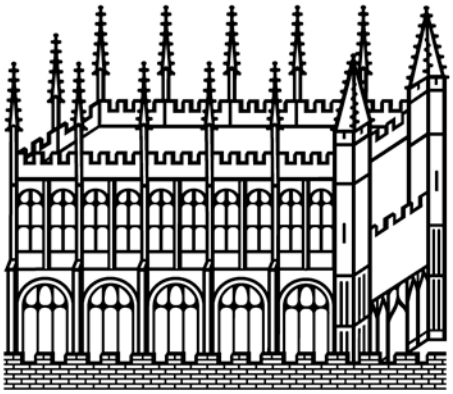

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EDWY THE FAIR,
OR THE
FIRST CHRONICLE OF ÆSCENDUNE.
A TALE OF THE DAYS OF SAINT DUNSTAN.

C—416.]

ALFGAR THE DANE

OR THE

SECOND CHRONICLE OF ÆSCENDUNE

A Tale of the Days of Edmund Ironside

BY THE REV.

A. D. CRAKE, B.A.

AUTHOR OF 'HISTORY OF THE CHURCH UNDER THE ROMAN EMPIRE,'
'FIRST CHRONICLE OF ÆSCENDUNE,' ETC.

"Arma virumque cano."

SECOND EDITION

RIVINGTONS
London, Oxford, and Cambridge
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PREFACE.

THE tale now presented to the indulgence of the public is the *second* of a series of tales, each complete in itself, which, as stated in the preface to the first of the series, have been told to the senior boys of a large school, in order to secure their interest in historical characters, and to illustrate great epochs in human affairs by the aid of fiction.

Yet the Author has distinctly felt that fiction must always, in such cases, be subordinate to truth, and that it is only legitimately used as a vehicle of instruction when it fills up the gaps in the outline, without contradicting them in any respect, or interfering with their due order and sequence.

Therefore he has attempted in every instance to consult such original authorities as lay within his reach, and has done his best to present an honest picture of the times.

The period selected on the present occasion is full of the deepest interest. The English and the Danish invaders of their soil were struggling desperately for the possession of England—a struggle aggravated by religious bitterness, and by the sanguinary nature of the Danish creed.

The reign of Ethelred the Unready, from his ac-

cession, after the murder of his innocent brother, until the scene depicted in the nineteenth chapter of the tale was a tragedy ever deepening. Its details will seem dark enough as read herein, but how utterly dark they were can only be appreciated by those who study the contemporary annals. Many facts therein given have been rejected by the Author as too harrowing in their nature; and he has preferred to render the contemplation of woe and suffering less painful, by a display of those virtues of patience, resignation, and brave submission to the Divine will, which affliction never fails to bring out in the fold of Christ, whose promise stands ever fast, that the strength of His people shall be equal to their needs.

With the death of the unhappy king, and the accession of his brave but unfortunate son, the whole character of the history changes. Englishmen are henceforth at least a match for their oppressors, and the result of the long contest is the conversion of their foes to Christianity, their king setting the example, and the union of the two races—not the submission of one to the other. The Danish element had been received into the English nation to join in moulding the future national character—to add its own special virtues to the typical Englishman of the future. One more rude shock had yet to be sustained before the alloy of foreign blood was complete—the Norman Conquest. This is the subject of the Third Story of Æscendune, which has yet to be written.

One character in the tale has always puzzled historians—a character, so far as the author knows, absolutely without redeeming trait—Edric Streorn. It is

well said that no man is utterly bad, and perhaps he possessed domestic virtues which were thought unworthy of the attention of the chroniclers; but as *they* picture him—now prompting Ethelred to deeds of treachery against the Danes, now joining those Danes themselves, and surpassing them in cruelty—now seeking pretended reconciliation, only to betray his foe more surely, and in all this aided and supported by the weak, unprincipled king—as thus pictured there is scarcely a blacker character in history.

But more incomprehensible than the existence of so bad a man in such a dark age is the renewed confidence ever accorded him, when, after more than once betraying the armies of his country into the hands of their foes, and fighting openly in the hostile cause, he is again forgiven, nay, received into favour, and sent once more to command the men he has already deceived, until he repeats the experiment, and when it fails is again admitted into confidence.

To some extent the Author has endeavoured to find possible solutions of the mystery, but *mystery* it will remain until the day when all secrets are known.

The death of this unhappy man is taken, in all its main details, from a comparison of the chroniclers, as are also all the chief historical events herein noted.

An objection has been raised to the modern English in which the Author has made his characters speak. He can only say in reply that the Anglo-Saxon in which they really expressed themselves would be unintelligible to all but the few who have made the study of our ancient tongue their pursuit—far more unintelligible to those of ordinary education than Latin or

French. Therefore it would be mere affectation to copy the later orthography of Chaucer, or to interlard one's sentences with obsolete words. The only course seems to be a fair translation of the vernacular of the period of the tale into our own everyday English. The Author anticipated this objection in the preface to his earlier volume. He repeats his answer for those who may not have seen the former book. A similar rule has guided him in the orthography of proper names; he has used the customary Latinised forms.

In his descriptions of Dorchester and Abingdon he has been aided by the kind information received from the present vicar of the magnificent Abbey Church, still existing in the former ancient town, and by the extensive information contained in the Chronicle of the Abbey of Abingdon, edited by the Rev. Joseph Stevenson, M.A. He has also to express his obligations to his friend Mr. Charles Walker, editor of the "Liturgy of the Church of Sarum," for valuable assistance in monastic lore.

The moral aim of the tale has been to depict the mental difficulties which our heathen forefathers had severally to encounter ere they could embrace Christianity—difficulties chiefly arising from the inconsistencies of Christians—and to set forth the example of one who, having found the "pearl of great price," sold all he had and bought it, forsaking all that could appeal to the imagination of a warlike youth—"choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."

Yet *his* Christianity, like that of all other characters in the tale, is that of their age, not of ours, and

men will differ as to its comparative merits. "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required."

The author dedicates this tale to his brother, engaged, like himself, in that most responsible task, the education of youth, in memory of those happy days when they pored *together* in rapturous delight over old legend or romantic lore in their father's home at that very Cliffton (now Clifton Hampden) familiar to hearers or readers of the tale as the home of Herstan, and the scene of the heroic defence of the English dwelling against the Danes. It will be a great reward for the Author's toil should this little volume similarly gladden many firesides during the approaching Christmas, and perhaps cause some to thank God for the contrast between the Christmas of 1007 and that of 1874.

A. D. C.

ALL SAINTS' SCHOOL, BLOXHAM,
Advent, 1874.

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CHAPTER I.

THE DIARY OF FATHER CUTHBERT.

All Saints' Day, 1002.

INASMUCH as I, Cuthbert, by the long-suffering of the Divine goodness, am prior of the Benedictine house of S. Wilfrid at Æscendune, it seems in some sort my duty, following the example of many worthy brethren, to write some account of the origin and history of the priory over which it has pleased God to make me overseer, and to note, as occasion serves from time to time, such passing events as seem worthy of remembrance; which record, deposited in the archives of the house, may preserve our memory when our bodies are but dust, and other brethren fill our places in the choir. Perhaps each generation thinks the events which happen in its own day more remarkable than any which have preceded, and that its own period is the crisis of the fate of Church or State. Yet surely no records of the past, extant, tell us of such dark threatening clouds as hang over the realm of England at this time, when the thousandth year since our blessed Lord's nativity having passed, we seem to be entering on those awful plagues which the Apocalypse tells us must precede the consummation of all things.

But we who trust in the Lord have a strong tower wherein to hide, and we know of a land where there is no darkness or shadow of death; therefore we will not fear though the earth be moved, and the hills be carried into the midst of the sea.

This house of S. Wilfrid was founded by Offa, Thane of

Æscendune, in the year of the Lord 938, and completed by his son and successor Ella, who was treacherously murdered by his nephew Ragnar, and lies buried within these sacred walls. The first prior was Father Cuthbert, my godfather, after whom I was named. He was appointed by Dunstan, just then on the point of leaving England to escape the rage of the wicked and unhappy Edwy, and continued to exercise the authority until the year 975, the year in which our lamented king, Edgar the Magnanimous, departed to his heavenly rest, with whose decease peace and prosperity seemed likewise to depart.

Father Godric succeeded him, under whose paternal rule we enjoyed peace for ten years. Truly the memory of the just is blessed. He died in 985, and then was I chosen by the votes of the chapter to be their prior, and my election was confirmed by the holy Dunstan, who himself admitted me to mine office.

And truly the lines have fallen unto me in pleasant places, dark although—as I have said—the times are. The priory lies on the banks of the glorious Avon, where the forests come nearly down to its banks. Above us rises a noble hill, crowned with the oak and the beech, beneath whose shade many a deer and boar repose, and their flesh, when brought thither to gladden our festivals, is indeed toothsome and savoury.

Our buildings are chiefly of wood, although the foundations are of stone. The great hall is floored and lined with oak, while the chapel—the Priory Church the people call it—excels for limning and gilding, as well as for the beauty of its tapestry, any church in this part of Mercia. Our richest altar-cloth is made of the purple robe which King Edgar wore at his consecration, and which he sent to the thane Alfred of Æscendune for the Priory Church as a token of the respect and favour he bore him. And also he gave a veil of gold embroidery which representeth the destruction of Troy. It is hung upon great days over the dais at the high table of the hall.

The monastery is well endowed with lands by the liberality of its first founder, as appears in the deeds preserved in our great muniment chest. We have ten hides of woodland, wherein none may cut wood save for our use in the winter; five hides of arable land, and the same extent of pasturage for cattle. Now for the care of the culture thereof we have a hundred serfs attached to the glebe, who, we trust, do not find us unkind lords.

There are twenty brethren who have taken the final vows according to the rule of S. Benedict, and ten novices, besides six lay brethren, and other our chief servitors. We keep the monastic hours, duly rising at daybreak to sing our lauds, and lying down after compline, with the peace and blessing of Him who alone maketh us dwell in safety.

Our daily work is not light. We preach on Sundays and festivals in the priory church. We visit the sick. We instruct the youth in the elements of Christian doctrine. We superintend the labours of those who till the soil. We copy the sacred writings. In short, we have a great deal to do, and I fear do it very imperfectly sometimes.

I will add a few words only about myself. I am the third son of Alfred,* thane of Æscendune, and his wife the Lady Alftrude of Roll-rich. Elfric, my eldest brother, died young. Elfwyn is now thane, and I, the third boy, was given to the Church, for which I had ever felt a vocation, perhaps from my love to my godfather. We only had one sister, Bertha, and she has married the Thane Herstan of Cliffton, near Dorchester, the seat of our good bishop Ælfhelm, and the shrine of holy Birinus.

My father and mother both sleep the sleep of the just. They lived to see their children happy and prosperous, and then departed amidst the lamentations of all who had known and loved them. Taken from the evil to come, we cannot mourn them, nor would we call them back, although we sorely missed their loved forms. They were

* See Note A.—Genealogy of Æscendune.

full of years, yet age had not dimmed their faculties. My father died in the year 998, my mother the following year. They rest by the side of their ancestors in the priory church.

My brother Elfwyn married Hilda, the daughter of Ceolfric, a Thane of Wessex, in the year 985. He has two children—Bertric, a fine lad of twelve, and as good as he is manly, and Ethelgiva, a merry girl of ten. His household is well-ordered and happy — nurtured in the admonition of the Lord.

For myself, I have had many offers of promotion in the brotherhood of S. Benedict, but have refused them. I was once offered the high office of abbot in one of our great Benedictine houses, but I wished to be near my own people and my father's house, and here I trust I shall stay till I seek a continuing city, whose builder and maker is God.

And now a little about the state of the country round us. In this neighbourhood we have as yet been preserved from the evils of war, but for many years past the Danes, those evil men, have renewed their inroads, as they used to make them before the great King Alfred pacified the country. They began again in the year 980, and, with but slight intermission, have continued year by year. The awful prophecy which God forced from the lips of Dunstan, at the coronation of our most unhappy king, has been too sadly fulfilled. Ah me! I fear the curse of the saints is upon him.* When the holy bishop departed this life, I was one of the few who stood round his bed, and as he foretold of the evil to come, he bade us all bear our portion manfully, for the time, he said, would be short in which to endure, and the eternal crown secure.

Many of those to whom he spoke have since died the martyr's or the patriot's death, but as yet no evil has reached us at Æscendune, although many parts of Wessex, nay, all the sea-coast, and the banks of the great rivers, have been wasted with fire and sword, and the money

* Note B.—The Curse of Dunstan at Ethelred's coronation.

which has been given the barbarians has been worse than wasted, for they only come for more.

Our armies seem led by traitors; our councils, sad to say, by fools. Nothing prospers, and thoughtless people say the saints are asleep. Every day we say the petition in our Litany, "That it would please Thee to abate the cruelty of our pagan enemies, and to turn their hearts; we beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord," and we must wait His time, and pray for strength to submit to His will.

Around the priory live the serfs, the theows, and ceorls of the estate, each in his own little cottage, save the domestics, who live at the Hall, which is only half-a-mile distant.

On Sundays and Saints' days they all assemble in our minster church. It was full this day at the high mass, and I preached them a homily upon the Saints, great part of which I took from a sermon I once heard the holy Dunstan preach. And he showed us how saints did not live idle lives on this earth, but always went about, like their Lord and Master, doing good, and that through much tribulation they entered the eternal kingdom, which also bids fair to be our lot now-a-days, although we be all miserable sinners, and not saints.

Ah! how I thought of the dear ones we have lost when the Gospel was read at mass, about the great multitude which no man could number, and I almost seemed as if I could see father, mother, and Elfric there. I would not wish them back; yet my heart is very lonely sometimes. I wonder whether they remember now that it is All Saints' Day, and that we are thinking of them. Yes, I am sure they *must* do so.

There have been few troubles from the Danes, close at hand; so few that they seem trivial in comparison with those our countrymen suffer elsewhere. Still we have many of the pagans living as settlers in our neighbourhood, whose presence is tolerated for fear of the reprisals which might follow any acts of hostility against them. Kill one Dane,

the people say, and a hundred come to his funeral. Many of these settlers have acquired their lands peaceably, but others by the strong arms of their ancestors in periods of ancient strife; and these have been allowed to keep their possessions for generations, so that if they did not retain their heathen customs we might forget they were not Englishmen.

One of these lives near us. His name is Anlaf. Some say he boasts of being a descendant of that Anlaf who once ravaged England, and was defeated at Brunanburgh. He married an English girl, whose heart, they say, he broke by his cruelty. They had one child, *Alfgar* by name.

The mother died a Christian. Taking my life in my hands, I penetrated their fortalice, and administered the last sacrament to her; but they threatened my life for entering their domains, and, perhaps, had I been but a simple priest, and not also, small boast as it is, the son of a powerful English thane, whom they feared to offend, I had died in doing my duty. When the poor girl was dying she committed the boy as well as she could to my care, begging me to see that he was baptized; but the father has prevented me from carrying out her wishes, asserting that he would sooner slay the lad.

But it seems as if the boy retained some traces of his mother's faith; over and over again I have seen him hiding in some remote corner of the church during service time, but he has always shrunk away when any of the brethren attempted to speak to him.

I am sure he wishes to be a Christian.

I may, perhaps, find a chance of speaking to him, and a few words may reach his heart. He knows my brother's family, and has once or twice joined them in expeditions in the woods, and even entered their gates. His must be a lonely life at home; there are no other children, but from time to time hoary warriors, upon whose souls lies, I fear, the guilt of much innocent blood, find a home there.

November 2d.—This morning we said the office and mass for the dead, as usual on All Souls' Day. My brother Elfwyn and his children were, of course, present. That boy, Bertric, with all his boyish spirit and brightness, is very pious. It was a sight which I thought might gladden their guardian angels to see him and his sister kneeling with clasped hands at their uncle Elfric's tomb, and when service was over, they made me tell them the old old story about the first Elfric, the brother of my father, and how my father rescued him when the old castle was burnt.*

When I had told them the story, I saw my brother was anxious to say a few words to me.

"Cuthbert," he said, "have you seen the young Dane, Alfgar, lately?"

"Not very long since," I replied; "he was at mass yesterday."

"Because I believe the lad longs to be a Christian, but does not dare speak to any one."

"He fears his stern father."

"Yes, Anlaf might slay him if he was to be baptized; yet baptized I am sure he will be, sooner or later."

"Does the boy love his father, I wonder?" said I, musingly.

"Doubtless; it would be *unnatural* did he not; but perhaps he loves the memory of his mother yet more. We both knew her, Cuthbert."

"Yes, when she was a bright-hearted merry village maiden. Poor Kyneswith!"

"For her sake, then, let us both try to do something for the boy."

"With all my heart. I will seek an opportunity of speaking to him; perhaps he may unburden his mind."

"Have you seen Edric the sheriff?" asked Elfwyn.

"Not lately. Has he been here?"

"He has, and there was something in connection with his visit which troubled me. He had been telling me for a long

* See "First Chronicle of Æscendune."

time about the cruelties and insolence of the Danes, when he added, in a marked manner, that they might go too far, for hundreds of their countrymen, like Anlaf here, were living unprotected amongst us."

"What could he mean?"

"I understood him to hint that we might revenge ourselves upon them, and replied that whatever their countrymen might be guilty of, our neighbours would, of course, always be safe amongst Christians."

"What did he reply?"

"He changed the subject."

Elfwyn said no more, but bade me good-bye and returned to the castle; still I saw that he was a little discomposed by the sheriff's words. I don't like that sheriff; he is a cruel and a crafty man; but I daresay his words were only the expression of a passing thought.

CHAPTER II.

"ALFGAR, SON OF ANLAF."

SUNDAY, *November 6th.*—To-day I noticed Alfgar, the son of Anlaf, at the high mass, and felt a little discomposed at the relaxation of discipline, which, contrary to the canons of the church, permits the unbaptized, as well as persons who ought rightly to be deemed excommunicate, or at least penitents, to be present at the holy mysteries.

But it is not this poor boy's fault that he is not a Christian, for I have seen him, and learned for a certainty the real state of his mind.

The way in which it came about was this. I marked that after service he entered the woods, as if he shunned the society of his fellow-worshippers, and there I followed him, coming upon him at last, as if by accident, in a chestnut glade, the leaves of which strewed the ground—emblem of our fading mortality.

He started as he saw me, and at first looked as if he were inclined to fly my presence, but I gently addressed him.

"Dominus vobiscum, my son," I said. "I am pleased to see you sometimes at the minster church."

"I did not know I was noticed amongst so many," he replied.

"You mean," my boy, "that you would sooner your presence were *not* observed. I can guess your reason too well."

He looked so sad, that I was sorry I had spoken precipitately, and a deep red blush suffused his dark coun-

tenance. He has a most attractive face—so thoughtful, yet so manly; his mother's gentle lineaments seem to have tempered the somewhat fierce and haughty bearing of his sire, as they meet in the countenance of their child.

My sympathy became so deep that I could not restrain myself, and spoke out,—

"My boy, will you not confide your troubles to me, for your dear mother's sake? Do you not remember how she commended you to my care? And never have I forgotten to pray daily that her God may be your God also."

At the mention of his mother the tears filled his eyes. We were sitting together on the trunk of a fallen tree, and he covered his face with his hands, but I could see that the tears forced their way between the fingers, and that he was sobbing violently. He is only as yet a mere boy, and such emotion is excusable.

At last he looked up. "I long to be a Christian like her," he said; "over and over again she taught me, during her last days on earth, of the Christ she loved, and who, she said, was ever near her. I have heard all about the faith she loved, yet I am an outcast from it. What can I do?—my father will not let me be baptized, and I dare not oppose his will; yet I sometimes think I ought to chance all, and to die, if death should be the penalty."

"Die? You do not surely think he would slay you?"

"I know he would."

"In that case, my child, your duty seems plain: your Lord calls you to give Him your love, your obedience, and to seek refuge in the fold of His church."

"Ought I to leave my father?"

I felt very much puzzled indeed what to say. I could have no doubt as to the lad's duty; but then his father was his natural guardian, and in all things, save the plain duty of professing Christ, had a claim to his obedience.

"I think," I said at last, "my Alfgar, that when he knew you were determined to be a Christian he would oppose you no longer; that is, if you were once baptized he

would tolerate a Christian son as he once did a Christian wife."

"He broke her heart."

"At all events I think that you should delay no longer, but should seek instruction and baptism, which we will afford you; and then, unless you really feel life is in danger, you should return to him and try to bear your lot; it may not be so hard as you think."

"I am not afraid of death; but he is my father, and from *his* hands it would be hard."

"He hates Christianity grievously then?"

"He says it is the religion of cowards and hypocrites; that it forms a plea for cowardice when men dare not be men, and is thrown aside fast enough when they have their foes in their power."

Alas! I could but feel how much reason the ill lives of Christians had given him to form this opinion, and of the curse pronounced upon those who shall put a stumbling-block in their brother's way. The conversation of the Sheriff, Edric Streorn, rose up in my mind as an apt illustration of Anlaf's words.

"My boy," I said, "there is nothing perfect on earth. In the visible church the evil is mingled with the good. Yet the church is the fold of the Good Shepherd, and there is salvation therein for all who love and serve their Lord, and strive humbly to follow His example, and those of His blessed Saints."

"May I think over all you have said, and meet you next Sunday? You will be here, will you not?" And he looked imploringly in my face. Poor boy! my heart bled for him.

So we parted, and he went home.

Friday, November 11th.—I feel thoroughly uneasy and anxious about the sheriff's proceedings. He has been about the neighbourhood to-day, and seems to have been talking secretly with all the black sheep of my flock; thank God,

I do not think there are many. What they can be going to do, or what plot they are hatching, I cannot discover, only I fear that it is some design for vengeance upon the Danes—some dark treachery plotted against those in our midst; and, if such is the case, I can but feel uneasy for poor Alfgar. I wish the lad would leave his home, if but for a short time, until the signs are less threatening; but he would not forsake his father in danger, and I ought hardly to wish it.

S. Brice's Day, Sunday, November 13th.—This has been a harassing and eventful day. Early in the morning, before the high mass, whereat the neighbourhood is generally present, I received a missive from the sheriff, bidding me, in the name of the King, to exhort my people to remain at home to-night, since danger is afoot, and there is likely, he says, to be a rising on the part of the pagans who dwell amongst us. Why, they are but one in five in this neighbourhood; hardly that. I determined to give the message in my own way, for I could not keep silent, lest, through fault of mine, any of my sheep should perish. So I preached upon the Saint of the day, who was pre-eminently a man of peace, and I took occasion to tell my people that there were many hurtful men about, who, like their master, Satan, were seeking whom they might devour, and that, like that master, they chose the night for their misdeeds, seeing they loved darkness rather than light. So I said I hoped every good Christian would keep at home, and go to bed early.

At this point I observed a sarcastic smile upon many faces, notably on those of the black sheep aforesaid, to whom the sheriff had spoken, and I concluded that they were very likely to be the ministers of darkness themselves. So I spoke on the Christian duties of love and forgiveness, and exhorted all present to take joyfully the chastisement of the Lord, even like holy Job; and that it would all tend to their eternal good, through Him who, when He was reviled,

reviled not again. And so with this exhortation to patience I closed my homily. I fear I spoke to many in vain.

I am sure they are bent on immediate mischief, and that this notice of the sheriff has much to do with it. He wants to keep good people at home to have all the field to himself. I see him—the black bell-wether.

After mass I mingled with the dispersing congregation. The weather was very gloomy—the faces of the congregation yet more so. All seemed to apprehend coming evil. Instead of returning cheerfully home they stood together in groups, talking in low tones, as if they feared to speak their thoughts aloud.

Most of them evidently were men of peace, but not all, as I have already hinted; and, as I drew near a group standing behind the great yew-tree, I heard one of these latter discoursing to his fellows :—

"Heard you the prior's sermon?" said Siric, for that was the fellow, Siric of the Wold; "a fine homily he gave us on S. Brice—that man of peace."

"It was easy for him to be a man of peace," returned another; "he hadn't got Danes for his neighbours."

"Holy Job himself would have turned cut-throat if he had."

"Then they have been insulting, robbing, and murdering all over the country."

Just then I interrupted them, for I could no longer hear the blasphemy.

"How now, Siric?" said I; "hast thou come to Æscendune to revile the saints?"

"Nay, Father," said he, with a mocking smile; "I was only rejoicing that they were not exposed to such trials as we. Job's Chaldeans were gentlefolk in comparison with our Danes."

"Thou blasphemest; and what didst thou say of the blessed S. Brice?"

"Only that I wished he were living now to tame the cut-throats who live in our midst, and who murder and rob daily, just in mere sport, or to keep their hands in."

"What new outrages have occurred?" I asked.

"A party of the heathen carried off the cattle from my farm down the water early this morning, and slew the herdsman."

"Dost thou know who the fellows were?"

"All too well; they were Anlaf's men."

I hardly knew what to answer, the outrage was so recent, and the excitement of the speaker so pardonable, as I could but feel.

Well, at this moment my brother Elfwyn came out of the church, where he had lingered to pray, as he generally does, at his brother's tomb, and, noticing us, came and joined the group. He seemed much concerned when he heard the details.

"Siric," he said, with his usual kind way of speaking, "do not distress yourself unduly; you know I am rich in flocks and herds. I will make up the loss of the cattle, my brother the prior will have a mass said for poor Guthred, and he shall have the last rites performed at our expense; it is all we can do for him; the rest we must leave to the mercy of God."

"Nay, Thane," said Siric; "I thank you for your goodwill, but I may not stand thus indebted to any man. I will repay myself at the expense of the robbers. Still you may remember Guthred at God's altar."

And he strode away.

My brother was now joined by his children Bertric and Ethelgiva, and his wife, the Lady Hilda. I saw that he was ill at ease, but we did not mention the subject, which I am sure was uppermost in both our minds, lest we should alarm the gentle ones.

Just then I remembered that I had promised to meet Alfgar in the pine-wood, and I hastened to the spot.

I found him seated again on the fallen tree. He rose at my approach, and saluted me with some emotion, as if some inward excitement made itself visible in spite of his efforts to suppress it.

"My son," said I, "have you pondered my words of last Sunday?"

"I have, and I am come to put myself under your instruction, I will be guided by you in all things, and fulfil thus the dying wish of the only being who ever loved me."

"But, my boy, there must be yet a higher, a holier motive."

"I trust it is not wanting, my father."

"Are you able to stay long to-day?"

"O yes, my father is keeping high festival; a number of his countrymen are visiting him and holding revel; this morning they drove in a number of oxen, I know not whence, and slaughtered two on the spot, and they have broached several barrels of mead; they will keep the feast all day, and before night my father will not be in a state to miss me; I always absent myself if I can on such occasions."

"Then you must come home with me, and share the noon meat, after which I can give you my time until evensong."

He made no objection, and we returned to the Priory together, where he took his noon meat in the guest-chamber, and I devoted all the time between the meal and nones to an examination of my catechumen.

