyfully, as a thick-set, sturdy, shock-headed young Wihtwara of about Wulfstan's age emerged from the cover of the tall grass.

"Why, where hast thou been, Wulfstan, all this while?"

"Aha, Stuff, I've been a voyage, and I have killed a wild boar, and thou canst not think how well I can fish. Brother Malachi has taught me how to make net, and what's the right sort of bait for pout, and bass, and lots of things."

"Oh, Wulfstan, thou dost not say so! And where's Ædric and old Biggun? But thou hadst better not be seen, or thou wilt be killed, that thou wilt."

"What happened that night when Arwald attacked us?"

"What, don't thee know? That was a fine night, that was. How it did burn just! and weren't there a many head broke! Oh, Loki!" [1]

[1] LOKI.—The Scandinavian God of Mischief. He caused the death of Baldur the Beautiful.

"Who was killed? What became of father?"

"Why, who's that a-standing there on the point yonder? I do believe its old Biggun! and he's calling thee. Thou hadst better run, Wulfstan."

"Thou must come too, and tell us all that has happened."

"I don't know about that," said Stuff, scratching his head, and looking dubiously in the direction of Ceolwulf, of whom he seemed to stand considerably in awe.

"Thou hadst better, Stuff, for if thou dost not I will make thee."

"Thou make me! I'd like to see thee do it. Why, I've—"

But before he could say any more Wulfstan had seized him round both arms, and putting his foot behind Stuff's heels, laid him on the ground in an instant, falling on him at the same time, so that all poor Stuff's breath was knocked out of his body with the concussion.

"There, I told thee thou hadst better do what I bid thee."

But Stuff struggled manfully on the ground, and did all he could to shake or roll Wulfstan off him.

"Ah, wouldst thou? If thou dost not lie still and listen to what I am going to say, I will pommel thee black and blue. Dost thou not know I am thine eorl now? or at least I am till Ædric comes back."

But Stuff only struggled all the harder, for he was a sturdy young Wihtwara and very obstinate, until at last Wulfstan had to put his threat into execution, and began to beat the breath out of his unruly antagonist.

The contest was speedily ended by the arrival of Ceolwulf, who, seeing the struggle, and not understanding the cause, strode hastily up to the spot, fearing lest some harm should happen to his young lord.

"Hullo! what's all this about?" he exclaimed, as he saw that he need not have been uneasy about Wulfstan, who was evidently master of the situation. "Whom have we got here?"

"It's Stuff, Biggun; he didn't want to come to thee, and I said I would make him. He doesn't understand that I'm his master now."

"Do thou leave him to me, Wulfstan; it isn't for the like of thee to be rolling on the ground with such as he. He won't get away now, I'll make sure."

Wulfstan accordingly allowed the youngster to rise, and Ceolwulf said sharply to him:

"Down on thy knees, and beg the young eorl's pardon for having dared to be insolent to him, or it will be the worse for thee."

Stuff did as he was bid sullenly enough, saying as he did so:

"He didn't know as how he was his eorl now, there had been such changes."

"Don't talk to me of changes," said Ceolwulf. "He who has once been born a thrall is always a thrall to his eorl until he frees him, and that thou wilt not be in a hurry."

"Never mind, Stuff, thou shalt not be hurt, if thou art only wise and behavest properly. Of course, thou didst not know, that's all."

"Now come along with us, we can't be standing here where anyone might see us. Do thou come and tell us all that's been going on since we've been away," said Ceolwulf.

The three went off in the direction of the wreck, where, on their arrival, they found all astir.

"Is there any water about here fit to drink, Ceolwulf, thinkest thou?" called Athelhune.

"Aye, that there is, and very good water, too," cried Wulfstan. "Come with me, Beornwulf, and I will show thee where the spring is."

"Go with the young eorl, Beornwulf and Osborn, and take a bucket or two if thou hast them," said Athelhune.

They very soon found the spring, which was not far off along the shore, but the opposite way to that which Wulfstan had taken before. Amid some dead seaweed, blown up above high water mark, and a few large stones covered with moss and lichen and sheltering a few ferns, a clear spring of water welled up in unpolluted purity, and, trickling over the stones, lost itself immediately in the loose shingle of the shore. A spring that might elsewhere have been the source of some large stream, but here, cut off at once in its earliest infancy, joined the sea without longer life than a few short feet of furrowed stone—a fitting subject for a moralist or divine; but, as neither Wulfstan nor his companions were in the least degree disposed to either character, they drew as much water as they wanted, and returned to the others.

Ceolwulf had elicited from the reluctant Stuff a short account of all that had taken place after the destruction of Ælfhere's houses and farm-buildings. It appeared that Arwald had left a trusty adherent of his to look after the district, and to set the thralls to work to pursue their usual avocations as if nothing had happened, only all the produce was to be considered as Arwald's property.

Ceolwulf could not find out anything about his master, Ælfhere. As far as he could make out, nobody had found his body after he was seen to fall in the midst of the fight; but Stuff said everyone declared he must be dead, as he was seen to receive a terrible wound in the head from an axe, and "there was them as said Arwald had carried off his body."

When asked whether he thought the people were discontented with the man whom Arwald had placed over the thralls, Stuff said he thought nobody liked him; but they were all afraid of him, as there were some fighting men left to support his authority.

"How many are there?"

"I don't rightly know the proper number, but I think there are not more than eight or nine."

"Dost thou think, if we drove them off or killed them, the rest of the people

would fight for their young eorls, Ædric and Wulfstan?"

"Aye, that I do. Thou knowest us all well enough for that, Biggun."

This answer being considered satisfactory, it was agreed it would be best to keep the boy with them all day. That they would try and get the boat up out of the reach of the sea and cover her up as well as possible in order to prevent her being seen by anyone; that then, at nightfall, they would march, under Ceolwulf's guidance, to a knoll, covered with thick brushwood and trees; that they would make their head-quarters at this place; and if Ceolwulf, after seeing a few of the old servants and herdsmen of Ælfhere should judge that they really could offer an effectual resistance to an attack from Arwald, that they would then make an onslaught on the ruined house and farm buildings, and drive off the party Arwald had placed there, and that they would then send over to Cædwalla and ask him to come to take possession of the island.

In accordance with this determination, immediately after their simple meal the men all set to work, under Ceolwulf's instructions, to pull the boat up the beach, a matter very much more easy to accomplish now that they had taken everything out of her, and could see what they were about. They cut down a couple of straight and slight young ash trees, and dividing them into three lengths each, they soon had the old boat up high and dry under the low cliff, hauling her up on the ash rollers. Ceolwulf then made a careful examination of the hole in the boat, and was pleased to see that it would not take very much time to put a couple of new planks in, and she would then be capable of at least making one voyage across to Boseham in fine weather.

Having accomplished this part of their work, the men were set to clean the armour and weapons, and put what food was left in the buckets, and get all ready for their expedition a little before nightfall.

Brother Malachi had quite recovered his usual spirits, and had become an object of much interest and astonishment to Stuff, who had never seen a man like him. He longed to ask Wulfstan all about him, but was rather shy of talking to the young eorl now that he had so clearly established his rightful position, and he was also struck by the respect the others paid him.

The day passed away without particular incident. About an hour before dusk Ceolwulf directed all to fall in, and, telling Stuff to keep near him, led the way to their intended stronghold. Their route lay through dense brushwood, but Ceolwulf soon struck into a narrow track where walking was more easy, but in which they were obliged to proceed in single file.

After going in this way about a mile, they descended a very steep declivity, and came out upon an open meadow. And then the strangers perceived that they were on the border of a large land-locked piece of water, to which, standing where they were, they could see no inlet from the sea.

The tide was up, and the expanse of silver water stretching up to the foot of a high down at its western end, and washing a steeply-wooded shore opposite, had all the appearance of a magnificent lake or splendid harbour, offering a very different scene to what it would be in five hours' time, when, instead of a silver mirror in which the hills and woods and autumn sky were pictured, a tiny stream would sluggishly meander between brown slush and slimy mud.

Crossing this meadow, the party plunged once more into the dense wood, and ascending a slight rise, dipped again to the level of the sea; but the wood was so thick they could see nothing on either hand or ahead, and had still to walk in single file.

Again the path rose steeply in front, and they seemed to be mounting a considerable acclivity. Climbing higher and higher, Ceolwulf left the beaten track, and turned aside through the low growth of oak and ash that seemed unable to attain to any size, and were gnarled and twisted into all sorts of fantastic shapes.

Scrambling over some moss-covered boulders, Ceolwulf stopped, and said:

"Here, men, we will make our camp; there is a spring down the steep slope on that side, and by felling a few trees, we can make a very fair shelter for ourselves, as well as a stockade against any sudden attack."

The place, certainly, was well chosen. There was a small open space on the top of the hill, but no view could be obtained from this as the trees grew thick all round. It was, however, sufficiently obvious that the sides of the hill were very steep, and a handful of men could hold their own for some time, especially with the aid of a few fallen trees to form a breastwork.

As it was now getting dark, no time was to be lost in making their preparations for spending the night. While these operations were going on, Ceolwulf said he would go down into the valley, and find out how matters really were in the vicinity of their old home. So saying, and equipping himself in his hawberk, and with all his offensive weapons, he disappeared among the trees on his way down the hill.

CHAPTER IX.

"I CAN CALL SPIRITS FROM THE VASTY DEEP."

Ceolwulf descended the steep side of the thickly-wooded hill with the assured step of one who well knew his way, although the increasing gloom of night was

fast spreading over hill and dale. After walking about a mile through the dense brushwood, the old Wihtwara emerged upon a smooth slope of grassy down, and even he, sturdy and matter-of-fact old heathen as he was, stopped a moment to look at the beautiful scene before him; not so much struck, however, with its beauty and poetry, as from a desire to take in all he could of the well-known aspect of his native land while yet there was any chance of seeing, and to compare the present appearance of the cottages with what they had been before the fatal onslaught of Arwald and his followers.

At Ceolwulf's feet stretched the close, wind-worn grass of the westerly sloping hill-side, reflecting the rich glow which still suffused the darkling sky. Beyond gleamed the sheen of a wide-stretching marsh, across which the curlews called and the bitterns cried, and in which the reflection of the evening star, setting over the distant top of St. Boniface Down, streamed in flickering light. Across the Marsh a bank of land separated the floods that came from the centre of the island, from the waters of the great deep; for on the other side of this narrow strip of land a wide and magnificent bay spread out its grey depth, till it met the violet of the sky beneath the crimson glow of the departed sun. Rising out of this sea, and forming the western side of the noble bay, loomed a magnificent hill, the base of which lay bathed and hidden in the green-grey mist; but enough of the shape of the promontory could be seen to justify its name of the "Dunnose," by which it is now known. The upper part of the hill stood up in clear outline, presenting a solid, opaque mass of deep purple against the golden background, and descended abruptly towards the north in two steep slopes, or escarpments, to the level of a wide-reaching valley that led up to the centre of the island. On the other side of this valley a line of downs presenting their slope to the western light, stretched in fore-shortened length, till they ended in a wooded hill immediately fronting the place where Ceolwulf stood. The lovely scene gradually changed from the lingering warmth of day to the colder shades of night, and all objects grew rapidly indistinguishable.

"Too late to make out what is left of the house," muttered Ceolwulf, "and as the floods seem to be out, I don't see that I can cross the Yare by the old ford. I shall have to go round by the sands along the dunes."

At that time, and indeed until long after, that part of the island on which Ceolwulf and his companions had been cast was known as Binbrygea or Bembridge Island, as the other end of the Isle of Wight, which was equally separated from the middle part of the island by an inlet of the sea, was called Freshwater Island; and as the internal communication at that early time was very defective, there was no bridge over the Yare, and the inhabitants who wished to pass from Bembridge to the centre of the island had to go round by the sandbanks cast up by the sea along the shore where Sandown now flourishes.

There was a ford at low water over the marshes, but it was very difficult to find, and impassable if there were any extra water in the small river Yare. The homestead where Wulfstan and Ædric were brought up was built at the head of what until a few years ago was Brading Haven, and which at that time was a large and magnificent sheet of water stretching up nearly to where Sandown Railway Station now is. The home and farm buildings stood among some old trees, the ancestors of the present Park of Nunwell, and were sheltered from the north-west and north-east by rising ground and the woods that spread in an uninterrupted forest right through the island to Yarmouth, covering all the north side of the island with a dense growth; the only clearings being about Whitgaresbyrig, now Carisbrooke, and Cerdicsford, now Yarmouth. The few patches of land ploughed up by the Romans had rapidly gone out of cultivation during the wild period of the fifth and sixth centuries, and the sparsely scattered inhabitants lived chiefly on the results of the chase and such dairy produce as their rude methods of farming could raise, and in this part of their domestic economy the Jutish conquerors of the Isle of Wight were much assisted by the more cultivated race whom they conquered, and many of whom they kept as their slaves.

Ceolwulf once more fell into his former long swinging stride, and, turning more to the left, directed his steps towards the shore of the open sea.

After proceeding for about a mile and a half, until he had nearly reached the sea beach, he suddenly turned to the right, and plunging through some thick reeds he came to the edge of the river Yare. There was evidently a ford here, for the reeds were broken and trodden down. Groping his way with his spear, Ceolwulf at last emerged on the bank on the other side.

He had now reached a level tract of land rising gently to the foot of the Downs, which had faced him when he first emerged from the wood; he was still a good couple of miles from the old homestead, but as he was now in a more populous part it behoved him to be rather more cautious in his advance.

A little ahead of him and to his left was a belt of thick, low scrub and brushwood, through which could be seen here and there a whiter patch, looking like the walls of some building; but in the dim light it was difficult to make out anything clearly, excepting that in one place a pile of masonry rose above the bushes, and stood out against the stars in a jagged and broken outline.

Ceolwulf now paused a moment and listened intently for any sound, but all was still; occasionally a dull thud reached his ear, caused by the sea breaking on the shingly shore behind him, and the fast dying leaves of an old oak near shivered in the scarcely perceptible breeze, but all else was still as the grave.

Suddenly a sharp whirr rose on the silence, and a sound of heavily flapping wings beat the quiet air as a nightjar started out of the old oak tree to search for his evening meal. Ceolwulf was superstitious, like all his race, and he especially

disliked the place where he now found himself.

He well knew what those ruins were, and firmly believed, like all the dwellers round, that the place was haunted. Men had lived there who were as gods compared to the rough, uncultured Jute, and now their dwelling was become a ruin, and desolation brooded over its halls.

Little more than two hundred years ago that house had been a stately mansion, from which civilisation and Christianity spread their soothing influences around, where a cultivated Roman gentleman dwelt with his family of well-regulated servants, slaves in name, but as much attached to their master and mistress as any free servants could be, and perhaps still more so from the knowledge that their treatment was the pure result of the humanity of their master, who, as far as the laws were concerned, could have treated them far otherwise. In the wreck of the Roman empire all the life of an expanding culture was crushed out of Britain, and the old civilisation, religion and government were but as myths dimly told by the rude conquerors to their children. The house whose ruins were faintly delineated in the doubtful light had been a Roman villa of very elegant proportions, and fitted with all the appliances a luxurious civilisation knew well how to adapt to domestic comfort; but since the fatal night of slaughter, fire, and rapine, when the invader had harried the island, and remorselessly put to the sword all the men who were likely to show courage or ability, and had made slaves of the young women, the gaunt and blood-stained ruins had been left desolate, haunted by the memories of past happiness, and the horror of that awfully evil night, to which the superstition of the Jutes added the terror of their weird mythology.

As Ceolwulf, startled as he was for the moment by the flight of the night-jar, begun once more to pursue his way, a shrill cry, like that of a child in pain, only with a sound in it different to that which proceeds from human beings, startled him again.

The cry rose piercingly on the night, and then sank in silence once more.

"It's only an owl, I do believe," muttered Ceolwulf, looking in the direction of the sound. "But who can be stirring there at this time of night?" he added, as a flickering ruddy glare shone on the masonry of a remote part of the ruined Roman villa.

The flame had suddenly sprung up—for Ceolwulf felt sure he must have seen it before if it had been there—and suddenly it was obscured again, only to reappear in another minute. "There's somebody, or something, passing in front of that light," thought Ceolwulf, "and, be it witch or fiend, I must find out who it is before I go any further."

So saying, he cautiously turned towards the light, and at the same time felt for a piece of dried skin he wore suspended round his neck.

"Ah! thanks be to Woden! I have not lost that," he chuckled, "and I rubbed my sword in wolf's grease too, so that they can't throw any magic over that," he added, for the powerful virtues of a dried and split wolf's snout were universally held to be a sure antidote against magic; while wolf's grease was an undoubted protection from the wiles of the evil spirits who haunted desolate places, or were hostile to the human race.

Protected by such lucky possessions, Ceolwulf felt his courage rise, and advanced with resolution.

As he approached nearer, again that shrill and wild screech rose upon the air, and set Ceolwulf's blood curdling, and this time the cry ended in a low, prolonged and shivering sigh above his head.

"It's that owl, stupid!" said Ceolwulf to himself, clutching nervously his precious wolf's snout, but wishing much he had more confidence in what was, without doubt, a sure safeguard.

Stealthily stepping over the damp twigs and briar-covered stones, he got nearer and nearer to the light, but could make out no objects distinctly, and he now found that the light was further off than he had at first thought.

"Perhaps, after all, it is only a marsh fire, and it's no use following that," Ceolwulf growled, as he knocked his shin against a large block of stone lying half concealed among the tangled brushwood.

But, at this moment, as if to contradict him, the flame leaped up with greater brilliancy, and he saw a tall figure pass in front of the flame and disappear in the inky black beyond.

Paying more attention than ever to the inequalities of the ground, and arranging his arms as carefully as he could to prevent the light of the fire falling upon them, and announcing his presence by an unlucky gleam, Ceolwulf crept warily up, fearful lest the slightest sound should betray his approach; while ever and anon the unearthly cry that had previously startled him rang vibrating through the silence.

Keeping well in the shade of every bush and obstacle that intervened between him and the light, he was at last able to creep within a distance sufficient to enable him to make out the objects immediately within range of the fire, and the sight that he saw was not reassuring to one imbued with all the wild magic of the mystic northern legends.

Squatting before the fire, and occasionally attending to an iron pot that hung suspended over it from an iron rod that looked as if it had once been used for other purposes, which was held up by two forked sticks placed far enough off from the fire to prevent their being burnt, was a strange, uncanny-looking figure. Nothing could be seen, intervening immediately as it did between the fire and Ceolwulf, but the coal-black outline of a figure sparsely clad, with a

hood over its head, and, as it turned towards one side or the other, showing the outline of a very hooked nose and chin, that, owing to the loss of the creature's teeth, approached the nose so closely as almost to touch it. A few locks of wispy hair hung down over the forehead beneath the hood, and a long and skinny arm from time to time stirred the mixture in the pot, while the other arm seemed to hold together the garment in which the figure was dressed. As Ceolwulf looked intently, fascinated and awe-struck by the sight of this being, whom he could not possibly mistake for anything else than a most undoubted witch, surprised by him in her unholy work, he heard her mutter scraps of sentences from time to time, but could not make out a word she said.

"She is brewing spells, I do believe. Now for whom can she be doing that? If only I could get her on our side it would be bad for Arwald. Hullo! what she's doing now? Soul of Woden! but there's another, and it's got horns!"

This remark was caused by a hairy object, which Ceolwulf had not before noticed, raising a gaunt head from which two long curving horns protruded, and which proceeded to get up on its haunches, and then upon its feet, and presented the outline of a fine goat.

"So she's really raised the soul of him who dwells in Hellheim. I hope he won't tell her I am here," muttered Ceolwulf, clutching more vigorously than ever at his wolf's snout. "I wish I could make out what she is saying. What a height she is! and where's she gone to now? I shall have to move round a bit to see the other side of the fire."

The figure had risen up, and had taken the pot off the hook which suspended it over the fire, and had then disappeared into the darkness on the other side, the goat remaining, turning however in the direction where Ceolwulf was, and beginning to utter the plaintive "hinny" that has procured for its race the name of "Nanny goat."

"I don't like this; I believe it has seen me, and is telling her I am here. Well, if I must come out, I must; but I'll hold on a bit longer yet, and perhaps if it does not look at me I shan't feel so queer." So saying, Ceolwulf moved to one side, and, drawing back, made his way round to the other side of the fire.

It took him, however, some time to grope his way among the thick brushwood and fallen stones, for the darkness was all the greater owing to his having looked so long at the light. At last he reached a loophole in the ruins, and found he was opposite to where he had previously stood.

The ruins in this part were not quite so dilapidated. There yet remained a portion of the roof that had fallen in, but still rested upon such columns as had not been thrown down on that terrible night when fire and sword had done their awful work on the peaceful household. Under this shelter the figure of the being whom he had so suddenly come upon was bending over something—what,

Ceolwulf could not see, for the light of the fire, which was now sinking down, only blazed fitfully on the face of the walls, and was not powerful enough to pierce the gloom of the covered portion of the ruins.

"There's somebody else in there, that's certain, for she's talking. If she turns me into a toad for it, I must hear what she's saying," and Ceolwulf wriggled himself through the aperture, and crept stealthily nearer, and then suddenly stopped, horror-struck.

"Why, it's the voice of my dead eorl!" he exclaimed in terror, his hair standing up in fear upon his head, and his knees knocking together. He was so terrified at the thought of seeing his disembodied master, that his first thought was to fly from the spot. But the voice spoke again, feebly and with difficulty:

"Tell my children, if thou ever seest them, to revenge me on the House of Arwald, till not a stock remains from which that evil race could renew its life."

"Hush, my lord!" mumbled the aged voice of the hag whom Ceolwulf had first seen. "If I had harboured thoughts of vengeance, should I have succoured thee? Who did me and mine more grievous wrong than thou and thy fathers?"

"Then, why, in Woden's name, didst thou not leave me to die? I should have done so by this, and thought myself none the worse," answered the faint voice of the invisible speaker.

"That's right," muttered Ceolwulf to himself. "I see they tell us true. The heroes don't become less men down there in Nifleheim."

No other sound came from the deep shadow of the recess, and Ceolwulf began to think he would go on his way, only, in spite of his superstitious terrors, he wished very much to see if he could not get a glimpse of his dead lord, if indeed, there was anything to be seen.

The fire was now dying down, but occasionally flickering up, and casting weird shadows over the ruins, and Ceolwulf was just turning to go, when the voice again spoke:

"Woman, wilt thou give my message to my sons, if ever thou meetest them? I have not long to stay here; promise me."

"My lord, I have done what I could to save thy body, but I will do naught which can imperil thy soul. I will take no message of hatred to thy sons."

"Woman, darest thou refuse me? Dost thou dare to disobey me— Ah! but the descendant of Cerdic is indeed fallen low when his bond woman scoffs at his command."

"My lord, leave thoughts of vengeance to God, and think of what I have tried to tell thee of death. Ah," murmured the old woman, "if only I could remember more clearly all that my mother used to tell me; but these are weary times indeed, when they only who worship the real, true God are miserable old women. How can any words of mine persuade my master to believe that his gods

are false, or to trust to what I know to be truth?"

"Thou hast saved me, then, to live to know I shall be dishonoured? and then, when I knew this, I was to die? Was this thy plan? Woman, thou hast well avenged thy wrongs and those of thy race. By letting Ælfhere know that he was to die as a woman in his bed, driven from his home, and unavenged on his enemies, thou hast inflicted on him a misery far worse than death on the battle-field."

"My lord, it was not so. Should I, timid old woman as I am, should I have risked death in every horrid shape merely to satisfy a feeling of which I know nothing? No; I was taught to love my enemies, do good to those that persecute me, and pray for those that spitefully use me."

"Woman, I believe thee not. May Wodin's curse alight on thee for a false traitress! I die unavenged I die dishonoured, and thou openly sayest thou wilt bear no message to my sons if thou shouldst meet them."

All this time the ideas of Ceolwulf were undergoing a change. Could it be that his master was really alive? As this thought took possession of his mind, the supernatural terror gradually gave place to one of hope, curiosity, and delight.

"I will stand it no longer, come what will; so here goes," he muttered, and stepping into the open space, among the ruins, he called out resolutely:

"My Lord Ælfhere, thou shalt not die unavenged. Thy thrall Ceolwulf has heard thee, and will bear thy words to the young eorls. Whether thou bee'st alive or dead, Ceolwulf vows it on the edge of his sword."

CHAPTER X.

"FOR MY SAKE, BE COMFORTABLE."

The bold speech of Ceolwulf produced the most absolute silence. The fire had now become a mere heap of glowing embers, and nothing was distinguishable in the darkness.

As Ceolwulf peered into the blackness where the voices had seemed to come from, he thought he could hear a faint rustle as of some one moving. Again his superstitious fears came over him. He was seized with panic, and turning to make a hasty retreat, he caught his foot in a trailing branch of ivy and came heavily to the ground.

Muttering a terrified and hasty ejaculation, he rose to his feet, and for the moment forgot which way he had come. While turning over in his mind this

important question, he heard a hollow voice say:

"Is it really thou, Biggun, or art thou a dream of my weary and fitful brain?"

"Surely, my lord, it is thy voice; but if thou art dead, let me not see thee."

"I am alive, Biggun, but have not long to live. Come nearer. Put some sticks on the fire before it goes out, that I may see thee, whether thou art my faithful Ceolwulf or not."

Ceolwulf did as he was told, but with considerable difficulty, for it was no easy matter to find any dry sticks, and had it not been for the help of the old woman, who came out to assist him, he would scarcely have been able to accomplish his object. When the fire burnt up again brightly, Ceolwulf, to his disgust, found that the terrible witch whom he had so dreaded was no other than the poor old slave Deva, the most despised of the female serfs in Ælfhere's household.

"Why, Deva, woman, how didst thou save thy life when so many better than thou died around the homestead?"

"It is not the lowly blade of grass the storm lays low, but the lofty wheat-stalk."

"True; but who would have thought of thee being the only one left to care for our master? Thou art a better woman, Deva, than I took thee for."

"Ceolwulf," said the invisible Ælfhere, "stand not prating there, but come here that I may see thee, and hear tidings of my sons, if they yet live."

The woman Deva took up a half-burnt brand from the fire, and going before Ceolwulf to light him, pointed to a rude couch made of a few skins.

On this lay a wasted form, the lower limbs swathed in bandages, and a blood-stained cloth around the head. The face was ghastly white, and an unkempt and grizzly beard spread over the chest.

"My lord, my lord, it is thou of a surety; but how art thou changed!" cried Ceolwulf.

"Speak not of that, man; tell me of my boys."

"They are well, my lord, and one is not far hence."

"Not a prisoner in the hands of the traitor Arwald? Tell me not that; anything but that!"

"No, my lord, not so bad as that. He is safe among a trusty band of men who have come to win for thee thine own again."

"Thou bringest me life, Ceolwulf. Oh that I could live to revenge me on that nothing! then I should go to the land of heroes and feast for ever among my ancestors! But tell me more."

Ceolwulf then narrated the events of the past three weeks, making as light as he could of the wound of Ædric, and praising the manliness and enterprise of Wulfstan.

As Ælfhere listened his eye grew bright and his breathing quick, while at the narration of the assault on Cissanceaster he could not forbear to exclaim, "Well done, brave sword!" "Bravely sped, keen axe!" at each episode of the hard-fought fight.

"That Cædwalla is worthy to succeed to the throne of Cerdic, and I trust he may yet fare well! So those strange men," alluding to the monks, "were hospitable to thee, were they? And yet they were strangers in blood and language. It is odd how Deva here, instead of handing me over to Arwald, as she might have done, has nursed me and tended me as if I were of her race and had always benefited her; but this is no time for thinking, we must act, Ceolwulf—" Then, suddenly recollecting his crippled condition, he added, despairingly: "Ah, well, I talk of acting, who must lie here while death-blows are dealing. Aye, and must die, too, before I can drink the blood of my enemies."

"Say not so, my lord; with care and attention, and with the assistance of the bald-headed man I have brought with me, I doubt not we shall have thee well and on thy legs in a few days."

"No, Ceolwulf, no, my fighting days are done, and I shall soon rest with my fathers. But enough of this. Thou must get thee back to thy men. What thinkest thou of bringing them hither? There is water here. Thou canst make a stout defence of these old walls if thou art attacked. No fire will hurt them now, and it will be a safe hiding-place, if it be thought well to keep concealed."

"It is well planned, my lord, but I do not yet know the state of feeling among the old servants and people round; however, we cannot go on much longer, for we must have food, and this will do as well as the place where they now are, or better, for aught I know. Shall I bring them here to-night, my lord?"

"Aye, Ceolwulf, do so, and that quickly, for I fain would see my little son before I die. And thou hadst best do it before dawn too, that no prying eyes may see thy march."

"I will, my lord; but had not Deva best allow the fire to go out, or, at least, to bank it up, lest any other stray passer should be attracted by it, as I was?"

"There's none dare venture near," said Deva, contemptuously; and then added bitterly: "The memory of their evil deeds haunts this place, and the sons of those who murdered the innocents shudder for the iniquity of their fathers without knowing wherefore."

"I go, then, my lord; and when thou hearest the cry of the curlew repeated four times, know it will be the signal of our approach, and let Deva, there, light a brand, that we may see where to enter."

So saying, Ceolwulf disappeared in the darkness, and Deva prepared to attend to the fire, banking it up to burn some time, but so as not to give much light.

It did not take the hardy old Jute long to reach the encampment of his allies. They had already got things into order, and, under the practised hand and eye of Athelhune, a fairly defensive breastwork of timber surrounded the little clearing.

Four men also were posted as sentries, and Ceolwulf was challenged by a rough voice before he could get nearer than two hundred yards of the camp, and so well did the man understand his duty that he did this without himself giving any clue to his whereabouts, having concealed himself in the brushwood, so as to command the only natural approach.

”’Tis a friend, man—Ceolwulf; let me pass.”

On hearing and recognising his voice, the sentry emerged from his ambush.

”Is all well?” said Ceolwulf.

”Aye, aye, there’s naught stirring; but we are all grievous hungry,” grumbled the man.

”Thou shalt have food enough soon,” and Ceolwulf strode past to the encampment. Here he found all, excepting another man on guard at the entrance, were sound asleep. Wulfstan was lying near Malachi, and Stuff was sleeping near a burly Boseham man, who had taken the precaution to tie a thong tightly to the boy’s hands, and allowing sufficient play for the boy to turn over, had made the other end fast to his own wrist.

Ceolwulf went up to Athelhune, and, shaking him vigorously, soon woke him up.

”What is it, man? Canst not let me have a quiet night for once?” growled the still sleepy chieftain.

”Thou shalt sleep fast enough presently, and with better chance of food and safety than here, but thou must rouse up now. There’s work to be done first, and good news to cheer thee besides. The Eorldoman Ælfhere is still alive.”

”Truly?”

”True as I stand here. I have seen him and talked with him.”

”That ought to help us much with the country side. When they know their lord is alive and is at the head of a trusty band, they will gather thick round him.”

”Aye, that they will; but we will talk of this presently. We must move our camp at once before dawn to where he is.”

In a few moments all was stir and confusion. The sentries were still left at their posts to keep watch, while the others quickly packed up such things as they had brought. When all was ready, the men were arranged in line, the sentinels were called in, and Ceolwulf put himself at the head. The column then filed off into the path, and without further adventure reached the ford which Ceolwulf had crossed. Here they halted, while Ceolwulf took three men with him and reconnoitered as far as the outskirts of the ruins. Stopping here himself, he sent the men back, telling two of them to halt at equal distances from himself and the

main body, while the third man was to act as guide.

Having given these directions, he imitated the cry of the curlew four times, at the preconcerted intervals of time.

As Ceolwulf stood awaiting the lighting of the fire-brand that should have answered his signal, he heard a twig broken a few yards from where he was standing, and, peering through the gloom, he fancied he descried a figure move off into a denser part of the thicket.

While he was hesitating whether to follow it or not the flashing of the torch diverted his attention, and the speedy arrival of the main body made it necessary to see to their guidance into the ruins. However, thinking it of very great importance that their movements should not be observed, and feeling tolerably sure that there was someone concealed there, he directed four of the young men to go through the bush, and, either pursue, capture, or kill, any one who might be there.

He then guided the others towards the entrance to the ruins, a proceeding made all the easier by the light of the torch.

Ceolwulf had not yet told Wulfstan of the discovery he had made, fearing the boy, in the wild delight of the surprise, should do some foolish thing, and break the silence so necessary to their movements. He now, however, took him aside, and, telling him he had something of very great importance to confide, impressed upon him at the same time the necessity of absolute quiet. When he saw that the boy was quite ready to give his submission to what should be required of him, he told the joyful news.

Wulfstan for a moment was almost beside himself with joy, but a look from Ceolwulf restrained him, and he managed to master his transports.

"Oh, Ceolwulf, where is he?" whispered the boy. "Can't I see him? is he very ill?"

"Thou shalt see him, Wulf; but he is very ill, and thou must not trouble him with questions."

"Ceolwulf, hast thou brought my boy?" called the voice of Ælfhere.

At the sound of his father's voice Wulfstan started away from Ceolwulf, and in a moment was at the side of the couch. Pressing his father's feeble, hot hands, he whispered, "Father, father, I am so glad! I never thought I should see thee again. Oh, poor father, how thou must have suffered! Ah! that nothing Arwald, he shall pay for this."

"That's right, my own Wulf, there spake the blood of the free Jute. I shall die now happier, knowing that I leave behind me one who will one day grow up a worthy upholder of the honour of Cerdic," said Ælfhere, fondly caressing his son's curly head.

A deep sigh close by startled Wulfstan.

"Why, father, who is here? didst thou hear that sigh?"

"It's only old Deva, my son; she has been good to me, and thou must do all thou canst to make her more comfortable when thou gainest possession of the homestead."

"Why does she sigh like that? father, is she ill, too?"

"No, but she is a woman, and a slave, and has poor, dastardly thoughts. She would not have us avenge our wrongs; what thinkest thou of that?" and Ælfhere laughed a scoffing laugh.

"Why, father, that's what brother Malachi says too."

And he was going to tell his father all about that curious man, when Ceolwulf came up, bringing Athelhune with him, and then they all three talked over the fortifying of the ruins and their plans for getting provisions.

These topics did not please Wulfstan, who very soon dropped off to sleep by the side of his father. Deva brought a stone, and, covering it with a portion of one of the skins off the couch, placed it under his head for a pillow, and so left him, after throwing over him another covering.

The rest of the band had now settled down for the night, sentries, as before, being placed at proper posts, and all was once more silent.

Before Ceolwulf prepared to take his well-earned rest for the short period of the night that yet remained, he inquired whether the four men whom he had sent to follow up the figure he had seen in the bushes had returned. Greatly to his dissatisfaction he heard that they had come back, but had discovered no signs of anyone.

"We shall hear more of that to-morrow, I doubt not," growled the old man, as he lay down to rest not far from his master, Ælfhere.

The next day was some little way advanced before the men were astir, Wulfstan, as usual, being the first to awake.

He could scarcely believe he was not still dreaming when he saw his wounded father lying on the couch beside him; however, recollections of the past night soon brought back a sense of reality, and he gazed at the worn and ghastly face of his father with tears of pity and sympathy.

One by one the others woke up, until at last the whole party was up and about. Such of the food as was left from the previous day was now divided equally, but it was not enough to satisfy the hunger of these vigorous men, and all agreed that something must be done to obtain a fresh supply.

Ceolwulf and Athelhune decided that the first thing to do was to put the ruins in a state of defence, and for this purpose all hands were set to work at once. The hewn stones that faced the rough rubble of the walls were piled up as skilfully as they were able to arrange it, and the space to be defended was much contracted; but they took care to enclose the well within their walls.