I found that poor Kyneswith had impressed all the primary truths of our holy faith deeply upon his mind, although he wanted much building up, and needed instruction in details; he seemed deeply impressed by the main facts of the life and teaching of our blessed Lord, particularly His message of peace on earth, good will towards men, contrasting so forcibly with the faith of his own people.

The time passed rapidly away, and we went to the minster church at three, when nones and evensong were said together, for we could not keep the people till the proper hour for the latter office, owing to the darkness of November.

When the holy office was over, I accompanied my

brother part of the way home, for I wanted to communicate my suspicions, and to learn whether he shared them.

It was a dark and gloomy eventide; the sun, which had only made its appearance at intervals during the day, was fast sinking behind a heavy bank of clouds which filled the western horizon, and the wind, which was freshening to a gale, seemed to bear the storm onward in its track, while it tore the few surviving leaves rudely from the trees, and whirled them in mazy windings.

"Elfwyn," said I, "what do you suppose was the true object of the sheriff in bidding folks keep in-doors to-night?"

"I cannot divine, unless he has some deed of blood on hand which he wishes to have undisturbed, all to himself and his underlings."

"Siric spoke mysteriously."

"Yes; if there is aught going on amiss, he has a hand in it."

Here I communicated my fears respecting Alfgar, whom I had invited, with my brother's permission, to sup at the hall.

"Could you not keep the poor fellow with you all night? I fear his father is in some danger, as well he may be, acting as wickedly as he did this very morn."

"I will try to persuade him to stay, he is along with Bertric and Ethelgiva; they are only a few steps behind. Cuthbert, I have ordered every one of my theows and ceorls to be obedient to your warning if they wish to preserve their allegiance to Æscendune, or to escape chastisement, and I think none of them are likely to be abroad to-night."

"Can you not find out what the sheriff has told them? I saw him speaking to one or two."

"I will try. You must be my guest to-night, or at least for a few hours."

"Nay, I must return to compline; I may be wanted to-night, and ought to be at my post," said I.

We arrived at the old home, dear familiar place! stronger

and better built than most such houses, because, being burnt down in my father's younger days, it had been rebuilt in a more substantial manner, and was capable of sustaining a formidable attack successfully.

We crossed the drawbridge, and entered the court-yard under the gateway; before us was the door of the great hall, merrily illumined by its blazing fire.

There, then, was the supper-table bountifully spread, and the theows and ceorls awaiting the arrival of their lord. We entered, Elfwyn and I, and soon after Bertric, Ethelgiva, and Alfgar followed.

A loud horn was blown upon the battlements. Stragglers made their entrance good; the drawbridge was drawn up, the doors closed, and I blessed the meat.

CHAPTER III.

THE NIGHT OF S. BRICE.

Monday, November 14th, 1002.—I hardly know how to write the events of last night, my pen almost refuses to begin. I feel thoroughly sickened by the very remembrance of the bloodshed and treachery which have disgraced Christian England, and which will assuredly bring down God's judgment upon us.

But I will do violence to myself, and will write all things accurately, in order it may serve to show that there were those amongst us who were not consenting parties, who entered not into the counsels of those men of blood, whom may God "reward after their deeds, and according to the wickedness of their own inventions."

Well, to begin. When supper was ended at the hall last night, my brother bade his wife and children seek their bower, and Alfgar went with them; then he addressed his people with that confidence and affection he not only shows in his outward speech, but really feels in his heart.

"Are all the folk present within the gates?" he asked.

"We are all here, my lord," replied they; "none have been wanting in their duty."

"It is well; and now, my people, I ask you, whom I have ever trusted, and to whom I have tried to be a friend as well as a master, have you any of you a suspicion what the sheriff is about to-night, and why he desired the prior to tell good Christians to keep within doors?"

There was a dead silence. At last one of the ceorls rose up, and spoke with some hesitation—

"I think, my lord, that they intend to avenge themselves upon the Dane folk."

"Did they say anything about it to you or any other of my people?"

"Yes; they tried to get two or three of us to join in the work, but when they found we would do nothing without your knowledge, they told us no more."

"Then you do not know what is the exact work they have in hand?"

"No. But I heard something which made me think that plunder and massacre were both likely to be committed."

"Did you hear any particular names mentioned?"

"Yes. That of Anlaf."

"This explains Siric's insolence, Cuthbert."

"It does," I replied.

"But surely they cannot intend to do anything to-night. They would not choose Sunday for a deed of darkness. Men who have attended mass during the day, surely would not so forget their God as to go through the country like cowardly wolves, pulling down the prey in company which they dare not attack singly."

"I should hope the same; but then the looks and words of to-day," said I.

"Did they say what authority they had for their projected scheme?"

"They dared to say," replied the ceorl who had before spoken, "they had the sanction of the king."

There was again a painful silence. We groaned in the bitterness of our hearts,—O Ethelred, son of Edgar, hast thou forgotten all truth and mercy?—thou, the son of Edgar the Magnanimous?

Every impulse of our hearts led us to detest the cruel deed of treachery about to be consummated, but which we could not prevent.

At least there was one whom we could save from the general destruction, the young Alfgar, and we determined

to detain him if possible by persuasion, keeping the truth from him, but in any case to detain him at the hall during the night.

I could not remain at the hall myself, for, on such a night, it seemed necessary to be with my own people, and to be ready to seize any opportunity of saving the effusion of blood, or of giving protection to any who might seek refuge under the shelter of our roof, where murder would be sacrilege, a consideration of some importance where Christians, shame to say, were the murderers.

But before I went my brother and I sent to Alfgar that we might speak to him, and prevail upon him to stay with us the night.

"Alfgar," said Elfwyn, "the night is very stormy and blustering, and we wish you to remain with us, and share our hospitality till the morn. Your father will not miss you?"

"I do not think he will; for after one of these debauches he generally sleeps far into the next day. But the domestic serfs may remark my absence."

"There is another reason, my boy, why we wish you to stay. Wild men who hate your father's race are abroad, and did you fall into their hands while returning home it might fare hard with you."

"I can imagine that. I marked the looks they cast upon me in God's house, even there, this day. They cannot forgive me my Danish blood, although my mother was one of themselves, and a Christian."

"They have suffered much, my lad; and suffering, as is often the case, has blunted their feelings. But you will stay with us, will you not?"

"I will stay; many thanks for your kindness."

After this I had nothing further to detain me at the castle, so I left for the priory.

It was a black dark night. The violence of the wind almost lifted me from my feet; not a star could be seen; but occasionally a sharp hailstorm pelted down. Glad was

I, although the distance was not great, to see the lights of the priory, and to dry my chilled limbs and wet garments before the fire in the common room while I told my brethren the tidings of the night, and the supicions which we entertained.

When I had finished there was a dead pause, during which the howling blast without, as it dashed the hail against the casement, seemed a fitting accompaniment to our sombre thoughts.

The compline bell rang.

This office is always full of heavenly comfort, but there seemed a special meaning to-night in one verse—

"A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee."

Yet the thousands were heavy on our hearts, and I meditated some means of carrying tidings of their danger to our pagan neighbours; but I knew nothing of the details of the plot, only that there was a plot, and I knew that if I sent a brother, the Danes, in their hatred to monks, would probably set their huge dogs at him before he could speak, and perhaps worry him to death. Neither could any other messenger approach their dwellings safely at night.

I tried to hope, but against reason, that we had perhaps exaggerated the danger. Still, after the compline was over, we sat in deliberation a long time in the hall. The novices and lay brothers, ignorant of the peril, had retired to rest; but we, who knew the portentous state of things around us, could not have slept had we retired. Ever and anon we looked forth from doors and windows into the black darkness without; but although it was near midnight, neither sight nor sound told of aught amiss, and we were beginning to yield to fatigue, when I ascended the tower in company with Father Adhelm, to survey the scene for the last time. It was so windy that we could hardly stand upon the leaded roof, and although we gazed around, nought met our eyes until we were on the point of returning.

"Listen!" said Father Adhelm, the sub-prior.

It was unnecessary. Borne upon the wind, a loud noise, as of men who shout for mastery, met our ears, followed or intermingled with cries for help or mercy,—so we fancied at least.

While we stood rooted by horror to the spot, a bright light arose, which rapidly increased, as a conflagration well might in such a wind, and soon the whole horizon was illuminated. I knew but one homestead in that direction,—the fortified house of Anlaf.

I thought of the poor boy, with thankfulness that we had restrained him from returning home. He is saved, at least, thought I, as a brand from the burning.

The other brethren joined us, and after a short consultation, we determined to go to the scene in a body, to mitigate the rage of the people, and save life where we could.

So, putting our cowls over our heads, we sallied forth into the black night—black and dark save where the light of the fire illumined the horizon, and even cast a faint ray upon our own path. We were not used to journeys in such weather, and I am afraid we made very slow progress, but it was not for want of good will. The fire grew brighter and brighter as we proceeded, and the shouts louder and louder. We knew that Anlaf had a party of his countrymen, all of them obnoxious to the English, and could easily understand that they had collected themselves together for their own destruction. Yet, when we looked around, we perceived by the blood-red reflection in the skies at other points, that the same ruthless task was being carried out in many a distant spot, as well as close at hand.

Reaching the bank of the river, we directed our course along its banks until the dark forest closed in upon us, and rapid progress became difficult. The trees were all rocking wildly in the wind, and here and there a severed branch fell down before us. Occasionally a gust of rain

and hail descended. The path was wet and slippery. Poor Father Adhelm groaned aloud. He had the podagra, (or gout), and ought not to have ventured forth; but zeal would not let him rest.

"Verily our path is hedged about with thorns. It is hard to kick against the pricks," said the chamberlain.

"It is God's work," said I, "and we may not falter." Yet I felt my own heart weak.

But for the red light, which shone even through the shade of the forest, we could not have pursued our path. But plainer and plainer the wind brought the fierce shouts of the assailants to our ears, until, emerging from a dark belt of underwood, the whole horror of the scene burst upon us.

Before us, at the distance of a few hundred yards, defended by a mound and a ditch, rose the irregular and fortified dwelling of Anlaf. It was wrapped in flames from top to basement, and even as we looked one of the towers gave way, and fell upon the hall beneath, with hideous din, in headlong ruin.

Around the blazing pile stood some two or three hundred men, who completely encircled it, and who had doubtless prevented the escape of the inmates. We were evidently too late; the passive attitude of the assailants showed that their bloody work was done.

We learned afterwards that the domestics, who were English serfs, had betrayed the place to the foe, while the Danish lords were revelling in the great hall, and half drunk with wine. Surprised at the banquet, they fell an easy prey, and were slaughtered almost without resistance, after which the house was plundered of everything worth carrying away, and then set on fire in every part. Further details we could not gather. All was over when we arrived.

Full of indignation, I and my brethren advanced straight upon the group surrounding the sheriff, the crafty and cruel Edric Streorn, and in the name of God denounced the cruelty and sin of which they had been guilty.

"Sir monk," was the reply, "are you traitor to your

king that you thus league yourself with his deadly enemies? All that is done this night is done by his order."

"God will avenge the deed," said I. "Ye have not fought like men, but crept on like serpents, and slain those who, trusting to the faith of Christians, dwelt blindly in our midst. And now, what can we say? How can we hope to win our foes to God and Christ when we set at naught his precepts and despise his example?"

"Sir monk, I have not time to listen to a homily; keep it for next Sunday, when I will try to attend. For the present"——

Here he was interrupted by a loud cry which arose near us.

"The wolf cub! the wolf cub! Slay him, and the work is complete."

The cry, "Slay him! slay him!" was taken up by a dozen voices, when I recognised Alfgar, who by some means had learned the danger of his kinsfolk, and had come to share their fate.

"Save him, sheriff!" I cried; "save him! He is a Christian. His mother was English." And I rushed forward myself, and saw that the poor lad had already been brought on his knees by more than one fell stroke.

I held up the crucifix, which hung at my girdle, on high; I threw my arm over his head, and abjured them under the name of Christ, and as they feared the curse of the Church, to forbear. My brethren all aided me.

Sullenly they dropped their weapons, and the sheriff, coming forward, seconded me, although in a very contemptuous manner.

"Let him have the lad for his share of the night's work," he said.

And so God gave me the poor lad's life.

I had scarcely time to lay him on a sloping bank, where the light which shone so luridly from his burning home might fall upon him, when my brother Elfwyn appeared on the scene with a score of his men.

He recognised us by our habits, and came and looked with me at the orphan as he lay on the bank. The boy had received no serious wound, but was exhausted, as much I thought by the violence of his emotions as by his injuries. He was wet through; his clothes were torn with brambles, for he had followed a straight path through six miles of tangled forest, from Æscendune. They had unfortunately given him a bed in a chamber which looked towards his home: he had chanced to wake, had looked from the window, seen the flames, and had started thither at once, swimming the moat when he could not cross the draw-bridge—suspecting, doubtless, that he was surrounded by treachery.

I had already poured a rich cordial down his throat, and he was coming to himself, my brother aiding me, when the sheriff, grand in his robe and chain of office, came up.

"Good day, or rather night, to you, Thane of Æscendune," said he to Elfwyn; "we have had a fair night's work, and destroyed a big wasp's nest; have you come for your share in the spoil?"

"I only ask permission to preserve life; your work has been of an opposite nature."

"Yes, we have been obedient to our king, and avenged him this night of his enemies, who are also, I should have thought, the enemies of the Church."

"God will not bless midnight murder," said I.

"Murder! it is not murder to slay heathen Danes; had they been Christians it would, of course, have been a different thing."

"He hath made of one blood all the nations of the earth," I replied.

"The good prior wishes me to talk theology. Unfortunately I have much work to do; you will hear tidings soon of other Danish holds than this. The land may rejoice, freed from her oppressors, and they who blame our work will praise its results."

"That remains to be seen" we both replied.

"We had, meanwhile, placed Alfgar, now partially recovered, on a palfrey; and, supported by my brother and me, one on each side, we led him homewards. Arrived at the castle, we gave him to the care of Osred, the domestic physician. He looked at the patient, and pronounced a favourable opinion, saying that with time and care all would be well. But his left arm was broken, and he had received a slight blow on the head. Fever was the leech's chief apprehension; if he could keep that off, he said he doubted not all would be well.

S. Andrew's Day.—Our patient has lain some time in a state of delirium, whereat no one could wonder. In his ravings he was incessantly acting over the scenes through which he had passed during the dreadful night which followed S. Brice's Day. But, thanks to a good constitution, to-day he has taken a favourable turn, and seems likely to recover from a blow which would have hopelessly shattered a frailer frame. I was seated by his couch when he seemed to awake out of sleep, and I saw his bright dark eyes fixed inquiringly on me.

"Where am I?" he inquired.

"In the Hall of Æscendune; you have been very ill here."

"Indeed! I have had such dreadful dreams!—but were they all dreams?"

"Your mind has been wandering for days, my dear son. You must not talk too much."

He was silent, but evidently pondered more.

December 25, *Christmas Day*, 1003.*—All the household has given itself up to joy and gladness; even poor Alfgar, who has been released to-day from the confinement of his chamber, has entered into the general joy, although ever and anon relapsing into sadness.

* Note C.—Chronology of Father Cuthbert.

He knows all now: a day or two agone, when all the household had gone to hunt in the woods, I was alone with him in his chamber, and thought that at last I must discharge the painful task of telling him the truth.

"My boy," I said, "you have not lately inquired about your father."

He looked at me very sadly. "I know all," he said, "that you would tell me. I have no father, no mother, no kinsfolk."

"Some of our people have told you then?"

"No. At first the events of that fearful night seemed all like a dream, and mingled themselves with the strange spectres which haunted me in delirium; but afterwards the *real* separated itself from the *unreal*, and I knew that my father and all his friends, my Danish uncles amongst them, had perished with the whole household assembled there that fatal day. I also remembered, but faintly, how I came here. Did not you save me from the murderers?"

I briefly explained the whole circumstances to him, adding such words of consolation as I could think of, and telling him that he must always look upon Æscendune as his home. At length he rose. He had not replied.

"Pardon me, my father," he said, "but may I retire to my chamber? I wish to say much, but I am too weak now."

"Meanwhile, you will not leave us."

"I have no other home."

And he retired to his little chamber, from which he emerged no more to-day.

Feast of the Epiphany.—This day my catechumen Alfgar was baptized in the priory church. It seemed useless to delay longer, as he was fully prepared both intellectually and spiritually, nay, has been so for some time, only the tragic event which deprived him of his Danish kinsfolk had distracted him for a time from spiritual things. Nay, had he not been surrounded by real Christians and loving

friends here at Æscendune, I fear the Church would have lost him altogether. Such a commentary was the massacre of S. Brice on the Christian doctrine of love and forgiveness! He felt it grievously at first, but he was able at length to distinguish between men that say they are of Christ, and are not, and those who really set the example of that Lord and his Saints before them. He is now one of ourselves; a sheep safe in the fold, and the dying wish of his sainted mother is fulfilled. My brother intends to adopt him as a son, and as his family is small, the proposal meets my approbation. Bertric and Ethelgiva already love him as a brother.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DANES IN WESSEX.

Up to this period we have availed ourselves of extracts from the Diary of Father Cuthbert; but the events of the following four years, as recorded in that record, although full of interest for the antiquarian or the lover of monastic lore, would possess scant interest for the general reader, and have also little connection with the course of our tale; therefore we will convey the information they contain, which properly pertains to our subject, in few words, and those our own, returning occasionally to the Diary.

The melancholy history of the times may be compressed, from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other sources, in a few paragraphs.

Burning with revenge—for his own sister had fallen in the massacre on S. Brice's night—Sweyn returned to England the following year (1003). He landed in Devonshire, took Exeter by storm, and returned to his ships laden with the spoil. Then he sailed eastward, landed again and ravaged Dorset and Wiltshire. Here the ealdorman Elfric met him with a large English army; but when he saw the foe he fell sick, or feigned to be so; and then the old proverb came true, "When the general fails, the army quails." So the English looked on with fear and trembling, while Sweyn burnt Wilton and Salisbury, whence he returned to the sea laden with wealth and stained with blood; yet was not his revenge satisfied.

The following year East Anglia suffered as Wessex had suffered the year before. Ulfketyl, the ealdorman, gave them much money, hoping to buy peace from the merciless

pagans. The result was as he might have expected. They took the money, laughing at his simplicity, and three weeks afterwards pillaged Thetford, and burnt it. Then Ulfketyl, who was a brave man, got an East Anglian army together, and fought the Danes, giving them the uncommon chastisement of a defeat, so that they escaped with difficulty to their ships.

The following year a famine so severe visited England, that even the Danes forebore to ravage so poor a land; but in 1006, the next year, they overspread Wessex like locusts. Here the action of our tale is resumed.

During this interval of four years in Æscendune there had been peace. Alfgar had been domesticated as one of the family, and was reported well of in all the neighbourhood. Diligent in the discharge of his religious duties, he was equally conspicuous in all warlike sports and exercises and in the chase, while he afforded much help to Elfwyn the thane in the management of the estate. In short, he had won his way to the hearts of all the family; and perhaps the report that he was the accepted suitor of the fair daughter of Æscendune, Ethelgiva, was not without foundation.

Ethelgiva was nearly his own age, and was a perfect type of that beauty which has ever distinguished the women of the Anglo-Saxon race. Her fair hair, untouched by artificial adornment, hung like a shower of gold around her shoulders, while her eyes were of that delicate blue which seemed to reflect the deep summer sky; but the sweet pensive expression of her face was that which attracted nearly all who knew her, and made her the object of general regard.

Bertric was now about sixteen,—a handsome, attractive boy, full of life and fire, yet still possessing that devotion which Father Cuthbert had remarked in him as a boy of twelve. As the heir to the lands of Æscendune, and the only son, he would have been in much danger of being

spoiled had he been less genuine and manly than he was. He and Alfgar were inseparable; they seemed to revive again the traditional love of Nisus and Euryalus, or Orestes and Pylades.

The famine, which had made Wessex too poor even to serve as a bait for the Danes, had also afflicted Mercia, but not nearly so severely, and the generosity of the family of Æscendune had been exerted to the utmost on behalf of the sufferers.

But the spring of the year 1006 bade fair to atone for the past. It was bright and balmy. May was just such a month as the poets love to sing, and June, rich in its promise of fruit, had passed when the events we are about to relate occurred. At this time there was some hope amongst the people that God had at length heard the petition breathed so often in the penitential wail of the Litany,—"From the cruelty of our pagan enemies, good Lord, deliver us,"—and they forgot that the massacre on S. Brice's night yet cried for vengeance.

It was a fine summer's evening towards the end of the month of July, and the sun was slowly setting behind the wood-crowned range of hills in the west, where the forest terminated the pastures of Æscendune; the cattle were returning to their stalls; the last load of hay was being transferred from the wain to the rick, and all things spoke of the calm and rest of a sweet night, fragrant with the breath of honeysuckle and wild brier, when nature herself seems to court luxurious repose.

The priory bell was tolling for compline, and thither many of the people, released from their labour, were wending their way. The Thane and his children, accompanied by Alfgar, paused on their homeward road, and when the drowsy tinkling ceased, deep silence seemed to fall over the landscape, while the night darkened—if darkness it could be called when the moonbeams succeeded to the fiercer light of the glowing orb of day.

The Lady Hilda was at the window of her bower,

slightly indisposed; she had not gone down to the priory, but sat inhaling the rich fragrance of the night as the gentle breeze wafted it from a thousand flowers. Star after star peeped out; one sweet-voiced nightingale began her song, trilling through the air; another enviously took up the strain. Hilda thought the earth had never seemed so much like heaven, and she imagined the tuneful birds sang their vesper song in union with the monks, whose solemn and plaintive chant awoke the echoes of the priory church. Her heart was full of solemn yet not sad thoughts; peace, sweet peace, was the subject of her meditations, and she thought with gratitude of Him who had hitherto preserved Mercia from the foe, who had indeed for nearly two years ceased to molest England.

But as she gazed, her attention was attracted to a light on the opposite hills. It was a fire of some kind, and rose up more and more fiercely each moment. It was but a bonfire in appearance, yet it marred both the landscape and the meditative rest of the gazer.

The party from the hall were returning home from the church.

"Father," said Bertric, "look at that light! Is it not singular? I never saw one there before."

But even while they looked another fire appeared in an opposite direction, and Bertric saw his father turn grave.

"It is the beacon fire," said he seriously.

"Yes it is, and see it is answered from the hills to the north," said Alfgar.

Then they were silent, and Bertric felt his spirits sink with a vague kind of apprehension. They said no more till they reached home, and the whole family met, much later than usual, at the evening meal.

"You are late," said Hilda to her lord.

"We were returning home from the meadows on the water, whence the last load of hay has been carried, and we tarried for the compline at the priory. The bell sounded as we were passing."

"Did you see the bonfire on the hills? It must be a large one."

"I did; and it made me uneasy."

"Why so, my Elfwyn?"

"You forget that when the last invasion of our pagan foes was over, it was agreed in the Witan that a set of beacons should be prepared, in readiness to fire, on the tops of the hills, and that if the Danes appeared again, they should be fired everywhere, in which case Mercia was to hold herself in readiness to come to the aid of Wessex or East Anglia, whichever the foe might be harrying."

"But then *that* was eighteen months agone."

"Still the beacon piles remain or *did* remain. I saw one at the summit of the hills which the trackway crosses between our county and Oxfordshire, when I last returned form Beranbyrig,* and I think that one gives the present alarm. It means the Danes are again in the land."

"Now, God forbid!" said Hilda, with clasped hands.

"Amen say we all; but I fear me such will be the case, unless some poor fool has set the pile blazing for amusement. I fancied I saw it answered away north and west. We will go and see anon."

Supper being ended, Elfwyn rose to go out, and his example was followed by Alfgar and Bertric, and several of the serfs, who from the lower end of the ample board had heard with much alarm the previous conversation.

Ascending the hill, they directed their steps towards the highest point, where an old watch-tower had once been reared, composed of timber, and overlooking the forest.

From the summit the party gazed over three or four counties lying dimly beneath them in the still moonlight.

The mist, slowly rising from the river and forest, partially obscured the immediate view, and hid the valley beneath in smoke-like wreaths; but the distant hills rose above. There three large fires immediately caught the eye, and confirmed the apprehensions. One was on the

* Now Banbury.

summit of the range culminating on the spot now known as Edgehill, lying about ten miles south; but on the west Malvern Heights had caught the flame, and on the far north the Leicestershire hills sent forth their reddening fire in more than one spot.

"The country has taken the alarm," said the Thane.

"What must we do, father?"

"Summon and arm all our vassals, and await the sheriff's orders; the king will communicate to us through him. We know not yet where the danger is."

"Perhaps it is only a false alarm," said Bertric.

"God grant it; but I dare not hope as much."

Alfgar was very silent. Well he might be. The enemy dreaded was his own kith and kin; and although all his sympathies were with his English friends, from whom he had received more kindness and love than he had ever known elsewhere, yet he seemed to feel compromised by the deeds of his kindred, whose savage cruelty no Christianity had as yet softened.

While they yet remained on the hill, fire after fire took up the tale and reddened the horizon, until a score of those baleful bonfires were in sight. Sighing deeply, Elfwyn led the way down the hill.

"What have you seen?" was the inquiry of the Lady Hilda.

"The hills flame with beacons."

"Alas for poor Wessex!"

"Alas for England! I have a foreboding that we shall not always be exempt from the woes which affect our neighbours. Wessex scarcely tempts the plunderer now; neither does East Anglia. Northumbria is half Danish, and kites do not peck out kites' eyes. No; on Mercia, poor Mercia, the blow must sooner or later fall!"

"And how to avert it?"

"There is but one way; we must fight the foe in Wessex. Now we must rest, to rise early, and await the sheriff's summons."

It was silent, deep night; the whole house was buried in slumber, when Alfgar dreamed a strange dream. He thought he stood amidst the ruins of his home, the home of his father Anlaf, and that he heard steps approaching from the forest. Soon a solitary figure emerged, and searched anxiously amongst the fallen and blackened walls, uttering one anxious ejaculation, "My son! I seek my son!" and Alfgar knew his father. Their eyes met, recognition took place, and he awoke with such a keen impression of his father's presence that he could not shake it off for a long time.

"Do the dead indeed revisit earth?" he said. "Nay, it was but a dream."

He went to the narrow window of his chamber, and looked out. The dawn was already breaking in the east, and even as he gazed upon the purpling skies the birds began their matin songs of praise, and the valley awoke. The priory bell, beneath, by the river-side, now tolled its summons to matins, and Alfgar arose and dressed.

Never did the household of Æscendune begin the day without religious observance, and the first thing that they did on this, as on every day, was to repair to the priory church, where Father Cuthbert said mass; after which he and his brother the Thane were closeted together for a long time.

The rest of the party returned home to break their fast, and conversed about the warnings of the preceding night. While they were still at their meal, Bertric, who sat near a window, cried out, "I see a horseman coming from Warwick."

The panting steed was soon reined up in front of the drawbridge, which was down as usual; and, passing beneath the arched gate, the rider dismounted in the courtyard.

All the household were soon assembled to hear his news. He bore a sealed missive addressed to the Thane; but he gave the secret of the night's alarm in a few words.

"They are in Wessex, plundering, murdering, and

burning. The forces are all to meet at Dorchester as soon as man and horse can get there."

"Where did they land?"

"The great fleet came to Sandwich, and they are advancing westward as fast as they can come."

"Are they merciless as ever?"

"Worse."

"The fiends!" said Bertric bitterly; and then seeing Alfgar's saddened face, said, "Oh, I beg pardon," which made matters worse.

"You are not a Dane, Alfgar; you are a Christian; no one thinks of you as one."

Shortly Elfwyn returned from the priory, and received the messenger. The sealed packet only contained a formal summons to the general rendezvous of the forces, which was to take place at Dorchester, the episcopal city of the great Midland diocese, and situated in a central position, where Wessex and Mercia could easily unite the flower of their youth.

All the necessary preparations for departure were shortly made—the theows and ceorls were collected together, beasts of burden selected to carry the necessary baggage, the wallets filled with provisions.

Before the third hour of the day all had been done which the simple habits of the time required, and only the sorrowful leave-takings remained. Husbands had to bid the last good-bye—it might be the *very* last — to their spouses, sons to their aged parents, fathers to their children. And then there was hurrying to and fro, as of people only half conscious of what they did; while the warriors strove to smile and preserve their fortitude. But alas! there were no traditions of victory to encourage them; only gloomy remembrances of defeat; and, but for the stern call of duty which bade them, as men and Christians, go to the succour of their brethren, the majority would have preferred to remain at home and abide the worst, although they knew full well that submission utterly failed

to mitigate the ferocious cruelty of their oppressors, who slew alike the innocent babe and the grey-haired grandsire.

Alfgar had volunteered to share the perils of his adopted lord, but was kindly told that it would be inexpedient. Indeed, by many he would have been suspected of treachery.

"Nay, Alfgar, remain at home; to you I commend the protection of my home, of the Lady Hilda, and our children," said Elfwyn.

Neither were Bertric's prayers to be allowed to share his father's perils any better received. He was bidden to remain where he was, and to be a good son to his mother —not that he had ever been otherwise.

And so the last sad words of adieu were spoken as bravely as might be, and the little troop, about fifty in number, departed from the hall. They crossed the rude wooden bridge, and took the southern road.

Their loved ones watched them until the last. They saw their warriors cast many a longing lingering look behind, and then the woodland hid them from sight; and a dread quiet came down upon Æscendune, as when the air is still before the coming hurricane.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRACKS IN THE FOREST.

It was a long time before any news of the warriors reached home; for in those days the agony of suspense had always to be endured in the absence of posts and telegrams; but after a few weeks a special messenger came from the army. He was one of the Æscendune people, and his was the great privilege of embracing wife and family once more ere returning to the perils of the field.

His news was brief. The forces of Mercia had been placed under the command of Edric, formerly the sheriff of the county in which Æscendune lay, but long since returned to court, where his smooth tongue gained him great wealth and high rank. Gifted with a subtle genius and persuasive eloquence, he had obtained a complete ascendency over the mind of the weak Ethelred, while he surpassed even that treacherous monarch in perfidy and cruelty.

Under his direction that unhappy king had again and again embrued his hands in innocent blood. This very year they had both given a proof of these tendencies worth recording.

Edric had conceived a hatred against the Ealdorman Elthelm, which he carefully concealed. He invited that unfortunate lord to a banquet at Shrewsbury, where he welcomed him as his intimate friend. On the third or fourth day of the feast he took him to hunt in a wood where he had prepared an ambuscade, and while all the rest were engaged in the chase, the common hangman of Shrewsbury, one Godwin "port-hund," or the town's hound,

bribed by Edric to commit the crime, sprang from behind a bush, and foully assassinated the innocent ealdorman. Not to be behind his favourite in cruelty, Ethelred caused the two sons of the unfortunate Elthelm to be brought to him at Corsham, near Bath, where he was then residing, and he ordered their eyes to be put out.

Such was the man to whom the destinies of the English army were now confided, and such the king who ruled the unhappy land,—cruel as he was cowardly.

Under such leaders it is no marvel that the messenger Ulric had no good news to tell. The army had assembled, and had marched after the Danes, whose policy for the present was to avoid a pitched battle, and to destroy their enemies in detail. So they were continually harassing the English forces, but avoiding every occasion of fair fight. Did the English march to a town under the impression the Danes were about to attack it, they found no foe, but heard the next day that some miserable district at a distance had been cruelly ravaged. Did they lie in ambush, the Danes took another road, meanwhile the English stragglers were repeatedly cut off; and did *they* despatch a small force anywhere, it was sure to fall into an ambush, and be annihilated by the pagans.

Their repeated disasters weakened every man's heart, and gave rise to a well-founded belief that there was treachery in their midst, and that plans decided even in their secret councils were made known to the Danes. What wonder, then, that they grew dispirited, and that murmurs arose on all hands, while the army could scarcely keep together for want of provisions?

The war was at present raging in the southern counties, but ever and anon the marauders made a forced march, and sacked some helpless town remote from the seat of war.

There was no prospect, Elfwyn said, of the campaign coming to an end; the harvest must take care of itself, or the women and children must reap it. The men were all, and more than all, wanted in Wessex.

There were loving messages for wife and children, and Alfgar was not forgotten.

But there was one piece of information contained in the letter which made Alfgar very uneasy, and reminded him of his dream.

One Beorn, a retainer of Elfwyn, had been taken prisoner by the Danes, and by a very uncommon piece of good fortune had escaped with life from his ferocious captors.

He stated that he had been closely examined concerning his home, character of the population, and their means of defence, especially as to the events of S. Brice's night. Although he strove to evade their questions, yet he incautiously, or through fear of torture, revealed that he came from Æscendune.

The name evoked immediate interest, and he was asked several further questions about the destruction of Anlaf's house, and what became of his son. He tried to baffle their inquiries, and thought he had succeeded.

These facts the Lady Hilda thought of sufficient importance to justify their communication to Alfgar. They caused her some anxiety.

The messenger returned to the army. Weeks passed away, and the women and children, as well as the old men, were all busy in getting in the bounteous harvest with which this year God had blessed the earth. Alfgar and Bertric worked like the theows themselves, and slowly the precious gifts were deposited in the garners.

Alfgar had one source of consolation in the love he bore to Ethelgiva, a love which was fully returned. Their troth had been pledged to each other with the full consent of Elfwyn and the Lady Hilda; and on those fine August nights, as they walked home after the labours in the field, or the service in the priory, they forgot all the misery of the land, and lived only for each other.

Happy, happy days! How often they looked back to them afterwards!

A second messenger came during harvest time from the camp, now on the borders of Sussex. His news was no better than before. The Danes were harassing the army on every side, but no decisive battle had been fought. The enemy still seemed to know all the plans of the English beforehand; and the booty they had gained was enormous, while a deep distrust of their leaders was spreading amongst the defenders of the soil.

Elfwyn expressed his intention of seeking an early leave of absence should events justify him in paying a short visit home. This delighted the hearts of his wife and children, and they were happy in anticipation.

It was a fine day in September when the thankful people of Æscendune were called to raise the song of "Harvest Home,"—for the fruits of the earth had indeed been safely gathered in ere the winter storms by the hands of women and children. Such joy as befitted the absence of their lords was theirs, and Alfgar and Bertric, not to waste the holiday, agreed to have a day's hunting in the forest, rich with all the hues of autumn, while the feast was preparing at home.

The day was delightful. Two young theows, whose fathers had gone to the war, but who had been left behind as being too young to share its dangers, although in the flush of early youth, accompanied them, and were soon loaded with the lighter game their masters had killed, while a deer they had slain was hung in the trees, where a wolf could not reach it, and where wayfarers were not likely to pass until the sportsmen should return for their own. Onward they wandered until the sun was declining, and then, having some few miles of forest to thread, and the deer to send for, they turned on their homeward way.

No thought of any danger was on their minds that day. The Danes were too far distant. They were more than a hundred miles from the seat of war, and a hundred miles in those days meant more than five hundred would mean now. About the hour of five they rested and

bathed in a tributary of the Avon. Bertric's spirits were very high: he laughed and talked like one whose naturally ardent temperament was stimulated by the bracing atmosphere and the exercise. His active and handsome frame, bright with all the attractions of youth, was equal to any amount of woodland toil; and Alfgar, who was, as we have said, deeply attached to his companion, felt proud of his younger brother, as he delighted to call him, and Bertric loved to be called so. Alfgar trusted some day to have a yet better claim to the title. Leaving the bathing-place while there was yet time to reach home before dark, they came at last to a ford across the stream, the only spot where it could be safely forded, and as such known to the natives of the vicinity, when their dogs began to whine, and to run with their noses to the ground, as if they had found something unusual to attract their attention.

The two theows who were in front paused at the ford till their lords came up, and then pointed to the ground with a terrified aspect. Alfgar gazed and started, as did Bertric. There were the footmarks of a large number of horses, evidently belonging to a body of horsemen who must have crossed the ford since they passed it in the morning.

"Can my father have returned unexpectedly?" said Bertric. "He said he should get an early leave of absence."

Alfgar did not answer for a moment. He was evidently very much alarmed.

"Look," he said, "at the footmarks, where some have dismounted."

Bertric looked, and comprehended the terror of his companion. The armed heels, which had sunk deeply into the mud, had left traces utterly unlike the marks to which they were accustomed in similar cases.

The stories they had both heard of predatory bands of Danes who had wandered far from their main body, and had sought gratification for their lust for plunder and

blood in remote spots where the inhabitants dwelt in fancied security, came to their minds, and also the inquiries which had been made in the Danish camp concerning their home and the circumstances of S. Brice's fatal night.

"Still, it may be our father and his men; they may have worn the spoils of the enemy."

The spoils generally went the other way, Alfgar *thought*, but did not say.

They crossed the ford in silence, intent only on reaching home. For a long time they could follow the trail of the horsemen.

"Who can lead them?" said Bertric, as they bounded onward. "They seem to know the country."

A sad and harrowing suspicion had filled Alfgar's mind, that these men might be deputed to avenge the fiery death of his father,—and to avenge it, probably, on the very people who would have died to prevent it.

But the one desire uppermost in the minds of the whole party was to hasten home. They feared every moment that they might see the bright flame through the trees, or that the wind might bring them the tidings that they were all too late—too late to save those whom they loved from outrage and death.

So they continued running, or walking when breath failed, at the utmost speed they could command, and just as the sun set they arrived at the crest of a hill, from which they could see the hall.

"Thank God, it yet stands!" said they both.

They descended, and plunged again into the wood which lay between them and the goal; their theows, less perfectly trained, and perhaps less ardent, fell slightly behind. They came upon the spot where they had left the deer, not, however, with any intention of encumbering themselves with the burden, as may be imagined. They looked, however, at the tree where they had hung the carcase, and their eyes met each other's.

"It is gone," said Alfgar, with bated breath.

They said no more, but continued their headlong course, until they had reached an open glade by the side of a small stream. Here their dogs became uneasy, and uttered low threatening growls.

The lads paused, then advanced cautiously, looking before and around.

Turning a corner round some thick underwood, they came suddenly upon a sight which justified all their previous alarm.

A huge fire burned by the side of a brook, over which was roasting the deer which they had killed. The light shone out in the gathering darkness, and illumined the recesses of the bushes around, and the faces of a large body of men reclining on the bank, or engaged in the task of sharpening their arms while their supper was roasting. A momentary glance told that they were Danes, thus advancing under the shadow of the forest, to take their foes unawares. Their horses were picketed around, and sentinels were evidently posted, to give the first alarm of any danger.

Alas! they had seen the poor lads before they could withdraw into the woods which fringed the path, and instantly prepared for pursuit. Three or four jumped upon their horses, two or three more plunged into the wood to cut off the retreat. It was all-important to their plans that their presence should not be discovered; and these manœuvres were executed in perfect silence.

They had not seen the theows behind, but fixed all their attention on Bertric and Alfgar, who, on their part, comprehending their danger, turned at right angles into the wood, and ran for life. The boys were fleet of foot, and would probably have distanced their pursuers, but an arrow from some ambush on their left hand pierced Alfgar's thigh, wounding an important muscle, and he could run no farther.

"Leave me, leave me, Bertric," he cried; "you are in more danger than I."

Poor Bertric would not leave his friend. He tried to

assist him, and turned a deaf ear to all solicitations for the few moments that they could have availed. It was soon too late, and the heavy hands of the Danish warriors were laid upon them.

Shuddering at the contact, they yet yielded without useless and unmanly resistance, and were at once led to the side of the fire.

It was a scene Salvator Rosa would have loved to paint: the firelight bringing out in strong relief the huge limbs of the oak-trees, the bronzed faces of those dread warriors, which no pitiful or tender feelings ever seemed to visit.

The theows had fortunately, being behind, taken the alarm in time, and escaped unnoticed by the Danes.

A large athletic warrior, but yet a man of some age, rose from his seat by the fire, and scrutinised the captives. Alfgar knew him. It was Sidroc, an old fellow-warrior of his father, who had often visited their home near Æscendune, and he was at no loss now to comprehend the object of their enterprise.

The warrior gazed upon him fixedly, and then spoke aloud.

"Whence your name and lineage? Your face is not of the hue of the faces of the children of the land. Speak! who art thou?"

"Alfgar, the son of Anlaf."

"Thor and Woden be praised! We had learned that you yet lived. Boy, thou art the object of our search. Thou, the descendant of kings, mayst not longer dwell with slaves. Thy father is at hand."

"MY FATHER!"

"Yes. Didst thou not know that he escaped on S. Brice's night, baffling his would-be assassins, and yet lives? He thought thee dead, and only sought vengeance, when he heard from the captured prisoner of Elfwyn's band that thou wert yet alive, and he is come to seek thee."

Poor Alfgar!

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH SUFFERING TO GLORY.

FOR a few minutes Alfgar sat like one stunned by the intelligence. Joy and fear were strangely mingled together; well did he remember Sidroc's frequent visits to his father's English home, and that the warrior had more than once taken him in his infancy upon his knee and sung to him war songs, telling him that he too must be a warrior some day.

He was roused from his reverie by the voice of Sidroc.

"Who is your companion?"

"Bertric, the son of Elfwyn of Æscendune; oh! you will see that no wrong is done to him, will you not? his people saved my life."

"That they might make you a Christian, knowing that your father would sooner you had expired in the flames which consumed his house. No," he added sternly; "he is doomed, he and his alike."

Alfgar uttered a piteous cry, and appealed so earnestly that one might have thought he would have moved a heart of stone, yet all in vain.

"Does the eagle mourn over the death of the dove, or heed what pangs the kid may suffer which writhes beneath its talons? If you are of the race of warrior kings, act like one."

While this was going on the warriors had been selecting some light and sharp arrows and stringing their bows.

"You have but one target, not two," cried Sidroc, "and scant time wherein to use it."

"Then you shall have two, for I will die with him,"

cried Alfgar, comprehending at once that the death by which Saint Edmund of East Anglia, and many a martyr since, had glorified God, was destined for his companion, his brother. He snatched at a weapon, and rushed to the tree to which the victim was bound, as if he would save him or perish in the attempt, but a grasp like iron was thrown around him, and he struggled in vain.

"Bind him, but do him no harm," said Sidroc, "and detain him where he may see all, and strengthen his nerves for future occasions."

Against the tree leaned Bertric, pale, yet strangely composed; the bitterness of death seemed to be past, so composed were his youthful features. The lips moved in earnest, fervent prayer. Once he glanced with a look of affection, almost of pity, upon Alfgar, and when the latter made the vain attempt to deliver him, he cried, "Do not grieve for me, dear Alfgar, you cannot save me; you have done your best; pray for me, that is all you can do."

His patient courage, so unexpected in one so young, touched his captors, as nothing else would have touched them, and Sidroc approached him.

"Bertric of Æscendune, thou mayst save thy life on one condition; dost thou wish to live?"

The thought of home and friends, of his mother, awoke in his breast, and he replied—

"Yes, for the sake of those who love me."

"I know nought of them, neither must thou henceforth, but thou mayst live if thou wilt join our nation and renounce thy Christianity; for I, who have no son, and seek one, will even adopt thee."

"I cannot deny my faith."

"Dost thou not fear the pain, the sharp arrows with which they will pierce thee?"

"I fear them, but I fear eternal death more; God help me!"

He repeated these last words over and over again, as if the struggle were very sore.

"Decide," said Sidroc.

"I have decided—'In manus tuas, Domine," he breathed out, "commendo spiritum meum."

"Let fly," cried the chieftain, "and let the obstinate young fool know what death is."

Arrow after arrow sped through the air and pierced the legs and arms of the martyr boy, for it was the cruel amusement of the Danes to avoid the vital parts in their living target. The frame of the sufferer quivered with agony, while the lip seemed striving to form the holy name, which has given strength to thousands of martyrs, whether at the stake, beneath the ferocious beast, or in whatsoever manner it has pleased God to make His strength perfect in weakness.

Then Alfgar saw what was the marvellous power of Christianity, and beheld a heroism utterly beyond the fierce excitement which nerved his countrymen for their scenes of carnage and blood; not one of his pagan friends could have suffered as calmly, as patiently—it seemed easier for the sufferer to bear than for Alfgar to look on; once or twice the latter gave audible vent to his emotions, but the look which Bertric turned upon him spoke volumes, and he restrained himself lest he should add to the pain of the victim. He knew not then that the example before him would nerve him in moments of severest trial, then fast approaching, that the one accusation urged against the Christians, which he had felt most keenly, that of cowardice, was answered in the weak yet valiant boy, who found strength in the name of Christ to endure all for His sake; neither did his fierce countrymen know that they were preparing a disappointment for the pagan Anlaf, and for all those of his house and lineage.

We cannot enter more closely into the secret which gave the martyr his strength; we know not the visions of heavenly joy which may have overpowered the present pain; we know not whether He who gave this elaborate framework of flesh and blood, nerve and sinew, miraculously

suspended the full operation of His laws, as is elsewhere recorded of other martyrs. Certain it is, that sooner than relinquish Him, Bertric, like Saint Edmund nearly two centuries earlier, yielded his life to the rage of the enemies of His Lord.* The struggle was sharp but short, for Sidroc, to the surprise, and we must add the disgust, of his compatriots, seized a bow and sent an arrow straight to the heart. One nervous shudder passed through the limbs, and all was still; they had killed the body, and had no more that they could do.

Alfgar gazed with reverence, as well as love, upon the calm features from which the expression of pain had wholly passed; the light of the fire, mingling strangely with that of the rising full moon, illumined them in this their first day of nothingness, for the spirit which had lived and dwelt in the tabernacle of clay had fled. Yet there was a wondrous beauty still lingering over them; they seemed etherialised—as if an angel's smile had last stirred their lines, when the spirit went forth, and left its imprint of wonder, joy, and awe thereon; and Alfgar instinctively turned from them to the blue depths of heaven above, where a few stars were visible, although dimmed by the moonlight; and he seemed to trace his beloved Bertric's passage to the realms of bliss. A light wind made music in the upper branches of the oaks, and it seemed to him like the rush of angels' wings.

It had often been a sharp struggle to him, nursed in heroic times, learned in battle songs, and of the very blood of the vikings, to avoid the feeling that Christianity was not the religion of the brave; now the difficulty was over, and who shall say that the first joy of the martyr's soul was not the knowledge that his sufferings had already borne such fruit to God?

And not only was Alfgar reconciled to the reproach of the Cross, he was also content to be an Englishman, if not in blood, at least in affection and sympathy as in action.

* See Note D.—Death of S. Edmund.

An hour passed away; the body remained affixed to the tree; the night grew darker, and the hour approached when, under ordinary circumstances, people retired to rest, and the band commenced its preparations for carrying out the attack upon Æscendune.

One hope Alfgar had, and that not a faint one: he knew that the two theows had escaped unnoticed, and that they would give warning in time for either defence or escape; their strength at Æscendune was but slight for the former, all the able-bodied men were absent at the seat of war.

In the excitement of the last hour Alfgar had almost forgotten the meeting before him, but now it occupied his thoughts fully, and he began to expect the arrival of Anlaf each moment. He learned from the conversation around him that he and a portion of the band had gone to reconnoitre the position of the prey.

While Sidroc was somewhat impatiently expecting the arrival of his coadjutor, the cry of a raven was heard; it proved to be the signal for the party to advance, and Sidroc and his men obeyed at once.

But all their horses were left picketed by the stream, under the care of three of the youngest warriors, and there Alfgar was left, safely bound to a tree, for his captors could not trust him.

He was strongly, but not cruelly bound; it evidently was not intended to hurt him, only to secure him, and he could see that one of the warriors was especially charged to guard him.

Oh, how anxiously he strained the senses of sight and hearing for news from the forest party! could he but have given *one* warning, he would willingly have died like Bertric; all was silence—dread silence—the sleeping woods around gave no token of their dread inmates.

An hour and a half must have passed, when a bright light, increasing each minute in intensity, appeared through the trees—then a loud and startling cry arose—after which all was silence.

The light seemed to increase in extent and to have two chief centres of its brilliancy, and Alfgar guessed them to be the hall and the priory.

But no screams of distress or agony pierced the air from two hundred women and children, and Alfgar hoped, oh, so earnestly! that they might have escaped, warned in time by the theows.

With this hope he was forced to rest content, as hour after hour rolled by, and at length the footsteps of a returning party were heard.

It proved to be only a detachment of the fifty, sent to bring horses to be loaded with the spoil. Alfgar listened intently to gain information, and heard enough to show that the Danes had been disappointed in some way, probably in their thirst for blood.

"But how *could* they have known we were coming? We have marched through a hundred miles of the most desolate country we could find, and have come faster than any one could have carried the information." Such seemed to be the substance of the complaint of the warriors on guard, from which Alfgar felt justified in believing in the escape of the theows, and the consequent deliverance of the people, if not of the place.

Half the horses were taken to fetch the plunder, the other half left where they were, for the spot was conveniently situated, and the distance from Æscendune only about two miles.

When they had gone, Alfgar heard his guards talking together.

"What did they say, Hinguar?—not any blood?"

"No, but plenty of plunder."

"That is not enough, we want revenge. Odin and Thor will not know their children; our spears should not be bright."

"They must have been forewarned; Eric said that they had taken away a great many things."

"Why could we not trace them?"

"Because there is no time; we are too far from the army and fleet; we must return immediately, before the country takes the alarm; remember we are only fifty."

"Yes, but mounted upon the best horses, and the first warriors of our family; we may take some plunder, and send a few Englishmen to Niffelheim, before we get back; Anlaf would not let us stay to touch anything as we came."

"No; all his desire was to get to *this* Æscendune."

"Then the lad whom we made into a target is the only victim, while our kinsfolk's blood, shed near here, cries for vengeance."

"He died bravely."

"Yes, that is a Christian's kind of courage."

"Well, perhaps some day they will learn to fight, and then"——

"Their songs tell them of an Alfred who defeated our best warriors."

"That was long ago; if you go back far enough these English were sea kings before they were spoiled by becoming Christians."

"Hush; I think I hear steps."

"Who comes?" cried one of the guards, challenging a new comer.

"I, Anlaf, your chief."

And the father of Alfgar appeared on the scene.

Of average height, Anlaf possessed vast muscular powers; his sinews stood out like tight cords, and his frame, although robust, was yet such that there seemed no useless flesh about him. His hair was a deep grizzled red, as also his beard, and his eyes were of the same tinge, his nose somewhat aquiline, and his whole features, weatherworn as they were, were those of one born to command, while they lacked the sheer brutality of expression so conspicuous in some of his subordinates.

He addressed a few words to the guards, and they led him to Alfgar.

"Cut him loose," he said.

They did so.

He looked mournfully yet sternly on the youth, who himself trembled all over with emotion.

"Alfgar," he said, "do I indeed see my son?"

"You do, my father."

"Follow me; nay, you are wounded—lean on my arm."

"Alfgar's thigh had, it will be remembered, been pierced by an arrow, but the wound was not deep, and with his father's assistance he could proceed. He knew where Anlaf led. At length they came upon a deserted clearing, and there he paused until Alfgar, who could scarcely keep up, stood by his side.

Before them the moonbeams fell upon a dark charred mass of ruins in the centre of the space.

"This is the spot where father and son should meet again," said Anlaf, and he embraced his son.

CHAPTER VII.

FATHER AND SON.

"HERE, my son," said the old warrior, as he pointed out the blackened ruins, "here stood our home, where now the screech owl haunts, and the wolf has its den. *There*, where the broken shaft yet remains, was the chamber in which thou first sawest the light, and wherein thy mother died; *there*, where snake and toad have their home, was the great hall. Surely the moonbeams fall more peacefully on the spot now all has been avenged, and the halls of the murderers have fallen in their turn. But how did'st *thou* escape?"

"The folk of Æscendune saved me, father."

"But how; from the burning pile?"

"Nay. I had spent the previous day with them, and returned home only in time to find the place in flames. The enemy seized me, and would have slain me, but Elfwyn and his brother, Father Cuthbert, delivered me; and now thou hast slain their Bertric, and burnt both hall and priory."

"Think not that I owe them gratitude for aught they have done. They tampered with thy faith, I now apprehend, even before the night of S. Brice, and perhaps drew from thee the knowledge which enabled them to surprise so large a party in my house. But all this was to make thee abandon the gods of thy fathers, and to inflict the worst injury they could upon a warrior. I trust they have failed?"

"Father, I am a Christian!"

"Say not that again, boy, if thou would not have me kill thee."

"I can but say it, father. In all that touches not my faith and duty as a Christian, I am bound to love, honour, and obey you. But our religion forbids me to nourish revenge."

"Of what religion, pray, were they who would have slain thy father on S. Brice's night?"

Alfgar hung his head.

"When Christians practise *themselves* what they teach, then we will heed their pretensions, but not till then. Their religion is but a cloak for their cowardice, and they put it aside as a man throws away a useless garment when they have the chance of slaying their foes without danger."

"There are good and bad Christians, father."

"Commend me to the bad ones then. Do not speak to me of a religion which makes men cowards and slaves. These English were warriors once, till the Pope and his bishops converted them, and now what are they, cruel and treacherous as ever, only without the courage of men?"

Alfgar felt the injustice of all this, and with the example of Bertric in his mind, he cared not for the accusation of cowardice.

"Here, then, my boy, on this spot where thou wert once cradled, renounce all these Christian follies and superstitions, and thou shalt go back with me to the camp of King Sweyn, where thou shalt be received as the descendant of warrior kings, and shalt forget that thou, the falcon, wert ever the inmate of the dovecote."

There was a time when this temptation would have been almost irresistible, but that time was over, and after one earnest prayer for strength from above, Alfgar replied.

"My father, if you claim my obedience, I must even go with you to your people, but it will be to my death. I have said I am a Christian."