Cutting down some of the brushwood which grew close against the ruins, they made a rude shelter with the boughs, and wattled it with hazel. Into this cabin they carried the Eorldoman Ælfhere, whose wounds had been examined by Malachi, and pronounced very serious; indeed, it was a marvel he had lived so long, for the battle-axe of the Jutes and Saxons did not leave much life in a foeman when once it was driven home. In Ælfhere's case, however, the blow had been partially turned aside by the eorldoman's own axe. When Athelhune, who now that the conduct of the expedition was completed had taken command in right of his rank as eorldoman and chief officer of Cædwalla, saw that the defences could be completed without much more labour, he consulted with Ceolwulf about the necessity of sending out a party to forage. There was no question about the absolute need of getting food, only it was a matter of great importance not to alienate the sympathy of Ælfhere's ceorls or labourers; but as nearly all the cattle and crops, of which there was very slight store, belonged to Ælfhere, and were now in the hands of Arwald's eorldoman who was left in the occupation of the house at Brædyngge, there was less chance of their taking anything that belonged to any one else. At this early time in the Saxon settlements the free rovers, who had come under the leadership of their own elected chiefs, were still very free and independent, and the difference between the eorls and the ceorls was much less marked than it was in the later Saxon time, when in the days of Æthelred the life of a ceorl was valued at a third of the "were," or money value of a thane, and a sixth of that of a royal thane: but in the seventh century, and in the unsettled state of the lawless parts of the South Saxon and West Saxon kingdoms, the right of each eorldoman depended very much upon his might, and the title to property, both real and personal, rested chiefly upon the power of defending what each man possessed by his own strong arm and good sword, supported by such adherents as affection or interest attached to him.

It was therefore decided that at nightfall Ceolwulf should take out two of the most enterprising men, and carry off what he could from the barns around the old house of Ælfhere. The men who were told off for this service were directed to rest. The others went on with the completion of the defences.

After Malachi had attended to the wounded and seemingly dying eorldoman, he began to examine the ruins of the building in which he found himself.

The whole place was littered with *débris*, broken pottery, fallen columns, decaying rafters that had once supported the roof, and tiles. The work of clearing away a space round the well had disclosed several curious short columns made of tiles all very close together, but the spaces had been hastily filled again to render the standing room all the firmer. During the progress of raising the walls the men had uncovered here and there fragments of coloured designs, which they would have liked to explore further, but Athelhune was anxious to get the defences in a

fitting state to stand an assault before nightfall, and all examination of them was at that time put off.

Malachi, however, being looked upon as a rather feeble idiot, was allowed to do what he liked, and he had now uncovered a picture such as he had never seen before, at least not in that style and size.

Such art productions as he had ever seen consisted in a few pictures in an illuminated manuscript which belonged to a monastery in his native Ireland or Ierne: among them was one representing our Lord under the symbol of the Good Shepherd. The pictures were the work of a Byzantine artist, and traces of classical influence were naturally seen in the designs and their treatment. He was, therefore, at once struck by the similarity of the large figure playing on some musical instrument, surrounded by animals, to the illumination of the Good Shepherd. His delight, which was very great, was caused not only by the novelty and beauty of the discovery, but because he concluded that there must have been Christians here—a somewhat rash conclusion to come to on such a slight foundation.

While he was removing still more of the rubbish, he was aroused from his absorption by an aged voice near him saying:

"Ah, many's the time I have looked at that picture, and thought of them that did it."

"What! woman, thou knowest who did this?" cried Malachi in astonishment, looking at the aged form of the old woman.

Without immediately answering him, Deva looked at him for some time, and then slowly said:

"And who be ye? Thou art not a Saxon; thy speech is different, and thy clothes are different, and thou lookest not like a blood-thirsty fellow such as they are. What are ye?"

"I am a poor servant of our Lord, come into these parts to see if I cannot do the Lord's work among the heathen."

"The Lord!—the Lord's work!—the heathen!" repeated the old woman as one in a daze. "'Tis long, long since I heard these words. I doubt if there's any left in all these parts who know even what such words mean. Man, what art thou? I mean whence comest thou? What race art thou of?"

Malachi briefly explained that he was an Irish monk come to preach among the heathen Saxons, and on questioning her, in turn, was overjoyed to find that she still had preserved a dim memory of the truths of Christianity, obscured by the mists of six generations of bondage, and unassisted by any contact with other Christians. On being questioned closely, however, she acknowledged she had heard that there was still a holy man left, who was said to live in a cave in the face of a high cliff overlooking the sea. Tradition said he had learnt what he knew from a succession of holy men who had retired there when the island was taken

by the Jutes under Whitgar and Stuffa.

The two were now joined by Wulfstan, who had always been very frightened of poor old Deva, whom he looked upon as a witch; but now that he had seen so much of the world he felt it would not do to have these ideas any longer. As there was now nothing more to be done but wait patiently for Ceolwulf to return with the party that had gone out after the food, he asked Malachi to tell him a story; but Malachi, who wanted to learn more about these ruins, suggested that Deva should tell them all she knew.

The poor old woman was in a talking mood. She looked upon the arrival of Malachi as an answer to her complaint of the night before, and she somehow felt that she was not so lonely. Here was a man who had the same ideas as herself, and knew far more than she did of the real, true faith, and one who, like the Master she dimly served, was ready to lay down his life for the good of others.

The wish of her heart was going to be realised; she would learn more about the Lord before she died. Being in this happy frame of mind, she was willing to do what was wanted of her, and said she would try and recollect things told her by her mother and grandmother.

Wulfstan stretched himself on the pavement to listen, while Malachi sat with hands folded and an intelligent interest on his ascetic features.

CHAPTER XI.

"MEMORIES OF LONG AGO."

"It's very difficult to remember things clearly," said old Deva, meditatively. "There's mother now, and what she said, and then grandmother, and how many did she say there were before her, all slaves like me? It was granny's grandmother that was made the first slave, and she was born a princess—at least, so grannie said; but perhaps she didn't know," and the poor old woman sank into a reverie, from which brother Malachi roused her by saying gently:

"But who lived in these ruins, mother? Canst thou tell us who they were that built these buildings, and made this beautiful pavement?"

"Aye, that I can; they were my own forefathers—at least, some of them were. Those must have been lovely days, when the land was tilled in peace, each man worshipped God as He ought to be worshipped, and there was plenty and goodwill throughout the length and breadth of the land.... But those days will never

come again! There's naught but ravaging, and murdering, and starving, and no one left to tell us the way of salvation. And, thank the Lord, I shall soon depart, and there's none left after me to mourn her weary life out as I have mourned mine."

"Dost really mean to say, Deva, that thou art the daughter of a princess?" said Wulfstan, wonderingly.

"Aye, that I am, for all my rags, and my old age, and my ugliness— No! not daughter—what am I talking about?—but descended from one, just as thy father is always saying he is descended from Cerdic. And now I come to think about it, I must be a good two lives nearer to my princess than thy father to his Cerdic, for I am old enough to be Ælfhere's grandmother. My ancestress was the daughter of Natanleod, and he ruled all this land before thy Saxons or Jutes came here."

"Natanleod," said Malachi, repeating the name as if he had heard it before, but could not quite recollect where. "There were some people who came to a place near my home who told me of a great prince or king who, when the Angles first came over to Britain, had fought a great fight against them; but, as it was a long time ago, they could not remember much about it, but I think his name sounded like Natanleod. I know they said he was a Christian, and they thought he was killed in a battle; and now I come to think of it, they mentioned the very name Cerdic, who thou sayest was Ælfhere's ancestor, as the name of the heathen who was attacking him."

"How odd it would be if you had met some of old Deva's relations!" said Wulfstan.

"Ah, my child, they were scattered far over the earth," said Deva, mournfully. "Some went to a place called Ierné,[1] some to a country over the water called—called—my old memory won't help me now, but it sounded like 'Morick.'"

[1] Ireland.

"Was it Armorica, mother?" said Malachi.

"Why, that was the name, to be sure. Now how didst thou know that? They've called me witch-wife many a time, because they said I knew more than human beings ought to know, but my knowledge is ignorance to what thine is."

"It is nothing so very wonderful, mother. Those same strangers I told thee of often told me where their people went to, and many a time they would have liked to have crossed the sea again to meet those of their kith and kin that were scattered abroad."

"Well, well. And maybe thou hast met with those that really were my blood. Ah, they would not be proud of poor old Deva, the slave daughter of Helva, a slave too. How things do change, to be sure!"

"But, mother," put in Malachi, who thought he saw signs in her of going off into a reverie again, "what about this house? Thou hast not told us yet who built

it.”

”And how do I know who built it?” said the old woman, testily.

”Why, thou saidest just now thy forefathers built it,” said Wulfstan.

”Then if I told him, why does he ask me again?” said Deva, wearily. ”I shall go and see how the wounded eorldoman is.”

”Don’t go yet, Deva,” said Malachi. ”He was sleeping very well when I came to look at these pavements, and we should hear him if he moved or wanted anything. And so thou art descended from the great Prince Natanleod, art thou! In those days men were indeed cleverer than they are now. There are none living near here who could work like those who made these walls or wrought these pictures. Thou canst not remember what thy grandmother said about the destruction of her grandmother’s home?”

”Yes I can, though,” said Deva. ”Ah! well I can remember her telling me, for she would take me up here on a summer’s evening when the young moon was just going down there behind yon hill. These floors were not covered up so much then, and many stones have fallen down since. She would always choose that evening in the month when the moon was like that, and it was getting dark and dusk—a time when all the land is hushed, and young men and maidens like to meet by a lonely hillside or pleasant dell, while the cockchafers buzz and the beetles boom. Because, she said, it was on an evening like that her grandmother had always told her the story, and it was on an evening like that the dreadful deed was done. They came, they came,” said the old woman, stretching out her skinny arm and pointing with most dramatic action to a large gap in the ruins towards the land-locked Brædyngæ Haven, whose shining waters could be seen framed in this very gap, ”up there”——

But Deva did not finish her sentence, for both Wulfstan and Malachi, who had followed the old woman’s action and gesture, broke in upon her words with a wild and simultaneous cry that rang through the silence of the ruins, like the shrill scream of an affrighted sea-bird, as it suddenly spies the robber of its nest suspended overhead.

[image]

How Deva, Malachi, and Wulfstan, were surprised by ye Wihtwaras

There, entering by the same gap through which their ancestors had come to slaughter the ancestors of Deva, was a band of armed men, who, the moment they saw that their approach was known, added to the din and confusion that

already prevailed by shouting their battle-cry together, and rushing upon the few men who, with Athelhune, were left to defend the encampment.

Malachi and Wulfstan had, as they shouted "to arms," darted back into the enclosure, nearly fenced in by this time, fortunately, and had with great promptitude begun to pile up the stones that had been left to close in the only means of exit or entrance for the little fortification, when suddenly Wulfstan darted out again, and returned in another minute helping poor old Deva over the rough stones.

"One moment more, and I should have been too late," cried Wulfstan, joyously, as he led the good old woman up to his father's side.

"It's only putting off the fated day, Wulfy, a little longer," said Ælfhere, drearily. "But this torture is worse than all that has gone before, for I must lie here and see all who are faithful to me and my little son slain before my eyes, and I unable to move hand or foot, or strike a blow for their safety. Oh! Woden, all-Father, help me!"

It was, indeed, a hopeless prospect. There were, besides Malachi, old Deva, Wulfstan, and the wounded eorldoman, only Athelhune and three men, and the attacking force consisted of at least twelve; but the quick eyes of Wulfstan detected among them five or six faces of men he had known as ceorls on his father's farm, and he shouted out loudly to them by name, calling on them to turn on the false traitors who had done such foul wrong, and to fight for their lord, Ælfhere, who was still alive.

It did not seem, however, that his words produced any effect; for the band of men, seeing that their surprise had in part failed owing to the inner line of wall that had been raised, after consulting a moment together, advanced on three sides, with the evident intention of taking the little fort by assault.

At first sight it seemed as though nothing could save the little party inside the hastily contrived defences, and this was evidently the view of their assailants, who rushed on to the attack in all the confidence of an easy victory; but the very extremity of their position supplied the defenders with the courage of despair.

Athelhune, with the quick apprehension of one suited to command, had heard with pleasure Wulfstan's words, and hastily told him to point out to him the men whom he had addressed. Two were advancing on the side where Athelhune and Wulfstan were standing.

Judging, that if the men who were Arwald's own people, and who had come from the other part of the island, could be disposed of, the other men would be less likely to fight with any vigour, especially if they knew that they would be received into favour again by their old eorl's son; Athelhune shouted out to his men to kill the traitors who came with Arwald, but to spare the poor fellows who were compelled to fight against their will for a tyrant and robber they hated; and

he immediately hurled a stone with all his force at the man who seemed to be the leader of the party. The blow was warded off by the man's shield, but in raising his arm to do this he exposed himself to a spear thrust which Beornwulf, who was standing near Athelhune, promptly gave him; and although the man, with great heroism, continued to struggle on, yet his blows lost much of their force, and eventually he fell fainting to the ground.

Meanwhile it was already obvious that Athelhune's well-judged words, added to Wulfstan's expostulations, had had their effect, and had also been useful in a way Athelhune had not thought of; for the men who were from the other part of the island were now evidently suspicious of their allies, who had given some grounds for it by not pressing up quite so eagerly as the others had done; and this very consciousness of mistrust served to make the men work less heartily together.

It was quite clear to the man who succeeded to the leadership of the assailants on the fall of Athelhune's antagonist that what had got to be done must be done by his own men, and that the others would join in heartily enough as soon as they saw success attending their efforts. Being, therefore, a brave and energetic man, he called to his men to follow him, and sprang at the wall.

The defences had been raised nearly eight feet high, and a rude platform had been made about four feet high all round inside; thus the defenders had the advantage of striking down at their foe, as well as being protected by the breast-work of the wall. The walls were, however, very imperfectly made, without any mortar or cement; if, therefore, any of the defenders were to push too violently against it in places, he was liable to displace some of the upper stones, and expose himself. This, however, was not such a disadvantage as at first sight it seemed, for the second leader, leaping up to grasp the top of the wall, in order to pull himself over, had seized a stone that was insecurely placed, and being at the same time pressed upon by Beornwulf above, who was waiting to strike with his spear the moment the man came within thrusting distance, the mass gave way, and came down with the man, falling upon him, and crushing his legs with its weight. The two men who were behind him, and who were bold enough, caring more for the destruction of their foes than for the safety of their friends, sprang on to the step thus offered, and were climbing into the breach when they were resolutely met by Athelhune and Beornwulf, and a hand-to-hand fight of a desperate nature began.

[image]

How Athelhune kept ye Roman ruins

The other half-hearted assailants were either making weak attempts to climb over the wall, or were trying to pull their crushed leader from under the weight of the stone that was lying upon his legs, and which was now rendered doubly heavy by the warrior, who was fiercely exchanging blows with Athelhune, using it as a standing place.

This desire for the safety of their fallen leader was more ostentatious than genuine, and was certainly not conducive either to his comfort or the success of the assault; for the only immediate result was to extort the fiercest execrations from the crushed leader, who suffered untold agonies by their wrenching his limbs from under the weight, and had the further consequence of causing their champion, who was engaged in the hand-to-hand fight with Athelhune, to reel on the unsteady stone. He thus missed a favourable, and what would have probably been a decisive blow at his antagonist, and received instead the full force of a tremendous stroke from Athelhune's axe, which toppled him down off the stone upon the men who were pulling at his chieftain.

Thus Athelhune was relieved of his assailant at a very opportune moment, for his neighbour, Beornwulf, was being hard driven by the Wihtwara, who was a powerful, resolute man, and, having scrambled up to the top of the wall, was more than a match for Beornwulf, who had hardly recovered from his late wound inflicted by Ceolwulf in the Andredesweald, and who was, besides, somewhat weak from want of food. Athelhune, having disposed of his foeman, turned in an instant to Beornwulf's help, and with a swinging blow of his axe shore through the leathern gaiters of the Wihtwara, as he stood striking down at Beornwulf. The force of the blow was so terrific that it not only severed the leg completely below the knee, but inflicted a deep gash in the other leg, and the wretched man fell headlong upon Beornwulf inside the fortification.

Meanwhile things had not been going quite so well on the other side of Athelhune. The two men who were defending that part of the little fort were Boseham men, and had not had experience of fighting like the body-guard of Cædwalla; they were, besides, physically inferior, being weakened by the long famine from which they, in common with the rest of the South Saxons, had been suffering; they also mistook the efforts of the old ceorls of Ælfhere for really hostile intentions, and were proportionately dispirited at the unequal nature of the contest.

The result, therefore, of the first onset had been the breaking down of the hastily-constructed defences in front, and the entry of two of Arwald's men, closely followed by three of their Brædynges allies. The two Boseham men were forced back, still fighting, and were left by the leading Wihtwara of Arwald's party to be disposed of by the others behind him.

He himself made a rush for where the wounded Eorldoman Ælfhere was

lying, and without a pause waved his gleaming axe over the defenceless eorl's head. The axe rose, flashed, descended, but at the same instant two other forms had darted forward, another flash of steel almost simultaneous with that of the Wihtwara glanced in the air, and the spear of Wulfstan, driven with all the energy of rage and despair nerving his boyish strength, pierced the heart of the man who was about to murder his father; but Wulfstan's blow would have been too late had it not been for another interposition. Brother Malachi, seeing inevitable death awaiting Ælfhere, had rushed forward, and being without any weapon to ward off the blow, had without a moment's thought thrust out his arms to intercept the stroke. With a fortunate instinct he had held them high up, so that the blow had not gathered full force, but the axe inflicted a fearful wound, and Malachi's arm dropped useless to his side. But he had done his work, he had gained his object, and he sank to the ground with a sense of gratification as he saw the Wihtwara fall. There was now only one determined foe left, for the rest of the assailants, who had at no time shown any great desire to come to close quarters, were now evidently wavering, and seeing that Athelhune and Beornwulf had disposed of their antagonists, and were coming hastily to assist the Boseham men and Wulfstan, they drew together and retreated outside the enclosure, the Wihtwara belonging to Arwald going with them. Wulfstan could hardly believe in their good fortune; it seemed impossible that four armed men only, a monk, and a boy should have been able to resist the determined attack of twelve men. Had these been all animated with the same spirit as the six followers of Arwald they certainly could not have made much of a fight of it; but the lucky recognition of his father's ceorls by Wulfstan, and Athelhune's well-timed speech, had turned the scale, and they were masters of the field.

But Athelhune was not satisfied with that; springing on to the wall he shouted out to the Brædynges men to return to their eorldoman, who was waiting to reward them for their services, and who had recognised how skilfully they had managed to baffle the attempts of his enemies. He also told Wulfstan to call to them by name, and invite them to come and see their lord.

These words had their due effect, and the men came in with a sheepish air to look at their wounded master, and to salute him with respectful words. Two or three of them with greater presence of mind suddenly turned upon the only follower of Arwald still alive or unwounded, and disarmed him, accomplishing the feat so quickly as to allow him no time to defend himself.

This was a very hopeful sign of their returning fidelity, and Athelhune saw it with very visible satisfaction; but, like a prudent commander, he would take no rest until he knew what had become of Ceolwulf, for he could not disguise from himself the danger that so small a party as only three men ran, now that he knew the enemy were aware of their arrival and whereabouts.

He thought the best thing to do, therefore, would be to send off three of the most trustworthy of the ceorls to look for Ceolwulf, tell him what had happened, and hasten his return with the much-needed supplies, the want of which was now more than ever felt. Wulfstan having told him who were the men he liked best, he sent them off, and then turned to examine the results of the fight.

His first care was for Malachi, whose heroism and self-sacrifice had raised him to a pinnacle of glory. The wound he had received was of a ghastly nature; the axe had struck the arm below the elbow, had cut to the bone, and then glanced sideways, inflicting a desperate gash, and poor Malachi had already fainted from loss of blood. But Athelhune had seen plenty of wounds of a worse kind than this; indeed, the one he had himself just now given to his antagonist was of a far more terrible nature, and he did not doubt that Malachi would recover. He quickly picked a handful of grass, the softest he could find, placed it firmly over and round the wound, then tore off a piece of the dead Wihtwara's tunic, and bound the arm tightly up. Finally, making a sling, and suspending it round Malachi's neck, and inserting the arm in it, he had him placed under the shelter by Ælfhere's side. Then, leaving Deva and Wulfstan to watch over the two wounded men, he went out to see what had become of the other Wihtwaras.

The first man lay dead, close to the wall; near him lay the second leader, still unable to move, for both his legs were broken, and the stone yet rested on them; across him lay the warrior who had nearly killed Athelhune, and who lay face downwards, his helmet cut through, and showing clear evidence of what a well-delivered blow from an English battle-axe could do: he was stone dead. Inside the fortification lay the other man, whose leg had been shorn off by Athelhune; he was fast bleeding to death: nothing could be done for him, even if they had felt inclined. Near the cabin, where Ælfhere and Malachi were placed, was lying the other Wihtwara, with Wulfstan's spear still in him; and not far off was the captured follower of Arwald, sitting disconsolate and sulky, with his hands and feet tied fast.

Of Athelhune's little party only two had received wounds, and those very slight. Wulfstan was unhurt, and had forgotten all about his hunger in the joy of having slain his first enemy, and, more than all, saved his father. The rest of the men were talking together, and already Beornwulf and the Boseham men were fraternising with their late foes, who were offering to go and bring some refreshments, when a distant trampling announced the arrival of a considerable body of some sort.

Athelhune directly ordered the men to their posts, and urged them hastily to repair the walls, and then sent one of the Brædyng men to reconnoitre.

There were a few minutes of breathless suspense, for had a fresh enemy appeared it would have fared badly with the weary and scanty defenders. Suddenly

a loud cheer relieved their minds, and they knew that Ceolwulf was coming, and bringing them food.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE KING SHALL HAVE HIS OWN AGAIN."

The wild cheering that answered the shouts of Ceolwulf and his party was scarcely over when the old ceorl appeared, accompanied by a number of Ælfhere's former servants, carrying baskets of provisions and other comforts, from which it was quite evident that there was no further danger to be apprehended from Arwald or his followers; indeed, it was soon known to Athelhune and Ælfhere that all the men of Arwald's party had been engaged in the late assault, and that there was no immediate risk of Arwald himself coming with a larger band, as the news would not reach him rapidly, seeing that all his men were either killed, wounded, or prisoners, and none of Ælfhere's men were likely to report the matter. This was good news to Athelhune's men, who were nearly worn out, and they were very soon engaged in discussing the good cheer.

Some of the choicest of the food was brought to Ælfhere, and although the wounded eorldoman was able to eat but little, yet that little seemed to do him good.

"Oh, father, what a joyful time is this!" cried Wulfstan, with his mouth full of a juicy morsel of pork pasty. "How I do wish Ædric were here! It seems years since I saw him; how he will wish he had had my luck!"

"My son," said Ælfhere, "the gods have been good to us; we must remember to save of the arms of those robbers to make an offering to Woden. There is one of them taken alive; it will be as well to offer him up, that my ceorls who died when they attacked us that night may have one more foeman to hack in pieces in Valhalla. Mind thou seest to it that he is taken care of. Verily, as he hath made me suffer, so shall he suffer."

Old Deva was all this time sitting rocking herself backward and forward over the fire she had lighted; near her was sitting her goat. The two seemed to understand each other. She was chanting some doggerel in an unknown tongue, in which the words "Arthur ap Uther Pendragon" seemed to occur very frequently, but nobody paid her any attention.

It had now become quite dark, and the scene was very picturesque; the men

had piled up a large fire, and were stretched in various attitudes around it. They had laid the dead bodies of the Wihtwaras in a distant part of the ruins, for all were now dead; those who were mortally wounded having been put out of their sufferings by a merciful cynicism, human life in that rough age being very lightly valued.

The news of Ælfhere's existence and the arrival of the young Eorl Wulfstan, with old Biggun, had spread over the neighbourhood, and all the populace had turned out, and were thronging round the ruins. Athelhune, who did not know whether they were to be trusted, was at first a little uneasy, and told his men secretly to be on their guard; but Ceolwulf soon reassured him, and he cast off all anxiety, feasting and enjoying himself with the rest.

Song and jest and practical joke rapidly succeeded, and it would have been hard to realise that only about an hour before that same spot had been the scene of a desperate fray, in which at least ten of the revellers had been deadly antagonists; but so it was then, when men were more like children than they are now, when the world has grown older, and the transitions from one frame of mind to another were more rapid and complete, and impressions were less lasting.

As all of Athelhune's party were very weary, directions were given by Ceolwulf that a trusty band of the ceorls of Ælfhere should guard the ruins that night, while he and a few more returned to the half-burnt homestead at Brædyng. With him dispersed the rest of the crowd, and the ruins once more sank to their usual silence.

The night passed tranquilly enough. When day broke next morning, the sun rose on a sleeping band of men, and they were not aroused from their deep, refreshing sleep until the servants of Ælfhere were busied in preparing the morning meal.

Wulfstan woke with a deep sense of comfort. He was at home, as it were. Round him were the faces of many who had been familiar to him from infancy, and he sniffed up the fresh morning air that blew salt and pure from the sea with the relish of healthy youth.

The ruins bore a new aspect. Fresh rushes had been laid down near and around the little cabin where Ælfhere lay; a large iron vessel was steaming over the fire a little way off, from which the fragrant smell of a well-seasoned stew reached him, and this he appreciated even more than the pure air from the sea.

In different parts of the ruins his companions-in-arms were either still recumbent or were going through a simple toilet. Personal cleanliness was not much in fashion in the seventh century, except when it was likely to conduce to comfort, and not many, therefore, were found indulging in the luxury of a wash in the cold water from the well; but some there were, and of this number was Athelhune.

When all were aroused, breakfast was served. It was pleasant to Wulfstan to see how much better his father seemed this morning, and that Malachi also was going on well. He had had his wound dressed and strapped up again, and this time some linen was substituted for the rough remedies of Athelhune.

After breakfast a council of war was called, near the wounded Ælfhere, and it was debated what should be done next, as it was not likely Arwald would allow the death of his men to go unavenged, and the news was sure to reach him soon. It was also discussed whether it would not be better to move Ælfhere to the homestead again.

It was finally decided that this should be done, and it was also thought the restoration of the eorldoman to his home should be made as important as possible; for as Arwald was sure to hear of the matter very soon, it would be as well to let him know that the love of Ælfhere's ceorls was still with their lawful lord, the descendant of the first chieftain that led the free band of roving Jutes to conquer the land for themselves and their descendants.

Messengers, therefore, were sent out to all the country round, and all the ceorls and their thralls were invited to assist at the ceremony of bringing home the eorldoman. It was also widely disseminated that Cædwalla had sent a large force to assist Ælfhere, and to restore the Wihtwaras and Wihtea to the domination of Wessex, a part of which kingdom it had originally formed, until Wulfhere, the son of Penda, had quite recently handed it over to Edilwalch, king of the South Saxons; who, however, had never done more than appoint Arwald as his deputy, with instructions to depress such of the Wihtwaras as still preserved any attachment to Wessex.

It was quite evident to Athelhune and Ælfhere that Arwald would not allow these proceedings to pass off unmolested; or, if he did not feel himself able to attack them at once, he would undoubtedly do so in the course of a few days, when he had collected enough men for the purpose; but they hoped that the ceorls and thralls would be all wrought up to enthusiasm by the unexpected return of their own eorldoman, and would be able to make a stubborn and effectual resistance.

To the surprise of all, Ælfhere seemed much better this morning: whether it were that the treatment of Malachi had really done any good, or that the excitement of the evening before, combined with the delightful satisfaction of having been saved by his own son, and seeing his enemies slain, had roused him from his despondent torpor, and so produced this good effect. But, from whichever cause it arose, there could be no doubt of the fact—he was decidedly better. His wounds looked more healthy, and he was much more cheerful.

The ruins of the Roman villa—for whatever Deva might think about her ancestors having built it, there was no doubt it was built by the Romans or Romanised Britons—were about two miles distant from the house of Ælfhere. Ce-

olwulf had given directions to have the house made as comfortable as possible, and all traces of its occupation by Arwald's followers were carefully obliterated. Care also was taken that there should be a large supply of food; for no Saxon or English ceremony could be considered complete at which a large amount of good cheer was not consumed; and the usual result of a very splendid festival was the half starving of the poorer population for some weeks afterwards; but as it also had another effect, namely, the producing of a good many quarrels, which generally terminated fatally, the number of mouths to be filled subsequently was somewhat reduced.

When all was properly prepared, which was not until the afternoon, a litter was made for Ælfhere, and another for Malachi, who was now treated with greater respect, while old Deva was also placed in an important position; then Athelhune and Ceolwulf marshalled the procession. The advance was led by Ceolwulf, attended by all the old servants of Ælfhere carrying such hastily contrived banners as could be obtained for the occasion, and armed with axe and spear. Then came a crowd of thralls; a great many ceorls followed, all armed also; and immediately behind them came the litter of Malachi, followed by that of Ælfhere, by whose side walked Wulfstan and Deva, and attended by one or two of his own servants carrying refreshments. Behind the eorldoman came Athelhune, followed by Beornwulf and Osborn, and the four Boseham men, their arms all bright, and their accoutrements in proper order. This was the end of the organised procession, but a crowd of men, women, and children came thronging behind, shouting, talking, and gesticulating.

At the head of the whole procession marched a harper; there had not been time to get more than one. He was attended by a band of children, who sang desperately out of tune, and with a very hazy notion of the words, a song of welcome, and waved branches of oak leaves and holly, while some had bedecked themselves with the red berries of the wild iris, and sprigs of "Holm" or "butcher's broom."

The procession wound round the foot of the downs skirting the marshes, and then ascended a gentle rise, until, turning to the left among the tall trees, the old homestead suddenly appeared.

It was a long, low-built, thatched house, with no pretensions to architectural effect. One end was in ruins, and the gaunt, half-charred rafters produced a feeling of desolation, which was somewhat relieved by piles of straw lying ready to repair the damaged roof, while new timbers were in process of being sawn up in a pit close by; behind the house could be seen the higher roof of the barn, and other farm buildings, and the blue smoke curling up amid the brown trees gave a look of comfort very pleasing to Ælfhere and Wulfstan.

A few servants stood outside the house ready to receive their lord, and

tables were set under the trees near, upon which a lavish amount of steaming joints, huge jugs of ale, and gigantic loaves were spread, and it was quite evident from the longing looks cast in this direction that unless the ceremonies were soon over the procession would dissolve of its own accord.

Ceolwulf therefore briefly welcomed his master home, to which Ælfhere as briefly replied, and then gave directions that all should at once sit down and begin upon the feast, and he hoped that all would eat plenty and thoroughly enjoy themselves.

A loud cheer answered these few words, and instantly all was confusion. Ælfhere had told Ceolwulf to see that Wulfstan paid especial attention to Athelhune and his men, to whom seats of honour were assigned at the head of the principal table.

The feast passed off like all the feasts of those days: an enormous amount of food was consumed, a little wit went a very long way, and no one seemed much inclined to move. After the eating was over one or two loud voices seemed to show that some amount of quarrelling was going on, but Athelhune and Ceolwulf had determined that none of this should take place, and so order was well kept.

Had Arwald attacked them directly after the festivities he would have found an easy prey; but, fortunately for Ælfhere and his supporters, the news did not reach Arwald until late that day, and he was not in a position to move at once to the attack.

While the feast was at its height a boy rushed in and shouted that a boat was coming up the haven, and no one knew who it could be. Questioned by Ceolwulf, he said that the boat was not a large one but that there were several men on board, and from the sun shining on something bright, he thought they were well armed. Ceolwulf immediately sent a trusty man to find out what the boat was, and bring him word again.

Just as the festivities were ending this man returned, accompanied by four men in linked shirts of mail, and fully armed. On seeing them Athelhune leapt to his feet, and shouted:

"Welcome, noble Wulf. Thou comest at a happy time. Mayest thou bring us good tidings of our king."

"I do, indeed, bring thee good tidings, Athelhune," cried Wulf, or, as he is called in some histories Mollo. "King Centwine of Wessex is dead, and on his death-bed he named our Cædwalla his successor and directed the eorldomen of Wessex to go to find him, and bring him back as their king. This they did, and I left Cædwalla surrounded by the power of Wessex, recognised as their lawful lord, and successor to the line of Cerdic."

"This is indeed good news," said Athelhune, and then turning to the assembled crowd he called out:

"Men of Wihtea, our lawful overlord has got back his kingdom; let us all thank the gods for this good news, and raise three cheers for Cædwalla."

Instantly all caps were off, all the crowd of revellers were on their feet, and three deafening cheers burst from the lungs of the mob.

The news was really important, for now the tables were likely to be turned upon Arwald, and instead of his venturing to attack them, they would be able to attack him. As the news became known in Wihtea all men would return to their allegiance to Wessex, and it would fare very ill with Arwald. However, as the allegiance of the Wihtwaras had hitherto been more nominal than real, there was not any certainty that they would welcome any actual interference on the part of Cædwalla; for, like all islanders, they were very jealous of any external control. But it was a great object for the rival chiefs of the island to use the moral influence of the name of a powerful authority on the mainland; and, as it was everywhere known that Ælfhere had supported the authority of Wessex, while Arwald had represented Edilwalch and Mercia, it was easily understood that since Edilwalch was dead, and his slayer had succeeded to the throne of Cerdic, Ælfhere was likely to be more powerful than Arwald.

The arrival too of Cædwalla's own brother, Wulf, accompanied by three such stalwart-looking warriors, brought a very material support, as well as a moral one, to the cause of Ælfhere, and the feasting, which was nearly over, was renewed with more joyous ardour.

Wulfstan did the honours bravely, but presently got tired of all the noise and feasting, and very nearly fell asleep two or three times. At last, Athelhune suggested to Ceolwulf that the poor boy should be sent in to his father, to tell him the news.

When Wulfstan entered his father's room he found that he already knew the good tidings, and was deeply thankful for the turn of fortune, but at the same time, knowing Arwald as well as he did, he was not at all confident that all would go well, for he knew that Cædwalla would not be able to bring him assistance at once, and Arwald was too powerful to give up his pre-eminence in the island without a fight. Being also a skilful as well as brave leader, Ælfhere well knew he would realise the necessity of striking before the ceorls and thralls had recovered from their late crushing defeat, and especially before any reinforcements could reach the island from Cædwalla. Filled with such thoughts, therefore, Ælfhere did not respond to Wulfstan's joy quite so readily. This was a disappointment to the boy, who was brimful of happiness at the bright prospects that were opening up for them.

"Why, father, thou seemest not nearly so merry as I should have thought thou wouldst have been," said the boy, in a disappointed tone.

"We are not yet out of the wood," answered Ælfhere. "If we can resist the

attack which Arwald is sure to make on us, either to-morrow, or the next day, or can hold our own until Cædwalla sends us reinforcements, all will be well."

"But, father, see how well we fought last night, and then there were only four of us, now there are ever so many. Thou hast not seen the Atheling Wulf who has just come; he is nearly as splendid as Cædwalla himself, and that is as much as saying he is like a god. Thou never sawest anyone so handsome or brave; and thou oughtest to hear old Biggun tell how he took Cissanceaster. Thou dost not really think we are not able to beat any of that villain Arwald's lot, dost thou?"

"Well, Wulfy, we've done very well, and Athelhune and the Atheling will no doubt guard against a surprise, but there will be hard knocks, and the Wihtwaras fight well."

"But we are Wihtwaras too, father."

"True, my son, but we are not as many as those whom Arwald will bring—but it is no good discouraging the lad," muttered Ælfhere to himself, "Like enough, being wounded and in sore pain, I look on the dark side, and the boy is right. Well, Wulfy, I have no doubt we shall do well enough, but I should like to see this same prince before night comes on; and Ceolwulf must see that proper guards are set, and all things made ready in case Arwald should come."

"Shall I bid Biggun come, father?"

"Aye, do, my boy, if he can be spared from the feast."

The boy left the room, and speedily gave his father's message to Ceolwulf, who immediately told Athelhune that the eorldoman would like to see the Atheling Wulf.

But Wulf the Atheling was very unlike his brother Cædwalla; he had been spoilt as a child, and was wilful, inconsiderate, and self-indulgent: the only quality he and his brother had in common was great personal courage. As, therefore, he was enjoying himself at the banquet, he declined to accede to Ælfhere's request, saying that he would come the next morning, when there was nothing better to do.

Ceolwulf was much displeased at this answer, but there was no help for it; so, asking Athelhune to do the honours in his absence, he accompanied his young master to the wounded eorldoman.

"Ceolwulf," said Ælfhere, "the news is indeed good, but let us not lose the wine now the cup is at our lips. You know Arwald, and that he is not likely to let the power he has got in this island slip through his fingers without fighting for it; and we have had too bitter experience already of what comes from keeping a careless watch. I trust, therefore, that thou wilt take every care for the night, and learn the earliest news thou canst of what is going on round Wihtgarsbyryg."