"And dost thou think I have found thee—*thee*, my only son—to part with thee again so easily? nay, thou art and

shalt be mine, and, if not mine, then thou shalt be the grave's; for either thou shalt live as thy ancestors have lived, a warrior and a hero, or the earth shall cover thee and my disgrace together."

"Father, I can die."

"Thou dost not fear death then?"

"Thou hast left one behind thee—one who did not fear to die the martyr's death."

"Dost thou mean Bertric of Æscendune?"

"I do; they slew him, cruelly, although neither he nor his have ever dealt cruelly with thy people."

"*Thy* people, why not *our* people? art thou ashamed of thy kindred?"

"Of their cruelty and treachery."

Anlaf laughed aloud.

"Cruelty and treachery indeed! and canst thou say that *here?* who set the example in this place? Come boy, come," he continued, "I will lead thee to those who shall soon talk or drive all this Christian nonsense out of your young head; meanwhile, do not disgrace yourself and me by attempting to escape."

Alfgar sighed, and accompanied his father, so inopportunely found, back to the camp.

Arrived there, the word was given at once to mount, and the whole party started on the return journey to the south. Alfgar cast a longing glance behind at the spot where he knew all that was mortal of poor Bertric was left, to be, so far as the Danes cared, the prey of the wolf or the kite; but the young Dane knew well that, if any were yet alive at Æscendune, the hallowed temple of the martyr would not want its due honour.

All his heart was with his English friends; he felt that in going to the Danish camp he was really going to his death, for although within a few years the conversion of the Northmen took place, yet at this period their hatred of Christianity was simply ferocious, and his father belonged

to the old heathen conservatives of his day, as did all his kinsfolk.

"O Æscendune, once happy Æscendune!" was the thought, the bitter thought, as each hour placed a larger barrier of space between Alfgar and his late home; all its happy memories came freshly back upon him, and particularly the thought of Ethelgiva, his betrothed, from whom he was so ruthlessly torn, torn as if he left part of himself behind.

They reached the confines of the forest by daybreak. Before them stretched an open country, where wild heaths alternated with corn-fields, and wooded hills were of frequent occurrence upon the landscape.

All at once a signal of caution was given, and the whole party retired again within the cover of the wood, where they could see, for they were on an eminence, the whole district before them without being seen.

A body of fifty English soldiers was passing on the road, which lay at the distance of a few hundred yards only, travelling at a considerable speed, as if they anticipated the emergency of Æscendune, and hurried to the rescue. Alfgar knew them at once; they were Elfwyn and his troops; oh, if they had but arrived earlier, thought he, and started to see how completely English his sympathies were. The Danes found it hard to repress their laughter at the thought of the reception which awaited the travellers at home; they had no idea of spoiling it by attacking them, although the numbers were about equal; besides, they had got all the plunder and spoil, and a battle would only endanger the success already obtained. So they lay in cover until the last straggler had disappeared in the direction of Æscendune, and then continued their course, with many a jest at the expense of the English.

Anlaf watched his son; he knew what his feelings were, and his thoughts were bitter as he felt that, could Alfgar have been consulted, he would be in that English band.

That night they arrived on the banks of the Thames,

near Reading, the border of Mercia. Their passage had been quite unopposed; all the fighting men were in Wessex; and those who had seen the Danish party had fled with terror —they had not stopped long to plunder, but had speared one or two unfortunate victims who fell in their way, a sight which sickened Alfgar.

The following day they continued their march to the south-east, sometimes hiding in woods, for the country was mainly occupied by Ethelred's troops; sometimes pursued by larger bodies of horsemen, but always successful in distancing them, until, at the approach of eventide, they came in sight of the entrenched camp of the northern host. The spot was on the northern borders of the ancient kingdom of Sussex—the land of the Saxon Ella—a spot marvellously favoured by nature, occupying the summit of a low hill, which commanded a wide prospect on all sides, while itself almost impregnable when fortified, as it was, by ditches and mounds, dug in the usual Danish fashion, for the Danes owed much of their success to their skill in fortification.

Beautiful in time of peace was the country around, but its desolation was sufficient to sicken the heart. Blackened ruins lay on every side for miles; nay, they had disfigured the whole day's journey. Scarcely a town or hall, unless strongly fortified, had they seen standing, and this for nearly fifty miles.

Within this fortified enclosure the Northmen had collected abundance of spoil, and there they detained many prisoners, whom they held to ransom, putting them to death with the utmost cruelty if the money were not forthcoming at the stipulated time.

When the party of Anlaf arrived at the northern gate, crossing the summit of the ascent on that side, they found it open and almost unguarded, so slight was the danger from the dispirited English—now *too* accustomed to the idea of a foe in the heart of the land. Entering, they beheld a strange scene: huts rudely constructed of the branches of

trees, intermingled sparingly with tents, were disposed at regular intervals. In the centre, where the main streets crossed, was the royal tent, with the raven banner floating therefrom; and there, at that moment, was the savage tyrant Sweyn in person.

Sweyn was the son of Harold Bluetooth, who reigned in Denmark fifty years, from A.D. 935-985, and who in his old age became a Christian and strove to convert his subjects. But the ferocious warriors rebelled against him, and were headed by his unnatural son, Sweyn, who, although baptized, renounced Christianity, and fought to restore the blood-stained worship so congenial to the heart of a sea-king. Defeated in battle, the unhappy father fled for his life, and fled in vain, for he was either murdered or died of his wounds.

Sweyn then became king, restored idolatry, and gratified to the full the fell instincts of his savage followers. His great object was now not merely to plunder, but to conquer England, and all his campaigns were so directed as to reduce province after province. Sussex and Kent were now wholly powerless; East Anglia was little better; Wessex trembled, for every inlet was a path for the robbers, and the turn of Mercia drew near.

Sweyn stood at the door of his tent, leaning upon his ponderous battle-axe; around him were two or three warriors, whose grey hairs had not softened the look of ferocity so plainly stamped upon their faces.

The king was not in armour, but wore a kind of close-fitting tunic, descending to the knees, and leggings leaving the legs bare above the knees. A rich mantle was thrown over the tunic, for it was cold.

By his side, similarly dressed, stood his son, the hopeful Canute, the future King of England, then only in his twelfth year, but already showing himself a true cub of the old tiger in fierceness and valour, yet not devoid of nobler and gentler virtues, as he afterwards showed.

"Welcome, Anlaf," cried Sweyn, as he saw the party

arrive; "welcome, hast thou enjoyed thy holiday in Mercia?"

"Bravely, my king, the ravens have tasted flesh."

"No need to tell me *that;* thy revenge, then, is accomplished. Hast thou found thy son?"

"He is with me, my lord, but their saints must have warned the English of our approach. We burnt the place, but the people were not in it. Their cries would have been music in our ears."

"Perhaps S. Brice told them you were coming; the English have a veneration for him," said Sweyn, bitterly.

They both laughed a *bitter* laugh, for both had suffered by the massacre in the persons of kinsfolks.

"But is this young springal thy long-lost son? he is like thee, even as a tame falcon is like, and yet unlike, the free wild bird."

"He is my son;" and Anlaf introduced Alfgar.

The youth made his salutations, not ungracefully, yet with an air of reserve which the king noticed.

"I thought S. Brice had got him long ago, and feared thou wert on a wild-goose chase."

"It is a long tale to tell now, my liege."

"Have they Christianised him?" said the king, with a sly look.

"He will soon lose that," replied Anlaf.

"Yes," said the king; "we know a way of curing the folly," when, even as he spoke, a spasm, as of mental agony, passed over him, and he shook like an aspen, but it was gone in a minute.

Was it the fate of his father which was thus avenged?

Every one looked aside and pretended not to notice the fact, and Anlaf, having made his homage, retired, leading Alfgar.

"You see, my son," commenced the old warrior, as he led his recovered boy to his own quarters, "how useless it would be for you to struggle against the tide, such a tide as no swimmer could breast."

"If he could not swim, it would be easy to drown," said Alfgar, and there was such a despairing utterance in his tone, that his father was checked.

The quarters of Anlaf were in the north-western angle of the camp; they consisted of huts hastily constructed from the material which the neighbouring woods supplied, and one or two tents, the best of which, stolen property, appertained to the chieftain.

Over a wide extent of desolated land, beautiful in its general outline, where the eye could not penetrate to details, looked the prospect. The round gently-swelling Sussex downs rose on the southern horizon, guarding the sea, while around them were once *cultivated* fields which the foe had reaped, while quick streams wound in between the gentle elevations, crowned with wood, and here and there the mere spread its lake-like form. The sun was now sinking behind the huge rounded forms of some chalk hills in the west, when the camp became gradually illuminated by the light of numberless fires, whereat oxen were roasted whole, and partridges and hares by the dozen, for the Danes were voracious in their appetites.

In Anlaf's quarters one huge fire blazed for all. Alfgar seemed the only silent member of the company; the warriors related their successes, and boasted of their exploits, and the bards sang their ferocious ditties, until all were tired, and the quiet moon looked down upon the sleeping camp.

O the contrast—the calm passionless aspect of the heavens, and the human pandemonium beneath!

CHAPTER VIII.

FATHER CUTHBERT'S DIARY.

S. MATTHEW'S DAY, 1006.—It is with a heavy heart that I take up my pen to write the events of the last few days. They have been so calamitous, so unexpected. We have heard of such things afar off, we had prayed for our brethren in Wessex, exposed to similar calamities, and now they have fallen upon us personally. May God, who alone is sufficient for these things, give us strength to bear all for His name's sake.

It was a fortnight ago, and our harvest was all gathered in. God had blessed our increase, and our garners were full with all manner of store; women and children had mainly been the reapers, but the Lady Hilda herself had been present amongst them, and so had her daughter, my niece, Ethelgiva, even sometimes labouring with their own hands.

Alfgar and Bertric had worked like common serfs, and did themselves honour thereby, for true nobility lies not in being idle, save in the field of battle, as the bloody Northmen vainly think.

Well, the work was over, and we had a mass of thanksgiving, after which Bertric and Alfgar went hunting in the forest. In the evening there was a harvest home; it was of course a strange one without the men, who were afar off, fighting for their country, but we tried to be thankful for mercies vouchsafed, and I and Father Adhelm were there to bless the food.

We found a large party assembled—as many, indeed, as

the hall would contain. My sister, the Lady Hilda, was somewhat uneasy, because Alfgar and Bertric were not yet back, but still not much alarmed, for what harm could befall such lads in the woods? So I blessed the food and the feast commenced.

Eating and drinking were over, and the old gleeman, striking his harp, was beginning a song of harvest-home, when in rushed the two young theows who had gone out with Alfgar and Bertric, with the startling intelligence that there was a band of Northmen lurking in the woods, who had seized their young lords, and were, they thought, bent on attacking the place.

Words of mine cannot paint the terror and dismay the tidings caused; the scene of distress and fear is yet before my eyes as I write. One woman rose superior to fear—the Lady Hilda; aided by her, I stilled the tumult, and we took hasty counsel together.

Nothing could be done for the poor lads, and the preservation of the lives of the whole population depended upon our promptitude. It was wonderful to see how the mother stifled her agony in her own breast, while she strove to remember that, in the absence of her lord, she was in charge of the safety of all her people, and the mother of all. I had already interrogated the two churls; their story was but too evidently true; and I learned that they had discovered the footmarks of the Northmen in crossing a ford; that afterwards, while returning hastily home, they stumbled upon them, and Alfgar and Bertric were taken. The party were evidently awaiting the approach of night, and were doubtless bent on attacking the castle and village.

Fifty men! and how could we resist them? The poor old gleemen expressed their readiness to fight for the old hall, and so did even the boys; but these accursed pagans are the very spawn of the evil one, and fight like fiends, whom they equal in skill, so that I saw at once there was no chance in resistance.

But there was safety in retreat and flight, and under

our circumstances no dishonour in so seeking it. So I saw the path clear at once, and not a minute too soon.

In the depths of the forest, about ten miles from Æscendune, in the opposite direction to that in which the enemy lay, is a solitary valley, surrounded by such morasses and quagmires that only those who know the paths could safely journey thither. But the valley is fertile, and my father years ago built a substantial farm-house with out-buildings there, which has ever since been occupied by our chief forester.

Thither I saw at once the whole party must retreat, alike from the hall, the priory, and the village. In such a way only could they hope to escape the wretches to whom bloodshed and cruelty are pastimes.

Yet I was deeply puzzled to understand what motive could have brought a war party so far, and why they had passed so many flourishing homes to come to poor secluded Æscendune. Surely, thought I, there is some great mystery hidden in this, which time may perhaps show.

In a brief space of time, shorter, indeed, than under other circumstances we should have conceived possible, everything was prepared; horses were loaded with provisions and all things necessary for immediate use. Old men and children were also mounted, who could not otherwise travel, and we started. It was indeed painful to part from home, and to leave all we had to the mercy of the Danes, but "skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life."

So soon as I saw the party safely away from the town, I left them under the guidance of some ancient foresters, who knew every woodland path, and hastened to my brethren, who had been duly forewarned, and were awaiting my arrival. I found them prepared for immediate departure. We had a large flat-bottomed boat on the river which washes the monastery garden; they had placed all the sacred vessels and the treasure of the priory therein, and had sent the novices and lay brethren to seek their

safety with the rest in the woods, only the brethren, properly so called, remaining.

And now, ready for immediate flight, we went forth with calm composure, which God sent us. Then, upon the brink of the stream, we stopped and listened. No sound broke the dread silence of the night, and we stood in perfect quiet for some minutes.

At last we heard the sound of muffled footsteps, as of those who sneak about on the devil's work, approaching the priory, and we pushed the boat into the stream. The moon had not yet arisen; it was quite dark. It was the *only* boat near.

We knew well what they were doing,—surrounding the priory to prevent any chance of escape, supposing, of course, that their victims would be within. This accomplished, they knocked loudly at the doors, and receiving no answer, raised their fierce battle-cry, and looked, happily in vain, for the pallid faces they expected to see at windows or loopholes. Then they proceeded to break the doors down with their battle-axes. A similar din, beginning a moment before, told us that the hall and the priory were simultaneously attacked.

We had heard enough. We let the boat drop down the stream till we reached a small island, where we waited to see the end, praising the Lord who had not delivered us over for a prey unto their teeth.

While we waited in suspense, we saw a fierce light flash forth from the hall, and perceived that, having plundered it of all that was portable, they had fired it in many places at once; and while we looked, we saw our own once happy home share the same fate, and emulate the hall in sending forth its volume of ruddy flame towards the skies.

This we had waited for, and we held council, and decided that, having no home, the brethren should depart with the sacred vessels and treasure to the mother house at Abingdon, while I remained, as also Father Adhelm, to minister to our afflicted flock in the woods as best we might.

Alas for our poor priory! the foundation of Offa and Ella, once the light of the neighbourhood! but now our candlestick is removed out of its place.

Our minds being made up as to the course to be pursued, we rowed quietly down the stream, fearing pursuit.

Down the stream about two hours' journey, an old Roman road, leading southward, crossed the river, where a bridge had once existed, long since swept away by time, but there was a tolerable ford quite safe, save in winter floods.

Hard by stood a hostelry, and thither we journeyed in our heavily-laden bark.

The light of the conflagration grew dimmer as we rowed down the stream, but it still lighted up the heavens with an angry glare. It was yet deep night when we drew near the inn, and we lay awhile on our oars, to listen for signs of pursuit; but there was nought to disturb the dead silence of the night, so we proceeded.

All the household were buried in sleep when we knocked at the doors,—a proof that they had not observed the redness in the skies, or little sleep, I trow, would they have taken.

We were so exhausted with the fatigues and excitement of the enemy, that we hailed this lonely habitation as a little Zoar. It showed how safe people were feeling in Mercia, that we could not wake the good people for a long time, and we were getting impatient, for they seemed like the seven holy sleepers of Ephesus, awaiting the cessation of persecution. I wish we could all sleep like those Ephesians, and awake in better days.

But their dogs were awake, and saluted us with a vociferous barking, and would not allow us to land until they were driven away by the oars which our theows used with much effect upon their hides.

At last a window was thrown open above.

"Who are you who travel at this time of night?" said a voice, which tried to be firm.

"The poor brethren of S. Benedict from Æscendune."

"Now the saints help thy lying tongue," thus irreverently he spoke, "do holy men travel like robbers in dead of night?"

"Look, my brother, over the tree tops, and you may learn the cause of our wanderings; dost thou not even yet see the angry glare in the heavens? It is from Æscendune; the Danes have burned it."

"Good lack, poor Æscendune! and the people?"

"Are all safe, we trust, in body."

"God be praised!" and the host hurried down and admitted us. His wife hasted to light a good fire, and to prepare us a breakfast; in short, we had fallen amongst the faithful, and we met great hospitality, for which may God repay the worthy host, Goodman Wiglaf.

We were so fatigued in mind and body that we no sooner lay down than we fell asleep, and slept until the sun was high in the heavens.

Wiglaf watched the river jealously to see that no foe pursued; but, as we afterwards learned, they had other things to think of.

The road which ran across the river at this spot continued southward into Wessex, and, so far as we could learn, was free from danger, so I determined to send my brethren to Abingdon by easy stages along its course, while I turned back with Father Adhelm, to share the misfortunes of my kindred and lay brethren in the woods. So we embraced each other and parted; and we two watched, with loving hearts, until the glades of the forest hid our brethren, dear to us in the Lord, from our sight, dimmed as were our eyes with tears. Then we plucked up our courage, and turned our thoughts to those others, dear and near to us, who had taken to the woods, where it was again our duty to seek them.

Wiglaf rowed us back in a light skiff up the stream, not without much protest, for he feared the Danes would surely

catch us, and at every bend of the stream he crept round, as if he expected to see a fleet of boats sweep towards us, while he kept in the middle, as if dreading an arrow from every bush. At length we reached the immediate neighbourhood, over which the smoke still hung like a black pall. Here Father Adhelm and I landed, and, giving Wiglaf our blessing, bade him depart in peace, which the good soul flatly refused to do until assured of our safety.

So, hiding the boat behind some bushes, we crept forward together, till, getting through the underwood, we came to the edge of the covert.

Before us lay the fated village, one mass of deformed and blackened ruins, from which the dark smoke ceaselessly arose, and made the air painful to breathe.

But there was no sign of life; no living thing seemed to breathe there; the place seemed abandoned for ever. It was a dull day, dull as the gloom which was upon our spirits; the very heavens seemed to have put on funeral attire, and the chilly wind which swept over the scene seemed quite at home.

We emerged cautiously from our cover, and soon stood where, a few days before, the priory had risen, beautiful before God; it was but a huge pile of blackened timber and stone; and even more conspicuous above all other ruins, by the black smoke it still sent forth, was that which *had* been the hall.

While we stood and pondered, Wiglaf suddenly started.

"I hear the tramp of men," he said.

Then I listened, and distinctly heard the footfall of men and horses. We paused; it drew nearer. We were on the point of taking to the woods again, when I thought I caught the sound of the word of command in the English tongue, and the voice seemed familiar.

We advanced still cautiously amongst the ruins, until we saw fifty or sixty horsemen cross the wooden bridge which the Danes had left uninjured, and advance with horror-stricken faces.

They were my brother and his men.

I recognised Elfwyn amongst them. I rushed up to him, and our tears mingled together.

"They are safe, are safe," I cried.

"Thank God!" broke from many an overcharged heart.

"But where are they? where are they?"

"Safe at the forest farm, protected by brake and morass; and now tell me how came you here?"

Tidings arrived at head-quarters that a small party of Danes were making an incursion into Mercia, riding as rapidly as they could, and I obtained Edric Streorn's leave to pursue them, with great difficulty I can tell you, and he would only allow me then to take fifty men."

"Why?"

"He affected to disbelieve the intelligence, and said sarcastically that the safety of Wessex could not be neglected for Æscendune. The Northmen would never hurt a place which had so distinguished itself on S. Brice's day."

Here he sighed heavily.

"Elfwyn," I said, "my brother, we must not be ungrateful to God. Here are ruins indeed, but they cover no dead bodies; all have escaped."

"No, Cuthbert, not all."

I was silent, for I thought of Bertric.

"We have buried him, Cuthbert, in God's peace, in the place he hallowed by his blood."

I saw the tears stream down his manly cheeks. My voice grew so hoarse, somehow, that I could not ask a question.

"I will tell you all we have seen by and by, not now. I could not bear it;" and he covered his face with his hands.

"How did he die?" I stammered at last.

"Like S. Edmund."

I asked no more, but I hope the martyr will forgive me the tears I shed. I know I ought to rejoice that he has gained his crown, but I cannot yet. I shall be able some day.

"How could they find the path through the woods, Cuthbert?" asked my brother; "how did they know the fords?"

The same question had occurred to me.

Then the words of the churl Beorn, who had been taken prisoner, as the messenger had told us, came fresh to my mind.

"Elfwyn," said I, "do you remember Beorn?"

He looked earnestly at me.

"Did he not say that his captors asked particularly about Æscendune, and that the name of Anlaf was mentioned, and inquiries made concerning Alfgar?"

"He did."

"It is the curse of S. Brice's night."

"Fallen upon the innocent."

"Leave it to God," said I.

"I will try; let us go to my people."

And we arose and took the path through the woods, sorrowing for the news we must carry, and still uncertain about the fate of Alfgar.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAMP OF THE DANES.

It was the noontide heat, and two Danish warriors reclined under the shadow of an ancient beech, hard by the entrenched camp of the Danes, a few days after the arrival of Alfgar therein. Their spears lay idly on the grass, as if there were no foe to dread, and the land were their own; they seemed deeply engrossed in conversation.

"Well, Anlaf, and when is your son going to give up his Christianity?"

"You are in a great hurry, Sidroc."

"Nay, all the camp inquires."

"They must wait."

"How long?"

"I cannot tell," said Anlaf, shifting uneasily about; "he is my only son, the heir of a long line of warrior princes."

"To whom his life is a disgrace."

"Not altogether; he is brave."

"Would be, you mean, were he not a Christian."

"No, he *is*, or he would not dare cross my path as he does; death, with which I have often threatened him, does not seem to have much terror for him."

"Perhaps he does not know how terrible death can be made. Has he ever heard of the rista örn?* (spread eagle).

"I should not value him much if I won him by fear. I must try other modes."

* See Note E.—The "Rista Örn," or "Spread Eagle."

"Only do not tarry; Sweyn himself inquires how long his obstinacy is to be endured."

"He must not expect that every conversion can be accomplished with as much rapidity as his own in early days."

"Better not refer to that."

"Why? he was baptized himself."

"He would slay any one who reminded him of it."

"Yes; the curse of Harold Bluetooth, they say, was not a comfortable thing to get."

"The *father* was a Christian in that case, and the *son* returned to the gods of his ancestors; in your case it is the opposite: the first might be permitted, the last never."

"You would not talk in that way if he were your own son."

"Should I not? listen; I had a son, a noble, gallant boy of fifteen—all fire and spirit—do you know how he died?"

"It was before we knew each other."

"Then I will tell you. We had been ravaging the Frankish coasts, and the lad got a wound in his shoulder; we carried him home, for he had fought like a wolf, and the leeches tried to cure him, but it was all in vain; they said he would never be fit to go to battle again. Poor Sigard! he could not bear *that*, and he said one day when I was trying to cheer him, 'No, father, I shall never be able to strike a good downright blow again, and I cannot live until I die a cow's death in my bed; I will die as my fathers have died before me when they could no longer fight.' I saw what he meant, but I did not like the thought, and I tried to change the subject, but he returned to it again and again, until at last he persuaded me to let him have his way. So we took one of our ships, stuffed it full with things that would burn easily, made a funereal pile on the deck, and laid him thereon in state, with a mantle fit for a king thrown over him. Then we bade him good-bye and a happy journey to Valhalla; he was as cheerful as if he were going to his bridal; we tried to appear as if we were too,

but it tore my heart all the same. Then we applied the torch and cut the cable; the wind blew fair, the bark stood out to sea. She had not got half-a-mile from shore when the flames burst out from every crevice of the hold; we saw them surround the pile where he lay passive; he did not move so far as we could see, and after that all was hidden from our sight in flame and smoke."

The old warrior was silent, and, in spite of his stoicism, Anlaf thought a tear stood in his eye.

"So don't tell me *I* could not give up an only son," added Sidroc.

Anlaf made no reply, but only sighed—a sign of weakness he strove to repress the moment he betrayed it.

They walked back together to the camp, and there they parted. Anlaf repaired at once to his tent, and found Alfgar seated therein.

"The king wishes to know when you will be enrolled amongst his followers."

The lad looked up sadly, yet firmly; the expression of his face, whereon filial awe contended with yet higher feelings of duty, was very touching. Anlaf felt it, and in his heart respected his son, while sometimes he felt furious at his disobedience.

"Father, it is useless, you should not have brought me here, I shall live and die a Christian."

"At all events, Alfgar, you should give more attention to all we have said to you, and more respect to the defenders of the old belief in which your ancestors were all content to die. What do you suppose has become of them?"

If Alfgar had been a modern Christian, he might have said, conscientiously enough, that he believed they would be judged by their light, but no such compromise in belief was possible then.

"There is no salvation save in the Church," he said, sorrowfully enough.

"Then where are they?—in hell?"

Alfgar was silent.

"What was good enough for them is good enough for me, and for that matter for you too. I should be more comfortable there with them than with your saints and monks; at all events, I will take my chance with my forefathers, cannot you do the same?"

"They did not know all I do."

"All fudge and priestly pratings, begotten of idleness and dreams. Valhalla and Niffelheim are much more reasonable; at all events they are parts of a creed which has made its followers the masters of the world."

"This world."

"The next may take its chance, if there is one, of which I by no means feel sure. You are throwing away the certainty of pleasure and glory here for an utter uncertainty; those rewards you will gain by submission are at your feet to take up; those you will gain by a bloody death only exist in the imaginations of priests."

"'Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, but He hath revealed them to us by His Spirit,'" said Alfgar in a low voice.

His father was silent; the words struck him like a strain of weird music; but he did not yield the point, save for the time, and after a pause changed the subject.

"You have other motives than heavenly ones. You love a Christian maiden."

"How do you know that?" said Alfgar, blushing to the temples.

"I have lain near you at night, and you talk in your dreams. Now, I have yet another motive to put before you. You think you have cause to love the Æscendune people, because they saved your life. I think I have cause to *hate* them, because they made you a Christian. Now, if you die in your superstition, when we invade Mercia they shall suffer for it."

"They have suffered enough."

"Nay, only in buildings, which they will restore. I will pursue them with unrelenting vengeance, with the

death feud, till I have destroyed the accursed race utterly."

"Father!"

"If you would save them," said Anlaf, who saw he had made an impression, "renounce your Christianity, and I will forget Æscendune."

Here he left the tent.

The days which followed were, it may be imagined, very uncomfortable ones for Alfgar; but he was not destitute of occupation. It was his father's wish that he should join the youth of the camp in athletic and warlike exercises. This he had no objection to do, and he spent nearly his whole time in practising the use of battle-axe, of bow, of spear, of sword, and shield, or in managing the war-horse, for the Danes had acquired cavalry tactics on stolen horses.