"Aye, that will I," answered old Biggun. "We had enough broken heads the last time to make those who were able to keep their brains in their skulls then,

do all they can to keep them there now. I've sent Leofa and the boy Stuff to get as much news as they can, and to tell anything that comes into his head about us. The boy Stuff is a good boy at putting a man on a wrong trail; he has a way of looking stupid-like, and not seeming to understand, and then answering with a question that gets more out than he tells."

"When they come back, mind thou tellest me. How hast thou placed the outposts?"

"Oh, well enough! if they are not too drunk, that is," said Ceolwulf, scratching his head doubtfully. "Leastways, I shall have to go round myself, I doubt not; but they are all placed where they ought to be, and if they allow themselves to be knocked on the head they ought at least to give a squeak first; but there, they've drunk a sight of ale, they have, and perhaps if they get killed they'll only think they are dreaming, and forget to make any noise about it."

"Well, Ceolwulf, I shall trust to thee. I don't myself think there is much danger of attack before morning, and they will be all right by that time. What dost thou think of this Atheling Wulf?"

"Humph! He can fight well enough when he likes, but fighting isn't everything; he can't obey, and he has got no doggedness in him. However, the more we have the better, and Athelhune is here to keep him in order a bit, that's one comfort. Hark to that hubbub! If I don't go there'll be a fight before long."

And so it seemed, for angry voices could plainly be heard, and Ælfhere bid Ceolwulf go at once to restore order. When Ceolwulf returned to the festivities, he found that one of the Boseham men, excited by the ale, was loudly boasting of the superiority of the South Saxons to the Wihtwaras, and an excited Wihtwara was as clamorously proclaiming their superiority to the South Saxons; while Wulf, to amuse himself, was promoting the rivalry by timely words. Fortunately Ceolwulf returned just in time to prevent blows, and, with Athelhune's help, order was once more restored.

As it was now getting very dark, a move began to be made by most of the ceorls to their homes, and in a short time the old homestead was comparatively deserted.

Wulf, Athelhune, and their companions, were sheltered in the house and barns for the night, and Ceolwulf and some of the most faithful of the servants took it in turns to keep watch during the hours of darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

"WHICH IS THE BETTER LIFE?"

After the departure of Ceolwulf and Athelhune from Boseham, only three days before the restoration of Ælfhere to his homestead had been so happily accomplished, considerable anxiety was caused to the worthy monks and Ædric as to what had become of Wulfstan. Father Dicoll had got the children and several of the older men to search everywhere, but naturally to no purpose, and as night set in the hopelessness of the search became evident.

"Oh! Father Dicoll, what can have become of him?" asked Ædric, piteously.

"My son, God will take care of him, and I should not be astonished if he had gone somehow with the others; if he has not, I feel sure, seeing that the lad is a quick lad and naturally endowed with the instincts of self-preservation, he will come in later on. He may, perchance, have gone out to kill some wild animal, a hare or a coney, maybe; but, wherever he is, he is in God's hands, so let us not be over-anxious, but pray for his safe return."

This was not very hopeful comfort, but certainly there were no means of giving any other, and Ædric had to spend a weary night, waking up frequently and putting out his hand in the darkness to feel if his brother had come back, and was sleeping on the pile of skins beside him; but in every case he was disappointed, and after an anxious reflection as to what could have become of him, Ædric fell off to sleep again.

The anxiety of the monks and Ædric was not allayed the next morning, when they found that it had been snowing during the night, and there were one or two ugly-looking footmarks outside the door of their hut, which looked very much as though a wolf or two had been prowling round during the night.

"Well, my son, it is no good making thyself unhappy about him," said brother Corman. "I think it is more than likely he managed to hide himself away on board the boat, and has sailed away to Wihtea as he wished."

"But he might have told me he was going. Why, and now I think of it, and so he did. What a stupid I was not to mind what he said! But I did not give heed to his words then, because I did not think he could possibly get on board without Ceolwulf seeing him, but, of course, he must have done it. Oh, how glad I am! But what a lucky fellow he is!" added Ædric, wistfully. "He will see our old home, and perhaps father; who knows?"

"Then, no doubt, he will send over and fetch thee, if all goes well; so now thou canst be happy again. But we shall have to take leave of thee soon, Ædric. Thou art to go to Wilfrid, the bishop, in Selsea."

"But I don't want to go. Why should I? I am much happier here with thee, Father Dicoll."

"Yes, but thou art not safe here, especially now that thy old ceorl has fought so well at Cissanceaster. All the country is talking about him, and they will soon know that he is gone on an expedition to Wittea to turn out the ally of the South Saxons."

"Oh! I don't want to leave thee; thou hast been so kind to me. Canst thou not come too if I have to go?"

"I am afraid Wilfrid will not care to have us; and to tell thee the truth, I don't think he will say we are the sort of men who ought to bring thee up."

"Why not? You both believe in the same God. You are both Christians, are you not?"

"Yes; but I shall never make thee understand how little it takes to make men cease to be of one mind in a house. We think we are right, and Wilfrid thinks he is right, but we are willing to think the differences are of little importance, only we don't like to give up our old custom, while he thinks we are stubborn schismatics and obdurate stumbling-blocks, stiff-necked in our ignorance and blinded by our own conceits. Truly our blessed Lord was right when He said, 'I came not to bring peace upon the earth, but a sword.'"

This was all impossible for Ædric to understand. That Christians who took their lives in their hands to convert the heathen, whose whole doctrine turned upon love, charity, peace, should yet be so bitter against each other, was incomprehensible to him, and still more so that they should let this appear in the face of strangers and the common enemy.

"Well, brother Corman, Wulfstan and I often quarrel, but we always make it up and fight like anything against anyone who is our enemy, and we don't let them know we quarrel."

The conversation was interrupted by breakfast, after which arrangements were talked about for taking Ædric to Wilfrid.

The monks had shown a certain animosity and bitterness in speaking of Wilfrid which had communicated itself to Ædric, and he was very unwilling to go to him. He was eager to know more about him, but the monks, to do them justice, were not willing to speak against the bishop, or to prejudice the mind of the boy in any way; while feeling as they did that the branch of the Christian church which they represented was older than the later form introduced by St. Augustine the Monk, they could not but be irritated at the superiority which Wilfrid assumed, and his assertion that they were in error. Worst of all, the new missionaries from Rome had sided with the victorious and pagan Saxon, and had added insult to injury by branding the suffering British with the odious name of unorthodox. And after all, what were these great differences? A fashion of shaving the head dissimilar to that prevailing at Rome, and a different system for calculating the Paschal moon. For practical purposes this last was the more serious difficulty,

for it occasioned the inconvenient anomaly of one set of Christians fasting while the other set were feasting, according as they observed the Roman or the Eastern custom of calculating Easter; but the fashion of the tonsure was quite as warmly disputed, and the Irish monks were taunted with being the imitators of Simon Magus![1]

[1] *Vide* Milman. Latin Christianity, vol. ii., pp. 247-269.

The preparations of the monks did not take very long, but it suddenly occurred to brother Corman that Ædric could not walk, and they had no conveyance by which he could be carried. It certainly would have seemed a matter of no great difficulty to have thought of this before, but their minds were so occupied with speculation, and the little daily round of their religious services, teaching the few children that came to be taught, and providing for their small daily wants, that they had not given any thought as to how Ædric was to get to Selsea, a distance of some five or six miles.

"*Beate Columba!*" said Father Dicoll, "but my head gets duller every day. Why did I not think of this before? We shall have to send someone to tell Wilfrid, and who will go?"

"True," said Corman, looking at Dicoll with a perplexed air. "We have nought that will tempt any of these South Saxons to go. I shall have to go myself."

"The matter is one that is somewhat urgent, I fear, for the boy ought to be with Wilfrid before night, in case the eorldoman Berchthune should send for him. But let us see if we cannot get any of these children to take a message for us."

So saying, Father Dicoll called out to a group of children that were making mud pies on the shore a little way off.

The children paid no attention at first, for they were making too much noise among themselves to be able to hear Father Dicoll. At last, a curly pated, blue-eyed, young Saxon heard him, and thumped a few of the other children to make them keep quiet, which, strangely enough, had the desired effect, which caused brother Corman, who was of a moralising turn, to observe how strangely the same process produced different results.

"For if I beat these younglings they don't keep quiet, but raise a greater clamour; whereas when that yellow-haired pagan beats his brethren they keep as quiet as mice. Perhaps they know that the process will go on until they stop, with him; whereas they have found out that after the blow has fallen there is no more danger from me. Truly, to get what one wants in this world, one ought to have no heart, and keep on thumping."

"Here, Ceolric, my child," called Father Dicoll, "I want to know if thou wilt do something for me."

The youngster ran up to the monk readily when he understood he wanted

him, for the monks were favourites with the children and their mothers, and were not disliked by the men; indeed, by most they were decidedly liked.

"Dost thou think thou couldest find thy way to Cymenesora if brother Corman were to put thee over the creek?"

"I don't know, Father Dicoll; it is a good long way and father said I wasn't to go away far from home."

"Is thy father in?"

"Not as I know, but mother is. There she stands yonder, thou hadst best ask her."

"But wouldest thou go if she would let thee?"

Upon this the boy fell to scratching his head. It was quite clear he did not want to go, but, at the same time, did not want to disappoint the monks.

"Look here, Ceolric, if I were to promise thee a fishing line and hook, wouldest thou go then?"

"I've got one."

"Then what would make thee like to go?"

"I don't know as anything would that thou hast got to give me."

The poverty of the poor monks was very well known, and certainly, if they had made any converts from the rough and boorish South Saxons, such conversion must have been entirely brought about by conviction, unalloyed with any thoughts of earthly gain.

Seeing the hopelessness of finding a messenger among the Boseham children, and, consequently, among the rest of the population—for if they could not prevail on the children, among whom their influence was greatest and their little rewards most prized, they certainly would have no success with the adults—it became evident brother Corman would have to go himself.

Ædric could not help seeing what a great deal of trouble he was giving these excellent monks, and, being a good-hearted boy, he felt very grateful to them, and more than ever sorry to leave them. The contrast of their simple, unworldly ways, their gentleness, and readiness to do good to others, with the rough, quarrelsome boastfulness of the men among whom he had lived, was not lost upon him.

The conversations, too, that he had with Father Dicoll had taught him many things he had never dreamt of before. When he was suffering great pain from his leg, it had been a relief to him to listen to Corman telling him of the terrible sufferings of Him who had no need to suffer, but had voluntarily undergone the most dreadful agony of body and mind for the sake of His enemies. It had been quite a new thing to hear that pain was a blessing, that it purified and sanctified; and now, when Corman had started on Malachi's little raft to row down the creek, and cross about a mile further down to the other shore, and thence walk to Selsea,

he longed to ask Father Dicoll a few questions, and fortunately Father Dicoll seemed in a talkative mood, for he presently turned to Ædric, and said:

"My son, this is perhaps the last time we may meet. Thou wilt go to a much more learned man than we are, if report speaks true, and one who has great reputation for piety. But remember, my son, that before honour is humility, and that the first thing in life is to be meek and lowly in heart, and then, loving unto all men; if we heartily desire to think others are better than ourselves, thou mayest depend upon it we shall live happier and die better. But what dost thou think should be the aim of our lives?"

After thinking a little Ædric answered, "I should have said a little while ago to be great and honoured in war, to kill a great number of my enemies, and to leave a great name behind me, was the noblest aim in life for a hero and a warrior."

"Dost thou think so now?"

"No, I don't think I do; and yet it is a great thing to be very brave, and do great deeds, and leave a name behind thee, is it not, Father Dicoll?"

"Certainly it is, my son; but what braver deed could anyone have done than He did who gave His life for us? What greater name can anyone leave behind than the name of Him who gave His life a ransom for many? Is not saving life as noble as killing? Is not making more noble than destroying? But what dost thou now think the aim of life?"

"I think," answered Ædric, slowly and meditatively, "the aim of a life ought to be to do something great, but I don't quite know what that ought to be."

"No, my son, no doubt thou dost not, for it all depends upon what we call 'great.' Hitherto thou hast thought—and no blame to thee, for thou knewest no better—that to live the life of a warrior, and make thy name more famous than others, was the highest object. It has never occurred to thee to think of others, but if thou wilt think, thou wilt see that in proportion as thy warlike fame should increase, others must suffer, and according to thy ideas of glory the more who suffer the greater will be thy renown. In other words, thy reputation would be the reputation of the most ferocious wild beast which preys on human food."

"But, Father, everybody I ever met praises the great warrior, the hero. Where canst thou meet a poet or skald who does not sing the fame of some noble chieftain?"

"True, my son, but because many are in error, does that make the mistake any the less? Now let us begin at the beginning: what is the thing in daily use thou thinkest has called for the most cleverness in making?"

Ædric thought a little; there were not many things in daily use at that time that were the result of much ingenuity, but at last he said, "I think a plough, or a boat, is a very useful thing, and must have taken a clever man to think of!"

"Well, yes; but I think a plough is much the more ingenious of the two, for a bit of wood will make a boat, and it is very easy to improve on that when once the idea is started, which any child can do by throwing a stick into a pond; but a plough requires much more thought. However, let us take a plough. Thinkest thou it is easier to make a plough—one that is complete and useful in all its parts—or to destroy one that is made?"

"Why, it is much easier to destroy it."

"Just so; and would the man who destroyed it be thought a more celebrated man than the one who made it?"

"No, certainly not; he would be thought an idle fool."

"Then the destroyer of what is useful is very much the same as an idle fool, is that so?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Now we all agree, heathen and Christian alike, that man was made by some Divine power: your legends say that the All-Father made men, which is exactly what Christians say. Is not a man more useful than a plough, and infinitely more cleverly made? Of course he is. Well, what must the man be who, to amuse himself, or gain glory, which is the same thing to him spends all his life in smashing the most wonderful of all created things? Is he not a destroyer? and we have said that a destroyer is the same as an idle fool. Now, dost thou think that to be an idle fool is a worthy aim? But I need not ask such a question."

"But, Father Dicoll, it is a glorious thing, whatever thou sayest, to die fighting, or, better still, to live fighting for what is one's own, to protect those who are being robbed by those who have no right to take from the weaker."

"Part of what thou sayest is not devoid of truth, and to the weak nature of man, who does not understand divine mysteries, it certainly seems to be a fine thing to be up and doing, to protect from wrong those who are too weak to protect themselves; but I think more is done in this world by the example of Christian meekness and heavenly wisdom, than by all the blows struck by earthly arms even in a just quarrel. What said our Lord Himself? 'If he smite thee on one cheek, offer to him the other also'; and again: 'Put up thy sword into his place, for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' To fight with carnal weapons has always seemed to me to show an utter want of faith. Look at the Christian religion: it grew not by the power of earthly grandeur, but by the blood of the blessed martyrs. Through three centuries almost they died one after the other, until at last men came to see that killing would not stop the faith, but that, like a fabled monster, from each death a thousand more believers sprung up. It was the beauty of holiness that captivated the world at last, not the victory of Constantine: that was but the effect of the growth of Christianity, not the cause of its universal acceptance. But there was one part of thy remark, Ædric, that

was wholly wrong: it is not a glorious thing to die or to live fighting for one's own; for what is thine own? Is anything thou hast thine own?"

"My life is, my clothes are, lots of things are."

"What dost thou consider thine own to mean?"

"Why, what *is* my own, what I can give away, keep to myself if I like; that nobody else can have or take away from me; that I can destroy, do what I like with, of course."

"Well, that is what most people understand by their own. But think if that is the correct description of what is thine own. Is thy life thine own? Canst thou keep it to thyself? Can nobody else take it away from thee? Thou canst certainly destroy it, or give it away, and therein lies the responsibility of ownership, which I will talk about later on, if we have time. But is it not the same with all that thou hast got? Cannot everything be taken from thee that thou hast? Dost thou not see that thou art entirely at the mercy of some over-ruling Power? If, then, thou wouldst fight for what thou callest thine own when anybody comes or wishes to take it away from thee, to save one thing thou wilt most likely lose another. Even if thou succeedest thou art certain to be the worse off; for no one would attempt to take away the goods of another unless he were pretty nearly equal to the other in strength, or some other quality; while he would not attack thee unless he thought he were superior to thee, or had a good chance of succeeding. Is it not better to have no 'thine own'? He who taught us the way of life, who, having all things, who being God, yet thought it not unworthy of Him to be the poorest man upon earth; who, having all things offered to Him (which He could have had indeed without such offer) by the Tempter, yet chose to wander upon earth, having nowhere to lay His head—He had no 'His own.' No, He preached, and practised what He preached—the universal love of God to man, and of man to his fellow. 'Give us this day our daily bread,' is all we ought to ask for ourselves in the way of earthly wants; all else has to do with our spirits, our souls.

"The instinct that causes us to wish for our own, to fight for our own, or to die for our own, is not the instinct of a Christian. 'Sell all thou hast and give to the poor,' are our Lord's words: for all we want in this world are food and raiment, which having, let us be therewith content. How did the first disciples of our Lord live after He was taken from them? 'Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was *his own*, but they had all things in common.' The more all of us realise that this is not our life, that our home is not here, the happier we shall be. A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth, but in the possession of the Holy Spirit of God, which no human power can take from him; in fact, the more they try to take it away, the more the Spirit abideth, for as the soul resisteth temptation, so it becometh stronger, holier, purer. The aim of our lives should be to live like Christ; and I have often

told thee how He lived. But we cannot attain to perfection by our own efforts, it must be the faith in Jesus, which will only do this; and this comes with His Holy Spirit. But by prayer and fasting and unceasing watchfulness we may prepare our bodies, and make them more fit to be the tabernacles of the Holy Ghost. But remember, my son, that the great danger to all men is to think of themselves. In deep religious meditation there is much danger of thinking only of *yourself*. The rule of life should be to work and to obey: *laborare est orare*—abolish *self*, forget *self*, annihilate *self*. So know thyself that thou mayest know thy faults; think not so to know thyself as to think thou hast any virtues. We have none but by the Spirit of God.

”But I fear I have not done my duty in telling thee how to live. Thou hast a mission before thee, my son, and God will help thee. Thou dost not yet know Him; but He will draw thee to Himself. If, as thou growest older, the pleasures of the world, the gibes of others, or the temptations of the flesh, should allure thee into sin, remember that a little endurance here will procure everlasting happiness hereafter. And, above all things, work; work is the great and homely friend that drives away temptation. Flee youthful lusts which war against the soul; yea, run away from them. Get up, run about; above all, work and pray. And now, my son, may the blessing of God go with thee. Thou hast been brought here in His wonderful wisdom to be as a brand plucked from the burning, and, perhaps, to be a great instrument to win souls to God. The aim of thy life must be to cast self on one side, and imitate the life of Christ. This will be a hard task. Thou wishest to be a hero. The greatest hero is he who unconsciously does simple or great deeds for the sake of others, but which may cause him unutterable suffering. But, remember, it is the unconsciousness of the actions that makes the heroism; I mean the unconsciousness that thou art doing anything great. And it is not the actions that the world calls great that are always great. I believe the greatest heroes are known only to God.

”And now, my son, let us pray that His Holy Spirit may fill thy heart, for thou hast a worthy object in life before thee, and wilt need much strength to fulfil it.”

CHAPTER XIV.

”TWIXT CUP AND LIP, THERE’S MANY A SLIP.”

It was nearly dusk before brother Corman returned; Father Dicoll and Ædric were seated outside on the little quay looking for him.

"There he is," cried Ædric, as he caught sight of the little raft coming sluggishly up with the tide. "I wonder what message he has brought?"

"Whatever it is, it is now too late for thee to go away to-night."

"How glad I am! And perhaps it will rain to-morrow. I do wish it would, and then I couldn't leave thee. Dost thou think it looks like rain, Father Dicoll?"

Father Dicoll looked up.

"No, I can't say I think it does. The sun seems to me to be setting beautifully."

And now brother Corman was coming nearer; they could hear the splash of his oars, and he seemed to be singing.

Ædric was all impatience to know what was to happen to him, but walking was yet far too painful, so he had to master his eagerness until Corman got nearer. But at last he could stand it no longer, and called out:

"Am I to go to-morrow?"

Brother Corman ceased his chaunt and his rowing, and turned round; but all he said was:

"Wait till I get on shore."

"How provoking he is! Why can't he tell me at once?"

But Father Dicoll said nothing. If he had said anything it would have been to reprove Ædric for his impatience; but he was a wise man, who trusted to silence for doing the work of words—a method which, however, requires great knowledge in its application.

It was not long before Corman had run his raft alongside the quay, and with provoking deliberation, as it seemed to Ædric, moored her to a post; he then picked up the oars, and putting them over his shoulder, came up to Father Dicoll and Ædric.

"Well, brother Corman, and how hast thou fared?" said Father Dicoll.

"Well enough. Wilfrid will have a litter brought down to the shore yonder by noon to-morrow, and Ædric is to go there to meet him. He promises to care for him well; and he also told me news which, if it be true, may make a great deal of difference to the boy's fortunes, and indeed for all the country round."

"What was that?"

"Why, that Centwine of Wessex is dead, and bid all men own the outlaw Cædwalla to be king in his stead, before he died."

"How knew Wilfrid of that?"

"How knows Wilfrid of everything? He is not like us. He is troubled about much serving; the doings of the world concern him, and the great ones of the earth are those in whom he delights."

Father Dicoll said nothing, but turned towards their hut. Ædric followed, leaning on Corman's arm, and using a stick for a crutch.

When they got inside Father Dicoll prepared their frugal meal, as Corman was tired with his long walk and row. Then they had evening service, and after that Ædric was attended to; the bandages on his leg were changed, and he was made comfortable for the night. He felt very sad as he lay down, and felt much inclined to rebel at being sent away without having a voice in the matter; but the lessons of the last few days were beginning to bear fruit, and he recognised the duty of submitting his own inclinations to the wisdom of those whom he had found by experience to be kind and good.

The next morning they were all up at the usual hour. Not much was said. Father Dicoll thought it better to let the many conversations he had had with Ædric remain in the boy's mind without further comment, and Ædric himself was too unhappy at parting to say or ask much. As the hour drew near for him to be put on board the raft, he felt more than ever inclined to be rebellious; but again the kindness of the good monks, and their constant teaching on the subject of self-obliteration, came to his mind, and he sorrowfully prepared for his departure.

The little raft was made ready to receive Ædric by Corman, who placed on it a few skins and a pitcher of water. As the boy had brought nothing with him there was no difficulty about baggage. When all was ready, Father Dicoll assisted Ædric down the path to the quay, and helped him on board, directing him to lie down in such a position as not to inconvenience Corman while rowing. Then, giving him his blessing, he took an affectionate farewell.

Ædric could scarcely refrain from tears, but, remembering how Ceolwulf would have laughed at him if he had given way to his emotion, he mastered his feelings, and smiled back at Father Dicoll.

"I shall soon come back and see thee; thou knowest; my leg is very nearly well now, thou hast cured it so wonderfully, and when I go back to Wihtea thou and brother Corman will come over and teach us all to be good."

Father Dicoll nodded and said, "As God wills it, my son." Then brother Corman got on to the raft, and, pushing off, began to row slowly away.

Ædric waved his hand to the good monk, and then sank back on his couch with a wistful look.

"What is Wilfrid like, brother Corman? dost thou think I shall like him?"

"I am sure thou wilt; but I don't suppose thou wilt see very much of him, he is always so busy. Thou seest he is not like Father Dicoll and me. He is not a simple monk like us, and he has a great deal to look after."

"Then shall I have to be all by myself all day? Will no one talk to me or tell me stories as thou and Father Dicoll were always doing?"

"No, there is no fear of that; he has several monks and priests with him,

and I expect Bernwine, or Hildila, will look after thee.”

”And who are they?”

”Well, Bernwine is Wilfrid’s nephew, and a priest. Hildila is also a priest, and they are reported to be good men.”

They were going gently by the sedgy banks; the trees were a deeper russet-brown than they had been when Ædric came wearily past them a few weeks before. He had felt lonely and in great pain then; he was stronger now, and his leg was nearly well, but Dicoll doubted whether he would quite regain the full use of it, as the wound had been very severe and had cut through a tendon. But he felt more lonely now, and dreaded the going among an entirely new set of faces, without a single friend to welcome him.

They went on in silence for some little time. At last Ædric said:

”I wonder if Wulfstan did really go with Ceolwulf?”

”I should think there was no doubt about it.”

”If people are dead dost thou think they can come and tell us where they are, and what they are doing?”

”I never knew myself any that did,” answered Corman, cautiously. ”But all men have believed it to be possible, and there are countless legends and stories which tell of such occurrences.”[1]

[1] See ”the Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great” for the belief in supernatural messages, a work not likely to be known by Corman, but surely representing the orthodox belief of the time.

”Then why dost thou think my father Ælfhere or my mother Alfruda never came to see me and tell me what has become of them?”

”Why, my son, what a very unreasonable question! How can I tell?”

Ædric looked dissatisfied. He thought the monks knew everything: a not uncommon belief with children in respect of those who are older than they are; a belief that is at the same time flattering and embarrassing, and which serves as the basis for the greatest number of impositions quackery and charlatanism have known how to successfully palm off on ignorance.

Again they lapsed into silence. Boseham was still in sight behind them. Ædric turned his head to look once more at the quiet little place where he had learnt so much.

”Why, Corman, isn’t that a man on horseback on the quay?”

Corman looked. ”Well, it does look like some one on a horse. I wonder who it can be.”

”Hark! I think I hear somebody calling,” said Ædric.

Corman ceased rowing, and the raft, sluggishly moving when Corman rowed his hardest, ceased to ripple through the water.

A loud halloo came over the water.

"What can he want. Is he calling us?" asked Ædric.

"Hush! he is saying something," said Corman.

An indistinguishable shout again reached them.

"I can't make out what he is saying, but it seems to be very important. I wonder who he is. Now, it may be right to go back, but it may be wrong. Hark! he's calling again."

"Something about 'back' is what he seems to say," said Ædric.

Corman still waited, and gazed in the direction of the horseman.

"What I can't understand is, why Father Dicoll is not there. I don't think it is all right, or he would be on the quay, and would wave to us, or make some signal."

Ædric looked carefully to see whether he could not make out his figure anywhere. At last he called out:

"I see him. There he is; he is waving his hands."

Corman looked where Ædric pointed, and saw Father Dicoll, who was certainly making some kind of sign, but it did not seem to him that they were signs to return.

"I think he means us to go on. Now do thou watch him, don't look at the other man at all. I will turn the raft round and row back. If he waves his hands, as if sending us away, tell me at once."

Corman then turned the raft round, while Ædric looked intently at Father Dicoll.

The man had stopped shouting as soon as he saw that the raft was coming back, but Dicoll went on waving his arms more than ever. He was standing a little way behind the man, so that his movements were not seen by him.

"Well," said Corman, "what dost thou make of it?"

"I think he means we are to return," said Ædric.

Corman turned round to look.

"Well, I don't know; it looks as though he were beckoning, certainly, but it is very difficult to see from this distance. However, I will go on rowing a little longer, and then, perhaps, we shall be able to make out what it all means."

So saying, Corman pulled against the tide, that was running out fast. He did not make much way, but Dicoll never ceased to make signs, waving his arms about frantically.

"I think he does perhaps mean we are to go on," said Ædric, who had been carefully watching him.

"Well, I will turn round again, and we shall see whether he changes his

movements.”

Directly the raft was turned round the horseman began to shout vigorously, but Father Dicoll ceased to wave his hands and arms.

”What dost thou think of that, Ædric?”

”I think it means we are to come back.”

”I don’t though; now see,” and Corman once more turned the raft round as if to row back. Instantly Father Dicoll began to wave his arms frantically, and the horseman ceased to shout. Suddenly he caught sight of Father Dicoll, something flashed in the air, and Father Dicoll ceased to wave his arms.

”What does that mean? He hasn’t struck Father Dicoll, has he?”

”I don’t like the look of it. I certainly shall not go back until I have left thee in a safe place.”

Corman again turned the raft round, and headed it for the entrance of the creek. As he did so, the shouting began again.

”Ah! thou mayest shout, shout till thou art hoarse too, but I shan’t come back yet.”

”Oh, Corman, he has struck Father Dicoll! I saw him raise his arm, and then I saw Father Dicoll fall. How dreadful! and all because Father Dicoll tried to save me.”

Corman was very much overcome.

”If any ill hath happened to him, the Lord will requite the doer of it; but it would be a grievous thing for any evil to befall him. Oh, Dicoll, my father, what shall I do bereft of thee? Sweet has thy intercourse been to me. Desolate am I, and deprived of life, if thy life be taken from me,” and Corman ceased rowing, and gazed ruefully towards Boseham.

”Oh, Corman, look! the man is galloping along the shore, and—why, there are several more men coming down. What are they going to do?”

Corman and Ædric remained for a few moments in speechless curiosity. The man on horseback had galloped furiously up to the men, and was gesticulating rapidly. The men dispersed and ran about the shore. At last they all seemed to be running to one spot. They all collected round something, the man on horseback appearing to be energetically directing them.

”Why, it’s one of the Boseham boats they are launching, I do believe,” said Corman.

”So it is, and now they are getting into it. What do you think it means?”

”I think they are going to row after us.”

So saying, Corman began rowing again as hard as he could.

They were about three-quarters of a mile away, and had to go about a mile more before they could reach the ”hard,” or landing place, on the other side of the creek, for they had to row out of the little creek, at the head of which Boseham

stands, and cross the larger creek that wound its muddy way up to within a mile of Cissanceaster.

The tide was running out strongly, and this was all in their favour, for as they got farther down the stream ran stronger.

Corman knew the importance of making the full use of the tide, and he strained every muscle to get into the main channel.

The other boat was now manned, and the crew were rowing vigorously, but unscientifically. The horseman had got in, and was steering.

"They are not gaining much, if at all," said Ædric.

Corman said nothing. He had need of all his strength and breath; the drops of perspiration on his brow told how hard he was working. The clumsy raft went sluggishly along in spite of all his toil, and the other boat came nearer.

"Why can't I row? I know how; I have often done it at home. I could at least take one oar."

Corman shook his head, and rowed hard.

Nothing more was said by Ædric, and the oars splashed and the water gurgled under the unwieldy logs of the raft, as it slushed its way through the water.

"They are gaining on us now. Well done!" cried Ædric, as one of the men twisted his oar under the water, and was knocked by the handle of it against the next man, and so into the bottom of the boat. It was comic to see his legs go up in the air, and to hear the shouts of wrath from the helmsman.

[image]

How Corman and Ædric fled before Berchthune

"That has stopped them a bit. Now if they only would stick in the mud! the tide is falling fast, and they couldn't get off."

Corman was getting tired with his exertions. It was quite clear, unless some accident happened to the other boat, they must be caught. They were so near to each other now that Ædric could distinguish the men. They were all strangers to him. The man who commanded was a tall, grey-bearded man, muscular and wiry. He wore a helmet and linked mail shirt, across which a chain hung supporting a two-edged battle axe; his keen eyes glared from under thick, bushy, grey eyebrows, and two wings of a hawk attached to his helmet gave him a very war-like air.

"Who can he be, I wonder?" said Ædric.

Corman only shook his head by way of answer, and kept rowing desperately, but there was evidently no chance. Suddenly an idea struck him. "Ædric,"

he gasped, "dost thou see any shallow spot ahead over which we could go, but on which they would stick? If thou dost, point to it, and I will row over it."

Ædric looked about; the sea was so muddy that it was difficult to tell where the deep water was, but the current ran in stronger eddies, and with more of ruffle on its surface in the channel, and the boy saw one bank that he thought would do.

They had now got to the part of the creek where the Boseham lake, or creek, joined the arm that went up to Cissanceaster. There was a long spit of mud running out from the western shore. If they could pass over this they would gain a good bit on their pursuers, who might, perhaps, be tempted to follow them, in which case they would inevitably run aground, and would have to remain for some hours.

"I see a lane of deeper water across that bank there, only you must row very hard for it. It is some way off yet!" cried Ædric.

Corman tugged at the oars, the awkward raft moved hardly any quicker, and the drops of perspiration rolled off the monk.

Nearer and nearer the other boat came after them. The steersman was laughing. Ædric could see his great mouth opening in a broad grin of triumph. The men were not rowing nearly so hard now, and he could hear them talking. They were quite confident of success.

"Pull, Corman, pull! we are just going into the shallow part."

And the poor monk rowed harder than ever. His eyes were straining and bloodshot, and the muscles of his neck stood out like knotted cords. The bow of the other boat was only a few yards off. The man in the bows had put his oar in, and was standing ready to jump on board the raft. The water curled under the bows.

Suddenly the man in the bows was jerked violently forward, a large rush of water spread over the yellow surface ahead, and a wild shout of joy rang out from Ædric.

"They are ashore, they are ashore! Hurrah!"

And so it was: the boat, drawing quite two feet of water, had plunged into the mud, and was now stuck fast. All was instantly confusion and clamour on board. The chieftain stormed and raged, notwithstanding it was entirely his own fault; for he had not followed the wake of the raft, but had tried to cut it off. The raft was still in comparatively deep water, and was going away merrily. The men on board all stood up, and pushed and tugged at their oars, but as fast as they pushed their oars in, and moved the boat at all, they pulled her on again by trying to get their oars out of the deep, clinging, holding mud. Fierce imprecations and abusive epithets flew from the commander, but all to no purpose.

"Get out, men! out with ye, or we shall remain here for ever. See how the

tide is falling!" shouted the old man.

The men tumbled over the gunwale into the shallow water, but they could hardly have done a more useless thing. Instead of pushing the boat off they only pulled it all the deeper into the mud; for not being able to obtain any foothold, they hung on to the sides of the boat to prevent themselves sinking in. It was a ludicrous sight to see all these strong men hanging round the boat, wallowing and plunging in the black, clinging mud. The helmsman grew more and more furious, the more it became apparent that their position was hopeless. The men, disgusted with the mud and their fruitless exertions, tried to get in again, and the sight was still more comic, as they all struggled to climb over the side of the high and awkward boat. Their muddy legs all had the appearance of wearing long black silk stockings, and as they wriggled and plunged, they gradually became covered with the same horrible, greasy, shiny coating. Sometimes a man would be seen to raise himself up, get one leg over the gunwale, lie down on his side, and try to roll himself into the boat, his other leg would wave in the air, and just as he was succeeding, some of the other men, intent on their own endeavours, would pull the boat too much down on that side, and he would roll over into the mud again. At last one or two succeeded in getting in, and the others, with their assistance, were hauled over the side, not without much bruising of legs and arms, and a plentiful bedaubment of mud.

Meanwhile Ædric and Corman were getting on well. The monk had rested a little when he saw that they had got far enough away to be safe from any arrow, supposing the men had bows and arrows with them, and he and Ædric were laughing at the miserable plight of their pursuers.

Suddenly Corman began to row vigorously again. He had looked round, and instantly worked as hard, or harder, than ever at the oars.

"Why, Corman, what is the matter?" said Ædric; but the monk did not answer. Ædric looked about, puzzled; there was no other boat in sight, and the men were still far too busy trying to get into their boat to be thinking of any means of pursuing them, even if they had a chance of finding any. But while Ædric was wondering what had caused these renewed exertions of brother Corman, the raft came to a stop. It also had run on the mud.

Their position was now singular, and very tantalising to both parties, but especially so for Corman and Ædric, for a few strokes more or a few inches more water and they would have been over the bank and into the little lake that ran into the deep channel on the other side. But there was no help for it. They could not push the logs of wood across, tied together as they were, and they were compelled to sit patiently and watch the struggles of the men in the other boat.

These latter had at last got in again, and a loud shout told Corman and Ædric they had discovered that they also were aground.

"What shall we do?" asked Ædric, ruefully.

"Sit here, my son, until the Lord sends the water back again."

Poor Corman was not sorry altogether. It had been a terrible trial of his strength, and he had pluckily answered to it; but he was very exhausted. Fortunately he had the pitcher of water on board, which he had put there in case Ædric should want any, or feel faint, and it now came in very usefully. After taking a long draught, he uttered a sigh of satisfaction, and stretched himself at full length on the raft, closing his eyes and folding his hands together on his chest.

Ædric pushed a skin under his head, but the monk took no notice. The boy would have liked to have talked, but he respected Corman's fatigue, and watched the other boat's crew instead. They were doing nothing, sitting listlessly on the sides of the boat, some with their black legs hanging over, some with their legs inside, all looking disconsolate and foolish. They evidently had no bows with them, or they would have tried a shot at the raft.

The tide had now gone down a long way, and both boat and raft were left high and dry. Corman still slept, and Ædric was beginning to be very weary of their position, when he thought he heard some one hailing them. He looked about, but could see no one. Thinking it was his fancy, he was going to lie down when again he heard a voice calling, and this time there was no doubt it was some one calling Corman. The boy instantly awoke the monk, who sat up and rubbed his eyes with a dazed look.

"Corman, there is someone calling you."

"Is there? Where?" said Corman, sleepily.

"I don't know where. Listen, there it is again."

Corman got up and stood upon the raft, which had by this time settled down with its weight into the mud. He looked about; the tide had got down so low that the mud banks in places obscured a view of the water. But as Corman looked round he caught sight of a small boat in the Cissanceaster channel as near to him as it could get, which was about a quarter of a mile off however. As soon as the men—for there were two—in the boat saw Corman, they shouted to him again.

"Hullo!" cried Corman; "what dost thou want?"

A confused collection of sounds answered.

"I can't hear thee," shouted Corman. "Who art thou?"

"Wecumfrolfrid" was all Ædric could make out.

"What does that mean?" said Corman. "Speak more clearly," he shouted.

Again the incomprehensible sound came back.

"Well, they've got very weak voices, whoever they are," said Corman.

"We've come from Wilfrid," came at last distinctly across the mud.

"They have come from Wilfrid," cried Ædric, joyously. "We shall escape,

then, after all.”

”I don’t know that,” said Corman. ”How are we to get to them, or they to us?”

At last an idea occurred to him. He got up again.

”Hast thou any mud-pattens?” he shouted.

No answer. He yelled out his question again. This time the word ”No” reached him.

”Canst thou not get any?” he yelled.

”We’ll gongetsome.”

”Well, that is sensible,” said Corman, as he saw the boat go off towards the opposite shore.

CHAPTER XV.

”THE CRUEL CRAWLING FOAM, THE CRUEL HUNGRY FOAM.”

”Well, Ædric, if we can once get over to the other shore we shall be all safe, for Wilfrid is feared by all these South Saxons in a way that I never could understand.”

”But who dost thou think they are who are pursuing us?”

”It must be the Eorldoman Berchthune.”

Corman had now stretched himself out again, and was preparing to have his doze out. Fortunately, the weather was fine. Their situation was uncomfortable enough with fair weather; it would have been deplorable had it rained. The little raft lay stranded on a wide-stretching bank of mud; all round little rivulets washed their muddy courses out of the soft ooze. On one side, but at some distance, a belt of shingle, marked with a long brown streak, the boundary of the sea at high water, was surmounted by a brown growth of wind-blown bushes, relieved here and there by a weird oak-tree, whose blighted growth appealed in outstretched leafless branches to the north-east to protect it from the violent treatment it always received at the hands of its tormentor, the south-west wind; above, a grey sky, windless and still, while all the world below looked sodden, and muddy, and brown. On this world of mud a sea-gull or two were having an eager feast, not unaccompanied by an occasional fight over some succulent crab or juicy winkle, while a curlew dipped its curved beak among the brown sludge, or plaintively cried to its more fortunate mate. Overhead a heron winged its way, looking sardonically down on the dot of the raft and the somewhat larger speck

of the boat. It was a dull, dreary scene—a world of mud, a world of wood, a world of grey and brown.

Ædric looked at it all wearily enough. He began to feel sleepy too. It seemed so odd to be so close to their enemies, doing nothing, and yet perfectly safe. They were not more than five hundred yards off, and in the perfect quiet he could hear the voices of the men as they occasionally spoke.

Gradually he dozed off. The seagulls came nearer, the crabs crawled up on to the edges of the raft, and the lobworms busily raised their piles all round. So passed an hour. But what is it that causes the crabs to sidle away, and the gulls to get up on circling wings, screaming the while?

“Wake up, Corman, wake up, Ædric, and see what your pursuers are doing,” the wild birds seemed to cry.

Wary of doing nothing, the idea had occurred to Berchthune to make a movable kind of platform of planks, by which two men could approach the raft. By laying down one set of boards and then standing on them, they were able to lay another set ahead, then getting on these, they were able to pull up the others, and slide them past and place them ahead again, and so they were able to make laborious but sure way up to their prey. In this way they had already advanced about fifty yards, and were getting more adroit in moving the boards.

Heavily Corman was sleeping, and Ædric was far away in dreamland. Nearer and nearer the boards were being pushed; not without much noise and mirth from those in the boat, however. Several times the two adventurous ones had, in the confidence of their skill, gone too much to the side of their treacherous platform, with the result that they had slipped into the fathomless mud, and had to crawl ignominiously back upon their fickle plank, blacker and humbler men. Each of these checks to their pride had evoked shouts of laughter from their comrades and showers of abuse from Berchthune, who was fretting at the delay.

Ædric was dreaming blissfully, and Corman still snored.

Nearer and nearer the men approached, when a shout from their comrades urged them to more activity. The other boat had been seen returning from the Selsea shore. It ran on the mud at the nearest point to the raft, and a man was seen to get out and walk over the slippery surface towards Corman and Ædric.

“Why, he’s got boards on his feet!” said the begrimed and weary South Saxon, as he squatted on his precarious plank to look at the strange spectacle, disgusted at the mean advantage of the other man.

Quite safely the man slithered his way over the mud, carrying four flat boards in his hands. He had already gone nearly half the distance, and this in about five minutes; while the enterprising South Saxons had taken nearly an hour to get over an equal space.

"Get on with ye, sluggards, or they will escape yet!" shouted Bercthune, stamping with rage at the idea of his game getting away, after all the hours of waiting on the mud, and the certainty of its falling into his hands at last, on which he had consolingly counted. The two South Saxons now realised that they must make the most desperate exertions if they hoped to get to the raft before the other man. They tugged at their boards—splash they went, into the mud ahead; quickly they got upon them—splash came the last ones they had trodden on out of the mud behind; they toiled at them to put them into their places, then jumped upon them, and once more heaved at their last resting-place. They had no time to look up, splash—slosh—heated work; grimy, filthy, slimy toil—and all the time the crew shouted to them, cheering them on, and encouraging them to fresh exertions. Brother Corman was well avenged for the trouble they had given him in the morning. The men were a great deal nearer the raft than the other man was; but he was going on steadily, and well. And in spite of all the South Saxons could do, the boards would stick in the mud, and their labour was terrific. Their plight was piteous: the perspiration rained off their foreheads, and formed little lanes of white down their muddy faces. And all the time Bercthune yelled at them, and the crew hied them on. And now the men were not more than ten yards distant, while the other man was about the same. The excitement on board the boat became intense, for their men, going as they were in a line from them, seemed to be much nearer than the other man, whose whole distance was visible.

"Make a jump for it!" roared Bercthune. "By Woden's beard, I'll have ye flayed alive if ye don't beat that 'nithing' there."

The men tugged amain, but, alas for their success! they could not get their last resting-place up; they had, in their eagerness, placed the board they were standing on too far away from the one they had just left. They leant over the mud, they stretched themselves, they gasped, they dripped, but all to no purpose, and, worse than all, their last standing place began slowly to increase its distance.

They had placed their boards on the slippery brow of one of the many little rivulets which drained the mud-banks, and as they leant over to get at the other planks left behind, all their weight, being on one side, caused the boards to lift at the other end, and begin slowly to slide down into the little gully.

One of the men had reached over so far that, as the board receded, he fell forward on his face in the mud, clutching desperately to the other planks. The other man was just able to recover his balance before too late.

"Hold on to my legs, man, can't thee?" roared the prostrate South Saxon, as loud as he was able, for his mouth was very near the mud. The other man did as he was told. The situation was now too ludicrous, even for the man who was hastening, as fast as his awkward mud-pattens would allow him, to rescue Corman and Ædric. He stopped still and begun to roar with laughter.

By this time Corman was beginning to be aware that there were other existences besides his own. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, looked about him, and could scarcely take in the situation. When he did he also burst out laughing, and Ædric, waking up, was astonished to see Corman sitting on the raft, his mouth wide open, and peals of laughter shaking him from head to foot.

The unfortunate South Saxons were not nearly so much amused; the wretched one, who was now acting as a kind of animated tow-rope to the other planks, was hanging on grimly to the tenacious boards, while his comrade held on fast to his ankles and all the time the other boards were slowly slipping over the ooze. Neither man dare let go, and yet there was no hope of being able to pull the obstinate boards out of the mud, as there was no purchase by which they could be raised, and they were besides slimy with mud.

For a minute the tension lasted; then slowly the man's hands slipped off the greasy planks, and he lay spread out, face downwards, on the ooze. The other South Saxon still held on to his legs, and the two, now that his comrade had let go of the firmly-imbedded planks, glided more speedily into the bed of the little rivulet. There was no danger of the prostrate man sinking into the mud provided he did not attempt to walk. The long weed-like grass that spread over the surface kept him up, so long as he lay outstretched; but he wanted to get on the boards on which his comrade was seated, and the difficulty was how to do it. He wriggled and twisted, and sank his knees into the slime, but at last he succeeded in rolling himself down sideways on to the plank; and there the two men sat, disconsolate and helpless, within six yards of Corman and Ædric.

All this time the Eorldoman Berchthune was shouting himself hoarse with abuse at the wretched adventurers, and Corman and Ædric were enjoying the sport.

Their rescuer had now waddled up to them. Corman knew how to use mud-pattens, but the difficulty was how to carry Ædric. He could use one leg, and they managed by putting one mud-patten on his foot, and holding him between them, to get him off the raft.

The South Saxons, seeing their prey escaping them, when they had so nearly grasped it, and urged on by the abuse of Berchthune, determined to make one more effort. Profiting by his experience of the buoyant nature of the mud, if only its properties were clearly understood, the South Saxon who had wriggled on to the planks beside his comrade determined to try the plan again. It was only six yards—only three times his own length—and the mud-pattens were not yet adjusted. Throwing himself forward on to the mud, he began to wriggle over it towards the raft. The other man, not to be out-done, began doing the same.

"Quick, Ædric, or we shall be too late after all," cried Corman.

The South Saxons were just reaching the raft as Corman and their deliverer

assisted Ædric off between them. Wildly their pursuers flung themselves upon it. The others were only a few paces off. Without hesitating a moment, the first South Saxon reared himself erect on the raft, and sprang fiercely after the retreating figures. He just managed to reach the skirts of Corman's frock, and plunged knee-deep in the mud. He held on to the poor, old worn gown of the monk, who struggled to wrench it out of his grasp, while Ædric and the other man pulled at Corman. Suddenly there was a crack, and the torn handful of Corman's garment remained in the South Saxon's hand, who sank deeper in the yielding mud with the recoil.

The other South Saxon had been more prudent; he stood upon the raft and looked at the now secure Corman and Ædric, and at his miserable comrade—for miserable he was, far more so than at first sight appeared. He wriggled and struggled to get out; plunged his hands and arms up to their elbows in the mud. The more he strove, the more hopeless his position became. Deeper—deeper, down he sank—the mud was now up to his waist. If only he could get one leg out, or throw himself flat upon the mud again; but the suction of the mud was upon him. Its awful grasp had got sure hold of him.

"For the love of Valhalla, lend me a hand!" he roared.

"I can't, man. I can't reach thee!" cried the other.

"Give me that oar—give me them both. Quick!"

The oars were flung to him; he placed them under his armpits, and so low had he sunk that he rested on them. For a time they bore him up, but the slight sticks, only roughly flattened at the end, began to sink too; and the pain in his shoulders was acute. His situation was desperate, for although he was being only very slowly engulfed now, yet none the less was the progress very sure. The tide had begun to rise—it was coming in rapidly. Would there be time for the raft to float before he was suffocated, or would the sea flow over his head first before there was water enough to float it? It was a desperate hope.

Meanwhile, Corman and Ædric were safe in the boat Wilfrid had sent for them, and were far away on the other side.

[image]

How ye South Saxon was held by ye mud, and naught could save him:

Up and up flowed the tide. The sea gulls had had their feast of crabs, and were screaming overhead. The wretched man's eyeballs were starting from his head; his head was sunk between his shoulders. Up and up crept the tide. The

lobworms had ceased to pile their little heaps; the crabs were playfully scampering to meet the crawling froth, pushed further and further with each succeeding wavelet.

No hope! the water has reached his chin; the slimy froth and scum of the mud forms a collar round the doomed man's neck. One more prodigious effort, one despairing, gasping heave. No good! The hands are clasped over the mouth, with the instinct of self-preservation, even in inevitable death; but the water knows no barrier. The froth bubbles up, it is on a level with the lower lip, each wave and ripple washes higher, now the mouth is covered. With a desperate wrench, the gasping man raises his mouth above the water, but, unable to keep up the strain, his head sinks again, and this time the cruel water has reached the nose. The head falls down, a few bubbles, a little brown patch, hardly to be distinguished from seaweed, around which the yellow froth laps in the ripple, is all that marks where a strong man has died. Soon even that will have disappeared, and the place that knew him shall know him no more.

The sea had been washing round the raft for some minutes, but the water-soaked logs were heavy, and had been sucked into the mud. The drowned man's head had been entirely covered before the awkward structure showed any signs of lifting. Indeed, the water was nearly floating over it, and the South Saxon had begun to dread a similar death to that of his comrade, when the raft gave a lurch, and once more was afloat. The man had no oars, or anything to propel it with; but as the other boat would be afloat also before many minutes, they would come and pick him up.

Presently the idea occurred to him to push the raft with one leg on the bottom; in this way, and with a favouring tide he was enabled at last to reach his companions.

The Eorldoman Berchthune was very sullen, and greeted the man with violent abuse for not having made more haste at first; and this was all the misguided ceorl got for having volunteered on a perilous enterprise: for having been face to face with death, and that almost the slowest, most lingering, which could happen to man. But then in those days what were men made for but for death?

The tide had now risen high enough to float the boat. Berchthune was about to give orders to shove her off the bank, when a horseman galloping hastily down the shingle on the shore, and riding his horse as far out as he dared, shouted to the boat:

"Cædwalla has been made king of Wessex, and is marching upon us."

There was now no thought of pursuing Ædric. Orders were instantly given to turn the boat's head towards Boseham again, and it was not long before they reached its little quay. There the horseman met them, having ridden his horse at full speed, and then Berchthune learnt fuller particulars of the startling news.

Cædwalla was only a day's march distant, advancing with a powerful force of West Saxon eorls, and his own veteran band of faithful followers, no longer outlaws, but honoured friends of the king. He was burning to avenge his last defeat and reassert his claim to the throne of the South Saxons.

This was grave news. Berchthune mounted his horse and rode off at once towards Cissanceaster, directing his followers to come after him as soon as possible.

But all this time Ædric and Corman were making the best of their way to Wilfrid. Corman, indeed, when he saw that Ædric was safe, intended going back to look after Father Dicoll, but Wilfrid's men advised him not, and as there was no boat, for they would not lend him theirs, he was compelled to go on. He cast one more lingering, sad look at Boseham, and mourned over his dearly-loved friend, Father Dicoll.

But Ædric was delighted; he should not now have to live at Selsea among perfect strangers. After a long ride over a drearily flat country, they came to a clearing amid the gorse and bush; on the other side of this clearing a building, that to Corman and Ædric looked immense, towered aloft over a hamlet of low thatched houses and a few farm buildings. The smell of the sea was all round, and stacks of seaweed filled the air with their peculiar odour.

What struck Corman and Ædric, however, was the order and tidiness of everything. The thatched cottages were well thatched, the walls looked well built, and the few people they met all looked better fed and happier than those about Cissanceaster and Boseham. As they got nearer to the large building a solemn sound rose and fell in measured cadence. Ædric had never heard a sound like it, at least not produced by artificial means; it was to him like the wind playing among the tall trees and the sea rolling on the shore mingled with the deep mutter of thunder on the horizon.

"What is it, Corman? is it an enchantment?"

"No, my son; it is the service of vespers in the new church Wilfrid has been building. He has brought over from Rome new wind instruments; and Gregory, the celebrated bishop of Rome, who sent Augustine, the monk, hither, has set new music to the canticles of the church. Thou wilt now be able to see how Christians perform their service of the voice and heart to God."

"It is very grand," said Ædric, who had never heard any music more beautiful than the harp, and no singing in combination more than a chorus to some interminable gleeman's tale in verse.

They had now got well into the village, and were approaching a long, low, barn-like structure; round the entrance everything was unusually tidy, and some attempt had been made to form a path of shingle and sand, edged with white flints, from the neighbouring beach. In front of this door their guide stopped,

Ædric was lifted off the horse-litter by Corman and the other man, and they entered a large room or hall. Ædric had never seen a room like it. The floor was very clean, and a fresh pile of reeds lay near the door, to replace the soiled ones that served as a mat. There was a long table down the middle of the room, and across one end was another table, in the centre of which was a large massive oaken chair; on each side of the table were wooden squares, or trenchers, which served for plates; by the side of these were horn drinking-cups. At the end of the room, opposite the large chair, was a wooden reading-desk, and on this was a splendid manuscript, heavily bound and chained to the desk. Ædric could see that there were some lovely pictures in it, and he longed to examine the volume. He had never seen a book in his life before, and the nearest idea he had ever had of a drawing had been some carvings on a horn which his father very highly prized, and some pictured hangings which were treasured among the family's most valued belongings, and which tradition said had been taken in the sack of the haunted ruins at Brædyng. Father Dicoll and the poor monks had no books; they had no parchment, and no paper. Ædric had heard of writing, but it had always been spoken of with awe, for it was considered to savour somewhat of magic. It was therefore with a solemn feeling, as well as one of curiosity, that he looked at the large mysterious volume. At the side of the room opposite the door, and nearly in the middle on that side, was a bright fire. The logs were piled up on iron bars, and a large square of hard trodden clay served as hearth. The smoke from the fire found its way up and out of the hall by an aperture in the roof immediately above it, but, as it did not always take this way out, there was a strong smell of burnt wood and smoke in the room.

Ædric and Corman were led up to the bench before the fire, and told that the clerks who were with Wilfrid were at service and they were to wait there until it was over. Ædric felt awestruck at the silence, the neatness, the comfort of everything, but especially at the stillness of the place, the hall of his own home having always been full of noisy domestics, familiar and lazy; the remains of the last, and indeed of several previous feasts, were left on the floor, and the whole place habitually reeked of feasting, rude plenty, and dirt. But here was something very different. Order and cleanliness were visible everywhere.

Presently there was a noise of feet outside on the shingle path, and a tall figure entered the room. It was Wilfrid, followed by his two faithful companions, Bernwine and Hildila. Corman at once arose and stood in submissive silence before the great churchman, while Ædric tried to get up, but was arrested by the kind voice of Wilfrid bidding him be seated.

The boy was at once won by the gentle voice and kind smile of the bishop, but was at the same time much in awe of him. Somehow he seemed so very much farther away from him than Father Dicoll had seemed; it was not that he did not

greet him in quite as friendly a way, or with even a kinder smile, but the boy had a feeling that he was a much smaller object, and could not possibly be of any interest to Wilfrid. At the same time there came across him all that Dicoll had said about him, and, with the instinct of a boy who is quick to recognise what is put on or assumed in manner, he felt as if Wilfrid's kindness were a matter of policy, and not a matter of the heart. It is not to be supposed that Ædric could have given these reasons for his awe of him, but in very great awe of Wilfrid he certainly was, and what was even more curious, brother Corman seemed equally in awe of the bishop. As not infrequently happens when very ingenuous, candid natures come in contact with deeper, more intricate, more commanding minds, it seemed to strike both that it was Wilfrid's part to be both kind and sweet in manner, while with Corman himself it was his nature to be so.

"My son, thou must be very tired after thy journey," said Wilfrid. "Thy couch is prepared, and supper shall be taken to thee there. I will entrust thee to the care of Father Bernwine, who will make a careful nurse, and see that thou art well cared for. In the morning, if all be well, I will talk with thee. Meanwhile, Good-night, and may the peace of God go with thee."

This was all said with such sweet dignity that Ædric, who would much rather have sat up and did not feel at all sleepy, did not venture to dispute the arrangement, although at home he would undoubtedly have boisterously done so. He was supported out of the room, therefore, by Bernwine, after taking an affectionate leave of Corman, who remained awaiting the bishop's instructions.

CHAPTER XVI.

"BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS."

The next day Ædric awoke early. It took him some time to realise where he was. The dim light of morning came in through a narrow aperture in the walls, and he could only just make out surrounding objects. All was very quiet. He could see that he was in a little room, neatly furnished with a wooden settle or stool, and the wooden bed on which he lay. There was a little wooden cross on the wall by the side of his bed, and some writing underneath it, at which Ædric stared, not quite liking it. He thought it must be writing, for it was rather like some marks on the horn at home, and which he had been told were spells. He wished it was rather lighter, or that some one would come, for he could not tell what the

runes might do, they might contain some enchantment, it was better not to look at them. Presently he heard the same solemn sound he had heard last night, it sounded very beautiful as it plaintively pealed through the building, now rising in sustained unison, then sinking in deeper notes, appearing to swell and sink and swell again, appealing in mystical utterance to an invisible but all-powerful Being. When the music ceased, Ædric could hear a continuous sound of human tongues, then one deep musical voice, followed by a solemn melodious blending of all the tones.

Soon after, he heard the noise of steps at his room, over the entrance of which a curtain hung, and in another moment Corman entered, much to the boy's relief.

"Oh! how glad I am to see thee, Corman, I feared thou hadst gone away."

"I should not have gone without seeing thee first, Ædric; how hast thou slept?"

"Very well. I feel much better, I believe I shall be able to walk without any help, to-morrow, if I am allowed to practise a little to-day—but what was that sound? what have they been doing? I never heard anything like it."

"That was the morning service, or matins, and I have just come from it. But thou hadst better get up now, and I will help thee into the Refectory, where we are all going to have breakfast."

When Corman and Ædric entered the large room or hall, into which they had first come the evening before, they found the room nearly full. Wilfrid was at the head of the table, on each side of him were Bernwine and Hildila, while all down the long table were a few monks, some lay domestics, and several boys, who all looked curiously at Ædric. One of the monks led Corman and Ædric to their vacant places, and then grace was said by another monk at the lower end of the table, after which all sat down, and the same monk who had said grace, began to read out of the beautiful book that had so attracted Ædric's attention the night before.

The breakfast consisted of a portion of fish to each person, and a portion of oatmeal porridge made with water. There was water to drink, but at Wilfrid's table there was a jug of milk, of which, however, the Bishop only took very sparingly, but he sent it down to Ædric, and another monk who seemed delicate, bidding them take it for their bodily comfort.

The fish had been caught by Wilfrid himself, who had taught the ignorant South Saxons how to supply themselves with this wholesome food, and, like many men remarkable for their intellectual gifts, he was especially pleased with the success of his skill in the gentle craft.

No word was spoken during the meal, all listened attentively to the reading of the monk. He was reading from "The Dialogues" of Pope Gregory the Great,

but Ædric naturally did not understand a word, as it was all in Latin; when Corman afterwards told him the marvellous tales that the monk had read, he wished much that he could have understood it, and longed more than ever to look at the pictures, and made up his mind he would like to learn to read. When all had finished, the reader closed the book and said grace, after which he sat down and had his own breakfast, while the rest dispersed. It appeared that each man had his allotted task; some went to the outhouses whither the platters and other appliances of the breakfast table were taken, and were there washed up; one of the lay brothers winding up a bucket of water from the well hard by, and heating it in a copper. Others went to a tool-house, and taking their hoes and mattocks went out to the garden on the south side of the little settlement. The choir boys were taken off to the church and were there taught general knowledge, as well as music, by Bernwine. Hildila took two or three monks with him and they carefully practised writing under his instruction.

Wilfrid beckoned to Corman to bring Ædric up to him.

The boy felt very shy when he saw the clear piercing grey eyes of the celebrated Bishop searching him through and through. For in Wilfrid's face there was that presence of a will, which is always so marked in men who have been great in the world, and this will makes its presence felt without a word being spoken, as the needle, when magnetised, is powerless to resist the attraction of the mysterious pole.

"My son, brother Corman has told me all about thee. He tells me how patient thou hast been under suffering, and how thou hast been brought to wish to lead a better life. Thank God for thy pain, for by it thou hast been enabled to learn the way of salvation, and mayst be intended for a blessed purpose, even the awakening of thy people from the dark night of Paganism to the glorious light of the Gospel."

Ædric looked timidly at Wilfrid: he did not know what to say, he could not talk to him as he had done to Father Dicoll and brother Corman. He felt he could only learn by hearing, not by questioning, which, to a boy, is so much the preferable way, but which, unless carefully directed, leads many times to a desultory and fruitless end.

Wilfrid went on, seeing that the boy was listening: "Thou wilt be able to learn many things here. When thou art thoroughly taught in all that is necessary, thou shalt be baptised; and when thou hast quite recovered, thou canst return to thine own land and teach thine own people. For what more beautiful or holy object canst thou have in life than the hope of meeting those who have been brought to eternal life by thy means? Think what a blessed thing it would be if the Almighty should employ thee as His messenger. And be not daunted, my son, by the scoffs and jeers of the world; rather count them as so much glorious

proof that thou art doing God's will. What saith our Lord: 'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you. Rejoice and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven.' Think not, my son, either that the reward is far off: all good men have reckoned that the sufferings of this present life are as nothing compared with the joys or sufferings of eternity. Think, for it is perfectly true, the short period of thy life here will make or mar thine everlasting life. Thou canst not grasp the word 'ever-lasting'; neither can I. But now thou lookest forward to change; each day, each hour has some hope in it. Then, there will be no change, not in the sense in which we understand change; and if we have hopes, for no man knoweth what is beyond, unless, perchance he has seen it in dim visions of the night, like that soldier thou didst hear of whom the holy Gregory knew—but I forgot, thou dost not yet understand Latin—they are hopes that will not affect our weal or woe, for it is by this life we shall be judged. And all men now believe that the times are at hand when God shall come to judge His people. What said the holy Gregory, now nearly a hundred years ago: 'But a short time, and the earth and the heavens will burn, and among the blazing elements, amid angels and archangels, and thrones and dominions, and principalities and powers, the terrible Judge will appear!' The times are very evil; around us are wars, and rumours of war; famine and pestilence have been stalking throughout the land; kingdom rises against kingdom; and who shall say that the time of our visitation draweth not nigh. Who then, my son, would count the sufferings of this present time as compared with the joys that shall be hereafter? Work then, my son, pray, mortify thy flesh, wrestle against the desires of the body, not forgetting that while we do only our duty, we cannot merit anything of ourselves, but can only be saved through the all-abounding grace of our Saviour. Of these things thou wilt learn more from the instruction of Bernwine, and may the blessing of the Almighty rest upon thee. If thou art in any difficulties, or doubts, or earthly sorrows, come to me, though of these I trust thou wilt soon be free, for the first step in the Divine life is to think naught of earthly affection and lusts, for what said the holy Fulgentius[1]: 'Youth can easily bear any burden when once it has learnt to despise human affections.' I trust, in a short time, to hear well of thee from thy instructor, and that the lessons thou art learning are likely to bear fruit. But remember docility is the chief quality. Thou must pray for the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which most becomes a follower of our Lord, for, truly, Solomon says: 'My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction.'"

[1] I have not ventured to convey literally the harsh expressions of St. Fulgentius, nor in this chapter or elsewhere have I attempted to render the severity of the early monastic ideas. In a rude age,

and with the perpetual recurrence of awful crimes, severe measures and pitiless conclusions were necessary—but in a work intended for the young, it is better not to represent the full force of religious thought in the 7th century.

After this little discourse, Wilfrid arose, and saying that he would send Bernwine to them in a little time, left the refectory.

"He seems much better than I had expected," said Ædric to Corman, "but I don't think I could ever talk to him as I did to Father Dicoll. He seems as though he knew too much."

"I daresay thou wilt find Bernwine easier to talk to, although Father Dicoll could not have talked to you in a kinder way, or told you anything better. It is not with children Wilfrid would show anything that Father Dicoll or I should disapprove. He is far too wise and good a man to let children see that there are controversies among Christians, and I sometimes think we have done wrong in letting thee know that we differ on some points from the Bishop. If we have erred, may the Lord forgive us; but, truly, the heart of man is desperately deceitful and wicked, and the Evil one is always on the watch to catch one tripping. But here comes Bernwine. Now, I hope thou wilt remember all Father Dicoll and I have tried to teach thee."

As Corman spoke, Bernwine entered the refectory. The ecclesiastic who now appeared, had not contrasted favourably in appearance as he sat next Wilfrid. He was strongly built, stout, and florid in complexion; but his bright, black eyes twinkled with a kindly expression when he spoke, and the corners of his mouth had an occasional twitch, which added to the humorous way he had in talking.

"Well, my son, and so thou hast come to the island of the seals, hast thou? truly an amphibious kind of place at the best of times; but when it blows a gale, it is really hard to see where the dry land is. The sea flies over us in such sheets that I verily believe there won't be much island for the seals, or anyone else soon. And how dost thou feel after thy day on the plank bed, in the midst of the mud?"

Ædric was amused at the priest's garrulity, and said that he felt very nearly well.

"That's right, that's right. Thou wilt soon be able to walk to matins, complines, and vespers; and we'll give thee a job in the garden that will just suit thee."

"But mayn't I learn to read, and hear stories out of that splendid book?"

"All in good time, my son, and each in its place; doubtless, thou hast learnt many stories all the time thou hast been nursed by our kind brother Corman here."

"We have done all we could to awaken in him a lively faith in our holy religion," said Corman.

"I doubt it not, my brother, and the good seed will bear happy fruit some day. And so thou comest from Wihtea? Well, now, I have looked at that island many a time, for we can see it quite plainly from the shore, and wondered who lived there. I come from a very different part; my home was in Bernicia, on the borders of Deira. Thou rememberest Gregory's pun—*De ira Dei*? No; of course thou dost not—how shouldst thou. Thou never learnedst Latin. Ah! but we will teach thee; dost thou know anything at all?"

"Yes, I know many things. I can row, I can hit a mark with my bow and arrow at sixty paces, and I can ride."

"Ah, all excellent accomplishments, I don't doubt; I could do most of them myself at thy age; but that was not what I meant. Canst thou say any prayers? Dost thou know thy letters? Hast thou ever had the Bible read to thee?"

"I can say 'Our Father,' in Latin as well as English. I do not know any letters. Father Dicoll had no books, and so he could not teach me to read; but he tried to teach me my letters, when I lay outside the hut, by scratching them on the sand; but as there were stones in the way, I couldn't always make them out. But he used to say long pieces of tales from the Bible. He told me often about David, and that big giant: about a great ship that took in all the animals, and about a magician whom the lions would not eat."

"I see thou hast profited by thy stay at Boseham. We must see that thou dost not lose what thou hast learnt, and, perhaps, we may even add something to it. Now, the first thing is to explain to thee how thou wilt pass thy time here. Thou canst not yet do as the others do, for thou canst not move about freely; but I will tell a boy to take care of thee, and always help thee to move when there is need, and to be a companion to thee; his name is Sigfryd, and he is the son of the South Saxon Eorldoman Tosti. He will like to help thee, for he has been taught that 'whosoever will be great, let him be as a servant,' and again, that we should 'bear each other's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.' For the present, then, thou wilt get up at seven and come to matins, then thou wilt spend an hour learning to read: then thou wilt have breakfast. After that, Father Hildila will teach thee the holy life, and Bible history. Then at noon, thou wilt try and take a little exercise, with Sigfryd's aid; which over, thou wilt come to me, with the other boys, and learn the meaning of the prayers and daily services, and practice responses and chanting, according to the method of the sainted Gregory. After that, the bell will sound for service; thou wilt then go back to thy cell and meditate on all thou hast learnt, remembering to ask me such questions as have occurred to thee— But Beate Martine! what is all this racket and noise about?" broke off Father Bernwine, as a confused din of shouts, and cries, and struggling,

resounded outside, mingled with the tolling of the bell which summoned all the community to assemble in the hardly-finished stone church.

Bernwine and Corman instantly ran to the door, and were nearly knocked down by a crowd of men; some armed, some without arms, rushing into the room.

"Holy Benedict!" exclaimed Father Bernwine, "but who are ye, and what do ye want here? breaking in upon our pious meditation, with no more compunction than a wild hog into a garden of cucumbers. What means it all?"

One of the intruders, more collected than the rest, answered:

"Be not wroth, holy Father; to implore pity, shelter and protection, we have come. We have no wish to do thee injury, and will go where thou mayest appoint, if only thou wilt save our lives."

"Surely, man; but who threatens thy life? What means this noise and tumult outside? Let me get out to find Wilfrid; he may be slain in all this confusion, for aught I know."

All the while the bell kept tolling, and the burly form of Bernwine forced a way through the crowding mass. Outside there was even worse tumult. Men on horseback were galloping about—a few, who seemed not quite to have lost all self-control, were forming themselves into some sort of order, and under the guidance of a few mounted eorls, were marching off to take up a position on the road leading to Cissanceaster. Bernwine could see that a great many were grievously wounded, and many had fallen to the ground either from exhaustion, or from the dreadful nature of their wounds. Hastily forcing his way to the door of the church, which was thronged with fugitives, the priest elbowed his way through the crowd, and entering the sacred building, he found Wilfrid robed in his full episcopal vestments, the rest of the community drawn up in processional order, and Hildila carrying the cross of the Arch-episcopal see of York, before Wilfrid.

"What means all this tumult, *quare fremuerunt gentes*, holy Bishop," said the panting Bernwine.

"It is the rout of the Eorldoman Berchthune and Andhune by Cædwalla, whom they rashly strove to oppose. We must perform the noblest duty of a Christian shepherd, and guard the flock from the edge of the sword. That is why I ordered the bell to call us all together, that we may all go forth to turn away the wrath of the victor."

All being now ready, the choir led by the melodious voice of the chaunter, Ædbert, raised the Psalm, "*Eripe me de inimicis meis, Deus meus, et ab insurgentibus in me, libera me,*" and slowly defiled through the thronging mass of fugitives.

As the procession, so entirely novel to the uncultured South Saxons, made its way across the open space between the church and the rest of the buildings of the little community, the panic-stricken crowd seemed to recover something

like self-control, and many of the men followed or accompanied the procession. Wilfrid had given orders that they were to proceed slowly along the road towards Cissanceaster, in the hope that he would fall in with Cædwalla, and prevent any further fighting; for he had learnt that one of the South Saxon eorldoman still kept up a hopeless struggle, while it was reported that Berchthune was slain. With great difficulty, and at a very slow pace, the white-robed choir, the grey frocked monks, and the gorgeously vested Wilfrid, stemmed the still hurrying bodies of fugitives that drifted away from the rout ahead. Nearer and nearer came the shouts of the combatants, the flash of an axe, or the gleam of a spear, showed where blows were being given, and the clang of metal striking metal rang like an army of rivetters engaged in their noisy toil. Many of the rallied South Saxons were ready to rush forward to renew the fight, but the voice of Wilfrid restrained them, and in obedience to a sense of awe, which his presence always excited in their superstitious and ignorant minds, the men restrained their ardour, and waited to see what would happen.

Wilfrid, with the eye of a leader, at once saw that in the heat and confusion of the fight, his little company might easily be swept away; he therefore directed the leading priest to turn to one side and lead the procession to an embankment or little knoll on the way side, large enough to contain all the community. There stationing himself in the most conspicuous position, with his cross held aloft by his cross-bearer, surrounded by his clergy, and flanked by his choir of fair Saxon boys, he calmly awaited the approach of Cædwalla.