Naturally quick, both of eye and hand, he learned all these things easily, and excited the admiration and envy of his companions. They became useful in time.

In this manner nearly a month passed away, when an incident occurred which claims our attention.

Strolling on the earthworks which defended the camp, near the royal quarters, Alfgar came unexpectedly upon no less a person than the king himself, in close conversation with a stranger.

There was something in the form and manner of this stranger which even in the brief moment conveyed recognition to the mind of our hero; and a second glance, which was all he dared to cast, as he withdrew from the spot, revealed to him the face of a traitor.

It was Edric Streorn.

A few hours later the chieftains were all summoned to a council in the king's tent, and when, after a short session, they came forth, the general order was given to break up the encampment, and move towards the south-west for the winter, for all the resources of the country around were exhausted.

The work was a laborious one. From the dawn of day,

horses, heavily laden, left the camp, loaded with the accumulated spoil of the year. Anlaf himself was very busy, and it was with some real alarm that Alfgar asked him what would happen did the English suddenly appear.

No fear of them, boy. We have received certain intelligence that their army is disbanded for want of provisions. They will not meet till the spring unless we rout them up."

Alfgar knew well whence the "certain intelligence" came.

Destroying and plundering, the mighty host moved on its way, crossing into Hampshire, and doing, as the chronicle says, "their old wont." Of them it might be said in the words of the prophet—

> "Like Eden the land at morn they find;
> But they leave it a desolate waste behind."

Whenever they found a tract of country as yet unexhausted, there they settled until they had exhausted it. The wretched inhabitants, who had fled at their approach, perished with hunger, unless they had strength to crawl to the far distance, where as yet bread might be found.

It was the custom of the invaders to burn all their resting-places when they left them, and to slay all captives, save such as could be held to ransom, or a few whom they detained in slavery, till they died a worse death from want and ill-usage.

Thus they moved from spot to spot, until towards the middle of November they reached the coast opposite the Isle of Wight, in which unfortunate island they decided, after due consideration, to winter.

Opposite the host, across the Solent, rose the lovely and gentle hills of the "garden of England;" but between them lay the Danish fleet, in all its grandeur, calmly floating on the water. Each of the lofty ships bore the ensign of its commander; some carried at the prow the figures of lions, some of bulls, dolphins, dragons, or armed warriors,

gaudily painted or even gilded; while others bore from their mast the ensign of voracious birds—the eagle, the raven—which appeared to stretch their wings as the flag expanded in the wind.

The sides of the ships were also gay with bright colours, and as the warriors embarked and hung up their bright shields, grander sight was never seen.

But chiefly Alfgar admired the ship of Sweyn, called the "Great Dragon." It was in the form of an enormous serpent; the sharp head formed the prow, with hissing tongue protruding forth, and the long tail tapered over the poop.

In this ship Anlaf himself had his place, in deference to his descent, and Alfgar accompanied him. It may easily be imagined he would sooner have been elsewhere.

Scarcely a fishing-boat belonging to the English could be discerned: the Danes made a desert around them.

Eight years before, in the year 998, they had wintered on the island, and since that time had regarded it as a Danish colony. No English remained in it save in the position of slaves, and the conquerors had accumulated huge stores of spoil therein, while they drew their stores of provisions from every part of the adjacent mainland.

"Is it not a grand sight, Alfgar?" exclaimed his father. "Are you not proud of your people, the true monarchs of the sea?"

Alfgar was for the moment inclined to sympathise; but he thought of the darker side of the picture, and was silent.

There was a higher glory far than all this, and it had left a life-long impression on his soul.

CHAPTER X.

CARISBROOKE IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY.

THE fleet bore the troops of savage soldiery safely—too safely—across the waters of the Solent, to the estuary formed by the Medina, where now thousands of visitors seek health and repose, and the towers of Osborne crown the eastern eminences. A fleet may still generally be discerned in its waters, but a fleet of pleasure yachts; far different were the vessels which then sought the shelter of the lovely harbour, beautiful even then in all the adornment of nature.

There the Danes cast anchor, and the forces dispersed to their winter-quarters. The king and his favourite chieftains took up their abode at Carisbrooke, situate about eight miles up the stream, but above the spot where it ceases to be navigable.

Their chosen retreat was the precincts of the old castle, —old even then—for it had been once a British stronghold, commanding the route of the Phœnician tin merchants across the island, whence its name "Caer brooke," or the "fort on the stream."

The Romans in after ages saw the importance of the position, fortified it yet more strongly, and made it the chief military post of the island, which, under their protecting care, enjoyed singular peace and prosperity—civilisation flourished, arts and letters were cultivated. The beautiful coasts and inlets were crowded with villas, and invalids then, as now, sought the invigorating breezes, from all parts of the island of Britain, and even from the neighbouring province of Gaul.

The Roman power fell at last, and when the English

pirates, our own ancestors, like the Danes of our story, attacked the dismembered provinces of the empire, its wealth and position on the coast made it an early object of attack—happy those who fled early. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle shall tell the story of those who remained.

"A.D. 530. This year Cerdic and Cynric conquered the Isle of Wight, and slew many people at Whit-garas-byrg" (Carisbrooke).

The conquering Cerdic died four years after, and his son Cynric gave the island to his nephews, Stuf and Wihtgar. The latter died in 544, and was buried in the spot he and his had reddened with blood, within the Roman ramparts of Carisbrooke.

It is needless to say that at that early period our ancestors were heathens, and the mode of their conquest was precisely similar to that we are now describing under another *heathen* (with less excuse), Sweyn the son of Harold.

It was a few days after the arrival of the Danes at their quarters, and Alfgar stood on the rampart at the close of a November day; it was S. Martin's Mass, as the festival was then called. The sun was sinking with fading splendour behind the lofty downs in the west, and casting his departing beams on the river, the estuary, with the fleet, and the blue hills of Hampshire in the far distance.

Southward and westward the view was alike shut in by these lofty downs, and eastward the hills rose again, so as to enclose the valley, of which Carisbrooke formed the central feature.

The ramparts whereon he was standing were of Roman workmanship, built so solidly that they had resisted every attack of man or of time; while down below lay the ruins of a magnificent villa, once occupied by the Roman governor of the island.

Anlaf appeared and stood beside his son.

"Alfgar," he said, "the day after to-morrow is the day of S. Brice."

He paused and looked steadfastly in the face of his son.

"And the king proposes to enrol you amongst his chosen warriors on that day; he has marked the skill you have displayed in the mimic contests with spear or sword, your skill as a horseman, and he wishes to see whether in actual battle you will fulfil the promise of the parade ground."

"And yet he knows my faith."

"Alfgar," said the old man solemnly, "you must renounce it or die; no mercy will be shown to a Christian on S. Brice's day; that is why the king has chosen it. Think, my son, over all I have told you; you will decide like one who yet controls his senses, and not disgrace your aged father."

"Father, I do think of you," said the poor lad; "at least believe *that*. I do not grieve for myself. I feel I could easily die for my faith, but I do grieve over the pain I *must* cause you."

The heart of the old warrior was sensibly affected by this appeal, but not knowing the strength of Christian principle, he could not reconcile it with facts, and he walked sadly away.

But two days, and the dread choice had to be made—the crisis in the life of Alfgar, a crisis which has its parallel in the lives of many around us—approached, and he had to choose between Christ and Odin, between the death of the martyr and apostasy.

He walked to and fro upon the ramparts, after his father left him, in the growing darkness, feebly illuminated by the light of a new moon. Below him, in the central area, a huge fire burned, whereat the evening meal was preparing for the royal banquet, for Sweyn and his ferocious chieftains were about to feast together.

Escape was hopeless. Even had he not been bound by the promise given to his father, it would have been very difficult. He felt that his motions were watched. The

island was full of foes, their fleet occupied the Solent. *No;* all that was left was to die with honour.

But to bring such disgrace upon his father and his kindred! "Blood is thicker than water," says the old proverb, and Alfgar could not, even had he wished, ignore the ties of blood; nature pleaded too strongly. But there was a counter-motive even there—the dying wishes of his mother. If his father were Danish, she was both English and Christian.

Before him the alternatives were sharply defined:—Apostasy, and his ancestral honours, with all that the sword of the conqueror could give; and on the other hand, the martyr's lingering agony, but the hope of everlasting life after death.

He could picture the probable scene. The furious king, the scorn of the companions with whom he had vied, nay, whom he had excelled, in the exercises of arms, and the ignominious death, perhaps that painful punishment known as the "spread eagle." *No*, they could not inflict that on one so nobly born, the descendant of princes.

Alas! what might not Sweyn do in his wrath?

Was Christianity worth the sacrifice? Where were the absolute proofs of its truth? If it were of God, why did He not protect His people? The heathen Saxons had been victorious over the Christian Britons; and now that they had become Christian, the heathen Danes were victorious over them. Was this likely to happen if Christ were really God?

Again Odin and Frea, with their children, and the heroes sung by the scalds, in the war-songs which he heard echoing from around the fire at that moment—

> "How this one was brave,
> And bartered his life
> For joy in the fight;
> How that one was wise,
> Was true to his friends
> And the dread of his foes."

Valour, wisdom, fidelity, contempt of death, hatred of

meanness and cowardice, qualities ever shining in the eyes of warlike youth.

This creed had sufficed for his ancestors for generations, as his father had told him. Why should he be better than they? If they trusted to the faith of Odin, might not he?

And then, if he lived, when the war was carried into Mercia, he would save his English friends, even although forced to live unknown to them.

"Oh! life is sweet," thought he, "sweet to one so young as I. I have but tasted the cup; shall I throw it down not half empty?"

He was almost conquered. He had all but turned to seek his father, when suddenly the remembrance of Bertric flashed vividly upon him.

He saw, as in a vision, the patient, brave lad enduring mortal agony for Christ, so patiently, so calmly. Had Bertric, then, died for *nought?* He felt as if the martyr were near him, to aid him in this moment, when his faith was in peril. "O Bertric, Bertric!" he cried, "intercede for me, pray for me."

He fell on his knees, and did not rise until the temptation was conquered, and then he walked steadily into the great vaulted room, of Roman construction, which served as the banqueting hall, and took his usual place by his father's side.

Oh, how hollow the mirth and revelry that night! How he loathed the singing, the drunken shouting, the fierce imprecation over the wine-cup—the sensuality, which now distinguished his blood-thirsty companions. The very knives he saw used for their meals had served as daggers to despatch the wounded or the helpless prisoner. The eyes, now weak with debauch, had glowed with the maniacal fury of the berserkir in the battlefield. Was this the glory of manhood? Nay, rather of wolves and bears.

Then he looked up at Sweyn, the murderer of his father, and marvelled that his hand was yet so steady—his head so clear. This apostate parricide! never would he live

to kiss the hand of such a man ; better die at once, while yet pure from innocent blood. *This* his Christianity had taught him.

" Minstrel," cried the fierce king, " sing us some stirring song of the days of old ; plenty of the fire of the old Vikings in it."

A strange minstrel, a young gleeman, had been admitted that night—one whose chain and robes bespoke him of the privileged class—and he sang in a voice which thrilled all the revellers into awed silence. He sang of the battle, of the joy of conquest, and the glories of Valhalla, where deceased warriors drank mead from the skulls of vanquished foes. And then he sang of the cold and snowy Niffelheim, where in regions of eternal frost the cowardly and guilty dead mourned their weak and wasted lives. In words of terrific force he painted their agony, where Hela, of horrid countenance, reigned supreme ; where the palace was Anguish, Famine the board, Delay and Vain Hope the waiters, Precipice the threshold, and Leanness the bed.

But in the innermost chamber of this awful home was the abode of Raging Despair ; and in the final verse of his terrible ode the scald sang,—

" Listen to the ceaseless wail,
Listen to the frenzied cry
Of anguish, horror, and amaze ;
Would ye know from whom they come,
Tell me, warriors, would ye know ?"

Here he paused, after throwing intense emphasis on the last words, till he had concentrated the attention of all, and the king gazed—absorbed—then he continued—

" There wave on wave of bitter woe
Overwhelms the parricide."

The king started from his seat. He was about to launch his battle-axe through the air in search of the daring minstrel, when the same dread expression of unutterable agony we have before mentioned passed over his face ; he trembled as an aspen, and sank, as one paralysed, into his chair, while

his glaring eyes seemed to behold some horrid apparition unseen by all beside. The warriors now turned in their wrath to seek the daring or unfortunate minstrel, but he was gone.

Alfgar had seen the apostate in his moment of retributive agony, and he shuddered.

"Better death, far better," he murmured, "than a fate like this. God keep me firm to Him."

The king had by this time recovered his usual composure, but his rage and fury were the more awful that the outbreak was suppressed.

"Sit down, my warriors, disturb not the feast. What if your king has been insulted in his own banquet-hall, there are hands enow to avenge him without unseemly tumult. Let us drink like the heroes in Valhalla. Meanwhile let the minstrel be sought and brought before us, and he shall make us sport in a different mode."

"The 'rista örn' whispered one in his ear."

The ferocious king nodded, and his eyes sparkled with the expected gratification of his fierce cruelty. Meanwhile warriors were searching all the precincts of the camp for the destined victim.

Nearly half-an-hour had passed, and the king was getting impatient, for nearly all the chieftains were getting too drunk to appreciate the spectacle he designed for them.

"Why do the men delay?" he cried; "let them bring in the minstrel."

Still he came not; and at length the searchers were forced, one after the other, to confess their failure.

"It is well," said the king; "but it was the insult of a Christian, and shall be washed out in Christian blood. Anlaf, produce thy son."

"Nay, nay, not now," cried Sidroc and others, for they saw that Sweyn was already drunk, and consideration for Anlaf made them interfere. "Not now; to-morrow, to-morrow."

"Nay, to-night, to-night."

"Drink first, then, and drown care," said Sidroc, and gave the brutal tyrant a bowl of rich mead.

He drank, drank until it was empty, then fell back and reposed with an idiotic smile superseding the ferocious expression his face had so lately worn. Meanwhile a hand was laid upon Alfgar's shoulder, and a keen bright eye met his own, as if to read his inmost thoughts.

"Come with me, or my father will disgrace himself."

It was Canute.

He led Alfgar forth into the courtyard.

"Thou dost not seem to fear death," said the boy prince.

"It would be welcome now."

"So some of our people sometimes say, but the motive is different; tell me what is the secret of this Christianity?"

Just then Sidroc and Anlaf came out from the hall and saw the two together. Sidroc seemed annoyed, and led the young prince away, while Anlaf seized the opportunity to whisper to his son—

"My son, I can do no more for thee; I see thou wilt persist in thine obstinacy. I release thee from thy promise given to me; escape if thou canst, or die in the attempt; but bring not my grey hairs to contempt on the morrow."

At this moment, Sidroc having seen Canute to the royal quarters, returned.

"Sidroc," said Anlaf, "I cannot any longer be the jailor of my unhappy and rebellious son. Let him be confined till the morrow. I shall ask leave of absence from Sweyn, and now I deliver Alfgar to your care."

"I accept the charge," said Sidroc; "follow me, Alfgar, son of Anlaf."

Alfgar followed passively. He could not help looking as if to take leave of his father; but Anlaf stood as mute and passionless as a statue. Sidroc reached a party of the guard, and bade them confine the prisoner in the dungeon beneath the ruined eastern tower.

"Listen to my last words, thou recreant boy; Sweyn will send for thee early in the morning before the assembled

host; it will be the day of S. Brice; and even were he not now mad with rage, there would be no mercy for a Christian on that day. Thou must yield, or die by the severest torture, compared with which the death of thy late companion under the archers' shafts was merciful. Be warned."

CHAPTER XI.

THE GLEEMAN.

It was a low dungeon, built of that brick which we still recognise as of Roman manufacture, in the foundations of what had been the eastern tower of the ancient fortification. The old pile had been badly preserved by the Saxon conquerors, but it had been built of that solid architecture which seems almost to defy the assaults of time, and which in some cases, after fifteen centuries, preserves all its characteristics, and promises yet to preserve them, when our frailer erections lie crumbled in the dust.

The roof was semicircular, and composed of minute bricks, seeming to form one solid mass; the floor of tiling, arranged in patterns, which could still be obscurely traced by the light of the lamp left by the charity of Sidroc to the prisoner; for the dungeon was of bad reputation; lights had been seen there at unearthly hours, when the outer door was fast and no inmate existed.

There were two long narrow windows at the end, unbarred, for they were too small for the human body to pass through them; they looked upon the valley and river beneath, for although the dungeon was below the level of the courtyard, it was above that of the neighbourhood.

The prisoner strode up and down the limited area, wrestling with self, bending the will by prayer to submit to ignominy and pain, for he knew now that his father had abandoned him, and that he had to apprehend the worst; still he did not regret the choice he had made, and he felt, as he prayed, peace and confidence descend like heavenly

dew upon his soul. Mechanically he cast his eyes around the cell, and tried to trace out the pattern of the flooring, when he saw that the central figure, around which the circles and squares converged, was justice, with the scales, and the motto, "Fiat justitia." He knew the meaning of the words, for Father Cuthbert had taught him some Latin, and the conviction flashed upon him that, sooner or later, all the wrong and evil about him would be righted by the power of a judge as omnipotent as unerring. And this thought made him the more reconciled to the apparent injustice of which he was the victim, and he prayed for his father, that God would enlighten him with the true light.

"Perhaps before he dies he may yet think of me without shame."

For the shame which he unwillingly brought upon a father who was stern, yet not unkind or void of parental love, was the bitterest ingredient in the cup.

And so the hours rolled on, which brought the dreaded morn nearer and nearer; and the victim, comforted by prayer, but without hope in this world, slept, and thought no longer of the torturer's knife, or felt the cruel anticipations which *would* rack the waking mind.

And while he slept he was wakened, yet but partly wakened, by a voice which seemed to belong to the borderland 'twixt sleep and waking.

"Alfgar, son of Anlaf, sleepest thou?"

"Surely I dream," thought he, and strove to sleep again.

"Alfgar, son of Anlaf, sleepest thou?"

Now he sat up, and beheld, or thought he beheld, a figure of one clothed in the attire of a minstrel, in the centre of the chamber.

"Art thou yet in the flesh like me?" he cried, repressing a shudder.

"Even so, a being of like mould, subject to pain and death."

"A prisoner, then; art doomed to die?"

"No prisoner, neither art thou, if thou willest to escape."

"Thou art the gleeman who insulted Sweyn."

"Nay, who told the brutal tyrant the truth."

"And what doest thou here?"

"I am come to deliver thee."

"But how?"

"Rise up, cast on your garments."

Hardly knowing what he did, Alfgar obeyed, and when he stood face to face with the stranger, began to lose the uneasy impression that the being who addressed him was otherwise than mortal; for he saw by the light of the lamp that the gleeman bore all the attributes of a living man.

"How came you here?"

"Because I know the secrets of the prison-house—knew them before the Danes had murdered the once happy dwellers in this garden of England, which they have made a howling wilderness; hence I escaped the wrath of the furious parricide, whom the saints destroy, with ease, and laughed in security at their vain efforts to take me; but we must waste no time; it yet wants five hours to daybreak; within those five hours we must reach the opposite shore."

"But tell me, I cannot understand, why hast thou braved the wrath of Sweyn? why hast thou cared for me?"

"All in good time, follow me now, I bid thee by the memory of Æscendune."

"Æscendune! surely I dream."

"Yes, of Æscendune. I have heard that thou art thence. Now waste no more time."

More and more mystified, for he had never to his knowledge seen the speaker before, Alfgar gazed at the gleeman.

He appeared of noble air and mien, but was evidently but a young man; he was somewhat above the average height, and looked as though he could wield the sword as well as the harp. But how were they to escape?

Alfgar was not left long in doubt. The stranger took up

the lamp and walked to the farthest recess of the dungeon, where, concealed amongst the rude carvings with which the builders had ornamented the wall, was a rose carved in stone. The gleeman pressed it sharply, and a hidden door sprang open, revealing a winding staircase excavated in the solid wall.

"Upwards it leads to the banqueting hall, and you can comprehend my escape this evening," said he; "but our path is now downwards, unless you would like to go up and see the drunken beasts of murderers snoring off their debauch upon the floor as they fell; oh, that it were lawful for a Christian man to cut their throats as they lie; many innocent lives would be saved thereby, which those brutes will live to destroy."

"Thou art, then, a Christian?"

The gleeman crossed himself piously.

"Why not?" said he.

"I heard you sing like a scald to-night."

"It was my part, and I acted it passing well, did I not? Sweyn would own as much; but, pardon me, I am forgetting that my daring put you in danger."

"How did you know that?"

"I heard every word; and perhaps I might even have risked more than this to save you."

Meanwhile they had descended nearly a hundred steps, and the atmosphere became singularly cold and charnel-like, when they entered a large vault, which, by the light of their torches, appeared of great extent. Its walls were covered with uncouth representations, and inscriptions in Latin.

"What place is this?"

"It had some connection, I believe, with the old idolatry, and that is all I know. This passage will guide us to daylight and liberty."

Following a short and narrow passage, they emerged upon a ruined vault, whose roof had fallen in. Climbing out with some difficulty, and disturbing in the process

hundreds of bat-mice and not a few rats, they found themselves in the midst of some old ruins at the foot of the acclivity whereon the fortress was built, and below them the brook ran rapidly to join the river.

"Thanks be to God for our preservation in that den of unclean lions!" said the gleeman; "but had they known who was amongst them, he would have had scant chance of escape."

"May I not know?"

"Not yet. Come, we must waste no more time."

They walked swiftly down the brook. No sentinels were posted in this direction, nor was any look-out kept.

"The danger is yet to come," said the gleeman, in a low tone.

Shortly they reached the river, and then they found a boat hidden in the rushes, which grew tall and strong. They embarked, and Alfgar steered, by the other's direction, straight down the stream, while he rowed for full an hour with remarkable strength and dexterity, so that they drew near the coast, and the cold air from the sea blew in Alfgar's face.

Here the gleeman ceased rowing, and spoke to him in a low tone.

"Do you see those dark figures ahead?"

"I do."

"Well, they are the Danish war-ships, and our hour of peril draws near. We must drop down with the tide, which is running out strongly, and I must steer. You can row, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, get the oars ready to pull for your life, if I give the word, but not *till* then. Now silence."

In perfect silence they drifted down upon the ships. Happily for them there was no moon, and although the stars were bright, there was little danger that their dark-painted bark would be seen at any distance.

One great mass after another seemed to float by them;

but it was the dead hour of the night, and no sounds were heard from the sleeping crews. They kept lax watch, because they had no foe to dread. There was, alas! no English fleet.

One after another, until they had drifted into the centre of the fleet, where discovery must have been instant death. There above them rose the "Great Dragon," in all her hideous beauty, the gilded serpent reposing on the placid waves. Her people, even at that untimely hour, were engaged in revelry, and as they passed by the fugitives heard the words—

> "Now the warrior's cup of joy was full,
> When he drank the blood of his foe,
> Where the slain lay thick on the gory hill,
> And torrents of blood from every rill
> Reddened the river below,
> For Odin's hall is the Northman's heaven"——

But they heard no more, for they had drifted beyond hearing.

They had now attained the last ship, when suddenly a watchman sprang to the side.

"Boat ahoy! Whence and where?"

"From the 'Great Dragon'—a poor gleeman and his attendant to his home on the shore."

"Come on board then, and wake us with a song. The watch is ours, and we will make it merry."

There was no help for it; and commending courage with a significant look to his companion, the gleeman and Alfgar ascended. It was yet dark, and the language and appearance of each might pass tolerably under ordinary circumstances for the characters they had assumed.

"Now a song, and we will keep it up till daylight."

Thus pressed, the gleeman took his harp and sang an old Scandinavian song of the first sea-king who invaded England, Ragnar Lodbrok.

He told how the fierce Ragnar sailed for England, how his fleet was wrecked, but still how, with the relics of his forces, he assaulted Northumbria, and was taken captive by

Ella the king, who threw him into a hole filled with vipers and toads.

"Sharp the adder's tooth, but sharper
Spake the sea-king to his foes,
Spake while savage brows grew darker,
As he told the countless woes
Which the bear's fierce cubs should bring
To those who slew their father and their king."

Then he described the retribution, and the lingering death of Ella under the agonies of the "rista örn" so vividly, that every Danish heart was filled with emulation.

"Well sung!" shouted the Danes. "Thou dost sing a song worth hearing. Hast not taught thy son to sing likewise?"

In turn Alfgar was forced to support his assumed character. Luckily his tenacious memory retained the words of many an old song, and the warriors were well pleased.

"Why must thou go to shore? We will feed and guerdon thee well if thou wilt stay with us."

"We are aweary now, and would fain return to our comrades on the shore, but we will return by and by."

"Do so, here is thy reward;" and one of the speakers threw a gold chain round the gleeman's neck. Gold was plentiful with the robbers.

They were allowed to return to their boat; but as they did so, many a keen eye was fixed upon them. The dawn was already beginning to appear in the east, and every moment was of importance.

"Thou hast borne the test well," said the gleeman, "and hast not flinched."

"I could not in your presence."

At this moment they heard the rapid splash of a boat, manned by many rowers, behind, and a voice shouted aloud to the men on board the ship they had left—"Hast seen a boat with a gleeman and harp-bearer?"

"They have just left the ship."

"Follow; they are English spies. Sweyn will give the weight of their heads in red gold."

Instantly they heard the sound of hurried voices, the lowering of boats, the splash of numerous oars, and all nearly close behind them. They took an oar each, and pulled with all the energy of men who pull for life or death.

The light was gradually growing stronger, and their chance of escape seemed feeble, when Alfgar saw before them a dense cloud of mist rolling round the eastern promontory, and uttered a cry of joy as it enfolded them.

"The wind is east, keep it on your right cheek, and steer straight forward. I will take both oars," said the gleeman.

It was wonderful with what energetic force and success the gleeman pulled until they had cleared the mist, and saw that they were in the red light of dawn, in the midst of the Solent.

One half-mile behind them a solitary boat pursued. There appeared to be only five men, four rowing and one steering. Other boats there were, but wide of the mark.

"Alfgar," said the gleeman, "you will find a quiver of arrows and a long bow at the bottom of the boat behind you."

Alfgar handed them to him.

"The points are passing sharp, and the bow is in order; take your turn to row."

Alfgar obeyed; he could not do otherwise, the gleeman's tone of command was so powerful, but he feared they would loss time by the change.

"You need not hurry yourself; let them approach. They are not likely to have brought other weapons than their swords and axes."

The boat gained on them rapidly, until it was within a hundred and fifty yards.

"Keep just this distance if you can," said the gleeman, and drew an arrow suddenly to its head; it whistled through the air, and the steersman, transfixed, rose, leapt in the boat, and fell in the sea a corpse.

"Gone to seek oysters for King Sweyn's table, I suppose," said the gleeman. Another steersman promptly took the place, but some yards were lost by the pursuers.