The stream of fugitives flowed past him uninterruptedly. At last a struggling band of horsemen, leading among them the fainting form of an old, grey-bearded warrior, his helmet hacked, the hawk's wings gone, one arm hanging down limp and useless, the other aimlessly holding the reins of his horse, came past in wild confusion, hard pressed by a victorious troop of warriors, flushed with victory, and striking mercilessly at the panic-stricken fugitives; brilliantly conspicuous among them was Cædwalla, his eyes flashing, his hair streaming behind him, on his head a steel cap, surmounted with a golden dragon, his steel-ringed hauberk gleaming in the sun. Both hands grasped his two-edged battle-axe, and the reins hung loose on his horse's neck; while the terrible axe flashed, and sank and flashed again, as he hewed his way up to the scarcely resisting band of South Saxons, who still strove to save their wounded eorldoman, the devoted personal following of the chief, who scorned to live if their lord were slain.

As the young king, looking the very impersonation of the god of battles, intoxicated with the strife, came abreast of Wilfrid, the Bishop called aloud in a clear, commanding voice:

"Cædwalla, my lord, put up thy sword now, and give thanks to God, who hath given thee the victory. As for the vanquished, I will answer for it, they

shall not trouble thee. Harken now to the voice of the Lord, who speaketh through me, His unworthy servant, and shed no more innocent blood. Remember, 'Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord, I will repay'; and again, 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.'"

At the first sound of the clarion voice of the Bishop, Cædwalla had reined in his horse, and when he saw the striking group of calm men surrounding the ascetic and commanding figure of the celebrated Bishop, he at once gave orders to stop all further fighting, and turned his horse towards the speaker.

The scene was a very picturesque one. The handsome, bronzed face of the victorious young king, looking every inch a daring soldier, as well as commanding chieftain, mounted on a powerful white horse, whose trappings were adorned with large gold studs, mounting bosses of cairngorm and polished agate stones. Behind him a fierce band of eager warriors, eorls, and chiefs of the West-Saxon kingdom, with here and there the weather-beaten face of some of his own faithful band of outlaws, who had stood by Cædwalla in his desperate fortunes. In front, the tall figure and noble countenance of Wilfrid in his gorgeous robes, standing on the highest part of the little knoll, his cross-bearer holding the golden cross, richly embroidered with crystals and agates; the white surpliced choir mingling with the darker robes of the monks. Above, a cloud-flecked sky, bright and changing, casting flying shadows over the brown land, wind-blown and desolate, while all around were masses of men still flying in wild panic, or falling in death from the effects of their wounds. All these combined to make a striking picture.

Cædwalla, not yet a Christian, and seeing only in Wilfrid a wise man, and one who had seen much of the world, besides being surrounded with a halo of superstition, as the possessor of talismans and charms far above all others in England, was also mindful of the benefits he had lately received from him; with wise policy, therefore, he at once saluted the Bishop, and gave orders to stop all further slaughter.

[image]

St. Wilfrid goeth to meet Cædwalla, and biddeth him stay ye battle

"My Father," he said, "I am fortunate in my meetings with thee. The last time we met I was a king, and now the next time, behold, I am king again, and this time my title is far above that of a petty prince of the South Saxons, and each time victory had smiled upon my arms."

"Give thanks, therefore, to the God of Hosts, my son, and humble thyself before the mighty hand of God, who bringeth down the lofty from their seat,

and raiseth up them that are of low estate. But wilt thou and thy faithful adherents come back with me? Such as our poor community can offer is freely at thy service, and thou canst rest thee after the dangers and fatigues of the past day.”

Cædwalla willingly accepted; and the little procession turned towards the settlement, raising the psalm, *”Jubilate Deo, omnis terra, servite Domino in laetitia,”* followed by Cædwalla and his retinue. Arrived at the open space before the buildings, Cædwalla gave directions to his chief eorldoman to see that his men were kept well in hand, and to encourage the South Saxons to go to their homes peaceably. Parties were sent out to forage, and one band of warriors was sent back with the most important prisoners to garrison Cissanceaster, and take measures for pacifying the district. Cædwalla then entered the refectory, which had been cleared of all the fugitives, and where hasty preparations for an impromptu feast were being pushed rapidly forward, under the practical eye of Bernwine and Eolla, the cellarer.

The feast that followed was much like previous feasts, excepting that there was more order and ceremony. Cædwalla recognised his young friend Ædric, whom he had first met in the boat with Biggun and Wulfstan, and asked him what news he had of the expedition, and when he heard that no news had come, he looked grave.

The rest of the day passed tranquilly enough. Cædwalla had much to arrange with Wilfrid, and also received much sound advice from the prelate.

About dusk a monk came in, and reported that the sky all above Wihtea seemed on fire, and flames could plainly be seen arising from the hills at the east end of the island, and all men were marvelling what it could be. Cædwalla and Wilfrid hastened out to look, and when they got to the door, a wonderful sight met their eyes, a vast blaze was going up to the sky, and lurid smoke was spreading over the heavens. As they were looking, there was a commotion in the crowd, and a wounded and reeling warrior half staggered, was half supported, to where Cædwalla and Wilfrid were standing.

”Beate Augustine!” cried Wilfrid, *”What more destruction has happened?”*

CHAPTER XVII.

”IN THE LOST BATTLE, BORNE DOWN BY THE FLYING.”

The night after the old eorldoman, Ælfhere, had been brought back to his home-

stead at Brædyngge, passed away peacefully enough. The outposts were relieved at the proper times, and no movement of any kind was detected from the direction of Wihtgarsbyrig. The next morning Wulfstan woke up, and it took him some few moments to realise that he had ever been away from home, all the past week's adventures appearing like a dream. He was on his own bed in his own room, which he shared with Ædric, and the absence of his brother first brought back the reality of past events. Soon afterwards, the voice of old Biggun outside roused him from his dozing reverie. He sprang out of bed, hastily performed his simple toilet, and went quickly into the dining hall. There a not unusual sight met his eyes, for after every festival the dining hall formed the sleeping-place of those who had succumbed to their too-convivial propensities, and there had been no exception in last night's entertainment. Stepping across the prostrate Wihtwaras, Wulfstan sprang into the open air, rejoiced to see around him all the well-known home life. Although a great slaughter had fallen upon the poultry, who had suffered from a double attack, for Arwald's people had not stinted themselves, and yesterday they had every reason to regret the restoration of their lawful lord, there yet remained a promising brood. The lowing of some cows from a shed near, showed that all the animals were not killed. Crossing over to the shed, the boy found an old friend of his, the cowherd, Stuff's father, milking the cows.

"Why, Wulfstan, how thou beest grown, and they tells me thou hast done lots of things; but these have been sad times. The work I have had to please those villains Arwald left here! But they tell me thou hast killed one of them. Only think of that, now!"

"Oh, that was nothing. But dost thou know I saved old Biggun's life? He never told thee, I know."

After drinking a horn full of milk, the boy rushed off to explore his former favourite haunts, and did not return until the loud blast of a horn announced some important event. When he got back, he found the morning meal was nearly over in the great hall. Athelhune and Wulf were still sitting at the table, and Ceolwulf was listening to the report of one of the ceorls, who dwelt a few miles away on the Æscing Down[1] side of Brædyngge. Ceolwulf's face looked grave, and after he had heard all the man had to say, he turned to Athelhune, and muttered a few words to him, upon which a consultation in a low voice was carried on by the two chieftains and the old man.

[1] Ashy Down.

Ælfhere was lying on a couch in a sheltered part of the hall, and brother Malachi

was sitting up by his side with his arm in a sling. Wulfstan went up at once to his father, and was pleased to find that he still continued to gain strength, and rejoiced that brother Malachi was fast recovering from the hardships and wounds he had suffered. He then set to work to make up for the missing breakfast, and paid no further attention to anybody until this serious duty was satisfactorily performed.

Before he had finished, Ceolwulf left the hall, accompanied by Athelhune, while Wulf sat gazing vacantly before him, and caressing a large wolfhound, who was resting his head on his knee. Presently the prince got up, and, stretching himself, strolled out of the room, saying as he did so to the wounded Ælfhere, that he was just going to see how things were passing outside.

The news that had arrived was very serious. Arwald was on the march, with nearly the whole force of the Western Wihtwaras, to crush the little party that had so boldly effected a lodgement on Binbrygge-*ea*.

Ceolwulf had at once hastily sent out to fetch in all the following Ælfhere could count on. The bravest had unfortunately fallen fighting round their lord in the first assault and capture of the homestead, but a good number could still be reckoned on who would be likely to give a report of themselves in an encounter with the enemy. But the force that was on the march against them was treble, nearly quadruple, the number they could hope to oppose to them. Arwald fully realised the importance of crushing this little band of enemies before Cædwalla arrived in the island. And he had received sure information that he did intend to arrive and re-assert the dominion of Wessex as soon as ever he had settled with his opponents among the South Saxons.

No time therefore was to be lost if Ælfhere's men hoped to save their lives. The question which most seriously presented itself was whether they would abandon the old homestead, and retire to the ruins again, or retreat still further to the stockade Athelhune had made the evening after their shipwreck, on the summit of the wooded hill under Binbrygge down.

Ceolwulf and Athelhune were in favour of this plan, but Wulf liked the comfort of the old house and the abundance of good cheer which he saw around him; he was naturally reckless and preferred a positive, although precarious comfort, to a certainty of discomfort and a doubtful safety.

Ceolwulf was convinced that all would be lost if they remained at Brædyng. He knew the certain destruction that would await them, and urged that their only hope was to take up such a position as should enable them to hold out until Cædwalla could come or send them reinforcements; and they would send at once to tell him of their situation. Strongly stockaded as they would be at their old post, with the creek at their feet, dense woods behind and around them, and many defensible positions between them and the place where they had left the

old boat; there they could fight with every advantage to themselves, and disadvantage to Arwald. To these arguments all that the Atheling Wulf replied, was by saying they were good men enough to fight any number of beggarly Wihtwaras, and he didn't see why he should stir out of comfortable quarters for anyone. The matter was at last referred to Ælfhere, who at once decided they must give up all hopes of defending the homestead, and must retire to the knoll above the Yare, locally known as Yaver wood. At this decision the Atheling Wulf was much dissatisfied, but there was no good disputing it, for he had only brought two men with him, and Athelhune quite agreed with Ælfhere.

All was now confusion. The neighbouring ceorls and thralls were rapidly coming in, and with them came such of their worldly goods as they could carry. Their wives and families accompanied them, and the dismay was universal when it was known that the homestead was to be abandoned, and all would have to cross to Binbrygge-ea, or be left at the mercy of Arwald. And what that mercy would be after this rising against his authority, all knew; and none were anxious to experience. Many would have liked to go back to their homes, but the thought that their lot would not be much better, deterred them; indeed it might be very much worse, for Arwald would be sure to plunder them although he might spare their lives, while in the event of Ælfhere being able to hold out until Cædwalla arrived, and victory then smiling upon their arms, as was not unlikely, a terrible punishment would await them at the hands of their justly enraged lord. Moved by such considerations, the crowd of armed ceorls with their households, and such belongings as they had brought, prepared to cross the ford over the Yare as the tide was now low, and make the best of their way to the wild fastnesses of Binbrygge-ea.

Athelhune and Ceolwulf showed much judgment in the direction and management of this heterogeneous mass, and Wulfstan, to his great joy, was allowed to act as a kind of aide-de-camp to Ceolwulf. The fighting men were sifted out, and formed up with the Boseham and West Saxon warriors. These numbered not more than seven men altogether, without counting Athelhune, Ceolwulf and the Atheling Wulf, each of whom, however, counted as hosts in themselves, for they were thoroughly experienced, toughened warriors. Including all the fighting men available, there was a respectable force of more than a hundred men. This body, on the whole well armed with shields, axes, spears, and swords, while some few possessed bows and arrows, was placed under the command of Wulf the Atheling, out of compliment to his rank, and were not to march until later in the day. Wulfstan was still more delighted at being told to get all the boys together and make them collect all the stones they could find, the sharper the flints the better; many of the boys possessed slings, and like boys of all ages in the lower order, were excellent shots at bringing down rabbits, or birds sitting.

Ceolwulf had counted on this assistance to annoy the enemy on their advancing to attack the stockade. Ceolwulf himself had undertaken, with the aid of the most infirm and oldest of Ælfhere's servants, to go on with the crowd of ceorls and thralls who could be spared from the first fighting line under Wulf, and superintend the crossing of the ford, and then enlarge and perfect the stockade. The chieftains had carefully counted their time, and had arranged to have their forces concentrated on the Yaver hill before sunset. They reckoned that Arwald would not reach the homestead at Brædyngge before the middle or end of the afternoon, that his men would be wearied with their march, and that, if they discovered where they had retreated, they would not attempt to cross the ford at high water, or care to stir at all for the matter of that, as all their food would either have to be brought with them, or they must go without, for it was carefully provided that every article of food, alive or dead, should be cleared out of the neighbourhood, and safely stored in the stockade, or else behind the protection of that little fortress, which commanded the only approach to the woods and commons beyond, between Binbrygge down and the Foreland, and which would serve as pasturage for the cattle. Thus Binbrygge-ea would form a little fortified settlement surrounded by the sea on nearly every side, and accessible only by the ford at low water, or else by the sandy beach which kept the sea from encroaching on the Yare; which stream must be in any case crossed before getting into the peninsula at all. Athelhune had undertaken the command of the outposts, whom it was most necessary to keep to their work properly; and it was arranged that as soon as his men caught sight of Arwald's column advancing, they should either make a pretended attack on the advanced body, and so drive them in on the main column, if the nature of the ground or Arwald's forces gave any opportunity of this being done without loss to Athelhune's men, or they should retire at once to the heavy troops under Wulf, and then the whole would retreat across the Yare in good order, and unseen by the enemy, who would find the old homestead totally deserted, and would most likely suspect some stratagem.

Everything was now perfectly arranged. The long line of straggling countrymen, with their wives, children, and cattle, had been slowly winding down to the ford across the Yare, for some time past, and were seen here and there among the bushes on the other side in their ascent to the woods behind Yaver hill. It was now a little past noon; there were many picturesque groups still left, however, seated around the homestead. Mothers looking after their little ones, and resting after the long walk they had already had before setting out again. Ælfhere and Malachi had been carried on litters down to the ford, and were already some way on the other side, and Ceolwulf had set all the able-bodied men who had reached the stockade, to fell more trees, clear the ground all round as far as possible, and enlarge the accommodation. It was not intended that the women and children

should stop here. They were to go on with the less able-bodied men, and the cattle, and take shelter in a secluded dell under the Binbrygge down not more than a mile away, but in the midst of dense brushwood, and in a spot known only to the local inhabitants.

It was now getting on for two hours past noon. Athelhune had gone off with his band of skirmishers to try and get news of the enemy; not knowing the country himself he was compelled to have recourse to the aid of one of Ælfhere's servants for guidance. It would have been better if Ceolwulf had undertaken this service, but the pride of Athelhune would not allow him to superintend mere manual labour, however important, and so he was assigned the post of honour next to that of the Atheling Wulf.

Athelhune's guide led him up the route or track that passed behind the homestead, and crossing the ridge of Æscing down dipped again towards the central valley of the island. From this high ground the Wessex chieftain commanded a wide extending view; at his feet lay the wooded dell and half-ruined roofs of Ælfhere's homestead, beyond was the valley of the Yare, and the silver track of the stream as it meandered among the mud wastes of Brædyngge haven to meet the incoming tide that would so soon convert the dreary swamp into a lovely lake. The little boat—a mere spot—in which Wulf, the Atheling, had come the day before, was lying high and dry near a shingle hard; across the Yare the long line of country people could be seen trailing like a long snake from the homestead below, till it was lost in the woods on the other side. The promontory or peninsula of Binbrygge, stood out in the midst of the sea, except where the long back of the magnificent down intercepted the horizon towards the south-east; far away, in the east, over the distant sea, could be seen a few dots edging the horizon. At that very moment among those dots which were the wind-blown trees of Selsea, Wilfrid and Cædwalla were discussing the invasion of Wihtea, and Ædric was wondering what had become of Wulfstan. The clear cloud-flecked sky looked down on a weary world. Wars and rumours of wars, and a people suffering much.

Suddenly one of Athelhune's men pointed to a spot far down below, on the southern side of the hill; a cloud of dust was driving before the south-westerly breeze; instantly Athelhune knew it must be the enemy; waiting one moment to take in the situation, he saw how perilous was their position. Not knowing the country, he had been ignorant that there was another road by which Arwald might come, and the guide, with the stolidity of a dull-witted Wihtwara, had never told him. The advancing cloud of dust was on a level with Athelhune, and he saw that it would be a race who should reach the homestead first. Mortified at the failure of his reconnaissance, and the imminent danger all would necessarily incur, he promptly made up his mind. Sending off the fastest runner of his men to

tell the Atheling Wulf, Athelhune determined to descend the hill diagonally, and attempt a diversion in flank before the enemy should be aware of his proximity. Hastily calling to his men, he started at a rapid pace down the hill. There was not much more than half a mile between himself and the enemy, and he directed all his efforts to getting, if possible, to a clump of bushes which lay directly in the march of the advancing column. He hoped to be able to reach this unperceived, and then, by a well-timed rush, to throw the enemy into confusion, after which his men would all hasten back as fast as possible to join the Atheling Wulf. Full of this hope he urged his men to greater speed, and they were fortunately concealed from their foes by the cloud of dust which was carried towards them by the breeze.

Athelhune had with him about twenty men, all Wihtwaras, active men enough, but not well armed. However, he trusted more to their sudden rush, and unexpected appearance, for gaining his object, than to any real execution they could inflict on Arwald's men.

They had now reached the clump of gorse and thorns, where Athelhune rapidly explained what he intended to do, and impressed upon them the absolute necessity of the rush being simultaneous, determined, and rapid, and pointed out to the men that in this way only could their lives be saved. There was no time for more, already through the dusty veil the glint of spears and flash of armour could be seen, and a serried troop of horsemen came directly towards the clump of gorse behind which the little band was crouching. Athelhune could see that the advancing force was a strong one, the leading horsemen were all well armed, powerful men, and were evidently the most important eorldomen and chief ceorls in the island; the descendants of Whitgar, Stuffa, and their followers, who nearly two hundred years before had come to Cerdicsford, the modern Yarmouth, to help Cerdic. Among them rode Arwald himself, a powerful, thickset man, with bushy black beard, and coarse features, burly in form, and brutal in expression. He was clad in a loose mail shirt, his muscular arms were bare, and on his thick bushy hair he wore an iron helmet, adorned with the large wings of a heron. Behind him was slung a spear; at his saddle hung a huge two-edged axe, and a straight sword was suspended at his left hip by a chain across his right shoulder. He was laughing loudly at some jest of his own, and all were evidently in high spirits. Behind him was a body of some four hundred men, but all were not well armed, and very few were mounted.

Nearer and nearer the column advanced, in the confidence of their strength; and despising the numbers of their opponents, no scouts had been sent out, and all were marching at ease, and as if in a friendly country.

The leading files had passed the clump. Athelhune could hear Arwald saying, "By the golden hair of Freya, but we won't spare a man, woman, or child,

this time.”

Then Athelhune gave the signal quietly to his men.

Instantly with a wild yell the whole twenty men sprang up, clashing their arms, and rushing upon the column not more than ten yards from them. Athelhune had ordered them to strike first at the horses, and then, when the riders were down, if time were left, to attack the riders. In between the first and second ranks Athelhune forced his way, striking furiously at the hind legs of the horses of the leading rank, and the forelegs of the horses of the rank behind. He was ably supported by his followers, who plunged in behind him. The confusion and uproar were terrific; the frightened horses reared, plunged, and neighed horribly with pain, many came down bringing their riders with them, and in some few instances crushing their assailants in their fall. The horses of the front rank sprang madly forward, and such as had been hamstrung, struggled wildly with their forelegs, and then sank helplessly down. Many of them that had only received slanting slashes and had had no tendons severed, galloped madly away, in most cases throwing their riders at the first plunge. Hitherto the attack had been very successful, fortune, as usual, favouring the bold. Arwald had been one of those whose horse had fallen, and that burly chieftain had come heavily to the ground; but the fall of his horse had also saved his life, for Athelhune, determining to kill him, if possible, before they retreated, aimed a terrific blow at the Wihtwara's head, but the wounded horse at the same moment gave one despairing plunge, and kicking violently with its hind leg, it happened to strike Athelhune and break his leg with the force of the blow; seeing their leader fall, the few men who were behind him shouted to the others to escape while there was yet time, and such as were able to do so, extricated themselves from the plunging, writhing, mass of men and horses, and sped away towards the homestead. The success of this desperate onslaught was dearly purchased by the fall of Athelhune; it was true the onward march of Arwald and his men was delayed some few moments, and much damage was done to the horses, while some two or three of the men had been killed outright, and about ten more seriously wounded, either by cuts from the axes, or by bruises from their falls, several having had their legs broken by their falling horses; but the attacking party had also suffered severely, some having been crushed under the horses, and others having been kicked by the affrighted animals, as Athelhune had been. So that the sum total of the success of this act of devotion on the part of the West Saxon chieftain was the giving time for Wulf the Atheling to form his men, and evacuate the homestead, and the death or putting *hors de combat* of some dozen of their enemy. But these advantages were more than counterbalanced by the capture of Athelhune, and the desperate feeling of furious wrath now doubly aroused in the fierce Arwald.

Rising from the ground with difficulty, the chief of the Wihtwaras looked a

truly awful spectacle. He was covered with blood; not that he had received any wound, but the blood from his fallen horse had flowed copiously over him as he lay on the ground. His eyes were red and fiery, like the wicked eyes of a furious wild boar. His first thought was to dash out the brains of his helpless assailant as he lay on the ground; but while watching his opportunity, for the struggling mass all round rendered a certain blow a matter of difficulty, a cruel thought crossed his mind, and he determined to spare Athelhune's life for the present. By this time the confusion had become a little less wild. The loud voice of Arwald shouted directions to the eorls who were nearest him, and in a little while something like order was restored. The mounted men were drawn up on one side, and the infantry were ordered to march past and then form up beyond, and halt until the casualties were counted up and fresh dispositions made. Athelhune was not forgotten. Arwald with a wicked light in his eye, had him seized by two fierce-looking Wihtwaras, and strict orders were given them to answer for him with their lives. It was found that fifteen horses were incapacitated or missing, and twelve men, among whom were five eorldomen and three ceorls of importance. More furious than ever, and burning to come to close quarters with Ælfhere's men, Arwald gave the order for the column to advance, but this time he took the precaution to send out some of the horsemen on either flank to act as scouts, and a small body some distance ahead as an advance guard. Arwald himself took the best horse he could find among those left, and the eorldoman who was thus compelled to give up his animal contented himself by taking another from one of the ceorls, who had to become a foot soldier, and was naturally very sulky in consequence. The whole episode, which has taken so many words, to describe, really only occupied a quarter of an hour but every moment was of importance, and the march was pressed on more rapidly to make up for lost time. In a few minutes more the advanced guard turned the foot of the hill, and came in sight of Ælfhere's house. At the same moment Wulf's men were descried hastening down to the ford, which was fast becoming impassable, owing to the rapidly rising tide. All the fugitives from Athelhune's force had not yet reached him, nor had all the tenants and dependants of Ælfhere yet got across the Yare. The news of the sudden approach of Arwald had caused the greatest consternation among these poor people, and all were hurrying down to get over the ford before it was too late. The position of affairs was at once reported to Arwald, who galloped up instantly to inspect the situation, giving orders for the rest of his men to come on at the double. With the quick glance of an experienced warrior, he decided that they must attack at once. He gave his men no rest, therefore, until he had brought them down to within a short distance of Wulf's men, who had not yet been able to cross the Yare, blocked as the ford was with fugitives.

Wulf, the Atheling, now that he saw his own supineness was likely to cause

a great catastrophe, did all he could to remedy the evil. He drew up his men in the best way he could, and determined to stand on the defensive, for he saw that with so powerful a force within striking distance of him, if once he attempted to retire, destruction would await him. There was one thing in his favour—his men were all fresh, while Arwald's people were tired with their long march.

Arwald halted his men as they came up, and gave them time to recover their breath, an ominous sign to Wulf, who, seeing how leisurely Arwald was now going to work, knew that his foe felt sure he had caught them in his toils. Their position was very critical, almost desperate. In front, was a powerful force of nearly four hundred men led by a determined and infuriated chief; behind them, was an impassable stream, and no succour to come to them. Seeing the desperate nature of their plight, Wulf thought he would try what a parley would do. He called, therefore, to Arwald, and invited him to settle the dispute by a single combat with himself, "for," he said, "these men are all kinsfolk. Why should they shed each other's blood?"

Arwald only laughed a jeering laugh. "Young man," he said, "thou shalt fight fast enough, if that is what thou wantest. My men are thirsting for blood, but no power on earth can save these doomed slaves of the rascal Ælfhere. Before another sun sets I have vowed to have their lives."

"Thou hearest that, my men," said Wulf calmly, to his followers. "Arwald always was a liar and a villain. Let us show him once more as he really is."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"LET'S WHIP THE STRAGGLERS O'ER THE SEAS AGAIN."

All Arwald's men having now come in, that chieftain quickly drew them up ready for attack. His object was to let none escape; indeed, there was not much chance of any of them doing so, even if he had not taken especial precautions against it. The sea had by this time come up, and all the waste mud of Brædyngge Haven was a glittering, sparkling lake. Wulf's little boat was floating not far off, dancing to its moorings on the rippling wavelets. A few despairing fugitives were sitting near the now impassable ford, awaiting the issue of the fight, with a listless expectancy. Their own fate would soon be settled, and the only doubt was how they would be killed. Some, however, who still kept their wits about them, were slipping away towards the other ford nearer Sandown Bay, where

Ceolwulf had first crossed, and which was some two miles distant.

The few moments of suspense before the fight began, were demoralising to Wulf, the Atheling's, handful of men. To stand still to be attacked is at all times a trying business when the force to be attacked is equal, or larger, than the assailing force; but when the latter is four times the number of the former, and the fight is to be a desperate hand-to-hand *mêlée*, with such formidable weapons as axe and broad sword, the trial to the nerves is naturally very much greater, and Wulf the Atheling would have acted much more wisely if he had charged the enemy before they had recovered their breath, or were drawn up in order. The one important thing was to keep his men's courage up, and for that there was nothing like action, and there Athelhune had shown better generalship, although the fortune of war had gone against him. Had Wulf possessed Athelhune's decision, he might have broken Arwald's men for a time, and then been able to cross the ford before they could rally again; but unfortunately, Wulf was only a handsome, careless, thoughtless fighter, of no more use than any other brave thrall or ceorl there. He had no judgment, no decision, no head.

Arwald, without further delay, gave the order to fall on, and rode straight for Wulf the Atheling. There was no indecision now on Wulf's part, the fight was coming; there was nothing more to do but use arm, and back, and foot—no head to direct others was now required; each man must fight his own way, and sell his life as dearly as possible. Calmly awaiting the charge of the heavy horseman, Wulf looked his antagonist straight in the face, and never blanched. The spear-point of Arwald's weapon came swiftly towards him, the powerful horse sprang, with long strides, to bear him to the ground; another second and Wulf would be transfixed, trampled on, dead. His axe flashed, his strong and active figure sprang aside; another gleam of the axe and Arwald was toppled off his horse. The first blow sheared off the spear-point, and the second, swung round at Arwald as he was carried past his victim, caught the chieftain between the shoulders, and rolled him over his horse's neck to the ground. But the blow had done no further injury, given as it was at an object that was retiring; it only had sufficient force to knock Arwald off, there was not power enough to cut through his mail shirt. Before Wulf could follow his blow by a second, he received a swinging cut on his helmet, which caused sparks to dance before his eyes, and his head to buzz with humming dizziness; instinctively striking straight before him, his axe clove the thigh of a horseman in the act to pierce Beornwulf, who was by his side. But blows were raining on all sides: the clash of sword and axe, the smashing sound of crashing wood, or sharp swish of cloven iron, as blows went home; the groan of sorely-stricken men, or the shriek of some agonised fallen one, as the combatants trode upon his prostrate body, wild yells and muttered oaths, and dust and ruin; so went on the dreadful work for some few minutes. So thick was the *mêlée* that

friend blindly hit friend, and no man could tell how the battle was going. Arwald had risen to his feet, more mad with rage than ever, and struck wildly, and with prodigious force, now right, now left, now down, hewing a way through the men opposed to him. Several heavy blows he received, but none that incapacitated him, and at last it dawned upon him that he was striking at empty air. Before him was the river Yare, behind him was the fight, he had cut right through the little force. Grimly he turned and looked at the raging mass. Savagely he smiled as he rested on his gory axe, and watched the wild and ghastly murder.

[image]

*How Wulf ye Atheling waited ye onslaught of Arwald and blenched
not*

There was fierce fighting still going on, and it was difficult to see the extent of the loss; many men were down; some were trying to crawl from among the legs of the combatants, others lay still; while others again, in whom the fierce spirit of the fight still glowed in spite of their desperate wounds, clutched at the legs of their antagonists and brought them to the ground. But the fight was too fierce to last long, and they were too crowded to ply their ghastly blows with sufficient effect. Seeing this, Arwald shouted in a stentorian voice, when a lull in the murderous din allowed him a chance for his words to be heard, that all his men were to fall back and rally around him; at the same moment he cleft to the chin a wounded Wihtwara, who was trying to crawl down to the waterside to hide among the sedgy banks. Pleased with this dastardly stroke, he strode past the writhing, struggling mass, and took up his position some little way off on the right of the fight. His own men sullenly obeyed, drawing off from their antagonists reluctantly. It was then seen how terrible had been the few minutes of that cruel work. The ground was strewn with dead, the nature of many of their wounds was awful—too awful to be described—and the scanty remnant of Wulf's little force remained resting on their axes or their swords. The combatants were now able to judge of their losses, and the effects of the fight. Very few of Arwald's horsemen remained mounted, and many of his best warriors were lying on the ground; but Wulf's men were greatly reduced. About two-thirds were still left, and the Atheling himself was able to wield his axe; but many had received desperate wounds, and in several cases the power to use axe or sword was entirely gone, as from the close nature of the fighting, and the absence of any guard to sword or axe, the fingers had suffered severely; and the maimed appearance of the men told how hopeless the next struggle must be, for of the two-thirds that

survived, at least half were disabled in either one hand or the other, while many had lost all four fingers of one hand, and a thumb off the other, and in some instances both hands were shorn off at the wrists. Arwald's people had suffered in the same way, but the proportion of fighters remained about the same as before.

Wulf the Atheling saw that their hours were numbered; each man of his force felt the same. He himself was bleeding profusely from a large gash in his shoulder, and one arm was nearly useless. His axe was notched, and stained deep-red. His helmet was deeply dented, and he looked faint and ghastly; but the spirit of his race was in him, and he prepared to sell his life as dearly as might be. Turning to his men he said briefly:

"Comrades, we shall meet ere long in Valhalla; remember, the more we slay, the happier we shall be; rejoice then, that we shall so soon live for ever, and shall have so many to meet us there."

Then turning to Arwald, he cried tauntingly:

"Boaster that thou art, where are thy young men? Look at the ground in front of thee. Who measured his length upon it? Dastard and villain, no wonder thou darest not fight it out with me, but must bring four to one to the fight, and yet canst not beat us. Are the Wihtwaras no better than this? But yesterday, an old woman—a bald-headed one—and a child, killed six of your warriors. Go bring thy women to kill us, they will fight better than thou."

Arwald, disdainingly to reply, led his men nearer to the Yare, and advanced once more to the attack. Wulf and his men grimly awaited them. Suddenly the Atheling heard his name called, and looking across the Yare, he saw old Ceolwulf standing by the water's edge, and at the same moment a whizzing sound rushed through the air, followed by a yell from one of Arwald's men:

"Make for the boat, Prince Wulf; thou canst reach her if thou makest a dash for it; at least some of ye can be saved!" shouted Ceolwulf, pointing to the boat which rode at her moorings not more than a few hundred yards away.

The advice was good, but could Prince Wulf act on it? Could he leave his men to be slaughtered, and seek safety in flight? Life was dear to him: he was handsome, young, and loved pleasure. He could do more good with a few men to defend the stockade, than by dying there, he thought. Fresh hope came to him, he wavered, and as Arwald's advance seemed unaccountably checked, he determined to take advantage of the moment, and make a rush for the boat. Instantly the whole band broke up. The faith in the pleasures of Valhalla was overbalanced by the desire to realise those of this earth a little longer; and each man as he was able ran for dear life. Arwald gave a yell of rage, and shouted to his men to follow at the top of their speed; but as he started at a run to set the example himself, he received a violent blow on the side of his forehead, that for a moment stunned him; many of his men were falling, or were receiving severe

cuts. What was it? Where did these invisible blows come from?

"There, there, from the other side of the water!" shouted one of his men, pointing to a large party of boys led by Wulfstan, who was plying his sling with delighted vigour. The speaker was unable to finish his sentence, for he received a crashing blow on his mouth which knocked several of his teeth down his throat. Arwald's rage was frightful to see, and the pain of his cut forehead, combined with the partial blindness which resulted from it, for the blood from the wound ran down over his eye, made him dangerous to approach. But he still pressed on after the fugitives, hoarsely shouting to his people to hasten up. But Wulfstan and his troop of boys kept plying the solid mass with stones, and richly they enjoyed the fun, for almost every stone took effect. Arwald's force was compelled to draw farther away from the water's edge. Unfortunately for the full success of the diversion, where the boat was riding at anchor was out of reach of the stones, and now that Arwald's people saw where the galling flights of stones came from, they kept out of range and continued the pursuit of Wulf and his men.

But the check the enemy had received gave a long start to the fugitives, which they had done their best to improve, and Wulf had reached the water's edge and was hastily splashing through the shallow sea; he was now wading out to the boat and was scrambling in, followed by two or three others, the rest were crowding behind; it was clear the boat would not hold more than nine or ten, and what would become of the others? Therefore each man ran, and splashed, with desperate haste; many had fallen as they ran, dizzy with loss of blood; one or two, sullenly desperate, giving up all hope and determined to die hard, turned to face the enemy, prepared to brain the first man that dared to come near them; a few even did not await the foe, but rushed fiercely to meet him, shouting their death song, and met their end like ancient northern heroes. Beornwulf and Osborn and two of the Boseham men, who had fought gallantly, still survived; the two latter were close beside Wulf the Atheling, and all three had now clambered into the boat. The breeze was blowing fresh off the land; one of the South Saxons ran to the bows, and with a blow of his axe severed the moorings, and instantly the boat drifted away from the shore. Wulf had lost so much blood that the moment he had climbed into the boat he fell into the bottom of it, and lost all consciousness. The two South Saxons were both wounded, one had lost three fingers off one hand, and the other had a terrific gash in his forearm, so that they were not able to do much in the way of rowing; indeed, they did not attempt it, but were content to sit down and let the boat drift before the wind, merely steering her by an oar over the stern.

Beornwulf and Osborn shouted to them to come back and take in more, but with the callousness of utter weariness and exhaustion, they paid no attention, scarcely looking up or heeding anything, and thus drifted far down the broad

Brædyngre haven towards the entrance.

When the fugitives saw that they were abandoned, and no hope left, they uttered yells of execration on their leader, and stood helpless and stunned for a moment. One or two tore off their armour, and began to wade out as far as they could, and then swam for the opposite shore. The shallowness of the water greatly aided them, and many more followed their example. In this way about twenty reached the shore of Binbrygge-*ea*, and were helped up to the stockade by Ceolwulf and the boys, many of whom, however, with the curiosity of their age, waited to see what would become of those left.

There were not many now; Osborn had swum across, Beornwulf was too much exhausted. He and three more stood gloomily resting on their notched swords awaiting their death.

Arwald, and some three or four others, had reached the edge of the sea. Grimly the wounded warriors in the sparkling water eyed them.

"Run to water at last," cried Arwald; "Look at the water rats that are afraid even of their own water."

"But we are not afraid of thee, thou nothing," shouted Beornwulf, "come and kill us if thou darest."

Whatever faults Arwald had, he certainly was not a coward; but the day was his, he had done enough fighting, and he saw no reason why he should risk his life in a desperate encounter with reckless men who must die sooner or later. He gave orders, therefore, for some of his people to sit down on the shore, and wait until the wounded men should be tired of standing in the water. He himself then drew off with the rest of his followers, and gave orders for all to repose, and get what refreshment they could, until the tide had gone down sufficiently to allow them all to cross the Yare at the ford, and advance upon the fugitives.

Beornwulf, seeing that he could not entice any of the men to come out to him in the water, where he hoped, from the unsteady nature of the foothold, to be able to obtain an advantage over his adversaries, felt it was no use standing there to slowly die a miserable death. He turned, therefore, to the two or three who still stood with him, and declared his intention of returning to the shore to sell his life as dearly as might be. The others gave a sullen assent, and without giving their wounds any more time to stiffen, they waded back to the land. Arwald, before he left the men on the shore, had given orders to take the West Saxon and the rebel Wihtwaras, alive if possible. He intended, when the rest of Ælfhere's men were taken, to have all the prisoners brought before him and his eorls at a banquet, and then put them to death. As Beornwulf and his companions therefore, approached the shore, Arwald's followers got up and warily awaited them, and no sooner had they emerged from the water than all the enemy hurled themselves upon them. Beornwulf had only time to whirl his sword round his head, severely

wounding one of his adversaries, when he was borne to the ground, pinioned by four men, and bound hand and foot in a moment. One of his companions was, more fortunately, slain, but the other two shared the same fate as Beornwulf; faint, weary, and despondent, they were conveyed in triumph to the main body, and were placed beside Athelhune to await their fate.

The afternoon was now far advanced; but Arwald was so inflamed with rage against his opponents, that he did not intend to give his men much rest, only sufficient to allow them to get such fresh vigour as would enable them to overcome any further resistance with certainty.

But besides the incitements of passionate revenge, there were other and more practical reasons why the attack should go on at once. They had brought very little food with them, hoping to take Ælfhere by surprise, or, at least, capture the homestead before the cattle and provisions should have been carried off. They were now feeling strongly the calls of hunger, but there was no chance of their getting any substantial food until they had crossed the Yare and come up with the encampment of the fugitives, or discovered some of their cattle.

There was no possibility of crossing the ford for another hour at least, and Arwald and his chief eorlomen improved the occasion by inspecting the men, and appointing leaders in the place of those who had fallen, and also in having their arms and belongings collected and placed securely under the same guard which was watching the prisoners. The arms were distributed to the men who had lost their own or had them injured, and in this way a better equipped, although much smaller force, was ready once more to renew the attack. The followers of Ælfhere were in a very hopeless position; all the powerful able-bodied men were either killed or prisoners, and all their arms and accoutrements had become the spoil of the conquerors. Only Osborn, and a few men, had been able to escape to join their companions on Yaver Hill, and these had been compelled to throw away their arms. The little boat, with the Atheling Wulf, when last seen, was scudding before the wind, through the narrow entrance of Brædyngge haven, for they had managed to set up a sail in her, and were evidently steering straight for Selsea. They had a fair wind, but the chances were small of their ever getting there, for the men were desperately exhausted with their wounds, and had no food. Impatiently, Arwald waited for the tide to fall. He did not want the wounds of his men to become stiff, and they were all extremely hungry; besides, every minute gave the fugitives time to strengthen such defences as they could make, or contrive hiding-places for themselves in the dense scrub and bush that clothed Binbrygge-ea.

With the wind blowing right on Selsea, there was not any fear of Cædwalla coming yet; even if he had defeated the South Saxon eorls; but should the wind change—and it appeared to be getting rather more off the land—there would be

every possibility of an invasion from the West Saxons: and Arwald had received news before he left Wihthgaresbyrig, that Cædwalla had given orders for a fleet to assemble at Portanceaster, which might at any moment set sail for Wihtea.

"Get in, one of you men, and see how deep that ford is!" cried Arwald, at last. And one of his men waded carefully into the water. He got on very well for a few steps, when suddenly he gave a plunge and disappeared, but reappeared again in a few moments a little lower down. Being a good swimmer he soon got out, but in a very dismal condition, for he had to land by the muddy banks of the Yare, which the rapidly falling tide was leaving bare. He had slipped off the gravelly bottom of the ford, not knowing that it turned at an angle in the middle of the stream.

"Here, blockhead!" cried Arwald, who was getting more and more savage at the delay, "try again, and feel the bottom with the end of thy spear."

The man did as he was told, and this time he got across, after carefully feeling the gravelly hard which formed the ford. He was then told to cut down with his axe some withies, and stick them on the upper side of the ford. When this was done, Arwald gave the order for all to cross. As the leading men stepped into the water they were assailed by a violent shower of stones, one or two of which took serious effect, for one man lost an eye, and the others were cut about the face. Daunted by this warm reception the men drew back, but were driven to advance again by the fierce menaces of Arwald. The main body pressed hard upon them, and they were urged on by the weight behind. All they could do, therefore, was to put their shields up in front of their faces, and make a rush for it. The effect of this blind advance was that many of the men fell into the deeper part of the stream, and several were drowned, while many more were severely cut about the face. They could not see their stinging assailants, for the banks opposite were clothed with thick bushes down to the water's edge.

When all the men had passed the ford, Arwald sent off a small party to drive away the stone throwers, who hastily withdrew through the bushes, without being caught. Wulfstan and Ceolwulf were with the boys, and all of them knew the bye-paths through the gorse and scrub, so that they were able to retire to the stockade unseen by the enemy.

Taught by bitter experience with what an active and enterprising foe he had to deal, Arwald sent out an advanced guard, and also a party on either flank, and thus effectually guarded himself from surprise. After marching for about a mile, and meeting with not a sign of any human being, Arwald began to get suspicious that all was not right.

"Where has this Ælfhere betaken himself and his belongings? We may march all night, and find nothing at this rate," was the universal thought of the men, who were beginning to grow discontented at the amount of marching re-

quired of them.

It was obvious they must capture some one who should act as guide, or they would fare badly for that night. Warily they trudged along through the narrow track, and it was getting more and more risky, penetrating such a bush with night coming on, and an active enemy near. True, Arwald had every reason to believe that scarcely any men capable of bearing arms were now left; for he knew how many had come from the mainland, and he also knew about the numbers Ælfhere could muster. Had it not been for this knowledge, even he, headstrong and passionate as he was, would scarcely have dared to go so far as he had done.

They had now come to a more open part of the wild land; it was a sort of common, covered with furze and brambles, which, in most places, grew very high and thick. The path lay through the middle of this, and the common appeared, as far as could be seen, to extend for some distance all round. Suddenly Arwald stopped and sniffed the air. The wind had now nearly died away, the sun was setting, and there was that stillness over nature which so sweetly harmonises with a lovely sunset. The light air, which gently came from the north, brought a smell of smoke with it, which caused Arwald to stop and look in that direction.

"The knaves are cooking over there," cried Arwald, his mouth watering as the delicious smell of roasting meat reached his senses. "But they are making a big fire for it," he added, as a great volume of smoke rose up not far off. "Call in the other men. They may mean to attack us under cover of this," he shouted.

The men came in, and all the force was drawn up ready to repel any sudden onset. But no enemy appeared; all was as silent as the grave, save that a sharp crackling could be heard all round, from the north to the east side of the gorse-covered common. The common was on fire.

Volumes of smoke began to drive across their faces, the atmosphere was stifling. Ahead of them they could see the whole common in a red blaze; behind them the flames were bursting out. The dry gorse crackled and blazed, and dense masses of smoke eddied round their faces. No one paid any attention to Arwald's orders; all with one thought broke away and tried to escape the blinding, smothering smoke. They rushed into the gorse on their right, they tried wildly to run through it. Faster and faster roared the flames, louder and louder crackled the gorse. The smoke became thicker, hotter, more stifling than ever, and which way to escape Arwald and his men, for the life of them, could not tell. The gorse on their right was impenetrable, while everywhere else it was on fire.

Of that well-armed, compact little band of some three hundred men, scarcely two or three remained together. Blindly, madly, they rushed through the tangled prickly bushes; numbers fell down; many fell into the deep gullies which lay hid in the furze all over the common; and all the while the fierce, glowing flames leaped, and crackled, and revelled in their hot destruction. Swiftly

the curling smoke swept over and after the fugitives, suffocating the fallen ones; pursuing with its hot, stifling breath, the frantic, scared Wihtwaras. Where could they fly? The smoke was everywhere, and behind the smoke was the devouring fire.

The few men who preserved their presence of mind aimed for the corner of the common that was nearest to the wind, and with great difficulty, and many scratches, about a hundred managed to reach a place of safety on the edge of the common under some old gnarled oaks; the flames rolled away from this part and they were able to see the awful destruction of many of their comrades. As the fierce fire swept on in its rapid course, the charred and blackened limbs of the gorse curled and twisted like a million tortured snakes, and the shrill squeaking of innumerable agonised things filled the air. Here and there an awful figure writhed and rolled on the ground, and a sharp, thin voice, shrieked tortured cries. Some of these fearful forms rose up and ran madly a few paces, gibbering horribly, and then fell in a column of sparks among the smoking embers. Others sat, a shapeless heap, rocking to and fro, moaning in unearthly sounds. The fatal element had done its ghastly work. Ælfhere's followers were well avenged.

"We must return to the ford," said Arwald, sullenly. "They shall dearly pay for this."

Wearily the band retraced its steps, skirting the edge of the fire to windward; and, without further attack, reached the ford, and found the guard and the prisoners where they had left them. They then returned to the homestead, and prepared to spend the night as well as they could.

CHAPTER XIX.

"BE READY, CLAUDIO, FOR YOUR DEATH, TO-MORROW."

The night was spent by the weary followers of Arwald in dismal plight. They had scarcely any food, and now experienced all the hardships Athelhune, Ceolwulf, and their party had suffered when they were cast upon the island.

Some men had been sent to bring in food from the country behind Æscing Down, and to hasten up reinforcements and more supplies from the west end of the island. During the night many of the dispersed followers came in; in fact, they kept dropping in throughout the night, so that, when day broke, there was a large muster of men around the homestead; but they were, many of them, wounded,

burnt, and listless; all heart seemed to have been taken out of them by the last awful event. In order to stir them out of their lethargy, Arwald determined to have the prisoners put to death. This was not only a matter of policy, but he was longing to gratify his revenge and cruelty.

Some small amount of provisions having been brought in at early dawn, they were distributed as far as they would go, many of the men having made a hearty meal off the slaughtered horses which were lying where they fell in yesterday's conflict.

At eight o'clock, all the men, who now numbered about two hundred and fifty, were drawn up in the large yard of the homestead, the remainder of the force having been either killed, placed *hors de combat* by their wounds, or been lost among the wild country on the other side of the Yare, while some few had deserted.

The prisoners were seated on a few logs of trees that had been rolled into the centre. Each man was placed some feet apart from his neighbours, and in his long hair was twisted a couple of tough withies, long enough for a man to hold the head steady from behind. All the men were bare-headed, stripped to the waist, and tied together. Only the chief prisoners were arranged in this way first; the common men were guarded in a crowd in a space separated from the spectators, but in full view of the ghastly proceedings.

On the right of the prisoners sat Beornwulf, next him were three of Ælfhere's chief ceorls, then came Athelhune, and next him one of the followers of Wulf the Atheling. Outside of these sat two South Saxons. Athelhune had suffered terrible pain from his broken leg, for no attention whatever had been paid him, and he had been roughly carried along with the other prisoners; but he still held up his head bravely, and smiled contemptuously at the preparations for his death. The old Teutonic spirit was strong in him, and he remembered how heroes had met their death. Although deadly pale from the sharp pain of his maimed leg, his eye was bright, and his bearing fearless. All the men preserved the most absolute composure, and did credit to the training of their race. Not a sigh or a regret seemed to announce their reluctance to leave this life; on the contrary, if there were any expression but absolute indifference to the whole proceedings, it was one of pleasure at the thought of so soon enjoying the delights of Valhalla.

The withies entwined in their hair were intended to be held by the thralls or slaves, who accompanied Arwald's force, so that the heads of the victims should not twitch, or avoid the stroke of the executioner's axe, and were long enough to allow the holders to be at a safe distance from the blow. Behind each man stood a thrall holding the withies, and these men were laughing and joking together.

When all was ready, Arwald and his chief eorldomen came out of the homestead, and seated themselves on settles placed directly opposite the victims. The

Wihwara chieftain was in high good humour: he had had an excellent breakfast, as far as quantity went, and had washed down his food with copious draughts of ale; for, however much his followers might suffer, he had no intention of being uncomfortable. He came out, therefore, with a hearty, loud laugh, as he cracked some coarse joke with one of his eorls, and took up his seat, lolling his large fat body in the most comfortable position he could. His little black eyes twinkled with cruel pleasure, and his puffy red face showed amid his large dark whiskers, beard, and hair, like a furnace against the black night. He wore his mail-linked shirt and his battered helmet, off which the heron's wings were shorn. His huge axe hung over his shoulder, but in his hand he held his hunting-knife, with which he played from time to time.

The executioner was a powerful, coarse-looking ceorl, with bare arms and legs, and holding a formidable axe, to whose edge he was giving a finishing touch with a sharpening stone.

The people were now all ready for the spectacle, and the interest was very great; but the disappointment was universal, for the victims were not apparently going to give them any sport by their cries and lamentations.

"Is all ready?" said Arwald carelessly.

"All is ready, eorldoman," said the executioner.

"Then begin, in Woden's name," answered the chieftain, and settled himself more comfortably for the better enjoyment of the tragedy.

The executioner advanced to the man seated on the log nearest to the left, looked at him, poised his axe, measured his distance, nodded to the thrall to hold the withy tight, planted his feet firmly on the ground, swung the axe swiftly through the air, and the man's head fell at some few paces from the body, which fell forward to the ground. The blow had been dealt so truly and well that the whole thing passed like an ordinary occurrence, and one could hardly realise that a man had just suffered a violent death. No sound had broken the silence of expectancy, only the whizz of the gleaming axe, and the dull thud of the head as it fell on the ground, interrupted the silence.

"Was that well done, eorldoman?" asked the executioner, turning to Arwald.

"Nothing could have been better," nodded the chieftain; "if thou doest thy work like that I will say thou art the best headsman in England."

"I hope thou wilt do something better than that," promptly replied the executioner. Arwald grunted an ambiguous reply, and bid him go on with the next man.

The executioner then stepped up to the next man and went through the ghastly preliminaries as before, performing the business as deftly as he had previously done, only the withies which were twisted into this man's hair were jerked

out of the hands of the thrall, who was holding them, and struck the next thrall a stinging blow in the face, which caused him to cry out, and made all the spectators laugh.

Arwald was put into an extra good humour by this event, and he felt inclined for a little playful conversation with the victims. So addressing the West Saxon who was to be executed next, he asked him what he thought of the death he was so soon to suffer.

"We must all die some day, and as I am tired of looking at thy fat carcase, the sooner I can get away the better," answered the West Saxon contemptuously. The nearest bystanders, who had heard the remark, began to laugh, and Arwald became angry.

"What art thou waiting for, man?" he said to the executioner. "Let him have his wish at once," and the man's head fell with the others.

It was now Athelhune's turn, and Arwald, deceived by his exceeding pallor, hoped to obtain some sign of weakness from him, and asked him whether death did not look very dreadful.

"Not so unpleasant as thou dost," was the answer; "but before I die I would like to have a question settled."

"What is it?" said Arwald.

"We have often talked about death, and whether a man has any feeling after his head is off," said Athelhune. "Now, give me a knife. If I feel anything after my head is off, I will throw the knife at thee; if it falls to the ground, it will prove I have no feeling. Now strike, and see what will happen."

Arwald laughed, and bid a knife be given him. The executioner approached. Athelhune held up his hand with the knife pointed at Arwald. The executioner slowly measured his distance. Flash went the axe, and at the same moment the knife flew from Athelhune's hand and pierced Arwald's burly leg, causing that stout warrior to utter a yell of pain; but Athelhune's head was on the ground, and no man could say whether he had hurled the knife while his head was still on his shoulders or no. The knife still quivered in Arwald's flesh, as the headless body fell heavily to the ground, and the brave West Saxon eorldoman was numbered with his fathers; glad enough to be away from the pain and anguish he had been suffering from his broken leg, which now, owing to the want of care and cruel treatment he had suffered, was rapidly growing black, and had swollen to a great size. He knew he never could be of any use again, and had longed for death to relieve him for some hours past.

The brave warrior died true to the instincts and noblest teaching of his race and ancestors. A faithful, devoted friend, a recklessly brave man, and a skilful chief, he came on this expedition, well knowing the desperate nature of the enterprise, without a thought which could reflect upon his friend and king

Cædwalla; his king wished him to go, that was enough for him. It was not his business to question or discuss the reasonableness of the wish; such an idea never crossed his mind; it could not occur to him. His sense of duty to his chief was comprised in those lines that so beautifully describe the whole duty of a soldier:—His "not to make reply," his "not to reason why," his "but to do and die." And this idea of a soldier's duty he carried out in its entirety, both towards his king and chief Cædwalla, as well as towards those who served under him, all of whom he tried to impress with the same spirit of noble discipline and self-sacrifice. He died contentedly, nay, happily; he had done all he could. If he had not succeeded, that was no affair of his; were there not the Norns or Fates, who ruled the affairs of men? And oftentimes, he knew, even in his own experience, what looked like failure was only the seed of success. Did not men put seed into the ground, and did not the seed disappear? Who could have told that that lost seed would come out of that dry, lumpy ground, green corn good for the food of man? The doing of one's duty, even if it ended in failure, was the sowing of good seed, it must bear fruit, only it might take a longer time, as some seeds took more time than others to come up. With the noble simplicity of his character, he also accepted implicitly the creed of his ancestors. Surely there was a place of reward for honest men, who struggled to live and die full of that virtue, that [Greek: *andría*], that manfulness, which all men in all ages, and of all races, have known to be the essence of a good life. Full of this hope, he rejoiced at his departure to the new life, grateful too that the last few hours of pain had made the longed-for moment all the greater relief.

There was a great shout of triumph from the prisoners when they saw the knife flying from Athelhune's hand straight for Arwald, and the disappointment was great when it was seen that the wound was not in any way dangerous, although the knife had plunged deep into the fleshy part of the leg and caused the ruler of the Wihtwaras considerable pain as it was drawn out. However, a bandage soon stopped the bleeding, and Arwald called to the executioner to go on with his work, more irritable now than ever.

The courage of the previous victims re-acted upon those whose turn was now coming, and when the executioner stepped up to the next man, and was preparing to strike him sideways, like the others, the man called out to him to strike the blow in front.

"Many is the time I have looked death in the face without blenching, and thou shalt see now if I flinch or no."

The executioner took him at his word; he placed the edge of the axe against the man's neck under his chin. Took up the proper distance, planted his feet firmly on the ground, told the man to raise his head a little higher, swung the axe swiftly back and then struck with a swish through the air forwards, and the

headless trunk rolled over on the ground, while the head dropped at the feet of the thrall who held the withy. The bystanders could see no change of expression as the axe gleamed in the act of striking, not a twitch of an eyebrow, or quiver of an eyelid told that the man dreaded the blow.

"Well sped, brave soul," cried the spectators, whose interest was growing deeper as each victim met his end so nobly. Five men had now died, there remained but three more on the log, of whom Beornwulf was the last. Beornwulf was getting weary of sitting so long, and he was irritated with the thrall who held the withy entwined in his hair, which was remarkably long and bushy, and of which Beornwulf was very proud. The thrall twitched his head every time an execution took place, not intentionally, but because he kept twisting round to get a good look at the performance, while Beornwulf also wished to see how each man met his death, with the result that his neck was now very stiff, and he himself was in an impatient, irritable, frame of mind. He did not care what became of him; he knew he would die in a few minutes, but none the less, or rather because of that certainty, he wished to excite Arwald before he died.

"Hi! old Wolf's head," he shouted, "thou mountain of flesh, thou! Arwald, or whatever thy name is; how long am I to sit here and have my head twisted off my shoulders by this lubberly thrall? Send that head-cutting knave down this way, and let me get away from here."

As Arwald paid no attention, Beornwulf began again.

"I say, thou round knave, thou, dost thou not hear?" and he proceeded to string together a collection of epithets considerably more apposite than elegant, which so enraged Arwald that to stop his abuse he told the executioner to go to him next, but Beornwulf had one more idea. He called out—

"By Woden's beard, I am not going to have my fair hair touched by a base knave; let one of thy eorls come here and hold my hair."

He had beautiful curly, long, fair hair, and took great care of it; and since great respect was paid to appearance even in those rough times, and the hair, curiously enough, in all savage tribes and races, is always the object of great solicitude, although no other attention is paid to the person, he was allowed to have his wish. One of the eorls sitting by Arwald said he would do as the merry knave wanted, and stepped up to Beornwulf. He took his position behind him, grasping firmly the thick, bushy, curly locks. The other two prisoners moved a little more to the left, so as to allow room for the executioner to have full play for his axe; and the headsman prepared to perform his horrid office. Beornwulf watched him very steadily, the proper distance was measured, the executioner told him to sit very steady. "For," he said, "thou art a fine young man, and I would be sorry to spoil thy beauty;" to which Beornwulf replied, "Thank thee, poor knave; but it would take a good deal to spoil thine." Which retort so enraged the

executioner, who was a snub-nosed, blear-eyed, red-haired man, and therefore felt the truth of the remark, that he swung back his axe, poised it, and then struck with all his force. There was a sharp cutting sound, a shrill cry, and a shout of astonishment from the crowd, while a loud mocking laugh rang out from—whom? Could it be the dead man? The crowd strained to look. There was no doubt about it. There was Beornwulf roaring with laughter; but instead of his head being on the ground, it was still on his shoulders; but something was on the ground. What was it? The crowd looked at the eorl. What was the matter with him? He was holding up his arms. But what had happened to them? *Where were his hands?* And then the trick dawned upon every one. And there were loud shouts of applause at Beornwulf's cleverness, for this was just such a joke as those rude, barbarous men could understand; and they shouted and screamed, and roared with laughter.

"Why, Loki, the mischief lover, was nothing to him." "Let him go free." "He ought to live," were heard on all sides. And even Arwald laughed, so that the tears ran down his face as the splendid joke dawned upon him.

And this is what had happened. When the executioner struck his stroke, Beornwulf, who had been carefully watching him, ducked his head with all his might, and with a sudden jerk. The eorl, whose hands were firmly twisted in his luxuriant hair, was naturally pulled down; the executioner could not stop his blow, even if he had had time to notice the stratagem, and the wretched eorl received the full force of the sweeping cut, with the result that both his hands were shorn off at the wrists.[1]

[1] The greater part of the above account of these executions is taken from Mallet's "Northern Antiquities," where the execution of the Jomsberg Rovers is extracted from various Scandinavian sources. I have inserted them here to give a really true picture of the wild, fierce, brave manners of that rude epoch. The episode of the Jomsberg Rovers is more than 200 years subsequent to the events here narrated.

The exquisiteness of this stratagem consisted not only in the mortification of the executioner, and the momentary saving of Beornwulf's life, but, above all in the disabling of one more of Beornwulf's enemies, for so it would count, according to all the received ideas; and thus at a moment, the most supreme in the life of a man, Beornwulf had contrived to add one more to the number of victims he would have for his own particular portion when he arrived in Valhalla, and his renown for wit would be very great.

But the executioner was furious at the trick that had been played upon

him: he paid no heed to the shouts of the crowd, and, uttering a savage cry, he rushed upon Beornwulf. Some of the bystanders shouted to Beornwulf, to warn him of his danger, but it seemed nothing could save him, for the man was upon him: when, quick as lightning, Beornwulf flung himself prostrate upon the ground at the feet of his would-be murderer. The man heavy, blundering, and blinded by passion, fell over him, severing the cord with his axe as he fell; and instantly Beornwulf rose to his feet, seized the axe out of his hand, and dealt him a swinging death-blow.

Again shouts of applause arose, but this time they were not so unanimous, the *amour propre* of the Wihtwaras was becoming hurt. Beornwulf was a West Saxon and a stranger; it was not right he should triumph thus over the islanders; it was time his conceit came to an end. Had he rested on his first success popular favour would have been with him, or had he simply managed to escape from the blow of the executioner; but the death of this latter, who was a well-known as well as a popular character at Wihtgaresbyryg, made many people angry, and especially Arwald; and he gave orders to have the West Saxon killed at once.

But Beornwulf's blood was up now. He held in his hand the axe; with a blow he cut the rope which attached the two other prisoners to the long row of prostrate dead bodies; he called to them to seize axes from the bystanders, and then rushed to where the other prisoners were standing; before the guards could interfere, he had cut down one of them, shouted to the prisoners to imitate him, and struck right and left at any who were near him. The whole thing was so sudden, the confusion and noise were so great, that many people did not know what was happening, while at the same time a great number of cattle which were being driven up for supplies, and were close behind the crowd, terrified at the hubbub, broke away from their drivers, and, with tails erect and lowered horns, rushed through the crowd, horning many and trampling on more. Arwald shouted, stormed, and raved; the leading eorls rushed in among the crowd and tried to restore some sort of order; but in such a fighting, struggling mass, confined between the building of the homestead, with plunging cattle, mad with terror, goring, trampling, rushing wildly here and there, with a desperate band of men, in whom the love of life was once more kindled, along with the hope of saving it, what could anyone do to restore order? The confusion could only cease with physical exhaustion. The noise was terrific.

Beornwulf cut his way towards the nearest opening in the buildings, followed by many of the prisoners. There was this advantage for them: they knew what they wanted and had a definite purpose, and were prompted by the most powerful impulse that could act on human beings when blindly yielding to the cry of nature. The instinct of self-preservation taught them where to go, which instinct, also acting upon their enemies, aided them in their efforts to escape. At

last—how, scarcely any one could tell—Beornwulf and about twenty more found themselves outside the buildings with nothing before them but open country right down to the ford. With a wild rush they started for the creek, followed by very few of Arwald's men. The confusion, now that it was relieved of a considerable part of its cause, gradually quieted down, and then Arwald was able to see that nearly all his prisoners had escaped; heaping terrific abuse upon the guards who had allowed them to get away, he ordered his horse to be brought, and all who could to follow him.

The fugitives had strained every nerve to get a good start and were rapidly rearing the ford, but they had had no food and were exhausted; gallantly they ran, but it was quite clear that some of them must be caught again. Panting, gasping, Beornwulf reached the ford, the tide was fortunately down and he dashed through it, followed closely by several others; they had scarcely reached the banks on the other side, when a wild cheer welcomed them, and Ceolwulf, with Wulfstan and a large force of boys sprang up and greeted them. Arwald and his few followers seeing that all the fugitives had now got within shelter of the stones, whose disastrous effects still left a mark on his forehead, thought it more prudent to retire, and all the fugitives were therefore saved.

"Oh, Beornwulf, I am so glad!" cried Wulfstan, as they all stood on the top of the bank and saw Arwald sullenly rein in his horse and give the order to return.

"Let's give him a parting volley. I do believe I could hit him," Wulfstan said, and swinging his sling round his head he sent a stone whizzing and humming through the air after Arwald, while all the band set up a derisive shout. Arwald was just turning round to shake his fist at them, when the stone struck his horse violently on the hind quarter, causing it to give a leap into the air. Arwald was pitched heavily forwards, and was nearly unseated; as it was he lost his stirrups, and had to clutch at the mane to keep himself from falling, while the horse galloped away towards the homestead, and in this undignified way the Wihtwara chieftain returned to his men.

Wulfstan and all the others shouted with mocking laughter, and then turned towards the stockade, their spirits considerably relieved at the safety of the fugitives, and at the unexpected addition to their little force.

One or two of the sharpest boys were left with Stuff to see how matters were going, and to watch the enemy, with strict orders to send up word of what was going on, and if any fresh attack seemed imminent.

"We did that fire well, didn't we, Beorney?" said Wulfstan, as they walked up to the stockade, passing the charred gorse on their right. "I heard Arwald say how nice our cooking smelt; he little thought how soon some of his men would

feel the fire. I wish it had been the old fat knave himself.”

CHAPTER XX.

”’TIS TRUE WE ARE IN GREAT DANGER; THE
GREATER SHOULD OUR COURAGE BE.”

When Ceolwulf and the rescued party reached the stockade it was a little past noon; the breeze that had been gently blowing from the east began to show signs of going round with the sun, for the weather was very fine. This fickleness of the wind was noted by Ceolwulf with a discontented grunt, for it was quite clear that any reinforcements that Cædwalla might send would be delayed by a westerly or south-westerly wind.

”Dost thou think Wulf the Atheling reached Selsea?” asked Wulfstan for about the hundredth time, and Ceolwulf, who was already grumpy enough at the prospect of the change in the wind, was exasperated at the persistency of his young lord.

”How can I tell thee? Why dost thou weary me so with such foolish questions? Thou wilt know fast enough when thou seest any boats coming,” and with this answer Wulfstan had to be content, until, in a moment of thoughtlessness, he should ask the same question again in the course of a few more minutes.

”I tell thee what it is, Biggun!” said Beornwulf, ”I shall not be sorry for a bit of food; so if thou hast got any hereabouts let me see it.”

”All right, man. Thou shalt have it soon enough,” replied Ceolwulf, leading the way into the now completed stockade.

Beornwulf was surprised to see how well everything had been done. The area inside had been made very much larger; unfortunately, now that all their fighting men were nearly exterminated, almost too large for the little force who could defend it. Stores of food were piled up at the sides, and boards laid on the top of these, to act as platforms; logs were rolled against the only entrance, and shelters made for the defending force against missiles. Ælfhere and Malachi had been taken away, and were carefully concealed in a very impervious and wild part of the country, known only to a few of the most adventurous of the inhabitants, and it was intended to try to mislead Arwald into thinking that all the household servants, dependents, and belongings of Ælfhere were assembled inside the stockade, and to carry out this impression a few cattle had been kept

inside, carefully penned up. All the trees that in any way commanded a view into the interior of the little fortification were cleared away, and a path down to the spring of water was defended by stout palings. Altogether, everything that prudence, foresight, and energy could do to render their position secure had been done: the only thing wanted to crown the preparations was a suitable number of defenders, and this it was now impossible to obtain. The midday meal had been postponed until Ceolwulf returned, and they all sat down inside the stockade, and made an excellent dinner. Free, careless, and in the enjoyment of the most perfect health, the majority of the men, like thoughtless children, forgot the danger they had passed, or the almost certain death that awaited them, in the animal pleasure of the moment, and, like the Homeric heroes, they sat eating much flesh, and quaffing home-brewed beer, in most absolute and unconcerned satisfaction.

All listened to Beornwulf's account of what had gone on at the homestead, and there was a disapproving grunt from all when they heard how narrowly Arwald had missed being killed by Athelhune's knife, but the applause was great as they heard how nobly the West Saxon eorldoman had met his death. But when Beornwulf came to his own part in the tragedy the rejoicing was tumultuous. The recital of these stirring deeds, and the example of stern, enduring indifference to death, had an excellent effect upon the men, and when dinner was over they all felt equal to any number of enemies. Indeed, so carried away were they all, that many openly said it was too much like women to stay behind wooden walls; they ought to sally out into the open; they could easily defeat such a miserable lot as the followers of Arwald, and among these was Wulfstan, who was overjoyed at the successes that had crowned his part in the fray hitherto. Although they could not help being depressed at the loss of all their fighting men in the fatal slaughter down by the meadows near the Yare, yet they attributed this entirely to the gross mismanagement of Wulf the Atheling, and their subsequent diversion in harassing the enemy at the ford, and the final total rout and retreat of Arwald, had fully compensated in their eyes for their previous defeat. And now this last success, in which Arwald had been bearded in his own hall, as it were, crowned the whole, and not a man doubted but that they would not only hold their own until Cædwalla could send them reinforcements, but would totally annihilate Arwald by their own unaided valour.

Ceolwulf alone was not blinded by their successes; in fact he could not but see that unless help were to come to them soon they must all succumb to the enormous odds Arwald would bring against them. After all, what had they done? They had worried Arwald; they had driven him back by a most fortunate stratagem, but such as could not succeed again. They had rescued some twenty of their own men, who would never have had to be rescued but for the bad generalship of their leader; but they had lost more than seventy of their best men,

and among them Athelhune and the Atheling Wulf. They had put off the evil day for a few hours, that was all—a great deal if they could see any help coming; but at best no help was likely to come for another twenty-four hours.

Anxiously Ceolwulf looked at the clouds, the wind was getting more and more to the west, but it might go back again at nightfall. But how could they hope to hold out if once Arwald attacked in earnest? There was one hope. Arwald did not show any signs of moving yet; at least, no news had come from the outposts, and it was now getting on well into the afternoon. Perhaps his reinforcements had not come up, or he might intend a night attack.

The force left to defend the stockade amounted to not more than a hundred men. There was a large number of boys, but they could be of little use in a hand-to-hand encounter, and Ceolwulf turned it over in his mind whether it would not be better to leave them outside under Wulfstan; they had shown such talents for annoying the enemy without themselves receiving any damage, and they were so perfectly at home in the intricate paths and rough tracks, over the hills and through the woods, that he thought it would be wisest to send them outside, they might thus escape the destruction which was sure to await those in the stockade, and might create a useful diversion by stoning the enemy from the cover of the woods, for in running they could outstrip most men, and knew the land well.

Full of these anxious thoughts Ceolwulf had been meditatively leaning, with his head on his hands looking dreamily over the parapet of the stockade. The stockade from this point commanded a view, through a gap in the trees, where the land fell abruptly to a wooded dell below, of the distant sea to the east of the island, and consequently towards Selsea. The sun was getting low in the heavens, but his rays were still bright; and the light shone full on the far-distant line of downs beyond Cissanceaster. Ceolwulf had been gazing vaguely in this direction for some time, in the see-nothing sort of way in which men look intently at objects without in the least grasping their reality.

"Why, Biggun, old man," called Beornwulf, who, now that he was thoroughly rested, and had had a good dinner, felt equal to anything, "What art thou looking so hard for? that is not where Arwald will come from;" and, as he spoke, he got up on to the platform by his side, but not looking in the same direction as Ceolwulf. Glancing up at the sky, he said, "I think the breeze is drawing more from the north again. We can't make another beacon fire for Arwald, can we?" Then he turned round and looked out towards the sea, and in another second shouted, "There's a fleet coming this way! Look at that dark patch on the water, half-way between Selsea and us."

Ceolwulf looked, and instantly perceived that he had been gazing at this object for some time, but had never given it a thought.

There was no doubt about it. That dark patch, with here and there a

brighter speck in the midst of it, was a flotilla, and the brighter specks were sails.

It was Cædwalla coming to save them.

But would he—could he arrive in time? Other eyes must have seen the flotilla too. Arwald would never allow the invaders to land without crushing the rebels first; and the flotilla could not, under the most favourable circumstances, reach Brædyngge haven before two or three hours, and then they would have to disembark and march three miles before they could help them; and in four hours there might not be a man alive in the stockade.

At this moment Stuff rushed up, shouting that Arwald had crossed the Yare with more men than ever, and was advancing upon the stockade.

"Well, then, that puts an end to all my doubts," said Ceolwulf. "Wulf, do thou take the boys outside. Thou art a sharp lad. Send two or three down to the point at the entrance to the haven. Tell them to light a fire there, and as soon as they can, let them tell Cædwalla where we are, and bid him hasten to our help. Anyhow," muttered Ceolwulf, "he will avenge us on Arwald, and the eorldoman Ælfhere will be saved, and the boy too. If that happens, what matters it what becomes of an old man like me?"

So saying, the old Wihtwara got down off the platform and prepared to give the final directions before the last decisive struggle began. It was now about an hour before sunset. Why Arwald had not attacked sooner he could not understand; and he argued that he would not have attacked now had he not seen the flotilla, from which he concluded that all the reinforcements had not reached him, or that there had been some accident. Ceolwulf directed Wulfstan to go outside at once, bidding him be sure to do nothing rashly, but make his way down to the shore, and, above all things, keep out of Arwald's way.

The boy took an affectionate leave of Biggun, but secretly resolved he would have a shot at Arwald before he retreated; and he was not sorry to have an opportunity of distinguishing himself without Ceolwulf's guidance and direction. He had every confidence in himself, indeed too much so, and was already turning over a deep scheme by which he might lead Arwald into destruction. When he got outside the stockade, therefore, he called Stuff to him, and the two boys entered into an earnest conversation, at the end of which Stuff, with a look of great and complacent cunning, and much mysterious importance, disappeared in the woods, while Wulfstan led the band of boys away towards the Brædyngge haven side of the hill.