"Slacken, we are too far for accurate aim; and we English must not disgrace ourselves in Danish eyes."

They slackened, another arrow sped, and the foremost rower fell. Evidently the Danes had no means of reply.

"Slacken yet more;" and before the pursuers could recover their confusion, a third fell, then a fourth, before the unerring shafts. The fifth was at the fearful gleeman's mercy, but he restrained himself, now danger had vanished.

But as he did so he cried aloud,

"Dane, we give thee thy life, blood-sucker though thou art. Go, and tell King Sweyn that Edmund* the Etheling, son of Ethelred of England, has been his gleeman, and hopes he enjoyed the song which told the doom of parricides."

* Note F.—First appearance of Edmund.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MONASTERY OF ABINGDON.

ONE of the central lights of civilisation and Christianity in the early days of Wessex was the monastery of Abingdon. S. Birinus had fixed the centre of his missionary labours at Dorchester, only six miles distant, but the Abbey was the fruit of the heroic zeal of another evangelist, upon whom his mantle fell—S. Wilfrid. After the death of Birinus, the zeal of his successors failed to evangelise the south-eastern districts of Wessex, until, at length, came Wilfrid, fervent in zeal, and, stationing himself at Selsey, near Chichester, evangelised both Sussex and Wessex, sending out missionaries like-minded with himself, even into the most inaccessible wilds.

Centwin was then king of Sussex, but various petty states were tributary to him, and ruled by viceroys. One of these viceroys was Cissa, whose dominions included Wiltshire and the greater part of Berkshire.* This Cissa and his nephew, Hean, founded Abingdon. A mission was sent out from Chichester which attracted great multitudes of the Berkshire folk. Hean was present, and heard the preacher take for his text that verse of S. Matthew which declares that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. These words entered into the hearts of Hean and his sister Cilla, who was with him. They determined to go

* The appellations Wiltshire and Berkshire were of course of later date.

and sell all that they had and embrace a life of poverty. From their uncle, Cissa, they obtained grants of land, whereon they founded monastic homes. Cilla dedicated the convent she reared to S. Helena, the mother of Constantine, traditions of whose life in the neighbourhood had survived the Saxon Conquest.

Hean obtained the land of which Abingdon formed the central point, then generally known by the name Cloveshoo;* he was tardy in his work as contrasted with his sister, and Cissa died without seeing the work for which he had given the land accomplished. Ceadwalla succeeded him (A.D. 685), and further augmented the territory. He rebelled against Centwin, and became king of Wessex; spending most of his life in warfare; it was through his conquest of the island that the "Wight" became Christian. He made a pilgrimage to Rome, where he died, after his baptism by Pope Sergius.

Ina, his successor (A.D. 688), was so angry at the long delay in building the monastery, that at first he revoked the grant of his predecessors to Hean, but becoming reconciled, gave all his energy to the work, and Cloveshoo, or Abingdon, became a monastic town, and its history commences as a house of God from Ina, about A.D. 690-700.

Important benefits were thus conferred on the whole neighbourhood; agriculture flourished, learning increased, a sanctuary for the oppressed was provided; and last, though not least in Ina's eyes, a bulwark against Mercia was provided for the neighbourhood; while the poor and the afflicted found their happiness in every way promoted by the neighbourhood of the monastery.

Several times the monastery was in peril by reason of the wars between Wessex and Mercia. In A. D. 752, Cuthred of Wessex defeated Ethelbald of Mercia at Burford, hard by, and protected Abingdon from further aggressions. Twenty-five years later the decision of war was reversed. Offa, the great and fierce king of Mercia, defeated Cynewulf of Wessex, at Bensington, and spoiled the land, destroying

* See Note G.—The early name of Abingdon.

the convent of S. Helena, founded by Cilla, and grievously robbing and oppressing Abingdon.

But the most awful calamity it ever underwent was its destruction in the first great Danish invasion, in the early days of King Alfred, when it was literally levelled with the ground, only, however, to arise in greater magnificence when the storm had passed away.

However the period of anarchy had introduced evils which required a stern reformer, and one was found in the person of the abbot Ethelwold, the friend of S. Dunstan, who, in conjunction with him and Oswald, introduced the rule of S. Benedict into Abingdon, Glastonbury, Ely, and other great houses, which, by its absolute prohibition of monastic idleness, and its wise regulations, caused the religious houses of that period to become the central points of civilisation and learning in the land.

Here, at this famous monastery, we resume FATHER CUTHBERT'S DIARY.

In festo S. Edmundi. Again I resume my diary, at the great monastic house of Abingdon, where I have rejoined my brethren. I have already told how, in company with Elfwyn, Father Adhelm and I sought the forest farm where our beloved ones had found refuge from the cruel oppressor. The joy of the women and children to whom their husbands and fathers were thus restored was very touching; all seemed willing to forget the destruction of their homes, since they had been spared to each other, and I, to whom, by my vows, such love is unknown, yet could but feel how holy a thing is family affection.

Alas, there was one family where the bitterness of death had found its way. I cannot describe the touching scene when Elfwyn told the fate of dear Bertric. Well, they will learn by and by to thank God for him and his example, for we doubt not he died a martyr, although we know not the details, and, unless Alfgar yet lives, shall perhaps never know them.

We held a long consultation upon our future movements. It was wisely decided not to rebuild Æscendune at present, for the place where they now are can be rendered very commodious, and is far more secure against a foe. We do not dare to hope that we have seen the last of our troubles; the Danes are wintering in the Wight, ready for fresh mischief next spring and summer.

We have been able to learn nothing of Alfgar; but we think that Anlaf probably yet lives, and that he has recovered his son; yet we cannot imagine how he escaped on S. Brice's night.

Well, to return. We at once set to work, and erected a church of timber, for the service of God; and I said mass in it the first Sunday after our arrival there. It may be supposed it is not a very grand church; but God looks at the living stones, and reads the heart.

We all had enough to do for the first few days; but within a week one might suppose we had been living there an age. Log huts were erected for the whole population; the old farm-house, which is large and strongly built, taking the place of the hall. One must dispense with some comfort now.

My brother sent a portion of his men to rejoin the army, but feels himself justified in entering at once on his winter quarters with the remainder; in fact, since my arrival at Abingdon, the troops have all been dismissed for the winter, and the Danes have, as I said, retired to the Wight.

Then, leaving Father Adhelm in charge of the woodland settlement, I determined to visit my brethren here, where I have been received with all Christian love and hospitality by the abbot and his brethren. Three days my journey lasted. I travelled with only two attendants, serfs of our house; a poor prior burnt out from house and home.

Nov. 21*st*, 1006.—This evening I heard heavy steps on the stairs, and methought their tread seemed familiar, as well it might, for no sooner had the door opened than my

son Alfgar, for whom we had mourned as dead, or at least dead to us, fell upon my neck and wept.

It was a long time before either of us was composed enough to say much, but when we had a little recovered, the abbot who had brought them to my rooms introduced a tall young man in gleeman's garb, as Edmund the Etheling.

At length we all sat down to supper, but talked so much we could eat little, and I soon learned all the news Alfgar had to tell. His tale is wonderful; he has been indeed delivered from the mouth of the lion, nay, from the jaws of the fierce lion; but I must set down all things in order.

. . . . . .

The one thing which delights me most is the way in which his faith has stood the hard hard test to which it has been put.

But my dear nephew Bertric, Saint Bertric we must assuredly call him, oh how it will lighten the grief of his parents and sister to know how gloriously he died for Christ! One could envy him his crown.

And then how delighted Ethelgiva will be to learn not only that Alfgar is alive, but to hear how true and brave he has been.

But when all these congratulations were over, and we had learned all that Alfgar had to tell, there was evidently something on the mind of the prince.

"Alfgar and I have a very important duty to perform," he said.

I waited, and he proceeded.

"There has been grievous treachery in our ranks. Edric Streorn has sold us to the Danes."

"I feared as much," said I, sadly.

"I learned it at Carisbrooke, and am now on my way to Dorchester, where my royal father has arrived, or will arrive to-morrow. I should have gone there at once, but Alfgar learned you were here, and *would* come. Besides, we need your help to fit us for appearing at court."

And, in truth, their habiliments were not very royal.

Well, Abingdon is a town of great resources, wherein all things meet may be found.

"We will to the tradesmen to-morrow," I said, "and fit you for the presence."

"I have yet heavier news to unfold," Edmund added, very seriously. "The Danes purpose a winter campaign in the heart of the land, hoping to take us unawares."

"Now the saints forbid!" said I.

"Even so; but they are not all with us. S. Brice is against us."

I sighed, and so did they. The very remembrance of that day is sickening.

"We have heard," said the abbot, "that the king will arrive to-morrow at Dorchester; we will send you thither in the morning. Meanwhile, my sons, you do not eat and drink as I would have you. Remember you need to sustain exhausted nature."

That was indeed true. They had travelled fast, and had fasted by the way, of necessity.

"Well, Alfgar, we will to-morrow to the king," said Edmund, after they had eaten and drunken; "he must surely listen to us now."

"He appears to love this wicked Edric," said the abbot sorrowfully.

"Far better than his own flesh and blood," replied Edmund.

"My son," said the abbot, "rest here this night in our poor house; to-morrow we will find you both horses and fitting apparel, and ye shall go meetly to the king, who is the guest of the bishop."

"I shall not be sorry, father, to see the inside of my chamber," said the young prince; for he is yet young, although so wise and valiant—not more than a year or two older than Alfgar.

The compline bell rang. "I will go with you to thank God first for our deliverance, and to pay my vows to Him," said Edmund; "then to bed."

After compline, Edmund went from the chapel to bed. Alfgar would not retire. He came to my cell; there he talked with me for a full hour. His affection moves me greatly. He has evidently found a real friend in Prince Edmund, who has delivered him from a cruel death, and who wants to attach him permanently to his service. Meanwhile Alfgar is all haste to return to Æscendune and Ethelgiva, before any further steps are taken.

Saturday, Nov. 22d, 1006.—After we had arrayed the Etheling and Alfgar this morning, I decided to accompany them on their road to Dorchester, for it happened that I had arranged to say mass and preach to-morrow at the little church of S. Michael at Cliffton, the residence of my sister Bertha and her husband Herstan. It lies on a cliff over the Thames, on the way to the cathedral city, whence its name, "the town on the cliff."

So we started, the Etheling, Alfgar, and I, after the chapter mass at nine. We crossed the fine timber bridge over the Isis, then kept the causeway over the marshes, till, crossing an arm of the main stream, we ascended a hill and passed through the open country.

On the north the country is richly wooded. There lies the chase of Neweham, abounding in deer, with a few wolves yet lingering in its recesses, and forming sport for the ceorls.

In the neighbourhood of a great monastery the roads are always good, and waggons can travel easily and smoothly from Abingdon to Dorchester. So, being well mounted, we were only the best part of an hour in reaching Cliffton.

The river here makes a sudden bend to the east, after running for some time almost due north, and at the bend the steep cliff rises whereon the little church and my brother Herstan's hall is built, with a few cottages below and around occupied by his theows.

We went first to the church and offered our devotions. From the elevated ground whereon it stands, the cathedral

of Dorchester and the Synodune hills formed conspicuous objects.

Then we turned to the hall, and met a reception such as warmed the heart. When we had refreshed ourselves, I had to tell Bertha all the strange events which have recently happened at Æscendune; of the destruction of her old home, but of the well-being of all her friends; yes, of all, for we know that *he* has won the martyr's crown.

Some natural tears she dropped; but I think she soon came to see all things in their right light, as we try to do.

Soon after our arrival, Herstan sent a messenger to Dorchester to learn at what hour the king was expected; and the answer was returned, that they expected him in time for the banquet at the episcopal palace this evening. So Edmund and Alfgar consented to pass the day quietly at Cliffton.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CITY OF DORCHESTER.

DORCHESTER was at this period the most important city of the Midland counties, for it was the seat of the great bishopric which extended its sway over nearly the whole of Mercia.

Here the apostle of Wessex, Birinus, had converted and baptized Cynegils, king of that country, Oswald, the saintly king of Northumbria, being present, and receiving him fresh from the regenerating waters as his adopted son. Here, the next year, Cuichelm, his brother, was baptized, and from this centre Christianity was widely diffused. The good bishop died in the year 650, and was buried amongst the people he loved, but many years later his relics were translated to Winchester. But the tale went forth that the cunning canons of Dorchester had given them another body than that of the saint, and their shrine was the object of veneration equally with the rival shrine at Winchester.

Dorchester became successively the seat of two great bishoprics—the one West Saxon, the other Mercian. The first, founded by Birinus, when Wessex extended far north of the Thames, was divided seventy years later into two sees—Winchester and Sherburne. For some years the city was without bishops, owing to its insecure position during the strife between Wessex and Mercia, but later it appears as the seat of the great Mercian bishopric, retaining its jurisdiction until after the Norman conquest, when the see was transferred to Lincoln. Therefore Dorchester long en-

joyed a wider celebrity and greater influence, than the city, Oxenford, which, lying at a distance of ten miles, was destined to supersede it eventually.

The day was closing on an evening of November 1006, and the sun was sinking across the level country beyond the walls, when the people of Dorchester might have been seen crowding the roads which led from the eastern gate towards Bensington and Wallingford; the wooden bridge by which the road crossed the Tame was covered with human beings, and every eye was eagerly directed along the great high-road. The huge cathedral church towered above the masses, rude in architecture, yet still impressive in its proportions, while another church, scarcely smaller in its dimensions, rose from the banks lower down the stream, below the bridge, and the wooden steeple of a third was visible above the roofs of the houses in the western part of the city.

But, as in every other city which had once been Roman, the relics of departed greatness contrasted painfully (at least we should think so) with the humbler architecture around. The majesty of the churches was indeed (as a contemporary wrote) great, but thatched roofs consorted ill with the remains of shattered column and pedestal, and with the fragmentary ruins of the grand amphitheatre, which were yet partly visible, although the stones which had been brought from Bath to build it had been employed largely in church architecture.

The light of day was rapidly fading; a light breeze brought down the remaining leaves from the trees, or whirled them about in all directions; winter was plainly about to assume the mastery of the scene, as was evident from the clothing the people wore, the thick fur and warm woollen cloaks which covered their light tunics.

At length the sound of approaching cavalry was heard, and the cry "The King! the King!" was raised, and cheers were given by the multitude. It was observable, almost at a glance, that they proceeded from the young and giddy,

and that their elders refrained from joining in the cry.

About a hundred horsemen, gaily caparisoned, appeared, and in the midst, with equal numbers of his guard preceding and following, rode Ethelred the king. He was of middle stature and not uncomely, but there was a look of vacillation about his face, which would have struck even an indifferent physiognomist, while his thin lips, which he was constantly biting (when he was not biting his nails), seemed to indicate a tendency towards cruelty.

But by his side rode one, whose restless eyes seemed to wander to each individual of the crowd in turn, while power and malice seemed equally conspicuous in his glance. Little changed since we last beheld him rode the traitor, for so all but the king accounted him, Edric Streorn.

Amidst the shouts of the populace, who loved to look on the display, the Bishop Ednoth* and the chief magistrates of the city received the monarch and his councillor in front of the church of SS. Peter and Paul, and escorted him through the streets to the palace, which stood in what was then a central position, on the spot now called Bishop's Court. It was spacious, built around a quadrangular courtyard, with cloisters surrounding the lowest storey and the smooth shaven lawn, in the centre of which a granite cross was upraised. A gateway opened in the southern side and led to the inner court, and the cloisters opened from either side upon it.

On the opposite side of the quadrangle was the great hall where synods were held, and where, on state occasions, such as a royal visit, the banquet was prepared.

Here, after the king had availed himself of the bath, and his attendants had divested themselves of their travel-stained attire, the throne of the king was placed at the head of the board, and a seat for the bishop on his right hand, and for Edric on his left.

Ethelred took his place; upon his head a thin circlet

* See Note H.—Bishops of Dorchester.

of gold confined his flowing locks already becoming scant, but, as their natural colour was light, not otherwise showing signs of age: he was only in his fortieth year. His tunic was finely embroidered in colours around the neck, and was below of spotless white, secured by a belt richly gilded, whereon was a sheath for the dagger or knife, which was used for all occasions, whether in battle or in meal time, the haft being inlaid with precious stones. Over the tunic a rich purple mantle was lightly thrown, and his slippers were of dark cloth, relieved by white wool; the tunic descended to his heels.

The attire of Edric was similar in shape, but of different colour; his tunic was of green, edged with brown fur, his mantle of dark cloth, and his belt of embossed leather. There was a studied humility in it all, as if he shunned all comparison with the king.

Ednoth said grace, and the chanters responded. The canons of the cathedral, the priests of the other churches, the sheriff of the county, the reeve of the borough, the burgesses, all had their places, and the banquet began; huge joints being carried round to each individual, from which, with his dagger, he cut what he fancied and deposited it on his plate; then wine, ale, and mead were poured foaming into metal tankards, and lighter delicacies followed. There was no delay; no one cared to talk until he had satisfied his appetite.

The king, as a matter of course, opened the conversation, when the edge of desire was gone.

"Have the levies who served in the war all been disbanded, Sheriff?"

"The last returned from the garrisons in Sussex a week ago, and are all hoping for a quiet winter in the bosom of their families."

"Have they lost many of their number? Did the people of this hundred suffer greatly in the war which Sweyn forced upon us?"

"Not very many; still there has been a little mourn-

ing, and much anticipation of future evil," replied the bishop.

"That is needless," said Edric; "they may all prepare to keep their Christmas with good cheer. The Danes are sleeping, hybernating like bears in their winter caves."

"While they are so near as the Wight, who can rest in peace?" said Ednoth.

"The Wight! it must be a hundred miles from here; the Danes have never reached any spot so far from the coast as this."

"Yet there is an uneasy belief that they will attack the inland districts now that they have exhausted the districts on the coast, and that we must be prepared to suffer as our brethren have done."

"Before they leave their retreat again we shall be ready to meet them; our levies will be better trained and more numerous."

"A curse seemed upon all our exertions this last year," said Ednoth, sorrowfully. "We were defending our hearths and our homes, yet we were everywhere outmanœuvred and beaten. It could not have been worse had we had spies and traitors in command."

The king slightly coloured, for he resented all imputations on his favourite, and was about to make a sharp reply, when a voice which made him start, replied—

"Quite right, reverend father! as you say, success was impossible while spies and traitors commanded our forces."

All looked up in amazement; two guests had entered unbidden, and the king, the bishop, and Edric recognised Prince Edmund.

"The unseemly interruption is a sufficient introduction to the company. I need not, my friends, present to you my turbulent son Edmund, or the attendant he has picked up."

"No need whatsoever, if you will first allow us to explain the reasons of our presence here. We have somewhat startling news from the enemy."

"The enemy, by my last advices, lies quiet in the Isle of Wight," said Edric.

"I will not dispute your knowledge, my lord Edric," replied the Prince, "considering the intimacy you stand on with Sweyn."

"Intimacy! I would sooner own intimacy with the Evil One."

"You might own that, too, without much exaggeration, since the good bishop will bear me witness that he is the father of lies."

"Edmund, this is unbearable," said the king.

"Pardon, my father and liege, but truth will out."

The company sat in amazement, while the hand of Edric played convulsively with the hilt of his dagger; meanwhile Edmund ate, and gave to Alfgar, ere he spake again.

"Stay, Edric," whispered the king; "thou art *my* Edric. I was never false to thee, nor will I be now; did I not, for thy sake, look over the death of Elfhelm of Shrewsbury, and put out the eyes of his sons? canst thou not trust me now?"

Thus strengthened, Edric remained, and uneasy whispers passed around the assembly.

At last Edmund looked up.

"When the flesh is weak through toil and fasting, speech is not eloquent, but now listen, all Englishmen true, and I will speak out."

He told his tale, how he had conceived suspicions that the Danes intended a winter descent; how he had risked his life (in the exuberance of youthful daring) to ascertain the truth; how, trusting to his knowledge of Carisbrooke, where he had spent many pleasant days in his boyhood, he had ventured amongst the Danes as a gleeman, in imitation of Alfred of old; how there he had assisted, unsuspected, at a meeting of the council in the great hall, and heard it decided to invade England, and finally how he had escaped. And then he continued—

"And in that council I heard that the Danes had a secret friend in the English army, who ever gave them due warning of our movements, and who caused all the miscarriage of our last campaign. Stand forth, Edric Streorn, for thou art the man, and my sword shall prove it, if need be."

"Edmund, thou ravest," cried the king; "produce thy witnesses."

"Alfgar, son of Anlaf, answer; whom didst thou espy talking with Sweyn?"

"Edric Streorn."

"How didst know him?"

"Because he threatened my life on S. Brice's night, and I had often seen him while dwelling in Mercia."

"A Dane witnessing against a free-born Englishman! Can it be endured?" cried Ethelred. "What, here, my royal guard?—*here! here!* your King is insulted—insulted, and by his son and his son's minions."

The guard rushed in, their weapons in their hands.

"Seize my son, the false Edmund."

"Here I am," quietly said the hero of the English army, for such he was, although not recognised as such by the government of his father. "Here I am; what Englishman will bind me?"

The men stood as if paralysed.

"Will you not obey?" shouted the weak Ethelred, and stamped in impotent anger on the floor.

But they would not—they *could* not touch Edmund.

Edric whispered in the king's ear.

"I was wrong," said the king; "retire, guards. Edmund, come with me; tell me what you have seen. I will hear you, and judge between you and my Edric—judge fairly."

"Wait till my return, Alfgar."

Alfgar waited. No one spoke to him; all the company seemed utterly bewildered, as well they might be; until, after the expiration of an hour, during which time Ednoth

had left the hall, and the company broke up by degrees, an officer of the court came and whispered in his ear that Edmund awaited him without the gates.

He left the table at once, and proceeded beyond the precincts of the palace, following his guide.

"Where is the prince?"

"He has had a stormy interview with his father, and has just left him, refusing to lodge in the palace, to sleep without the precincts. I am to conduct you thither."

Leaving the palace, they were passing through some thick shrubbery, when all at once two strong men sprang upon Alfgar. At the same moment his attendant turned round and assisted his foes. He struggled, but he was easily overpowered, when his captors led him away, until, passing a postern gate in the western wall of the town, they crossed an embankment, and came upon the river. There they placed him on board a small boat, and rowed rapidly down the stream.

In the space of a few minutes they ran the boat ashore in the midst of dense woods which fringed the farther bank, and there they forced him to land, and led him upwards until, deep in the woods, they came upon an old timbered house. They knocked at the door, which was speedily opened by a man of gigantic stature and ruffianly countenance, by whose side snarled a mastiff as repulsive as he.

"Here, Higbald, we have brought thee a prisoner from our lord."

The wretch looked upon Alfgar with the eyes of an ogre bent on devouring a captive, and then said—

"The chamber where blind Cuthred was slaughtered looks out on the woods behind where no one passes, and it is strong; it will be better for you to take him there."

And he drew aside to let them pass.

"Here, Wolf," said the uncouth gaoler, "smell him, and see you have to guard him."

The dog seemed to comprehend. He smelt around the prisoner, then displayed his huge fangs, and growled, as if to tell Alfgar what his fate would be if he tried to escape.

The poor lad turned to his captors who had brought him there, for they seemed more humane than his new gaoler.

"For pity's sake, tell me why I am brought here—what crime I have committed."

No reply.

"At least bear a message to one who will think I have deserted him in his need."

Again they were silent. They had ascended a rough staircase. At the summit a passage led past two or three doors to one made of the strongest plank, and strengthened with iron.

They opened it, thrust him in, showed him, by the light of their torches, a bed of straw in the corner.

"There you can lie and sleep as peacefully as at Carisbrooke," said one of his guards.

"And let me tell you," added Higbald, "that it will be certain death to try to get away; for if you could escape *me*, my dog Wolf, who prowls about by day and night, would tear you in pieces before any one could help you. He has killed half-a-dozen men in his day."

Like a poor wounded deer which retires to his thicket to die, Alfgar threw himself down upon the bed of straw. His reflections were very, very bitter. "What *would* Edmund think of him?"

"He will know I am faithful. He will not think that the lad whose life he saved has deserted him. He will search till he find me even here."

Thus in alternate hope and despair he sank at last to sleep—nature had its way—even as the criminal has slept on the rack.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SON AND THE FAVOURITE.

A STORMY scene had meanwhile taken place in an interior chamber of the palace of the bishop, which had been metamorphosed into a council-chamber for the king. There were present Ethelred himself, his irrepressible son, the traitor Edric, the bishop, the sheriff of the shire, and the reeve of the borough, with the captain of the hus-carles, or royal guard.

"We all need Divine guidance at this moment," said Edric, clasping his hands meekly; "would you, my lord and king, ask the bishop to open our proceedings with especial prayer for the grace of meekness."

"Hypocrite!" said Edmund, with a sound like the gnashing of teeth.

The bishop, however, said the form generally used at the meetings of council, but omitted to notice the special suggestion of Edric.

"The case before us," said the king, "is a difficult and trying one, but one which we must discharge in our bounden duty towards our subjects. Perhaps it is well that the accusation so often urged by backbiters against our faithful subject Edric should"——

"Your majesty begs the question when you call that coward 'faithful.'"

"Silence, Edmund," said the king, sternly, "you are hardly yet of age, yet you dare to interrupt me. I was going to say that it is a good thing the accusation should

at length be plainly made, and not spoken in a corner by men who are afraid to speak out."

"Lest they should get the reward of Elfhelm of Shrewsbury," added Edmund.

The bishop here interposed.

"Prince, remember that God has said, 'Honour thy father.'"

"Has he not somewhere also said, 'Parents, provoke not your children to anger'?"

"God judge between you, then," said the bishop, "but I warn you that you appear the greater transgressor."

"Meanwhile," said Edric, "I feel like a man who is being put unjustly to the torture. What is the accusation against me?—let it be stated in plain words."

"That just after the army disbanded in October, you visited the camp of Sweyn, and gave him to understand that the country was at his mercy, opposition being removed."

"What day of the month?"

"I do not know the exact day."

"Perhaps it was in the Greek calends," said Edric.

"I do not know when the Greek calends are, nor do I want to; my mother spent her time, I thank God, in teaching me to speak the truth, and to be true to my country, and not in teaching me outlandish gibberish."

"Still," said the bishop, "it is important to learn the day."

"Alfgar can perhaps inform you, but one day must have been much like another to him in the Danish camp."

"His statement would need verification," said Ednoth.

"He is as true and brave as any man here."

"Of course, all Danes are true and brave," said Edric.

"He is a Christian."

"Yes; I think he became one on S. Brice's day," suggested Edric.

"To save his life, no doubt," said the sheriff.

Meanwhile Ethelred had changed colour, and Edric cried out,—

"Have we not forgotten in whose presence we are? The

king, who was quite ignorant of the mistaken zeal which misinterpreted his wishes that day, cannot bear to be reminded of it. He is all too merciful and gentle for such days as ours."

"I suppose he put on mourning for Elfhelm," whispered Edmund in the bishop's ear.