After they had gone about half a mile they came to a marshy piece of waste land, surrounded on two sides with steep hillocks and high thick gorse bushes. On the other side was a narrow strip of shingly beach, for it was close to the haven, and at the farther end was a dense wood. Wulfstan told the boys to lie concealed behind the bushes, and when he whistled they were to spring up and

riddle the enemy with stones, and then rush away into the wood at the other end, and thence return towards the stockade, to give such aid as they could to Ceolwulf.

Stuff had been told by Wulfstan to let himself be caught by Arwald's men, who had been trying to capture some one to act as guide to where the rest of Ælfhere's party had hidden themselves. It was the accidental overhearing of the conversation between some of Arwald's eorls that first put the idea into Stuff's head; and he had suggested it to Wulfstan, who grasped at the scheme with joy. All went as they wished, Stuff allowed himself to be seen by one of the flanking party of Arwald's force. He pretended to run away, stumbled, and was caught. He made sufficient resistance to make his captor think that he was a desperate youngster, mad at being captured. Indeed, he acted his part so well that he got a very hard knock on the head to keep him quiet. He was brought up before Arwald, who, with many vituperations, ordered him to show them the way to Ælfhere. Stuff at first sullenly declared he didn't know it; then on being threatened with the most awful tortures if he didn't at once tell, he pretended to be overcome with terror, and said he did know. He was then ordered to lead the way at once, whereupon he implored them not to make him show them, "For," said he, "they will kill me if they see me." His terror seemed so real that one of the eorls said he might walk by his side, and he would protect him. Having at last very sullenly consented, he led them towards the spot where Wulfstan was in ambush, and which also seemed to Arwald to be in the right direction, as he had smelt the smell of cooking coming from the left hand when he advanced last night. Everybody was the more convinced that the boy was leading them right, because of his manifest reluctance to give the information, and because of his obvious terror. They little knew what a depth of cunning lay beneath that dull, stolid, cowed-looking exterior.

As they advanced towards the morass, the horses sank deeper into the soft spongy ground, and many of the eorls got off to walk in order to save their horses. Arwald, remembering the catastrophe of the night before, and, determining not to be so caught again, sent a strong body of men to scour the higher ground, directing them to push on some way to their right; and Stuff, seeing this, and knowing that they must come upon the stockade if they went on in that direction, muttered in a tone of satisfaction to himself, but loud enough for the eorl to hear:

"An' they go that way they'll get stuck in the mire, and on being interrogated by the eorl, he looked up in a startled way, and pretended he had not said anything. But the eorl was not going to be put off, and insisted on knowing what he meant, whereupon with much reluctance the boy said there were pitfalls and swamps up there. When Arwald was told this, he was about to give the order for the men to fall back, when a shout from one of the advance guard told him that

something had been seen.

While the attention of everybody was directed to the point from which the man shouted, Stuff took the opportunity to duck under the belly of the eorl's horse and escape into a thick clump of furze, or gorse, where he lay hid, but listening eagerly for what was going to follow. He heard Arwald shout for the man to come and tell him what he had seen; and he heard the scout report that he had seen a clearing in the forest, and the palings of a well-built stockade; but whilst they were talking the sound of a rustling near him, made him lie very close. The next moment he saw Wulfstan crawl into the clump followed by a dozen boys. Stuff gave a low whistle which caused Wulfstan to pause. "Stuff, is that thou?" he whispered cautiously. "Ay, it's me sure enough," replied the boy in the same cautious tone.

"What's up, Stuff? Why don't they go on?" whispered Wulfstan.

"They've seen the stockade, and are going to attack it."

At this moment they could hear the eorl who had undertaken to look after Stuff exclaim with surprise that the boy had gone—and several men began beating the bushes round. This was getting too close; so Wulfstan and all of them begun to crawl back into thicker and more distant cover, when suddenly one of the men who was beating the bushes caught sight of them and instantly uttered a view halloo. "Gone away; gone away," he shouted, dashing after the boys who now that they were seen rose to their feet and darted off, scattering in different directions. Wulfstan and Stuff, with some three or four more, kept together, and made for the thickest part of the wood to the north of the stockade hoping to be able to baffle their pursuers, double round behind them, and then follow them up, and perhaps catch them at a disadvantage somewhere, and so do them some damage.

Three men on horseback, and about half-a-dozen footmen, had started after Wulfstan, while others had gone after the rest of the boys, for Arwald's force was now so numerous, that he could easily afford to send off parties to scour the country, while he, with the main body, could advance to the attack on the stockade, whose existence he now for the first time learnt; and thus a very great danger arose lest the rest of the women and children, who were encamped right away at the south-east extremity of Binbrygge, should be discovered and all be made prisoners.

Arwald, naturally concluding from the impracticable nature of the ground, and the accidental discovery of the stockade so far on his right, as well as from the disappearance of the captive guide, that they were being led into an ambush, gave the order for all the force, with the exception of the small bodies sent in pursuit of the boys, to advance upon the stockade.

The cavalry, led by Arwald, marched across the outskirts of the burnt com-

mon, the scene of their rout and disgrace the evening before, while the footmen pushed into the woods on either side.

"By Freya's golden hair," said Arwald, as he came in sight of the steep knoll, on the top of which was the stockade, "but these knaves have chosen a good position. We must carry this place quickly, or we shall have more to deal with than we know how." And he looked up anxiously at the sky.

The breeze was clearly fresher, and what was worse was blowing from the north-east. The sun was going down fast.

"Come, my men, there's no time to be lost. There are enough of us here to make an end of these cripples without much difficulty. Begin the assault."

The various eorls were at the head of their separate bands, and dismounting, as Arwald did, they led their men into the wood, leaving the horses outside under a guard. The attacking force was so powerful that there were enough men to assault the stockade all round. And Arwald trusted to a combined rush to carry the place. The palisades were about nine feet high, in some places higher; it was, therefore, no easy matter to get over, but the leaders ordered their men to cut down trees from the wood outside, and make a sloping approach to the palisades. The sharp noise of axes felling trees, resounded on all sides for the next quarter of an hour or more, and then crash, crack, swish, came the trees to the ground, and again the busy axes were plied, lopping off the limbs and trimming the trunks. As soon as the trees were ready, they were carried up to the stockade and rolled, or placed, at the foot of it, and here the service became dangerous, for the defenders were naturally not idle. They had pierced holes in the stockade, and putting their spears through, they tried to stab their assailants as they came near, while others leant over the top of the palisades and struck down at the men engaged in putting the timber in its place. They had very few missile weapons, and could therefore do little to annoy the enemy at a distance, and were compelled to await the completion of the preparations for the assault in enforced idleness. Ceolwulf had distributed his men to the best advantage, mingling the young with the old, in the way most likely to benefit both, and all were ready for the final death struggle. Few words were spoken on either side, while the placing of the logs outside went on rapidly. The thickest trees were first rolled up and then the ends of the next set of logs were placed on these, crosswise, with the other end on the ground; and in this way a rough, sloping, approach was made up to the stockade. Where one set of trees was not enough another log was rolled up on the cross ones, which were at right angles to the palisade, and these were wedged up so as to make them more secure. The stockade was approached by about twenty different sloping stages on all sides, but as they did not touch each other, there were intervening spaces which were not open to attack, thus the defenders were able to concentrate all their efforts on the spots which were most

threatened.

Arwald, seeing that all the preparations were now completed, gave the signal for the assault to begin. With a shout of defiance and anticipated victory the Wihtwaras threw themselves upon the stages and rushed to the attack. Axes gleamed on all sides, and crowds of men pressed close behind each other. The front ranks tried to clamber over the palisade, and were sternly met by the desperate defenders. Such of the enemy as tried to get over, lost hands or arms from the quick blows of the watchful adherents of Ælfhere, and all the horrors of previous assaults were repeated over again with the same dreadful monotony. There was the same desperate valour in assailing, as in defending, and victory inclined to neither side decidedly as yet. But it was clear that the defence could not last long. Already many of Ceolwulf's party had received terrible wounds, although none had been killed outright; but they had inflicted much loss on their foe, who had hitherto failed to effect an entrance. But there was no cessation of the assault; as fast as the front rank succumbed there were others to take their places, pressing with furious ardour to annihilate the little band inside, for all Arwald's followers knew of the invasion with which they were threatened, and were keenly alive to the importance of sweeping away these few antagonists first.

Ceolwulf looked anxiously at the sky. The sun had just set, and the breeze came cool and keen from the north-east. Could there be any chance of their holding out another hour? He thought not. "Never mind," he kept saying to himself, "I have done all that could be done, all my lords are safe; and, anyway, I should not live for many more years. Better die now than live to be old and useless. But," he added, savagely chopping at a sturdy Wihtwara, who was boldly putting his leg over the stockade, "thou shalt not send me to Nifleheim, young man," and the luckless foeman fell back with a leg the less, to bleed to death outside the stockade; but there were many more to take his place, and weary work it was fighting against time, and hope, and terrible odds.

Arwald had given orders to break down the palisade that led to the spring, and a desperate fight was taking place here. The Wihtwaras had broken in, and were pushing back the defenders, but the narrow way got blocked with wounded and dead, and the assailants paused a moment to clear away the bodies which impeded them. Ceolwulf, seeing the lull, shouted to his men to leave the passage and pile up some logs that were inside, so as to close the entrance, but it was too late. The enemy dashed in, and a hand-to-hand fight took place in the narrow space inside the stockade. Beornwulf, seeing all was over, determined not to die cooped up in that shambles. He shouted to Ceolwulf to leap over the stockade, and cut their way into the woods. It was a hopeless and desperate venture, but Beornwulf had already escaped certain death once that day, and he believed he could not die for the next twenty-four hours, at least.[1] Behind them, inside, a

fearful murder was going on; before them was at least a chance of life, at any rate, no worse death. Springing over the stockade, therefore, Ceolwulf and Beornwulf, with four or five more, dropped down into the interval between the raised stages that were crowded with the enemy pressing up to take their part in the awful scene going on inside. Armed and clothed like the other Wihtwaras, they were not recognised as the very men the followers of Arwald had come to slay, and they were able to push through the lines of assailants, who thought they were only some of the numerous men who had got pushed over the edge of the stages by the pressure from behind, and were returning to take up their places on the stages again to renew the assault, and some even jeered at them as clumsy fellows who had had to make room for their betters, while others openly laughed at them as cowards who were not sorry to get out of the way of the enemy.

[1] It was a popular superstition, and is still, that if a man escaped imminent death or had a man killed alongside of him, he could not be killed that day—*vide* Prosper Mérimée, "L'enlevement de la Redoute."

"Thou art right there, my friend," said Ceolwulf, who, being a Wihtwara himself, ran no risk of his dialect betraying him. "But it will want someone to bury yon men, and so I intend stopping behind."

"Dost thou, though, my shirking knave," cried Arwald, who had taken no part in the assault himself, but waited outside to watch the attack, and encourage, or reprimand, his men. "Do thou go back at once, and don't let me— Ah! By Woden, but thou art a bigger scoundrel—"

He did not finish his sentence, for Beornwulf and Biggun made a rush for him, overjoyed at the opportunity of revenging all their wrongs on the chieftain himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

"LET US DIE IN HONOUR; ONCE MORE BACK AGAIN."

Arwald, seeing the determined rush made upon him by Beornwulf and Biggun, reined in his horse, swung it round, and, striking his heels into the animal's side,

caused it to leap past the two desperate men. As Arwald did so, he called out to the men nearest him to fall upon the traitors, for so at first he took them to be; but, seeing the woods before them, neither Beornwulf nor Biggun waited to have another attempt at Arwald. The instinct of life urged them on, and they dashed into the woods unmolested.

"There's some death the Norns are keeping for that knave," said Ceolwulf, as soon as he and Beornwulf found themselves at a sufficient distance to relax their speed. "He has always escaped hitherto, but let him look out, his time has nearly come now."

"Are we going right for the shore?"

"It's not far off, and Cædwalla ought to have reached it by now; but, hist! who's coming this way?"

They crouched down. A few horsemen and footmen were approaching through the wood, evidently guiding their course by the sounds that proceeded from the stockade, where the work of death was very nearly over. The troop now drawing near might be the advanced guard of their deliverers. This was almost too good to be hoped for; or it might be some of the raiders of Arwald's party; anyway, Beornwulf and Biggun had better lie still.

As the first horseman came up he was saying to the nearest footman who was walking by his side that they ought to make more haste or they would get none of the booty; and, besides, the news they had to bring was very important.

"I wish I knew what that news was," muttered Ceolwulf.

"Why, what have they got hanging down over the horses shoulders in front of him?" said Beornwulf whose sight was keener than his old companion's. "It's a body, I do believe, and the body of a boy, too."

Ceolwulf peered out between the dry leaves, and the next moment, without a second's reflection, flung himself out of the bushes, and rushed with a wild cry of rage straight at the horseman, oversetting the nearest footman in his rush. With one hand he seized the bridle of the horse, and with the other he struck the rider a tremendous blow on the arm, and before the man, taken utterly by surprise, could strike a blow in his own defence, Ceolwulf struck him again, and this time with a deep groan the man fell heavily from the saddle and dropped to the ground.

Beornwulf seeing the danger his old comrade was in rushed out after him, and began laying about him manfully, but the odds were against them; however, Biggun with great presence of mind jumped into the saddle, from which he had just ousted the owner, and, turning the horse's head, galloped back towards where they had come from, shouting to Beornwulf to follow him. The attention of the men was taken up in trying to stop Ceolwulf, or it would have gone hardly with the West Saxon; as it was, he was enabled to dash back into the wood again,

and so escaped the notice of the enemy. Ceolwulf urged his horse at the utmost to escape from his pursuers, but the horse was heavily weighted with the double burden; however, for the first few minutes it managed to increase the slight start obtained by the unexpected rapidity of Ceolwulf's movements; gradually, however, it became clear to Ceolwulf that he must be captured, in spite all his efforts, and he did not know what to do.

The reason of this desperate onslaught was that he saw there hanging over the horse's shoulders his young lord Wulfstan; whether he were dead or not he could not tell, but he hoped, as they were taking the trouble to bring him into camp, that he was still alive, and on the wild hope of rescuing him, old Biggun had staked his life; and now, after all, with help so near at hand, it seemed as though both must lose their lives.

"Beornwulf," the old man shouted, "catch this horse when I get off it, and ride like the wind towards yonder copse," but no answer came, and Ceolwulf felt it was all over with both of them. Still he urged on the horse, every stride was bringing them nearer safety, but the horsemen behind were close upon him. Ceolwulf turned round, there was only one man quite close, and he was some distance from the others. Could not he manage to disable this man? The Wihtwara gradually drew nearer, his axe was uplifted, the weapon seemed over Ceolwulf's head, crash it came down, and with it the Wihtwara rolling on the ground, the blow had missed Ceolwulf, but what had knocked the man down? Ceolwulf had struck no blow, he was far too intent in pressing on his horse, and for the moment concluded the man's horse had stumbled on the rough ground; it was not until afterwards that he learnt how he had been saved. Without pausing a moment, Biggun rode steadily on; the fallen horseman caused the rest of the pursuers to stop where he fell, and one of them dismounting, went up to the man; turning the body over, he found that one eye was knocked out, and that the man was dead. Whether this was the result of the fall or not could not be told; but the man remounted his horse, and they then gave up the chase and returned to Arwald.

Meanwhile Ceolwulf continued his course towards the shore. The evening was changing into night; as he emerged from a dense part of the wood he suddenly came upon a brilliant blaze of light, and knew that his orders had been carried out. Riding up to the fire he found a crowd of boys assembled round it, and he was not long in learning the news. Cædwalla was within a mile of the land, and might disembark in less than half an hour. But why did not Arwald come down to meet him? He might do so yet; in any case, Ceolwulf could not longer delay attending to his young lord. Tenderly the boyish figure was lifted off the horse, and gently he was laid down by the fire. He lay quite still, only blood welled up in a deep cut on his head, and all could see that he was desperately wounded.

"Oh! my young master!" cried Ceolwulf, "Why could not I have received this instead of thee? How shall I meet my lord Ælfhere? Ah! Biggun, thou art a dolt and a dotard to have allowed him to get from thee."

And then he enquired of the boys around how it had happened. Several of the boys had seen it all, but could do nothing to save their young lord; at least so they said, but Ceolwulf would not believe them, and heaped maledictions on them for their cowardice and want of devotion to their lord. It appeared that Wulfstan, while running away, saw one of his companions fall, and the noble boy knowing that he would be killed, stopped and fitted a stone to the sling preparatory to casting it at the first man of the enemy who should approach the disabled boy. While he was doing this and was totally careless of his own safety, a Wihtwara on horseback, the same whom Ceolwulf had killed, broke through the bushes behind Wulfstan and fetching him a blow with his axe knocked him down, and then dismounting, put him on his horse as Ceolwulf had found him.

"If ye boys had had a quarter of your young lord's pluck ye would never have let him be hurt, much less taken. Could none of ye have tried to save the boy who fell, instead of letting your young lord do it? And could none of ye have got in the way of the knave who gave him this wound? Ah! I am ashamed of ye all! Ye are a set of cowardly do-nothings; and what a chance ye have let slip; it doesn't happen to a boy every day; no, nor once in a year in these more peaceful times—it's true we have had a little more life lately—(by which Ceolwulf meant death)—for a boy, I say, to have the good luck to get killed for his lord, and here with this chance before ye, not one of ye had the sense or the gratitude to take it. Ugh! get along with ye all for a pack of skulking foxes."

The upbraidings of Ceolwulf caused many of the boys to hang their heads, and several reproached themselves for not having got killed instead of Wulfstan. However, there was no help for it now, and all stood round looking at the pale and noble features of the senseless boy. His fair hair fell back round his face in waving locks, his eyes were shut, and the pallor of his cheeks, usually so full of colour and health, was very ominous. Ceolwulf raised his head on his knee and bandaged the cut as well as he could, telling the boys to get him some salt water from the sea.

"Shall I go and find old Deva and the bald-headed man?" suggested one of the boys.

"Ay, my son, that's the best thing thou canst do, and the sooner thou bringest them the better, for we shall have work enough to occupy us all soon. Which of ye knows the way?"

"I do," and "I do," resounded from all sides, and Ceolwulf chose the sharpest-looking of the lads, and sent off three of them, telling them to inform Malachi, or "the bald-headed one," of what had happened, but on no account to alarm

Ælfhere, the eorldoman.

Away the boys darted, and were soon lost in the darkness. Ceolwulf continued to bathe the wound, watching anxiously for some return of consciousness; but the heavy lids remained shut, and the breathing seemed to grow weaker.

"Ah! Wulfstan, my dear young lord, hadst thou only stayed at Boseham with Ædric all would have been well. To think of the fights I have been through and my life worth nothing, and this boy, the joy of his father, and born to be an eorl and Heretoga, if ever there was one, to die before he is twelve years old!" and old Ceolwulf groaned bitterly. "How beautiful the lad is!" he went on. "Surely neither Baldur, nor Woden, nor Thor, could have looked handsomer; but Baldur died. Ah! yes, beauty is what death loves, and so Baldur died young."

While Ceolwulf was thus mourning over Wulfstan he forgot all about surrounding objects, and was suddenly startled into consciousness of this world and the present by a boy running up to him and saying, breathlessly:

"Master Biggun, here's some boats come ashore at yonder point, and there's a sight of people getting out."

"Why, whatever am I doing? I'm forgetting everything. Here, one of ye boys, run down and show the people the best way up; ask them, for some one will show thee—no, that won't do. Tell the first man thou seest that old Ceolwulf, who fought at Cissanceaster along with Cædwalla, is here, and wants help. Now, off with thee; what art thou waiting for?"

"But, maybe, they mayn't be friends; how do I know they won't hurt me?"

"By Thor's hammer but what are we coming to? These boys daren't get killed for their lord, and now they are frightened of their own friends! Get along with thee directly, and do what thou art told, or it will be the worse for thee."

The boy went off not much reassured, and intending fully to disobey Ceolwulf as soon as he got out of sight; but he had scarcely gone three steps into the darkness when he felt his arm seized, and a deep voice in a very different dialect to his own, but still such as he could understand well enough, say:

"Not so fast, youngster; tell us who they are round this fire, and why it is lighted?"

Paralysed with terror, the boy could not answer for a moment, but seeing the gleam of sharp steel as his captor held up a long knife before him, he called out:

"Oh, don't kill me! I was sent by old Ceolwulf, who did something somewhere, to find somebody—I can't remember who—and there he is sitting by the fire; and if thou wert to kill me I couldn't tell thee any more, indeed I couldn't, so please don't do it."

Recognizing the truth of the last statement, the man put his knife away, and called to some men behind. These now came up, and the boy saw a large body of

tall, powerful, well-armed men, most of them in the prime of life. Among them he noticed a magnificent man, taller than any of the others, and with a helmet surmounted by a golden dragon. The light of the fire flashed upon his close-fitting shirt of mail, on his sword and battle-axe, and shone in his bright, clear eyes.

"Did I hear the name of Ceolwulf?" he asked, eagerly. "Where is the fine old man? Lead me at once to him, my boy; no harm shall happen to thee if thou wilt tell the truth and do what thou art told."

The boy pointed to where Ceolwulf was sitting, hidden by the fire being between them, and the dragon-crested warrior, closely followed by a younger figure, hastened to greet him. The next moment a cry of joy and grief rang out as the younger figure, in spite of his lameness, outran the chieftain.

"Oh! Wulfy, my dear brother Wulf, to think I should find thee like this," and Ædric knelt down by Ceolwulf and burst into tears, sobbing bitterly as he took his brother's hand in his.

"What! Ceolwulf, my fine youth," said Cædwalla. "This is a bad business; the brave little lad is not dead, is he? Let me look at him." So saying, the kind-hearted king bent down and took the other limp hand, while he listened for his breathing. After a minute he rose and said, "He's not dead, but he wants attention; have ye no women near who can look after him?"

"I have sent, my lord, for help, and it ought soon to be here," answered Ceolwulf, sadly.

"Well, I can't be of any use, and I won't take thee away from the boy. While the rest of my men are coming ashore—By the way," broke off Cædwalla, "see that the boats are taken to a place of safety for the night. Thou canst send some of thy people to help us in this, canst thou not?" he added, turning to Ceolwulf.

"Our people are all slain," replied Biggun sadly.

"What! no one left? Has it gone so hardly with thee as all that?"

"There are none but women and children and feeble old men. All our bravest youth died with Wulf the Atheling, or were killed in cold blood by Arwald, or were slaughtered but now on yonder hill."

"Where are Athelhune, and Osborn, and Beornwulf, and the three that came with my brother Wulf?"

"All are dead for ought I know. Athelhune perished, slain by Arwald; Beornwulf may have escaped. Osborn and the others died an hour or so ago, on yonder hill."

Cædwalla's handsome features had gradually assumed a fierce expression; a wild, stern light shone in his eyes, and a tightening of his hand over his axe told of the storm within.

"By Woden's beard," he burst forth, "by all the joys of Valhalla, I swear

to avenge their blood! Not unhonoured shall they be in the abodes above, or wherever the soul of man goeth. Before I leave this island, I vow to kill all of the race of Arwald that cometh in my way, be it man or woman or sucking child; for not in fair fight were they slain. Oh! Athelhune, my comrade, my right hand, my more than friend, why was I not here to save thee? But I am here to avenge thee, and right well shalt thou be avenged."

"Is this a time to talk of vengeance?" said a voice near Cædwalla. "Rather humble thyself before the strong hand of the Almighty, and give Him thanks that thou art yet in the land of the living, when so many souls have gone unregenerate, unbaptised, to their last account. Man, swear not such awful curses. There may come a time when they will recoil on thine own head."

"Who is this that dares to rebuke Cædwalla?" said the king haughtily.

"A poor servant of the Lord—one Malachi, of Boseham."

Ædric had turned joyfully at the voice, and felt new hope for his brother.

"Oh! brother Malachi, come here; see what has happened to Wulfstan."

"What! Ædric, my son; hast thou come to this sinful and blood-guilty land? And how are Father Dicoll and brother Corman? Verily my heart yearns for news of them."

"Oh, Malachi, I will tell thee all about them while thou art looking at Wulfstan; but do tell me if he is alive?"

Malachi stooped down—he had brought some balsam with him, and a few remedies—and he gently examined the wounded boy. With a very grave face he signed to Ceolwulf to let him feel his pulse, and then said, "Canst thou make a shelter for him here? it will be better to keep him quite quiet if we can."

Ceolwulf nodded assent, and Cædwalla directed some of the sails of the boats to be brought up, and a shelter was soon made.

"Deva will be here soon," said Malachi. "She has got some food with her. We will make some strong broth for him."

Cædwalla, seeing that the boy was in good hands, called Ceolwulf aside, and consulted on what was best to be done. After he had heard the old man's ideas, he gave orders that all the men he had brought with him should encamp where they were till morning, as now the stockade was lost there was no need to risk an advance through the thick woods in the dark. It was clearly ascertained that the women and children and old people belonging to Ælfhere were safe, so there was no occasion to weary the men with a march immediately after their voyage.

All through the night Malachi, in spite of his wounded arm, attended ceaselessly on Wulfstan. Ædric had intended keeping awake, but the sea voyage, the excitement, and the novelty of using his leg, had made him very sleepy, and in spite of himself he fell off into a sound sleep. Ceolwulf had been so busy helping

Cædwalla that he had not had time to tell Ædric of his father being still alive, and Malachi had not thought of it; in fact, the critical condition of Wulfstan put all other ideas out of their heads. Wulfstan had opened his eyes once, but there was no consciousness in them, and a burning patch of red in each cheek had taken the place of the ghastly pallor of a few hours before.

With dawn, Cædwalla was up; he had brought sufficient food for his men for a couple of days, and therefore was not compelled to action from necessity; and, besides, there were all the supplies of Ælfhere's people hidden among the woods; but Cædwalla was nevertheless burning to come to blows with Arwald, and the order was given for all to advance directly breakfast was over. The number of men Cædwalla had brought was over a thousand, and their equipment and appearance left little to be desired. There had been a difficulty in bringing over any horses, but there were five or six brought over for Cædwalla, and his chief eorldomen, and Ceolwulf had despatched during the night some of the boys to bring over as many of Ælfhere's horses as they could. He himself had the horse he had captured from the Wihtwara he had killed, when he rescued Wulfstan the evening before.

"My old friend," said Cædwalla, when all was ready, "I must ask thee to ride along with us, and show us the way. I know thou wantest to be with thy young lord, but he is in careful hands, and we cannot get on without thee yet. I promise thee rest enough after we have established our right to rule the Wihtwaras."

Ceolwulf had not thought of being left behind, and was flattered at this public notice of himself before so many warriors, and many of them the chief eorldomen of Wessex. All being now ready, the advance began. Cædwalla had far too much experience of war to be led into any trap as Arwald had been. He sent on a powerful advance guard under the guidance of Ceolwulf, and the keenest and most experienced of his men were ordered to march at some little distance on each flank. In this way, although their progress was slow, their security against any surprise was certain. They had not proceeded far, when the leading footmen came across the body of a man lying on a bank. Turning him over, Ceolwulf found it was Beornwulf, and he was delighted to find that he was only asleep from exhaustion. He at once had him sent into the camp, and directed that every care should be taken of him. Cædwalla was much pleased to see his old follower again, and promised he would not forget him.

The little army advanced to the stockade without any further interruption. Here a dreadful sight presented itself. Arwald had abandoned the place, evidently feeling it necessary to retire to his own district, and call up all the fighting men of the island for the decisive battle that must take place; for he was not the man to allow himself to be killed without a fight. The scene inside the stockade was awful. Accustomed as Cædwalla and his men were to fearful sights, they had

never seen so terrific a spectacle as was here, crowded into the narrow limits of that gory enclosure. Ceolwulf noted with grim satisfaction that many of Arwald's men had died; he found Osborn under a pile of slain, and many of Ælfhere's old servants had died hard.

Cædwalla made use of the ghastly spectacle to arouse his men to fiercer ardour, and then ordered the column to advance. When they emerged on the black and charred common, and the successful stratagem was explained by Ceolwulf to Cædwalla, the king was loud in his praises of the pluck, determination, and skill of the little band of defenders, and vowed that in all his experience he had never heard of or seen a better executed ambush. He was especially struck with the readiness and sagacity of the boys. As they advanced Cædwalla admired the fertility of the island, and the suitability of their choice in retiring into Binbrygge-*ea*. Crossing the ford, Ceolwulf pointed out the ruined Roman villa among the bushes, and told how nobly Athelhune had defended it against the attack of Arwald's people, and showed Cædwalla where the homestead was. The king declined to visit it now, but sent on a party to find Athelhune's remains, and have them decently laid out, with a view to burying him, as became a West Saxon eorldoman and faithful adherent of his.

As they advanced farther into the island, and the country became more open, Cædwalla directed Ceolwulf to take a force along the ridge of the downs that separated the north side of the island from the south, while he, with one of Ælfhere's old servants to act as guide, marched parallel to Ceolwulf, along the valley to the south. Every precaution was taken, and strict injunctions were given that each column was to halt if the other were attacked. Touch was kept up between the flanking and main column by a light band of active young men. In this way the army got as far as where Arreton now is without coming in contact with the enemy. Here Cædwalla gave orders that the two columns should halt, and have their mid-day meal. He himself rode up to the top of the hill and joined Ceolwulf, who pointed out to him, from this natural observatory, all the objects within sight. At his feet the land sloped away towards the north in a gradual descent to the Solent, clothed in dense oak woods, through which meandered three narrow openings of the sea. The one towards the north-west was the most important, and looked a noble inlet as it lay gleaming like silver far down below, embowered in dense oak forest. The creek more to the north-east seemed very narrow at the entrance, but widened out into a splendid sheet of water as it penetrated farther inland. The dense virgin forest surrounded the glassy surface, and there was no trace of life anywhere. Between these two creeks lay a third much smaller one, whose existence was only faintly indicated by a dip in the woods. Towards the east Cædwalla looked over woods, only bounded by the sea, and beyond the sea the coast of the South Saxons, and his own native forests

and hills. The view south was more lovely even: at his feet the wide and fertile valley spread out to the magnificent bay, bounded on one side by the gleaming white cliffs of Binbrygge Down, and on the other the dun-coloured headland that rose into the noble down behind it, while toward the south-west hill upon hill, and ridge upon ridge, culminated in the highest hill of all—the broad-backed St. Catherine Down. The valley at his feet was hidden, towards the west, by the continuation of the ridge of downs upon which Cædwalla was standing, but Ceolwulf told him it wound round and passed into another valley, or valleys, which then turned westwards and northwards. This northern valley became the deeply indented creek near the head of which stood the only fortress in the island, the burg or castle of Wihtgar, known as Wihtgaresbyryg.

"Will Arwald make a stand there, thinkest thou?" asked Cædwalla.

"I doubt whether he will not fight in the open first. He has a powerful following with him, and he is not one to fight behind walls if he has any chance of crushing us in the open."

Cædwalla laughed. "He need not talk much of crushing. There won't be much left of him or his men if once I catch them in the open."

"Aye, no doubt thou art a doughty and powerful king, but Arwald will have as many or more than we have, and the Wihtwaras fight well."

"Tush, man! have I ever lost a battle yet?" said Cædwalla, disdainfully; and then he added, "Continue thy march until we unite in the valley in front of Wihtgaresbyryg; we may have to encamp there to-night." So saying, the West Saxon king rode down the hill again, and led his column along the lower ground.

The march was continued without further interruption until about two o'clock. They turned the northern line of Downs, and saw the ridge of the lower hills to the west, on the brow of which loomed up the grey walls of a circular castle—the rude and unscientific fortress of Wihtgar, built perhaps upon the foundations of a Roman castellum, and doubtless with much of the material. Hitherto it had been an accepted fact that whoever was lord of Wihtgaresbyryg was lord also of the Wihtwaras and the Wihtea.

When Ceolwulf's column, descending the steep declivity of the down now known as St. George's Down, joined Cædwalla and the main body below, they advanced together along the lower ground towards Wihtgaresbyryg, until they reached the ford over the marshes, that then formed the head of the long creek now known as the Medina. Here Cædwalla, having secured the ford and passed his troops safely across, halted until he could find out where the enemy were.

In the course of an hour one of his scouts brought back word that Arwald was marching out of Wihtgaresbyryg to give him battle, with a numerous and well-appointed force of horsemen and foot, and would be upon them in the course of half an hour or so.

This was joyful news to Cædwalla. His eyes sparkled and his figure became more upright, as he gave orders for his men to fall into battle order, and prepare for the decisive contest.

"Remember Athelhune and Osborn, and the stockade on Yavershute! Remember all your former victories—Edilwalch and the South Saxons, and the eorldoman Berchthune. The dragon of Wessex is spreading his wings for victory. Before night-fall, my eorls and my free Saxons, let us plant the standard of our nation on the tower of Wihtgar. Lands and possessions shall reward the victors, and ye all see what a smiling and fertile land it is. Standard bearer, advance the banner! My nobles, handle your weapons, and, O God of Battles, whom Wilfrid serves! if victory crowns our arms, I vow to become a servant of Thine. Let Woden and Thor fight for Arwald. Cædwalla will fight with the help of Christ."

CHAPTER XXII.

"NOW, BY MY FAITH, LORDS, 'T WAS A GLORIOUS DAY."

Cædwalla decided not to await the enemy, but to advance at once to meet him. He himself led the van, which was composed of his choicest troops, and he ordered old Ceolwulf to keep with him, as a mark of especial honour. The scout who had brought the news of Arwald's advance acted as guide, and in a short time the two rival forces came in sight of each other. Cædwalla saw that Arwald would have the advantage of position if he were allowed to attack from the higher ground where he was. He therefore ordered his men not to march directly for the enemy, but to leave them on their left and march as if with the intention of getting in between them and Wihtgaesbyryg. By this manoeuvre Arwald had to descend from his superior position, and the onus of attacking remained with him.

In those rude times there was not much attempt at marshalling the fighting men. The leaders brought their men on to the ground and put them as near to each other as possible, and then stout arm and keen steel had to decide the rest. Each chieftain acted as the bravest soldier, and his duty was to run the greatest risk.

In the present instance, there seemed a sort of tacit deferring of the awful struggle that must take place. When Cædwalla had obtained the equality of position he wanted, he halted, and drew up his men in a semblance of martial

array; and in this respect he had a manifest advantage over his antagonist, for he and his men were well known to each other. Many of the West Saxon eorls had fought in numberless fights on the borders of Wales, and against Wulfhere of Mercia, the son of Penda. They were, therefore, used to discipline, and were likely to keep cool in the hottest of the fray; while Arwald's men had never seen a set battle, and many of them had scarcely ever fought before. But their numbers and strength seemed quite to counterbalance this disadvantage, and Cædwalla saw at a glance the Wihtwaras were not to be despised. Arwald had wrought his men's courage up to a desperate pitch by telling them that Cædwalla would deprive them of all their possessions, and, unless they won the battle, no man's life or property was safe.

Cædwalla's eyes sparkled with excitement, but he was otherwise very calm, and no observer would have known that he was inwardly burning with eagerness to begin the battle, and avenge the death of his dearest friend. He rode along in front of his men, mounted on his white horse, cheerily saying an encouraging word here, or passing a light jest there, and congratulating everyone on the immediate prospect of realizing all their hopes.

The forces of Arwald had now approached to within two hundred yards, and the combatants could see each other well. There was nothing between them, and the battle might begin at any moment.

Cædwalla had turned his horse's head towards the enemy, and was quietly glancing along their line. In front of him was Arwald, looking more brutal than ever. The cut over his eye, which he had received from Wulfstan's sling, was swollen and inflamed, so much so that one eye was nearly obscured. His red, bloated face, and coarse features, combined with his huge and corpulent person, mounted on a powerful, vicious-looking black horse, offered a striking contrast to the refined, intellectual, determined face of Cædwalla. bronzed with exposure, and looking a splendid, dashing soldier, as well as prudent, clear-headed king: a perfect type of the old Heretoga, or leader in war, chosen by the free acclamations of his fellow tribesmen for his brilliant qualities, and not necessarily because of any hereditary claim; the pure type of an earthly ruler, if only such could be elected without corruption and for worthy motives.