"Forget not that he is your father."

"We are wasting time," said the king. "Edric, what is your answer to this accusation?"

"That when the army disbanded I went on pilgrimage to the shrine of S. Joseph at Glastonbury, and can produce, in the time requisite for a messenger to go and return, an attestation to that effect. Here," he said, putting his hand to his bosom, and drawing out a reliquary, "is a holy thorn plucked from S. Joseph's tree."

"Art thou not ashamed, my son, to have brought such a charge against the venerator of the Saints, one of the few in whom faith yet lives?"

"No, for I do not believe he was ever there at all."

"Witness the holy thorn."

"Thorns may be plucked in bushels round Dorchester or any other place."

"It is a question of pure testimony," said the bishop.

"It is," added the sheriff and the reeve.

"Then, may I produce my witness?" said Edmund.

"Certainly," said the king. "By all means," added Edric. The bishop called an attendant, and ordered him to fetch Alfgar.

"Before he enters I must remind you all," said Edric, "that the word of a Dane is to be opposed to that of a Christian."

"I have already said that Alfgar is a Christian."

"But Edric had already, by his adroit suggestion about S. Brice's day, predisposed the company to doubt the genuineness of Alfgar's conversion.

A long pause succeeded, which no one seemed to care to break. Ethelred was anxious for his favourite; the traitor

himself was studying how to meet the accusation; the Prince was furious, and was striving in vain to repress his surging passions, the others were perplexed.

The messenger returned after a time to say that Alfgar had left the palace.

"Left the palace!" said Edmund.

"About half-an-hour since."

"There is some vile treason here," said Edmund.

"Treason! on whose part?" said Edric.

"Thine, villain."

"I am glad you think so, for you give me an opportunity of demonstrating to the court how unreasonable your hatred makes you, and how unjust. I have not left the king's presence since your first appearance."

"It is true," said Ethelred.

Edmund was completely baffled.

"It appears to me," said the king, "that he fears the discovery of his villany, and has taken himself off. I will offer a fitting reward to the man who shall produce him; meanwhile, it is useless to continue this scene."

"Wait at least a few minutes," said Edmund, and went forth himself.

Vainly he sought through all the courts of the palace—once he thought Alfgar, whose fidelity he never suffered himself to doubt, might be in the chapel, and went there in vain. At last he found a servitor who had seen him go with some men into the city, and hurried forth in search of him. He passed through all the streets inflaming the curiosity of the watchmen; the darkness (for there were very few lamps, or lights of any kind, in those days for public use) was intense, a drizzling rain was falling, and at length, weary, wet, and dispirited, he returned to the palace, and found that the council, tired of waiting, had at length broken up.

The bishop offered him hospitality, evidently sympathising with his distress, and once suggested a doubt of the fidelity of his page, but Edmund repelled it instantly.

"He is true as life," he said.

"But the king himself is witness that Edric has not left his presence."

"If not, he has plenty of villains about him to anticipate his orders, vile as Godwin, port-hund of Shrewsbury. Depend upon it they have murdered him, but if so, I will have vengeance, such vengeance!—I will challenge the villain Edric to single combat."

"The Church would forbid it."

"Do you then sympathise with the hypocrite?"

"Alas, my son! who can read the heart of man? I know not what to think."

"But you could read the history of the last campaign. A fool might—I beg pardon—were not all our plans known beforehand? Did not all our enterprises fail? Were not all our ambushes anticipated? Did we not fall into all theirs? If they had had a prophet like Elisha, who told the king of Israel all Benhadad said in his council-chamber, they couldn't have managed better. Can you explain this?"

"No, my son."

"Then I can, for I heard Sweyn say that they had a friend in the English camp."

"Then you actually put your head in the lion's mouth, prince?" and the good bishop, purposely to relieve the prince's mind, drew out from him all the story of his late adventures. Deep was the distrust which Ednoth himself entertained of the fair-speaking Edric, yet he would not encourage the Etheling in further ill-timed opposition to his father.

So at last Edmund slept, and trusted that with the morn he should find Alfgar; but the morn came, and all his inquiries were vain.

The chamber in which Alfgar was confined contained a box-like recess for the straw bed, a chair, and a rough table, and these were all the comforts at his disposal, but

they were enough for one in that hardy age. It was very strongly built, not a loose plank about it, although the wind found its way through numerous crevices, to the slight discomfort of the inmate.

But not one hour of sleep could Alfgar take all that night. What would the Etheling think of him? was his constant thought, he who had saved his life at the risk of his (the Etheling's) own. Must he not think that the lad whose life he had saved had been false to him? and this thought was agony to the faithful and true heart of the prisoner.

He scarcely doubted for one moment into whose hands he had fallen—that he was in Edric Streorn's power. The only thing he could not quite comprehend was, why they had thought it worth while to imprison him, when murder would seem the more convenient mode of removing an unpleasant witness.

Early on the following day he heard some people approach the door of the house, and heard them admitted. Shortly afterwards a firm step ascended the stair, and the door opened.

Edric Streorn stood before him.

The captor eyed his captive with a look of conscious pride, and said with some complacence, "You see, and perhaps repent, your rashness in the accusation you made."

"It was true."

"I do not think it worth my while to deny it here; but what of that?—I am an Englishman by birth, but (let us say) a Dane by choice. You are a Dane by the fortune of birth, but an Englishman by choice; the worse choice, you will find, of the two."

Alfgar felt confused.

"But I did not come here to exchange compliments with you, nor to prove, as to the fools you have chosen to serve, that I was on *pilgrimage* at the time you name. I have a direct purpose in detaining you here, for I have lately seen Sweyn."

"Traitor!"

"I thought we had agreed that we could not throw stones at each other on that account. Well, the gentle Sweyn has taken your evasion very much to heart, and earnestly desires to repossess himself of your person; but for this, my easiest plan would have been to rid myself of so troublesome a witness in a more speedy manner, and you might ere this have fed the fishes of the Thames. Therefore," he continued, "unless you can satisfy me of two or three points, I shall deliver you to Sweyn."

Alfgar thought at first that this was simply an idle threat, since it would be almost impossible to convey him secretly through the country to the Isle of Wight. Edric understood his thoughts.

"You forget," he said, "that Sweyn will shortly be here; your friend, the Etheling, may have told you that, if you did not know it before; he is telling it to everybody, but no one believes him. Only think, no one will believe that Sweyn could be so audacious, and they think that, listening behind walls and in cupboards, the Etheling, perhaps, drank too much of what he found there—and that was all. Well, when Sweyn comes, he may, if he will, make a public example to all apostates in your honoured person; meanwhile Edmund thinks you have deserted him." No torturer ever seemed to take a keener pleasure in the throes of his victim, than Edric in the mental agony he kindled in the breast of his unhappy prisoner.

"But I said I might release you, or at least mitigate your fate, on one condition, that you answer me a plain question directly and plainly. Under what name does Edmund travel, and what disguise, and does he purpose to trust himself in the Danish camp again? Where is he at present residing? he has disappeared from the palace."

"Monster!" said Alfgar, "you tempt like Satan. Away, and leave me to my fate."

"You will think better of it by and by when confinement upon bread and water has tamed you. I will come once more, but it will be the last time; and, mark you,

should your people be defeated—the Danes I mean—still your escape would not necessarily follow ; the house might take fire, it is of timber, and would soon burn down ; a sad misfortune it would be. Good morning. I am going to mass with the king ; shall I say a Pater and an Ave for you, since you are prevented from being there ? The saints have you in their holy keeping ! "

His manner throughout had been like that of a cat playing with a mouse, and there was quite a gratified smile upon his lips as he went.

Strange to say, Alfgar felt less miserable after he was gone. The wickedness of Edric seemed so great, his hypocrisy so unblushing, that in his simple faith Alfgar could not believe that he would be allowed to succeed. Many a holy text in the Psalms came to his mind, and seemed to assure him of Divine protection.

" I myself have seen the ungodly in great power ; and flourishing like a green bay tree."

" I went by, and, lo! he was gone ; I sought him, but his place could nowhere be found."

" Seek innocency, and take heed to the thing that is right : for that shall bring a man peace at the last."

" So, come what will," said he, " I will trust in Him ; and never will I save my life by uttering one word which might betray the innocent."

In this manner days lengthened into weeks. He tried in vain to open any intercourse with his ferocious jailor, whose ward was sometimes shared by a comrade, when there was much ungodly revelry below, and snatches of Danish war-songs mingled with profane oaths. The deep, deep bay of the mastiff sometimes gave warning of the advent of a stranger, or of the step heard from the distance, in the still deep night ; but this was all that Alfgar could learn of the outer world, from which he was banished at so critical a moment.

CHAPTER XV.

FATHER CUTHBERT'S DIARY AT CLIFFTON.

SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT.—This evening, after the Vesper service in the church was over, and darkness had closed in, we all sat down to our evening meal. The doors were shut to keep out the storm, and I had already said grace, when the Etheling suddenly appeared.

His manner struck us all. He looked wild and agitated, and his first words cast a chill over us.

"Where is Alfgar?"

"Is he not with you, what has happened?" said I and Herstan, speaking in the same breath.

"No, I have lost him. I had hoped to find him here; they must have murdered him," he cried.

"Murdered him!"

"Yes, he was too dangerous to Edric to be suffered to live. I might have foreseen it; and they have put him out of the way by cowardly assassination," insisted the Etheling.

There was too much reason in his words.

"Besides," said he, "if he were well and uninjured, would he not have come here, where he was sure of a welcome?"

"I will go to Dorchester at once," said Herstan.

"It is useless," said Edmund; but my brother, having learnt all that the prince could tell him, mounted and rode into the town."

Meanwhile Edmund evidently needed our care; we found he had not eaten all day.

"I have risked my life for my country," he said; "and now that I bring tidings which ought to circulate through

the land like the wind, and rouse every man to action, I am disbelieved. Nay, it is hinted that I drank too much Danish wine and mead, and misunderstood what I heard. I could brain the man who dared say so to my face. I could — and would. Meanwhile no steps are taken, no levies called out; but I will myself alarm the country. The innocent blood shall not be on my head."

"Surely they must heed your warning," said we all together.

"Not they. The fox, Edric, pretended that it was all moonshine."

"But did you not expose his *treachery?*" asked I.

"I tried to do so; but he pulled out a bit of some hedge, which he said was a holy thorn from S. Joseph's tree at Glastonbury, and that he was there on pilgrimage when Alfgar saw him—*saw him*, mark you—at the Danish camp on the borders of Sussex; and I saw men, I won't mention names, who had more than once taken reward to slay the innocent, look as if they would go down on their knees to this holy thorn, which wasn't a holy thorn at all, but plucked from some hedge hard at hand. Did not Edric mock them in his heart! I should like to strangle him."

How I thought of those who tithed mint and rue, and all manner of herbs, and passed over justice, mercy, and the love of God.

So, in unavailing complaints, midnight drew on, and we heard the sound of my brother's horse.

He soon entered the room. We saw at a glance that he had laboured in vain, and spent his strength for nought.

"No one has seen him," he said.

"Have you asked many people?" we inquired.

"Yes, scores. The sheriff, the bishop, the watchmen, the tradesfolk—no one has seen or heard aught. I will go again to-morrow."

"Meanwhile, do the people know what passed at the banquet last night?"

"No ; it has all been kept quiet," was the reply. We could do no more, and all retired to rest. I have sat up to say my mattins and finish this diary. It is now nearly the third hour of the morn, and . . . . .

Monday Night, 23d Nov. 1006.—I had written as far as the word "and," when I was alarmed by a loud cry from the chamber next my own, which was occupied by the Etheling. I rose, and knocked at the door, but, receiving no answer, opened it and went in.

I saw at once that the prince was delirious ; the fever, which I had marked in his eyes and manner, but which he struggled against, had at length overcome his brave spirit.

Just as I entered the room, bearing my torch, he sprang out of bed.

"There is a snake under my pillow."

I tried to soothe him.

"It is Edric ; he is turned into a snake, and is trying to sting me. Kill him ! kill him !"

I got him into bed with some difficulty, and sat by him, after giving him a composing draught—for I never travel without a few simples at hand, in case of sickness amongst those to whom I minister.

He slept at last, but it was evident to me that exposure and excitement had grievously injured his health, and that he was in danger of prolonged sickness. Ever and anon he raved in his sleep about Sweyn, Edric, his father, and Alfgar, mixing them up in his mind most strangely : but the object of his abhorrence was ever Edric, while he spoke of Alfgar, "poor Alfgar !" as a father might speak of a son.

I watched by him all through the night, and in the morning he was evidently too ill to rise. His mind became clear for a short time, and yet his memory was so confused that he scarcely comprehended where he was, or how he got here.

So my return to Abingdon is indefinitely delayed, for Herstan and my sister both insist on my staying till he is

out of danger, if God will; and indeed I know no one else to whose care I could willingly commit him.

We think it best not to let his father or Edric know where he is, for we know how his death would rejoice the latter, and the wish is often father to the action. A little would turn the scale now.

Herstan has gone into Dorchester again to inquire about Alfgar, and to ascertain whether any action has been taken consequent upon Edmund's intelligence from Carisbrooke.

Saturday. — Vigil of S. Andrew, and Eve of Advent Sunday.—All this week I have been watching by the sick-bed of the Etheling.

I hope the crisis is past, but he is still very weak. He has been delirious nearly the whole time, and to-day has but a confused idea of things around him.

All our inquiries about Alfgar have been fruitless, but there was one circumstance which we learned, which seemed to me to bear some reference to the matter.

The ferryman, whose hut is situate at the bend of the river below the Synodune hills, where people cross for Wittenham, says that late on the night in question a boat with four people passed down the river, and that it struck him that one only rowed, while two of the rest seemed guarding the fourth passenger. He did not know the boat, yet he thought he knew every boat on the river.

This he has told to Herstan and others, but no further discovery has ensued.

But another important matter has claimed our attention. The king left on Monday without making any efforts to profit by the Etheling's discovery at Carisbrooke; but we could not in conscience let the matter rest. So Herstan and I went on to Dorchester on Wednesday, and I obtained an audience of the bishop, while he sought the sheriff.

The bishop received me very kindly, and talked to me a great deal about the happy days of Dunstan, when peace and plenty ruled everywhere; but I led the conversation

to the point I aimed at, and told him frankly how alarmed we were at Abingdon about Edmund's tidings.

"And so was I," said he, "and I have persuaded the king to place guards and watchers all through the coasts opposite the Wight, and with Edric's aid we elaborated a goodly plan."

"Indeed," said I, "but I wish Edric had nought to do with it."

"So did I at first, but I feel convinced that the young Dane who vanished so suspiciously must have deceived the prince concerning the presence of Edric in the Danish camp, and that we have no sufficient reason for thinking him such a child of hell as he would be could he betray his country thus cruelly. It would be Satanic wickedness. He is, I believe, a bad and untrustworthy man, but not quite so bad as all that."

I tried to explain my reasons for being of a contrary opinion, and asked what was the *plan.*

"Advanced guards have been placed all along the coasts of Hampshire, beacons prepared on every hill, with constant attendants, so that the Danes would find their coming blazed over the country at once."

"But if so, what men have we to oppose to them?"

"The sheriff has promised that the levies shall appear in case of need."

"Does he realise the danger?"

"I hardly think he believes in it; but the beacons will give sufficient warning."

"Who has arranged the guards and chosen the sites for the beacons?"

"Edric, of course, as general of the forces under the king.

I could say no more—it was useless—but I felt very sick at heart. After the noon meat I left the palace, and found my brother ready to depart for home. His interview had been the counterpart of mine. Neither had he succeeded in convincing the sheriff that there was any danger to be apprehended.

Well, all we can do is to prepare ourselves for the worst. I find that no tidings have been sent by any authority to the men of this estate to hold themselves in readiness for sudden alarm. I wonder whether the same remissness prevails elsewhere. No one expects danger. The Danes, they say, never fight in winter.

Advent Sunday, 1006.—My patient was able to sit up for a short time to-day, but his weakness is very pitiable to behold, and he dares not leave his room. He inquired very earnestly after Alfgar, and I found great difficulty in persuading him to commit the matter to God, which is all that we can do; for although the river has been dragged, the country searched, no tidings have yet been obtained, and we can only believe that the poor lad has been secretly murdered and buried, or that he has been sent away out of the country.

"I had a strange dream about him," said Edmund. "I thought that it was midnight of Christmas Eve, and that I was attending mass, when, just as the words were sung by the choir, 'Pax in terra,' the scene suddenly changed, and I stood in the dark on the chalk hills which overlook the Solent; by my side was a beacon ready laid for firing. I thought next I saw the Solent covered with the war-ships of the Danes, who were advancing towards the English shore, and that I tried to fire the beacon, but all in vain, for the wood was wet through, and would not burn.

"Then I had a strange sense of woe and desolation, for my country was in danger, and I could not even warn her. All at once I heard steps rushing towards me, and Alfgar appeared bearing a lighted torch. He thrust it into the pile, and it fired at once. Other beacon-fires answered it, and the country was aroused. Then I awoke."

Saturday, December 5th, 1006.—The week has again been spent mainly at Cliffton. The prince is better, but only able to rise a few hours each day, and I fear a relapse would be fatal.

On Wednesday I visited Abingdon, and had a long conference with the abbot about the neglected warning Edmund had given; but he seemed to think that the beacon fires and the guards placed near the sea coast secure us sufficiently. Like all the world, he thinks that the Etheling has exaggerated the danger.

I have written a full account of all things to my brother at Æscendune. Father Adhelm is still there ministering to the flock.

Saturday, December 12th, 1006.—The week has passed monotonously enough. The Etheling is now able to leave his room, but the stormy weather, with its torrents of rain, makes it impossible for him to leave the house. The river has overflowed its banks; all the country around is like a lake. We console him by telling him that all has been done which is possible, both to warn the people and learn the fate of Alfgar. He tries to look contented, but if he knew how little has really been done, and that that little has been in Edric's hands, he would not be so contented.

Saturday, December 19th, 1006.—A very severe frost has set in this week, and there has been much snow; the whole country is decked in her winter braveries for Christmas. O that it may pass in peace, as the birth-day of the Prince of Peace should pass!

I intend to spend it at Cliffton, after which I shall return to my flock at Æscendune.

Edmund has been out to-day, but the sharp air hurt his lungs, which have been grievously inflamed, and he was forced to return early.

He has been so patient for one of his temperament, so grateful for attention shown him, one would hardly think the lion could be such a lamb. He intends to receive the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ on Christmas day in the little church of S. Michael here, and then he will leave for London in the course of the week.

We have heard nothing of Alfgar—we fear there is no hope; but the prince clings to it, and says his dream will come true, and that Alfgar has yet a great work to do.

Christmas Eve, 1006.—O happy happy Christmas-tide! All griefs seem hushed and all joys sanctified by the blessed mystery of the Incarnation. O that Mary's blessed Son, the Prince of Peace, may indeed bring us peace on earth, and good will towards men!

The weather is beautiful. The stars shine as brightly to-night as if they were the lights about His throne; the very earth has decked herself in her clear and spotless robe of snow in His honour. As for the dear ones who were with us last Christmas—Bertric, Alfgar (for I fear he is gone where I hope he keeps a happier Christmas)—they have left the heart less lonely, for if we miss them on earth they seem to attract us to heaven, which is yet more like home when we think of the loved and the lost who await us there.

We sing a midnight mass in an hour in the little church, another to-morrow at dawn, a third in the full daylight. All the good people here will communicate, and the evening will be given up to such merry-making as is befitting amongst Christians. All the ceorls and serfs will be at the Hall, and the prince will share the entertainment. Herstan and Bertha have been very busy preparing for it, as also their children, Hermann, Ostryth, and Ælfleda.

But I must go and assist in decking the church for the midnight festivity.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS.

ALFGAR had completely lost the reckoning of times and days since his imprisonment, but he felt that weeks must have passed away, and that the critical period foretold by Edmund must be near, so he listened anxiously for any intelligence from the world without.

At last the weather became very cold, and being without a fire, his sufferings were great, until his ferocious gaoler, finding him quite stiffened, brought up a brazier of coals, which saved his prisoner's life, while it filled the room with smoke, which could only escape by the crevices in walls and roof, for to open a window would have been as bad as to dispense with the fire, such was the state of the outer air.

It was what we call an old-fashioned Christmas, in all its glory and severity—a thing easy enough to bear, nay to enjoy, when men have warm fires and plenty of food, but hard enough to endure where these are absent.

At last Alfgar could but conclude it was Christmas tide, for Higbald was joined by two comrades, and they sang and rioted below in a way which showed that they had got plenty of intoxicating drink, and were making free with it.

In the evening of the day Higbald brought him up his supper, staggering as he did so, and with it he brought in a bowl of hot mead. "Drink," he said, "and drown care. It is Yule tide, and drink thou must and shalt."

Alfgar drank moderately, for sooth to say it was invigorating and welcome that cold day, but Higbald finished

the bowl then and there, and then staggering down, drew the outer bolt in such a way that it missed the staple, which fact he was too drunk to perceive.

Alfgar watched the action with eager eyes. It was the first time there had been even a chance of escape.

Meanwhile the evening sped by; and the noisy crew below quarrelled and sang, drank and shouted, while the bright moonlight — brighter as it was reflected from the snow of that December night — stole over the scene.

Not till then did Alfgar pass silently through the open door, and listen at the head of the staircase. Before him was the outer door, the key in the lock. The question was, Could he reach it unobserved by men or mastiff?

Liberty was worth the attempt. He descended the stairs softly. At the bottom he looked around. The door was fastened which led into the large hall where the gaolers were drinking. He advanced to the outer portal, when he heard the growl of the dog from behind the inner door. The moment was critical. Evidently his masters did not comprehend the action of the too faithful brute, for they cursed and swore at it. Even then it growled, and the drunken fools—drunken they must have been indeed—threw some heavy missile at it, which caused it to yelp and cease its growling.

Just then something flashed in the ray of moonlight which stole in through an aperture over the door.

It was a sharp double-edged sword.

He grasped it with eagerness. It was now a case of liberty or death. He knew how to wield it full well.

Stealthily he turned the key and the door stood open. Still his captors sang, and he caught the words,—

> "When we cannot get blood we can drink the red wine,
> The Sea King sang in his might;
> For it maddens the brain, it gives strength to the arm,
> And kindles the soul in the fight."

Now he was on the outer side of the door, and he shut it, and then locked it and tossed the key into the snow.

But which way was he to go? He could not make out the locality, but it was evident that the hill rose above him, and he knew that from its summit he could discern the bearings of places; so he resolved to ascend.

It was now about nine at night, an hour when our ancestors generally retired to rest. All Alfgar's desire and hope—O how joyful a hope!—was to see from the hill the bearings of Cliffton, and to descend, with all the speed in his power, towards it. He might arrive before they had retired to rest. So he ran eagerly forward. The moon was bright, and the snow reflected so much light that locomotion was easy.

And now he became conscious that there was a strange gleam along the snow on his left hand,—a strange red gleam, which grew stronger and stronger as he advanced. It seemed above and below,—to redden the skies, the frozen tree-tops with their glittering snow-wreaths, and the smooth surface beneath alike.

Redder and redder as he ascended, until he suddenly emerged upon the open hill. Before him were earthworks, which had been thrown up in olden wars, before Englishman or Dane had trodden these coasts. He scrambled into a deep hollow filled with snow, then out again, and up to the summit, when he saw the cause of the illumination.

Before him the whole country to the south-east seemed in flames. Village after village gave forth its baleful light; and even while he gazed the fiery flood burst forth in spots hitherto dark. He stood as one transfixed, until the wind brought with it a strange and fearful cry, as if the exultation of fiends were mingled with the despairing cry of perishing human beings.

He knew whence it came by the red light slowly stealing beyond the next hill, and the fiery tongues of flame which rose heavenward, although the houses were hidden by the ground.

It was from Wallingford, a town three miles below Dorchester. He knew, too, where he was himself; and the one

impulse which rushed upon him was to hasten to Cliffton, where he trusted he might find Edmund, or, at least, hear of him in this dread emergency. He saw the village lying beneath in the distance, and turned to rush downward, entering the wood in a different direction.

But what sound is that which makes him start and pause?

It is the bay of the mastiff. He is pursued. He clasps his sword with desperate tenacity, in which a foe might read his doom, and rushes on, crushing through the brush-wood.

Again the bay of the hound.

"Onward, onward," he tramples through bush and bramble, until he sees his progress suddenly arrested by the dark-flowing river.

He coasts along its banks, keeping up stream. The bay of the dog seems close at hand, and the trampling of human feet accompanies it.

All at once he comes upon a road descending to the brink, and sees a ferry-boat at the foot of the descent. He rushes towards it and enters. The pole is in the boat. He unlooses the chain, but with difficulty, and precious moments are lost. He hears the panting of the ferocious beast just as he pushes the boat, with vigorous thrust, out into the stream.

The dog, followed closely by the men, is on the bank. The men curse and swear, but the dog plunges into the chilly stream, which, being swollen, has too rapid a current to freeze. Alfgar sees the brute swimming after the boat; he ceases to use the pole, but takes his sword, kneels on the stern of the boat, and waits for the mastiff. It gains the boat, and tries to mount, when the keen steel is driven between the fore-paws to its very heart. One loud howl, and it floats down the stream, dyeing the waters with its life-blood.

"Cursed Dane!" shouts Higbald, "thou shalt pay with thy own life-blood."

"When you catch me; and even then you must fight for it. Meanwhile, if you be an Englishman, warn the good people of Dorchester that the Danes are upon them. Your Edric has betrayed them."

Reaching the other shore, Alfgar finds smooth meadows all covered with snow. He knows his way now. A little higher up he strikes the main road which leads to Cliffton, and rushes on past field and grove, past hedgerow and forest. Behind him the heavens are growing angry with lurid light, before him the earth lies in stillness and silence; the moonbeams slumbering on placid river, glittering on frozen pool, or silvering happy homesteads—happy hitherto. He sees the lights in the hall of Herstan yet burning, and casting their reflection abroad. He is at the foot of the ascent leading up to it. One minute more and——

Christmas day was almost over when the population of Herstan's village of Cliffton obeyed the summons with alacrity to spend the evening in the hall in feasting and merriment. They had all duly performed the religious duties of the day, and had been greatly edified by the homily of Father Cuthbert at mass; and now innocent mirth was to close the hallowed day—mirth which they well believed was not alien to the birthday of Him who once sanctified the marriage festivities at Cana by His first miracle.

So thither flocked the young and the old: the wood-rangers and hunters from the forests of Newenham, where Herstan had right of wood-cutting; the men who wove baskets and hurdles of osier-work from the river-banks; the theows who cultivated the home farm; the ceorls who rented a hide of land here and a hide there—all, the grandfather and the grandson, accepted the invitation to feast. The rich and the poor met together, for God was the Maker of them all.

The huge Yule-log burnt upon the hearth as it had done since it was lighted the night before; a profusion of

torches turned night into day; the tables groaned with the weight of the good cheer; in short, all was there which could express joy and thanksgiving.