Cædwalla sat his horse tranquilly, and critically scanned Arwald with a contemptuous glance that made that fat chieftain furious. He was just going to give the order to his men to charge, when Cædwalla raised his battle-axe, and instantly the whole of the West Saxon army rushed straight for the Wihtwaras.

For the next few minutes there was the awful work of destruction, hideous sounds and confused sights, axes flashing, arms rising and falling, passionate shouts, groans, and wild cries. In the midst of the battle could be seen the golden dragon of Wessex, and ever and anon the clear, ringing stentorian voice of the

king, cheerily and happily cleaving a way through the struggling mass. Such battles must have been all alike, and the monotony of the death fight could seldom be relieved. The victory must go to the side who had most "last," or endurance, in it; for the idea of running away while strength remained scarcely could occur to men taught from earliest childhood that no fate in this world or the next could await any man worse than the fate of the coward. But sheer brutal strength, or capacity for fighting with the largest number of wounds, must then, as now, have been very materially modified by the moral influences of will and determination. And in this way the personal qualities of a leader were certain to affect his followers. The energy, moral as well as physical, of Cædwalla, infused itself into his men, and each man fought with a certainty of winning. Gradually the coherent mass of striking, thrusting, wrestling humanity gave way, and the scene became changed into groups of individual combatants.

The battlefield was strewn with dead and dying. Cædwalla's standard bearer was down, but the banner was still waved above the foremost ranks, and the golden crest of Wessex was foremost in the fight.

Arwald's army was being pushed back, no man looked to see where, but as the foe retreated Cædwalla pressed on. The Wihtwaras were thrust away from Wihtgaresbyryg, and were slowly retiring towards the high hills behind them. Fighting every foot of ground at first, they gradually hastened their retreat until at last it became a rout.

All round deeds of "derring-do" were being performed, and Cædwalla cheered his men on to the pursuit with words of praise and encouragement. The king was followed by the main part of his army, and pressed hard upon the retreating Wihtwaras.

"Unless we kill Arwald, we have done nought," shouted Cædwalla, urging on his horse to fresh exertions.

They had now reached the foot of the down, whose ample slope rose from the valley in wooded clumps up to a height of some five hundred and fifty feet above them. Pursued and pursuers were alike becoming exhausted. Arwald and the few that were left of his personal following kept on their way up the hill. Cædwalla's horse, which had received several severe wounds, was clearly incapable of following much further, and the king got off, resolving to follow on foot. Arwald still bestrode his black horse, but that powerful animal was fast becoming distressed. Seeing that he could not escape from his pursuers, Arwald, who had now reached a grassy knoll, drew up and turned to look at his enemy.

Below him he could see the golden dragon and the broad shoulders of the West Saxon king, the centre of a little band of determined warriors, among whom the weather-beaten face of old Ceolwulf looked hard set and enduring, like a grey lichen-covered rock amid the saplings of the forest.

"By the golden hair of Freya," muttered Arwald "but they shall die as well as we, if die we must. Here, my men, we will wait them; and let each man fight as he never fought before."

So saying, the Wihtwara chieftain dismounted from his tired horse, and prepared for the fight. The scene was a fitting one for the arena on which the sovereignty of the island was to be finally decided between the rival chiefs. It was very near the summit of the lofty down, now known as Newbarn, or Chillerton Down. From the spot where Arwald stood he looked right down the lovely valley of the Medene; eastward and northward, his eye roamed over swelling down and wooded valley, and here and there the silver streak of the distant sea. The lovely scene lay spread out in mellow haze, for the sun was getting low behind the chieftain, and great shadows stretched from his feet far over the valley below; while patches of grey mist were rising here and there over the basins of the Medene and the Yare.

Grimly Arwald looked at the scene, but none of its peaceful beauty struck him. All he thought of was hatred of the man who had dared to come to disturb him in the enjoyment of his tyranny and power, and satisfaction at the thought of how he could take him at disadvantage, breathless as Cædwalla would be when he reached the summit of the knoll, and dazzled with the setting sun level with his eyes.

Arwald mustered about thirty adherents, most of them wounded, and not more than a dozen of whom were able-bodied. The chief of the Wihtwaras himself had not received any serious wounds, seeming to bear a charmed life in the midst of the battle; and owing to this immunity from wounds, he himself, as well as many of his followers, believed that he was not destined to lose his life on the battle-field. Full of these hopes, he waited for his antagonist.

Cædwalla, seeing that his enemy was resolved to await him, and that now there was to be no more retreat, but that here either he or Arwald was to leave his bones for ever, bid his men to take it easily and regain their breath. The West Saxons, therefore, paused a little below the summit of the knoll, and gazed back at the land behind them, where many of their comrades could be seen drawing together and advancing after their king. Many others were visible, lying on the ground; for them no more fighting remained. Of the Wihtwaras no coherent body existed. The victory was evidently complete, and Cædwalla could plainly see that there was no need for him to fight Arwald now. The Wihtwara must fall to superior numbers; he could fly no further, and the desperate nature of his situation was evidently known to himself. Ceolwulf urged waiting for the rest to come up, pointing out the folly of risking such a life as that of Cædwalla, now undoubted king of Witea, as of Wessex and the South Saxons.

"Leave this swine to be dealt with by thy faithful ceorls and eorls, my lord.

Why risk thy life needlessly? Dost thou think thou must do more to show all men thy valour? Who does not know of Cædwalla?"

"Cease, old man," said Cædwalla. "I know well what is prudent, and what is rash. It becomes not Cædwalla to decline to punish the murderer of Athelhune, and I know my own duty as well as pleasure."

Arwald knew well that the game was up, but he counted on at least killing Cædwalla before the rest of the West Saxons could arrive. He ordered his men, therefore, to pay no attention to any other of the small following of Cædwalla, but to rush simultaneously upon the victorious king.

"What!" shouted Arwald, "is the dainty young chief of the robber-band afraid to meet the axes of warriors? Has he come thus far, and, finding himself face to face with brave men, does he now fear to meet their blows? Why does he not rush forward to avenge all his dead eorls? The axes of Arwald and the Wihtwaras have drunk deep of West Saxon blood."

"All in good time, my friend, all in good time. A king chooses his own season and means of punishment, and thou shalt not be forgotten," answered Cædwalla disdainfully.

All the West Saxons having now recovered their breath, Cædwalla advanced towards Arwald. Ceolwulf had seen the object of the Wihtwara chieftain, and he warned the few men round Cædwalla to look out for a rush.

As soon as the king set foot on the level sward on the summit of the knoll, Arwald and his men made a simultaneous charge upon him, which Cædwalla, on his part, sprang forward to anticipate.

Arwald, trusting to his huge strength and ponderous weight, struck with his battle-axe straight at Cædwalla's head, and the West Saxon king received the full force of the terrific blow on his already half-severed shield. The axe cut through the iron studs and ornaments that still kept the shield together, and buried itself sideways in Cædwalla's left arm. But Cædwalla's right arm was not idle. Striking with all his force at the same moment that he parried the blow of the Wihtwara, he cut through the steel hawberk, the under shirt of leather, and deep into the flesh of Arwald between the ribs over the heart; for Arwald was so determined to destroy his adversary that he took no thought of guarding himself. Before Arwald could recover from the overbalance of his own thundering blow, Cædwalla had struck again, and this time he aimed at the bare arms of the Wihtwara. So fiercely did he strike that the whole muscles and flesh of the upper arm were shorn off clean to the bone, and Arwald knew he could never fight again. The blood flowed down in torrents, but his rage still burnt fiercely. Wielding his axe in the other hand, he struck straight for Cædwalla's face, and the king had no use in his other arm to ward the blow. He parried it with his axe, but not sufficiently to prevent the axe glancing off and inflicting a deep gash in

his neck. But Arwald had struck his last blow, for Cædwalla, swinging his axe over his head, brought it down with fearful force on the helmet of his antagonist. Right through the iron helmet it went, and deep into the skull, and there so wedged itself between the bones that Cædwalla could not draw it out, and the huge Wihtwara chieftain rolled over to the ground dead.

But Cædwalla would also have been dead before now had it not been for the trusty Ceolwulf. The adherents of Arwald, true to their orders, and reckless of their own lives, had crowded round Cædwalla, and struck at the same time as Arwald. Two fierce blows aimed at the king were caught on Ceolwulf's shield, which was not so much damaged as Cædwalla's. A third was parried by the old man's axe, while a fourth the noble old warrior received in his own body, which he interposed between his lord and the death blow. The Wihtwara's axe caught Biggun on the chest, and would have penetrated to the lung but for the soundness of the mail shirt he wore. As it was, the stout old man swung his axe round upon his foe who had given him the wound, and split his helmet and head, felling him to the ground. The other attendants of Cædwalla had not been idle. The blows intended for the king were intercepted, and in many cases the Wihtwaras were killed without offering the least resistance to their slayers, so intent were they in trying to kill the rival of Arwald, and thus fell an easy prey to their antagonists. The fall of their chieftain, however, caused them to turn much more desperately on the West Saxons, and fierce blows were showered on all sides; but the result could not be doubtful for a moment. After a few plunging blows, wild struggles, and fierce imprecations, all resistance ceased, and Wightea was won to Cædwalla.

[image]

How Cædwalla won Wightea and slew Arwald

But that noble king was scarcely able to receive the congratulations of his supporters. He strove to remain standing, but the scene swam before his eyes; he forced himself to speak, but the words would not form themselves on his lips, and he would have fallen heavily on the ground had not two or three of his attendants run to support him. They laid him gently on the grass and stanchd his wounds: both cuts were fortunately clean ones, and a simple bandage round the arm prevented much loss of blood there; but the cut in the neck was more serious. Ceolwulf was sitting near, a grim and satisfied expression on his weather-beaten face. The blood was oozing from the wound in his chest, but he was doing nothing to stop the bleeding. His eyes were fixed on Cædwalla's pale face, and he was muttering some grumbling remarks to himself. The little grassy platform

high up on the hillside, so lately the scene of desperate, relentless strife, was now covered with dead or dying men, and the few survivors were too worn out to do more. They sat or reclined on the sward, waiting for the rest of their comrades to come up. The sun had now set, and the cold breeze of evening blew keen on that elevated spot.

Presently a West Saxon eorldoman rode up, attended by a few footmen, and gazed at the silent group. Seeing Cædwalla, he dismounted, and hastily went up to him, fearing the worst, but was reassured by the men who sat beside him.

"We must carry him down from here," said the eorl. "Get you as many young withies or hazel boughs from the copse down yonder," he added, turning to the men who had come with him, "and make a litter for your king."

Then he mounted his horse, rode to the brow of the hill, where the now numerous band of survivors were clearly seen in the valley below, raised his axe, on which he had put the helmet of Arwald, high above his head, and shouted, in a voice that rang over the silence of the hills:

"Long live Cædwalla, king of Wessex, Sussex, and Wihtea!"

Directly after a ringing cheer could be heard in the valley, and even the exhausted warriors on the summit joined in the shout of triumph. Again and again the cheers rang out, and rapidly the news spread over the island.

The men with the litter now returned, and carefully Cædwalla was lifted upon it. The movement caused him to open his eyes, and they happened to fall upon Ceolwulf. The king feebly beckoned him to his side, and, as the old man slowly and stiffly came up to him, the wounded king said: "Ceolwulf, old man, I owe my life to thee. Ask me what thou likest, and thou shalt have it."

But Ceolwulf made no reply. He merely shook his head slowly, and went on grumbling to himself.

Cædwalla was carried down the hill, and, as it was now too dark to go much further, the eorldoman who had taken charge of the little army gave directions that the king should be carried to a cottage near, and the rest of the men were to encamp around. With prudent foresight, another eorldoman had gone on with a party of men to make the country people bring them in provisions, and the victors were supplied with necessary food after their hard day's work.

The wounded men were cared for, and proper guards were set to keep watch during the night. Nothing, however, happened to disturb their rest.

The next morning the hardy West Saxons were all astir at an early hour, and parties were sent out to collect the arms and accoutrements of the dead, and to compel some of the inhabitants to help bury those who had fallen.

Arwald and those who died upon the grassy knoll of Chillerton Down were buried in five barrows, or tumuli, close to where they fell, but Arwald was honoured by having one all to himself.

Cædwalla had recovered consciousness for a short time in the early morning, and had given orders that Wihtgaresbyryg was to be occupied without delay, and all the able-bodied men throughout the island were to be slain as an atonement for the death of Athelhune and the other West Saxons.

It was evident he did not much realise the teaching of Christianity as yet, and the fierce spirit of his ancestors still burnt within him, unchecked by any softening influence.

Arwald had sent his two young sons away from the island as soon as he had received news of the probable invasion of Cædwalla, and they were in hiding near Stoneham, or as Bede calls it, ad Lapidem, a little village or manor to the north of Southampton. Cædwalla had given orders, in accordance with his vow, to kill all of the race of Arwald, and he expressly directed that search should be made for all his descendants and relatives; but these terrible orders could not be executed immediately, for much had yet to be done.

Ceolwulf was despatched to Binbrygge-*ea* with directions to see that Ælfhere and his sons were restored to their lands and possessions; and he was also charged with seeing that a force of men were levied to assist Cædwalla in getting in supplies and helping to crush the western and southern part of the island. The boats were to be sent round from Brædyngge Haven to the north of the island, and one boat was to be sent over to Selsea, to report the success of the expedition, and to bring over Wilfrid, if he would come. The rest of the little army, now thoroughly recruited, although sadly diminished in numbers, marched on Wihtgaresbyryg, expecting to meet with a stubborn resistance; but Arwald had led out all the fighting men with him, and owing to the skilful way in which Cædwalla had thrust himself in between Arwald and the fortress, none of the routed force had been able to escape to it.

When, therefore, the West Saxon host appeared before its walls, they found the gates thrown open, and they had no more fighting to do. Cædwalla was carried to Arwald's house, and all men throughout the island knew that the power had passed from the nominee of Mercia to the kingdom of the house of Cerdic.

The eorldomen, who managed affairs during the illness of Cædwalla, acted with determination and relentless cruelty. The wretched Wihtwaras were hunted down and ruthlessly slain in strict fulfilment of the orders of Cædwalla.

But the king of the West Saxons himself lay ill, and mostly unconscious for the greater part of the next few days, and at last his faithful followers began to despair of his life, and all men longed for Wilfrid to come.

Ceolwulf had returned to Brædyngge, and there, after having done all he was ordered to do, and arranged for the return of Ælfhere, had succumbed to the wound he had received, and which he had neglected. For some days he lay between life and death, but the faithful brother Malachi and Ædric nursed him well,

and he and Wulfstan were laid in the same room for convenience of attendance. Ælfhere, the eorldoman, had been making great progress towards recovery, but it was observed that, as he grew stronger, he seemed to be less vengeful. The self-devotion of brother Malachi, who had saved his life at the risk of his own, and the unexpected and unaccountable solicitude of old Deva, had caused him to think over matters seriously; and he could not help being struck by the fact that there were noble actions, as brave as any performed in fighting, which arose from some hidden spring of conduct.

The fugitive tenants and small freeholders who looked to the eorldoman for protection had all returned to their homes, and things round Binbrygge-*ea* and Brædyngne looked much as they did before the late exciting events.

The stockade was visited, and the dead all buried, care being taken to honour the defenders with a specially large tumulus high up over Binbrygge Down.

Malachi longed for news of Father Dicoll and brother Corman. He had heard of the adventure on the mud from Ædric, and was horror-stricken at the account he gave of what he had last seen of Father Dicoll, but was cheered by hearing that Ædric had since heard how Father Dicoll was taken into one of the cottages, and had been carefully attended to, and was probably by now quite well again.

Ædric had been told of his father's existence the day after he arrived. At first he could hardly believe the news, so joyful did it seem; but when he fully realised it, he only waited to know exactly where he was concealed, and then went off as fast as his lame leg would let him, in spite of all remonstrances, to find his father.

Fortunately he was met by one of his old servants, who was leading back a cow that had strayed away from the rest of the cattle, and thus he was able to have a ride; for the old cowherd, seeing how lame his young master was, lifted him up, and set him on the broad back of the patient beast, and he soon reached the secluded dell overlooking the sea under the great white cliff where his father was lying hid. The boy stole down softly to the side of the little wattled shelter that had been made for the wounded eorldoman, down close to the shore under a high pinnacle of red, sandy cliff, which here forms a striking contrast with the dazzling white of the lofty chalk precipice on the westward side of the tiny bay. The little cabin was difficult to find; it lay in a retired chine, and was carefully hollowed out of the soft sand under the over-arching shelter of thick bramble bushes and tall ferns. The perpetual sound of the breaking sea at the foot of the cliffs deadened any sound of voices.

Ædric approached quite close to the entrance: all was silent; he peeped in. There lay his father, pale and worn, his eyes closed; he appeared to be dying. Ædric stole in on tip-toe. His father moved; his eyes opened.

"Father!" said Ædric. The wounded eorl looked round.

"What, Wulfstan, my boy, is it thou? How goes the battle?"

"Father, it isn't Wulfstan: it is I—Ædric."

"What, Ædric! my son! Am I dreaming. How did'st thou get here?" and the father stretched out his hand for his son to come nearer.

"Why, it is Ædric, my own son—my boy! my boy! I thank the gods thou art returned to me. There, bless thee, my son; sit down and tell me all that has happened to thee."

And Ædric sat down, and, taking his father's hand, told him everything. As the old eorldoman heard of the kindness of the monks or baldheaded ones, and the splendour and power of Wilfrid, he murmured over and over again:

"Truly these are great men, and they know more than we. They can bear pain as well as we can, and they can rule without fighting; but I think they miss a good deal by that. But perhaps, after all, there is more to be got without it. I don't know though; if I get better, I will think over this."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER."

A few days after the decisive battle near Chillerton Down, Ædric, who had been sitting with Malachi and the invalids, went out to get some fresh air. He wandered up the hill behind the homestead to a freshly-raised mound on the hill side, looking away towards the Sussex shore, and commanding views of the far distant Andreadesweald. Here Athelhune had been buried, with his arms and battle-axe, like a free Saxon eorldoman, with his face towards the East, looking to the woods and the land where he had fought so well for his friend and king, Cædwalla, in the time of his adversity.

Ædric sat down on the newly-laid turf, and gazed towards Selsea. As he sat he fell into a deep reverie. He thought over all that had passed since that awful night when Arwald surprised their home, and he and Wulfstan and Biggun had had to fly over the water, they knew not where. He thought of the fearful slaughter that had since taken place; the dreadful suffering of the poor people, driven from their homes; the death in battle, in cold blood, and in misery of so many human beings. He saw how poverty, hunger, wretchedness, fell upon every one by the perpetual destruction going on. Cædwalla was nearly dead; Ceolwulf

was prostrate; Wulfstan was only just showing signs of recovery; brother Malachi had received a desperate wound; Athelhune and Osborn were dead; and Wulf the Atheling might be dead, too, for all he knew; while his father, Ælfhere, as well as himself, would bear their wounds to their graves with them. And yet they and their party were victorious. They had won all the glory, all the land, all the wealth; and this was what their noblest, most cherished ideas pointed to. Could anything be more complete? Arwald was dead; all his bravest warriors were dead too, and all the rest of his supporters were being ruthlessly hunted down and slain. They were drinking to the full the cup of victory. Could anything be more triumphant? What more could heroes do? They had gloriously chopped in pieces their enemies, and were entering into possession of their goods. But meanwhile the people were mostly starving, and the women and children were suffering terribly; but

”Things like that, you know, must be at every famous victory.”

And then Ædric thought of the monks—their kindness, their simplicity, their total surrender of themselves for others, their perpetual striving to conquer what, he could not help seeing, might make an individual great according to a slave’s idea of greatness, but could only make all others miserable. For what was it the monks strove to overcome? Certainly nothing of anybody else’s belongings, but their own passions, their own want of charity, their own worldly desires, their own incomprehension of the love of God; in fact, the world, the flesh, and the devil. And then he thought of the dead man below him, and he remembered all that had been told him of the shortness of this life and the certainty of death, and after death the judgment; and he remembered how terrible it had seemed to him, as Father Dicoll talked, if he should die, and have to enter upon eternity without having tried to follow the Christ-life while here on earth. The words of the Master, Christ, had often been told him, when He said, ”Verily, I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me; and these shall go away into ever-lasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.” Truly, death was very near; would it not be better to give up everything for the love of God? What could the world offer to him that for the brief space of this life could make up for the loss of life eternal? The truth of the question he had so often heard from brother Corman came back to him—What would it profit him if he gained the whole world and lost his own soul? or what could he give in exchange for his soul?

As Ædric thought over all these things, his eyes were fixed upon a distant speck beyond the entrance to Brædyngge Haven. It was a boat, and was coming fast before the north-east breeze. For some few minutes he dreamily watched it. He saw it enter the narrow mouth of the harbour, and wondered who could be in it. The men on board evidently knew the channel. As the boat drew nearer his

interest increased. "Who could it be?" And then it flashed across him that it must be Wilfrid. He jumped up with excitement, waited a minute to make certain, and then ran down as fast as he could, burst into the room where Malachi was, and shouted out the news.

All was bustle in the homestead. Ælfhere was anxious to receive the great man properly, and all the servants were sent here and there, and the cackling among the fowls told of slaughter going on there. Some of the servants were sent down with Ædric to receive the bishop.

It was as Ædric had guessed: the boat ran ashore, near the hard; the servants hastily put out boards on a trestle for the bishop to land, and presently Wilfrid, Hildila, and Bernwine disembarked on the shore.

The greeting between Ædric and the bishop was cordial, and Bernwine patted him on the head, with a pleasant smile, saying, "I told thee I wanted to see this island of thine, and here I am." The party then went up to the homestead, Ædric pointing out objects of interest as they went. The Wihtwaras were much impressed with Wilfrid's appearance, and the respect their young eorl paid him, as well as from the report of the magic charms he had with him, and which were relics he had brought from Rome.

Ælfhere welcomed his guests courteously, and the rest of the day passed in pleasant talk. Malachi asked eagerly after Father Dicoll and Corman, and was delighted to hear that both were well, the former having quite recovered from his wound, and that they sent him affectionate greetings. A messenger was despatched at once to announce the arrival of the bishop, and ask for instructions.

Ælfhere was pleased, as well as all his household, at the gentle manners and interesting conversation of Wilfrid and his attendant priests, and the evening passed away in pleasant intercourse. The stories Wilfrid had to tell of foreign lands, and the wonders of Rome, astonished every one. There was nothing he could not talk about; and when he asked permission, before retiring to rest, to have a little service in the hall, Ælfhere willingly gave his consent, and was much impressed with the earnestness, as well as ceremony, of the Christian ministers. There had never been seen anything like it, and all the household retired to rest awestruck and interested.

The next morning the messenger returned from Cædwalla, desiring that Wilfrid should come to him at once. The bishop, therefore, took an affectionate leave of his hospitable entertainer, and went off to Wihtgaresbyryg, leaving Bernwine behind to instruct and convert Ælfhere, already thoroughly predisposed to accept Christianity, through the example of Malachi and old Deva, to whom the late intercourse with Malachi had been a great happiness.

Ædric accompanied Wilfrid and Hildila, and when they arrived at the castle of Wihtgar they found there was some important discussion going on. When they

entered the courtyard they found a few men loitering about, all armed and fully equipped for some expedition, and the eorl in command was just bidding them to fall in, as a tall, noble-looking man came out of the house where Cædwalla was lying. His face wore a sad look, and he walked past Wilfrid and his party without appearing to see them. He was dressed in monastic garb, and his head was bare, showing the tonsure cut in the orthodox western fashion.

Wilfrid inquired who he was, but no one knew. As soon as he had joined the eorldoman, the armed men defiled through the gate, and went down the hill towards the Medene, where the mast of a boat could be seen over the woods that lay between the creek and the castle; for the new port had not yet risen at the head of the estuary.

As soon as it was announced to Cædwalla that Wilfrid had come, he gave orders that he should be at once admitted, and the bishop was ushered into his presence.

The wounded king was lying on a couch, looking pale and worn. The wound in his arm had healed, but the severe cut in his neck had proved a difficult matter, as Cædwalla was impatient of control, and chafed at his enforced inaction. At the entrance of the bishop he tried to rise, and was only induced to lie down again by the urgent remonstrances of Wilfrid.

"Thou seest, bishop, thou and I can never meet without my having gained a victory. Truly, the more often I meet thee, the better I shall be pleased."

"I trust, my son, thou wilt have no more enemies to fight. The Lord has been merciful to thee, and saved thee in the midst of great dangers. I hope thou wilt be spared to perform a good work among the people He has committed to thy charge."

"I hope so too," answered Cædwalla coldly. "But I call to mind thy telling me how a great heretoga and chieftain led his people into a promised land, and slew every man, woman, and child of its former inhabitants, and thou saidest he was a man approved of by thy God. I have tried to do the same. There will not soon be any of these Wihtwaras left. I trust I shall receive thy blessing for the thorough way I have tried to imitate that eorldoman Joshua, as thou calledst him."

Wilfrid sighed. Like many other Christian missionaries he wished he had not so impressed the savage mind with the conquests and wars of the Israelites,[1] but he prudently answered:

[1] The Bishop of the Goths, Ulphilas, entirely omitted translating the Book of Kings into the Gothic Bible, for he said: "The fierce and warlike spirit of his children required no spur in the matter of war."

"My son, before thou exterminatest, thou hast to prove that thou hast the right to punish. Joshua was the chosen leader of God's own people, appointed to execute God's command upon a desperately wicked nation, given up to every abomination. I do not yet know that thou art trying to introduce the love of Christianity among even thine own people, or that it has been offered to the poor victims thou tellest me thou art slaying. And even supposing thou wert a follower of our Lord, and the Wihtwaras were all pagans, who stubbornly refused to accept the Truth, that would not of itself give thee any title to kill or persecute them. But let me hear how thou art faring?"

"Oh, well enough! I shall be able to mount a horse in a few days, I hope," and then the conversation turned upon various matters, until Wilfrid discovered that the ecclesiastic whom he had met as he entered, was the Abbot Cynebercht of Reodbrygge (now Redbridge), and that he had come on an important mission. As Cædwalla did not seem inclined to talk about him, Wilfrid did not pursue the subject. And the king went on to say that he intended bestowing upon Wilfrid three hundred hides of land in Wihtea, as a proof of his affection for him and in thank-offering for the great successes he had achieved, and which he attributed to the protection and influence of Wilfrid's prayer and the possession of the marvellous charms or reliques he had brought from Rome. The bishop, perhaps from motives of policy, perhaps from real belief, did not attempt to make light of his power; indeed he did all he could to foster this idea and belief in the miraculous efficacy of relics, and his own influence as the minister of God's church here below, hoping that the more the fierce West Saxon king was impressed with his power and sanctity, the more he would be able to guide him in the way he wanted. Wilfrid therefore accepted the donation which amounted to more than a fourth of the whole of Wihtea, but he handed it over to his kinsman, Bernwine, with the understanding that he was to use the wealth arising from it for the purpose of charitable works and the promotion of the Christian faith, but especially in the redemption of captives and slaves. By this noble method the introduction of Christianity was associated with freedom and human sympathy, and all men blessed the humanity of Wilfred.

After a little desultory conversation, Wilfrid rose to leave Cædwalla to repose, and was conducted to the rooms prepared for him. He was now able to learn more particulars of the Abbot Cynebercht's mission, and was grieved to hear that he had come on a fruitless errand of mercy. It appeared that after the capture, or rather occupation, of Wihtgaesbyryg, search had been made for Arwald's two sons who were known to be living there. They could not be found anywhere, and at last, after long search and inquiry, it was discovered that they had been conveyed away out of the island to Stoneham, and were there kept in hiding. Cædwalla, in fulfilment of his vow, sent immediately to have them executed, but

the good Abbot of Reodbrygge, hearing of the order went over to Stoneham and delayed the execution of the sentence until he had been to the island and seen Cædwalla. He had come over at once, and had striven hard with the West Saxon king to spare the lives of the innocent boys, but to no purpose; all he could obtain was, that he might be allowed time to instruct them in Christianity, and so secure them the blessings of eternal life. Cædwalla would have spared them, only he felt bound by his oath of vengeance on the race of Arwald, and no arguments of Cynebercht could make him feel or see that any circumstances could justify him in breaking his word. Sad at heart, therefore, the worthy abbot had returned with the party who were to carry out Cædwalla's sentence. Horrified at the cruelty of the execution, Wilfrid was going back at once to Cædwalla to ask him to send after Cynebercht, when his eyes lighted on Ædric.

"Ædric, my son, thou hast suffered much at the hands of Arwald. Show now that thou canst forgive thine enemies; go at once to Cædwalla, remind him of what Ceolwulf did for him"—for the whole story had been told as Wilfrid rode from Brædyng to Wiltgaresbyrig—"and recall to him his promise, and, in the old man's name, implore him to spare the lives of these innocent babes. Quick! or it will be too late."

Ædric, as soon as he had grasped the situation, at once asked to be conducted to Cædwalla's presence. The boy was promptly ushered in, and laid his request before the king. Cædwalla frowned, but listened, and at last said, "If thou canst cross in time, thou mayest tell them to spare their lives; but I insist on their going into a monastery, and becoming monks. There! go, and let them thank old Ceolwulf for their lives."

Ædric required no second bidding. He hastened off joyfully to Wilfrid, who gave directions for him to go down with an escort to the water-side, and get a boat as soon as possible, and make all the speed he could after the abbot. There was some little delay in getting away, and it was nearly dark before they left Wiltgaresbyrig. On reaching the water's edge they found the tide was out, and all the boats were aground, and would not float before midnight, and then no one would take them down the long and shallow creek in the dark. So, weary and sad, Ædric had to return to Wilfrid, feeling sure that the sentence would be carried out before any one could reach Stoneham.

Early the next morning a messenger arrived with the news that the two young eorls had been beheaded, but that Cynebercht had baptised them first, and they had died tranquilly and happy, "in the certain hope of exchanging a temporary for an immortal and blissful existence."

Cædwalla was very sorry really for what had occurred, but, being proud and haughty in all that concerned his private acts, he would not allow openly that he had done wrong. However, he listened to Wilfrid's upbraidings without

betraying much impatience, and gave way so far as to issue orders for the relentless slaughter of the Wihtwaras to cease, and he professed a desire to know more of the Christian faith.

Several days were passed by Wilfrid at Wihtgaresbyryg, and were employed by him in organising a system of government of the island, under the rule of Cædwalla, making it a point that the estates which the West Saxon king had bestowed upon him should be especially well managed by Bernwine, whose sound business capacity he had already experienced. The eorldoman Ælfhere was appointed head man in the island, and lands were given to the warriors who had fought with Cædwalla; and the wisest of them, who were already Christians, formed, together with Bernwine and Hildila, who had been asked to stay in the island by Wilfrid, an assembly of wise men, or Witan, who were to assist Ælfhere in the administration of justice, but the executive power was left entirely in the eorldoman's hands.

And now there remains little more to add. Ælfhere the Eorldoman, and all his household were received into the fellowship of the Christian Church, and the example of the leading man in the island was followed by the rest of the inhabitants. Brother Malachi remained a little while, and then, seeing that the customs which he venerated were opposed to the Latin form of Christianity, introduced by the adherents of the Romanizing Wilfrid, he withdrew to Boseham, where the three excellent monks continued their unostentatious labours for the benefit of the rude South Saxons. As they lived longer they seemed to become more imbued with the real charity that "vaunteth not itself;" and for fear of causing a schism among their converts, gradually laid less and less stress on such matters as the cut of the tonsure, or the keeping of Easter, although the thought would occur to them, If such matters were trifles, why should not their opponents equally treat them as such, and not inveigh against their tenets, as if they were unorthodox and schismatics? As far as real self-denying, self-obliterating work went, the poor monks of Boseham were true imitators of their blessed Master; but the organising power of the splendid Wilfrid, enamoured as he was of the pomp of the See of Rome, and fascinated by the idea of Christian unity, governed by a visible, earthly head, to whom all workers in God's vineyard could appeal for protection and advice against the tyranny of earthly sovereigns, was too much for mere unambitious, humble-minded men, and the glories of the rising cathedral of Selsea blotted out the memory of the simple Irish or Scottish monks.

Ædric and Wulfstan preserved an affectionate remembrance of them, and Ælfhere always sent over a boat at Easter and Christmas, with farm and dairy produce for the good old men, who distributed it among their poorer neighbours. In this way they became much more venerated, and when they died there was much lamentation for them among their little flock.

Ædric, after his public reception into the Christian faith, obtained permission from his father to accompany Wilfrid to the north, and finally he was solemnly ordained a deacon; and, after returning to the Wihtea, and assisting Bernwine and Hildila in the conversion of his countrymen, attracted by the noble purpose of Boniface or Winfrid, the apostle of Germany, whom he had met at Netley, amid the lovely woods by the side of Southampton Water, he accompanied that holy man to the homes of his heathen forefathers, and met a martyr's death among the wild Saxons on the banks of the Elbe; curiously enough, within a few miles of the place where his ancestor had lived who first took part in the Jutish occupation of Wihtea.

The future of St. Wilfrid is well-known. How he accompanied Cædwalla to Wessex, subsequently became reconciled to Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, was re-instated in the episcopal see of York, again urged the interminable controversy of the tonsure and Paschal moon, with Aldfrid, king of Northumbria, who had been educated in "piety and learning" by some Irish monks; how he stigmatised the successor of Theodore as a schismatic, boasted of his support by the successor of St. Peter, and at the synod of Æastanfeld, dilated on his labours to "extirpate the poisonous plants of Scottish growth," and appealed from the judgment of his lawful sovereign and fellow churchman to the Apostolic see of Rome. How, finally, he went off to Rome once more, at the age of seventy, and obtained from the Pope, John V., a decree in his favour, and finally died in his monastery of Oundle; all these facts are the province of history.

The future of Cædwalla is more mysterious and romantic. After he had thoroughly secured the allegiance of Wihtea to Wessex, and established himself firmly on the throne of Cerdic, he led an army into Kent, and ravaged that country. During this campaign his brother Wulf, or Mollo, the Atheling, acting in his usual reckless manner, was surprised by the Kentish men, and burned to death. This tragedy so acted upon Cædwalla, who was already nominally a Christian, that he determined to lay aside the royal power and journey to Rome to seek absolution for his sins committed during his many wars. His change of life seems to have been carried out with the same vigour and determination with which he had conducted his previous actions. He would go to the fountain-head of Christianity, as taught him by Wilfrid. If absolution on this earth could be only obtained effectually from the successor of St. Peter, to that successor he would go. And not only for absolution, but for baptism; no meaner ecclesiastic—not Wilfrid himself—should baptise him; so clearly had he understood Wilfrid to say that the successor of St. Peter was the head of the Church, that he resolved that a king ought to be baptised by no lower prelate. Accordingly, the outlaw chief, the successful warrior, the noble king of Wessex, laid aside his arms, surrendered his throne to his kinsman Ine, and went in the lowly garb of a pilgrim to visit

the mighty Rome. There he was christened by the name of Peter, and there he died, at the early age of thirty, willingly and joyfully exchanging an earthly for an heavenly crown.

Of Wulfstan and Ceolwulf there is not much more to be told. Ceolwulf recovered slowly, but never was the same vigorous old man as before. He used to listen to Malachi, in whom he took a great interest and whom he looked upon as a very remarkable man, and he seemed to understand the beauty of Christianity as the simple monk explained it to him; but since he grew more and more taciturn, as he grew older, it was difficult to know what he really thought. However, as almost the last words he spoke before his death were "about my Master's business," Malachi thought he had been musing over the words of the Holy Child, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business." The old man was buried, as he had requested, by the side of Athelhune on the hill above the homestead.

Wulfstan completely recovered his health; he grew up a brave, simple-minded, noble boy, full of fun, and rejoicing in life. He helped his father on his estates, and eventually succeeded him as chief eorldoman of the island, which from this time, 709, until the reign of the last Saxon king, enjoyed peace and prosperity. Wulfstan died full of years and honour, a noble example of a Christian magistrate living among his own people, and exhibiting a bright pattern of kindness, firmness, and single-hearted devotion to duty.

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