The supper was over; the wild boar roasted whole, the huge joints of mutton and beef, the made dishes, the various preparations of milk, had disappeared, the cheerful cup was handed round; after which the tables were removed, the gleemen sang their Christmas carols, and all went merry as a "marriage bell."

Father Cuthbert, seated in a corner near the Yule-log, with his brother-in-law and the Etheling, forgot all his apprehensions, and shared in the universal joy around him; if his thoughts were sometimes with those who had once made Christmas bright to him—if he thought of the bright-haired Bertric, who had been the soul of last Yule-tide festivity at Æscendune, or of the desolated home there, he dismissed the subject from his mind at once, and suffered no hint to drop which could dim the mirth of his fellow guests.

Meanwhile, one of those whom he strove in vain to forget for the time drew nearer and nearer; a haggard figure, wan and worn by painful imprisonment, the garments dishevelled, the hair matted, the whole figure wild with excitement, he drew near the outer gate.

He heard the song of joy and peace within as he paused one moment before blowing the horn which hung at the outer gate.

Peace! Peace!
The whole wide world rejoiceth now,
Let war and discord cease;
Christ reigneth from the manger,
Away with strife and danger;
Our God, before whom angels bow,
Hath taught this lesson by his birth,
Good will to men, and peace on earth,
Peace! Peace!
Hark, through the silent air
Angelic songs declare
God comes on earth to dwell;
O hear the heavenly chorus swell,
Good will to men,
And on earth, peace.

He could bear it no longer, the contrast was too painful, he must break the sweet charm, the hallowed song, for the sky was reddening yet more luridly behind him, and each moment he expected to see Dorchester burst forth into flames. O what a Christmas night!

He blew the horn, and had to blow it again and again before he was heard.

At length a solitary serf came to the gate: "Who is there?"

"A messenger for the Etheling; is Prince Edmund with you? I would see him."

"All are welcome to-night, but I fear you will find the Etheling ill-disposed to leave the feast."

"Let me in."

Astonished at the tone of the request, the porter reluctantly complied, first looking around.

"Why, thou art wild and breathless; is aught amiss?"

"Step out and look over the hills; what dost thou see?"

"Why, the heaven is in fire; is it the northern lights?"

"*Southern*, you mean; the Danes are upon us."

Staggered by the tidings, the man no longer opposed his entrance, and Alfgar staggered into the hall, forgetting that he was come amongst them like one risen from the dead.

He entered the hall at first unnoticed, but the merry laughter and cheerful conversation withered before his presence, as of one who came to blast it.

Father Cuthbert and Edmund, amongst others, turned round to see what caused the lull, and started from their seats as they beheld at the end of the room Alfgar, his face pale as one risen from the dead, his black locks hanging dishevelled around his neck, his garments torn, his whole person disordered. At first they really believed he had returned from the tomb.

They hesitated, but for one moment, in speechless surprise, then rushed forward.

"Alfgar!" cried the Prince. "My son!" cried Father Cuthbert, "whence hast thou come? dost thou yet live?"

"Father; Prince; I live to warn you—the Danes, the Danes!" and he sank fainting into the arms of Herstan.

"Surely he raves," said they all.

The porter here ventured to speak.

"My lord, please go to the front of the house and look over the water."

Father Cuthbert and Edmund at once left the hall, followed by several others.

The mansion was seated on a considerable elevation; below them rolled the Isis; across the river a couple of miles of flat meadow land lay between them and the Synodune hills, and beyond the lessening range of those hills, on the south-east, they looked, and behold the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOR HEARTH AND HOME.

THE inhabitants of Cliffton stood on the terrace in front of the hall, gazing upon the fiery horizon, wrapped in emotions of surprise and alarm. Living as they did in an unsettled age, and far more prepared than we should be for such a contingency, yet the sense of the rapid approach of a cruel and remorseless foe struck terror into many hearts.

But they had one amongst them to whom warfare and strife were a second nature—one in whom the qualities which form the hero were very fully developed. He gazed with sadness, but without fear, at the coming storm, and to their late patient the inmates of the hall turned for advice and aid in their dread emergency.

"What shall we do?" asked Herstan, gazing with indescribable feelings at those who clung to him for support.

"The case is clear as the day," said the prince. "The storm I foretold in vain has broken over the land, and the levies are not ready to meet it. Listen; you may hear the sounds of alarm from Dorchester even here. They see their danger."

The tolling of the alarm bells, the sound of distant shouts, the blowing of trumpets rolled in a confused flood of noise across the intervening space—a distance of between two and three miles—and manifested the intense alarm of the city, so cruelly aroused from dreams of peace.

"But what shall we do?"

"Defend the place if attacked; it is well adapted for defence. You have the river on one side, and a cliff no Dane

could scale in the face of our battle-axes; on the other side, your earthworks and palisades keep the foe at a distance from the main building. How many able-bodied men are present now?"

"Happily we have all our force; the feast has brought them all here. There would be from sixty to seventy men, besides a score of boys."

"And how are you provided with weapons?"

"Each man has a battle-axe, and there are scores of spears in the armoury."

"And arrows?"

"Whole sheaves of them; and as good yew bows as were ever bent."

"Come, we shall do; and now about provisions?"

"You see we have bounteous fare now, but it would not last many days."

"Many days we shall not want it—many days! Why, the levies must all be out within twenty-four hours, and the Danes are not strong enough to maintain themselves here. It is but a raid; but they might all have been taken or slain had my father but believed me. As it is, they have shed much innocent blood by this time."

"You think, then, our buildings are capable of defence?"

"Assuredly; it would be madness to sacrifice such a position. If the Danes are about in the neighbourhood, it would be far more dangerous to expose your helpless ones *without* the fortifications. Have you all your people here, or are there a few sick?"

"A few sick, only."

"Let them be sought at once; the heathen will be revelling like fiends about the country. For the present I think Dorchester and Abingdon safe. Wallingford, if I may judge by the light over the hills, has utterly fallen. They were probably taken unawares; and their defences were never good. Now we must at once to work."

"Prince, you have more experience of war than I; you will be our commander?"

"I accept the post. To tell the truth, it will be a treat for me after the illness and confinement I have gone through; the thought of the struggle makes me feel myself again."

And so this strangely constituted man went forth and spoke to the assembled multitude, who stood passively gazing at the distant conflagration.

"Now, Englishmen, a few words to you all. We shall have, I hope, to fight these Danes; and for the honour of our country must even quit ourselves like men. Why should not the Englishman be a match for the Dane? ay, more than a match for the cut-throat heathen? Here we stand on a rock with our defence secure; and here we will live or die in defence of our women and children. What say you all?"

"We will live or die with you."

"Well said, men. Now, one good hearty cheer; no, stop, I should like them to be caught in their own traps. I know their plan. If they find the good people of Dorchester are awake, as the noise shows, they will swarm all over the neighbourhood like wasps after honey, to plunder the isolated houses and farms, and carry off all they can; and this place is too conspicuous—too much of a city on a hill—to be hidden. Well, we will be ready for them. Now, first of all, we must set our outposts around to give us due warning of their approach; and then every man must arm himself as best he can, and let me see what figure you can all make."

He was interrupted by a childish voice, and saw Herstan's little son, a boy of twelve years, touching his garment, and looking at him with unfeigned admiration.

"May I not fight the Danes, Prince?"

"No, you are too young; you must go and take care of your mother and sisters."

"I don't want to be shut up with the women. I have killed a wolf. I shot him with my bow in Newenham wood."

"Well, we will see by and by, my brave boy. We

shall have work for all; go and arm with the rest. Well, Alfgar?"

"Let my post be near you."

"You will fight in this quarrel, then?"

"Yes; to save Christian blood."

"Then I adopt you as an Englishman—Dane no longer. I know your courage and coolness, and will employ it where it is wanted. Now, you know the place; come and place the outposts where they can retire easily."

The small sally-port, as it would have been called in later times, was opened, and two men were in each case posted together all round the building, under cover of trees, at convenient distances. The trees immediately around the house had been cut down a few weeks earlier, by order of Herstan, who saw they might afford cover to an enemy, in case the prince's prophecies were fulfilled, as proved now to be the case.

The building was large and irregular, and had been added to at various times, the hall, looking over the river, forming its most conspicuous portion; but it had not originally been built for purposes of defence, and could not have endured the Danish assault for a moment, but for external defences, utterly independent of the building, which had been recently added; a mound, surmounted by crossed palisades, skilfully strengthened by osier bands, and a deep outer ditch, now full of snow, surrounded the building on three sides. The fourth was defended by the river, which, being full owing to the late rains, rushed impetuously along below.

"Alfgar," said Edmund, "ask Father Cuthbert to see that all the helpless ones—women and children—are safely shut up in an inner apartment, where no Danish arrow can find them."

This was accomplished, and Father Cuthbert cheered them all with his calm placid manner; reassuring this one and cheering that, seeming quite insensible to fear himself: one moment all sympathy, then all brightness, his presence was invaluable in the crisis.

"And now," said Edmund, "to the stables; the horses and cattle must be turned loose to-night, or the Danes will burn them in their barns and sheds."

The farm buildings lay some little distance without, and the Etheling and Alfgar, with two or three farm servants, carried out the task hastily but effectually. Duties were meanwhile assigned to all the able-bodied women and boys: some provided buckets and ladders, that, in case the Danes attempted to kindle a flame, they might attempt in vain; others tore up lint and prepared bandages for the wounded, while others passed into the upper apartments to see that no lights remained which could direct the aim of the foe.

The night had somewhat changed its character while all these things were going on; clouds obscured the moon, and light flakes of snow commenced to fall. The wind began to moan, as if a storm were at hand.

Alfgar visited the outposts while Edmund assigned their several stations to the men, who were now armed in readiness for the defence. When the former reached the post on the river's bank lower down, he saw that the sentinel had thrown himself ear to the earth, and was listening intently; he imitated his example.

A deep dull sound from the distance was heard, and Alfgar recognised the tread of an approaching host.

"Let us withdraw," he said.

They fell back quietly; Alfgar, passing rapidly round, warned all the other sentinels, and when all had entered, the gates were closed; all was done in profound silence.

Then Edmund caused the men to fit their arrows to the string, and to lie upon the inward slope of the earthworks, so as to be invisible; he placed all the rest of the men at the windows and loopholes of the building. Similarly prepared, Edmund, with Alfgar and young Hermann by his side, waited at the window commanding the gateway, when the Lady Bertha came up to them.

"Has not Father Cuthbert returned?"

"Returned?"

"Yes; he went to the church to bring in the sacred vessels and vestments."

Alfgar rose instantly.

"I will go and seek him," he cried.

"Then pass out by the postern gate, on the angle nearest the church; I fear the danger is great, but he must be told that the foe is near, or he may fall into their hands."

Alfgar left the hall and passed to an angle of the defences where a little gate led out towards the church; the bridge had been removed, and he had absolutely to descend into the ditch amongst the deep snow.

Emerging, he crossed the burial yard, and found the good father returning heavily laden with the precious vessels and other objects he had been able to save.

"Father," he said; "the enemy is near."

"Indeed! so soon?"

"We must enter by the postern gate."

"I could hardly cross the snow burdened as I am; is it unsafe to try the other gate? I hear no sound, see no symptom of danger."

They paused; all was so quiet that Alfgar yielded, and they passed round the mansion. The drawbridge was up, and no danger seemed near; the trees were in deep shadow, for the clouds, obscuring the moon, made the night very dark.

Alfgar gave the signal, and the drawbridge was lowered; but they had scarcely set foot upon it when dark figures rushed from the shadows behind them. The bridge, which they both had passed, was actually rising, when the foremost Dane leapt upon it, but was rewarded by a blow from the battle-axe of Alfgar, which sent him tumbling into the snow; two or three others leapt forward and clung to the edge of the bridge, but fell into the ditch like the first; the two fugitives entered, and the gate was closed.

Then the awful war-cry of the Danes arose from earth to heaven, chilling the very blood; and, disdaining all further concealment, the murderous warriors rushed forward,

doubtless expecting to find the place almost undefended, and to carry the defences at a rush.

But they were soon fatally undeceived, for so perfect had been Edmund's arrangements, that a storm of arrows burst from all parts of the building and embankment, laying nearly half the assailants dying or wounded on the ground.

Still the survivors threw themselves into the ditch, and strove in vain to pass the palisades, which projected over their heads, and which were vigorously defended by spear and battle-axe.

But in one place a gigantic warrior succeeded in hewing an aperture with his axe, wielded by giant strength, and all might have been lost had not Edmund perceived it, and rushed to its defence, collecting by his shout half-a-dozen followers. Several Danes strove to pass the breach; one was already through, and Edmund attacked him; meanwhile two others had crept through, but were cut off from their fellows, for the English rallied in front and presented an impenetrable barrier with their spears, while from the windows above the arrows rained upon the assailants.

Edmund's axe had found its victim; Herstan, who was by his side, had engaged and wounded the second; and, meanwhile, Alfgar, who was glaring about him for a foe, discovered the third, whose aspects and form were at once recognised by him.

"What! you, Higbald!" he cried.

"You shall escape no more," cried his late gaoler, and brought his axe down with a mighty rush. Alfgar leapt nimbly aside, and before his bulky but clumsy antagonist could recover his guard, passed his keen sword beneath the left arm, through the body, and the giant staggered and fell, a bloody foam rising to his lips, as he quivered in the agonies of death.

All was again silent. The Danes, discomfited for the moment, having lost half their number, had retired, pro-

bably waiting for reinforcements, and the victor addressed Edmund.

"Look," he cried; "this man is a servant of Edric Streorn."

"Is it true, fellow?" said Edmund sternly.

"What if it is? I am dying now, and it cannot matter to me." The last words were interrupted by a convulsive struggle.

"Art thou an Englishman or a Dane?" said the Etheling, bending over the dying ruffian in his anxiety to learn the whole truth.

"What is that to thee?"

"Much, if thou wouldst escape death."

"Escape death! I cannot. Neither wilt thou escape Edric Streorn, and I shall not die unavenged. Ah! young springal, *thou* wilt not escape again. To think that thy puny hand should give Higbald his death-blow! Ah, I am choked!"

Alfgar's sword had pierced his lungs, and a gush of blood rushing to the mouth stopped the breath of Higbald for ever.

"I have brought the foe upon you. We are tracked," said Alfgar. "Edric and the Danes are in alliance."

"But they have not taken this place yet; neither shall they, by God's help! Ha! was that lightning? Nay, it is winter."

A sudden burst of fiery light illuminated the scene, and the defenders looked forth, in spite of their danger, from their fortifications. The little church of S. Michael burst forth into billowing eddies of smoke and flame.

"This is a grievous sight, to see the place we had dedicated to God destroyed by the bloody heathen. O that He would stretch forth His hand as in the days of old!"

"Would I had but two hundred men; I would fall upon the villains in the rear, and leave not one," said Edmund.

"Look—the farm buildings!" cried little Hermann.

"The poor horses and oxen!" cried the Lady Bertha.

"They are safe," said Edmund. "You may hear the trampling of hoofs even now. The fools of Danes are hunting them in all directions. I do not think they will catch many."

Lights appeared in two or three places, and soon it became evident that the ruthless foe had gained their object, as the barns and stables lit up in all directions, and the manor-house was surrounded by the double conflagration, so that every object was as distinctly visible as in open daylight.

"To your buckets! Pour water upon the roof; and, archers, look out for the enemy; keep him as far off as you can."

The boys and women were speedily on the roof pouring water in all directions, in case the wind should deposit the burning brands upon the structure. Meanwhile flights of arrows came from the distance, and settled around them; but they were spent before arrival in most cases, for the defenders kept the ground clear for a large circle around by their well-sustained discharges. Not a few dead bodies lying in the glare of the fire testified to their deadly skill.

The flames passed from stable to barn, and barn to shed. The triumphant cries of the Danes added to the horror of the scene, heard as they were amidst the continuous roaring of the flames. Crash, crash, went roof after roof, the fall of the little church on the opposite side first leading the awful chorus. Life seemed the penalty of either Englishman or Dane who dared to trust his person within the circle of light.

The Lady Bertha was comforting her two little girls, Ostryth and Alfleda, where they sat, cowering and terrified, in their own little bed-chamber, the window so barricaded that no arrow could enter, but yet not sufficiently to keep out the glare of the flames.

"Mother, how light it is!" said the little Ostryth; "how dreadfully bright!"

"It will soon be darker again."

"But is it fire? Are they burning the house?"

"No, dearest. They have set the farm on fire. It cannot hurt us."

"But the horses, and my poor little pony?"

"Are safe, dearest one. The Etheling went and let them all loose."

"Oh! how good of him. I am so glad."

"Mother, let Hermann come and sit with us."

"Nay, he will out to the fight. He is a boy, and must learn to be a soldier."

"Oh, but he will get hurt, perhaps killed."

"Courage, dear child; remember how often I have told you how God helps those who trust in Him. Say your prayers, your Pater and Credo, and ask God to take care of dear father and Hermann."

"Mother!" said a voice. She looked up, and saw Hermann, his forehead covered with blood.

"It is nothing, mother," said the spirited lad, as he wiped the blood away; "at least only the scratch of an arrow while I was on the roof. Father wishes you to send all the women who are strong enough to help to carry water from the river. The well is dry, and the men cannot be spared from the embankment. We expect another attack, and there are great patches of blazing straw flying about in the wind."

She spoke a few words to the women, and all but two or three, who were too weak or ill, went forth to the work. One kiss she imprinted eagerly on his brow, and dismissed him back to his perilous task without allowing herself one sigh. "Now, dear ones," she said to the little girls, "keep quiet till mother comes back. I must go."

"O mother, do not leave us!"

But she could not listen to the earnest pleadings, for

she felt that where other women exposed themselves, she too must go, and cheer by her example.

A long line, reaching to the brink of the river, was soon formed, and buckets were being passed from hand to hand. A loud cry, and a boy in the line fell from an arrow, which retained just sufficient strength to pierce his heart. Herstan and Father Cuthbert carried the corpse reverently within, the father remembering that but that morning he had fed with the Bread of Life, at the altar of S. Michael, this poor lad, so soon to be called to meet the Judge who had entertained him as a guest at His holy Table that Christmas morn. Two or three others were soon wounded, but not seriously, and when a supply of water ready for all emergencies had been collected on the roof, the dangerous duty was over.

Pale and collected, the Lady Bertha was returning to her children, when she passed the corpse. One moment, and the thought struck her that it was Hermann, and the mother's heart gave a great leap. Tremblingly she put aside the cloth with which they had veiled it, and was undeceived. Repressing her feelings, she was again by the side of her little girls, when the fearful cries of the assailants once more rang through the air.

"Stand to your post! Quit yourselves like men! Be firm!" shouted the stentorian voice of Edmund.

Onward came the Danes, in three parties, to attack the three sides of the building. The arrows diminished their numbers, but stayed them not. They left a struggling dark line upon the ground, but the wounded had to care for themselves. Edmund rushed to command the defence at the gate, leaving Alfgar to superintend that upon the right hand, and Herstan on the left. They had but one moment, and they were in the thick of the conflict.

Shouts mingled with shrieks. Sword, battle-axe, and spear did their deadly work through and above the palisade; arrows rained down from the roof and windows on the assailants, women and boys doing their part in that

manner, while the men did theirs with battle-axe and sword on the bulwarks. In one or two places the palisade threatened to give way, and at last three or four stakes were dragged out in one spot; blow after blow of the axe was spent upon the yielding fabric, and a breach was effected.

The Etheling perceived it, and rushed to the scene just as two or three of the English, less used to arms, were yielding before the ponderous weapons of the Danes. Throwing himself into the breach, his practised arm made a desert around him. Of immense muscular strength, his blows came down like the fabled hammer of Thor, crushing helmet and breastplate alike before the well-tempered steel of his favourite weapon. The foe were driven back, and for one moment he stood in the breach alone.

Then and then only was he recognised.

"The gleeman! the false gleeman! the Etheling Edmund!" in various energetic cries, attested his fame, and the hatred of his foes.

"Yes, dogs, ye know me, and the prize ye have to win. Back, drunkards and cannibals, back to your royal parricide with the gleeman's greetings, and tell him Hela is waiting for him and his friend the accursed Edric."

A shower of arrows was the only answer, but they missed the joints, and rattled harmlessly from the well-tempered armour which Edmund wore. Still the position was critical, and Alfgar, with gentle violence, persuaded him to descend from his perilous position.

Here the attack was foiled, and foiled so decidedly, that the ditch was actually half filled with corpses. Cries of distress arose from the opposite side, but Edmund's arm restored the balance *there*, so great was the influence of one man, and so great the power of physical force in the desperate conflicts of that day.

Foiled at every point, the invaders were driven from the embankment. It was evident that they had miscalculated the forces of the defenders, and that they had

advanced beyond their main body in insufficient strength to take the place by assault. Could they have supplied the place of the fallen by fresh men, until they had wearied the defenders out, they would have succeeded, but they were evidently not in strength to do this; so they slowly yielded, until the deadly struggle ceased, and silence resumed her empire, while the besieged repaired the damage the defences had sustained.

"They have retired," said Herstan, wiping the sweat from his brow and the blood from his axe.

"Ay," said Edmund, "they will not now take the place by assault; they are not more than two to one, considering the losses they have sustained. They have lost twice as many as we. If we were a little stronger I would head a sally. "Ah! what was that?"

A globe of fire traversing the arc of a circle, rose from beyond the embers of the barns, and, sailing through the air, fell upon the roof, which, owing to the intense heat from the conflagration which had raged around, was in a very dry and inflammable state. Another, then another followed, and Edmund cried aloud—

"Pass up the water to the roof, to the roof. We shall need all our hands now."

He rushed up himself, but charged Herstan to remain below, and see that, whatever happened, the defences were not forsaken for one moment.

The defenders on the roof were prompt with their remedy; and no sooner did a flaming brand arrive than it was extinguished, provided it fell in a spot easy of access. But at length some of the deadly missiles fell where they could not be immediately reached, and one of these eluded the observation of the besieged until they saw a sheet of flame curl over the eaves beneath the roof, and play upon the surface of the huge beams above, until they suddenly started into flame. Water was dashed upon it, but only partially extinguished the destroying element, which broke out in fresh places until the defenders became desperate. And

now flight after flight of arrows fell amongst them, and many wounds were received, while the smoke and flame seemed to find fresh fuel each moment, and to need all the energies of the English.

It was at this inauspicious moment that the Danes charged the palisades again with deadly fury, while the attention of all was drawn to the flames; so fierce was the attack, that it was necessary once more to concentrate all the strength of the besieged to repel them; and the fire gained in strength, roared and hissed in its fury, seizing for its prey the whole roof of the eastern wing of the building.

And now the Danish archers, drawing nearer, sent fresh flights of arrows on those who were labouring on the house top, and, killing several, drove the others away. The condition of the English was rapidly getting desperate. Edmund threw himself into the strife, and drove the foe back from the breach they had previously made, but even his valour could not restore confidence.

"All is lost! all is lost!" cried some panic-stricken trembler, as he saw the flames spread. "To the river, to the river, to the boats!" cried others.

"Nay, nay," shouted Edmund, "we are not conquered yet; we can defend ourselves till daylight, or we can depart in order. Alfgar, bid the women and children prepare to leave the hall as the fire spreads; and you, Herstan, see that if the worst comes to the worst, the retreat to the river is made in order. We will defend the place if necessary till the last man, and cover your retreat; but all is not lost yet. Take a dozen stout men, mount the roof, the fire is not lower down; let them destroy the burning portion with their axes; let the women stand behind with the water. Archers, keep the Danes back. See those brutes there aiming at your wives on the roof; bring them down; make them keep their distance. Guard well the palisades."

But, although his orders were obeyed, the Danes grew bolder; the men could not work on the roof in the midst of the arrows. The women and children, emerging terror-

struck from the hall, made every father's heart sink within him. Edmund cried aloud—

"To the gate, to the gate! the villains have got the drawbridge down."

He rushed to the spot himself, and found that some adventurous Dane had severed the chains and lowered the bridge in the momentary confusion of its defenders, and the gate was yielding before their strokes.

He arrived; and that moment the gate fell. He stood in the breach himself; one man against a dozen. He did all a hero could; but he was already bleeding. Alfgar, ever faithful, fought like a lion by his side. Herstan and his bravest warriors brought their aid, but all seemed lost.

"Tell them to retreat to the river. Herstan, conduct the retreat; Alfgar and I can keep them out for five minutes more."

"All is lost! all is lost!" the cry arose within.

"No; saved! saved!" cried Father Cuthbert from the roof. "What! Englishmen, to the rescue! to the rescue!"

The Danes suddenly wavered, then turned in surprise and despair; for from the darkness behind emerged the forms of hundreds of Englishmen, who fell upon the Danes. The levies were out, and only just in time.

"One charge!" said Edmund; and, rushing forward, led the way into the heart of the foe.

The Danes who had attacked the house of Herstan were so far in advance of their countrymen that they were forced to retreat instantly before the superior force which came to the rescue of the besieged; and they fell back, at first in some order, but shortly, owing to the darkness and the pressure of their foes, in utter confusion.

But Edmund could pursue them no longer. His strength, having been so lately an invalid, was utterly gone. He fell from sheer exhaustion, and was borne back by Alfgar to the hall.

But there was no longer need for his protection. He had saved the mansion and all its inmates, as they most readily owned. And now he received all the loving care and attention he deserved.

Meanwhile the English continued the pursuit until a small remnant of Danes repassed the river; only a small remnant of the party which, as it will be easily guessed, instigated by Edric, had sallied forth to besiege the place where Edmund had found refuge, who had so recently provoked the bitter hostility of Sweyn.

The following day the whole army of the Danes retreated from the ruins of Wallingford towards the south; and the next day encamped in the village of Cholsey, which, with its priory, they utterly destroyed. Then they continued their retreat along the slope of the downs, by Aston, until they reached Cuckamsley hill, where they abode as a daring boast; for it had been said that if they ever reached that spot they should never see the sea again. Alas! the prediction was unfulfilled.*

* See Note I.—End of the campaign of 1006.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER CUTHBERT'S DIARY.

In the Æscendune Woods, Easter Tide, 1007.—Here I am at home, if I may call these woods home, once more, having spent my Lent with my brethren in the monastery of Abingdon. We are a very large party: Herstan and all his family are here, the Etheling Edmund, and Alfgar.

We all travelled together from Abingdon. Passing through Oxenford, Kirtlington (where Bishop Sidesman of Crediton died at the Great Council, whose body is buried in the abbey), Beranbyrig, and Warwick, we reached the domains of Æscendune.

We passed through the desolated village where lie the blackened ruins of priory and hall, not without a sigh, and entered the forest. Although I had so recently travelled by that path (in September last), yet I could hardly find my way, and had once or twice like to have lost the party in quagmires. So much the better; for if *we* can hardly escape such impediments, I do not think we need fear that the Danes will find their way through the swamps and brakes.

But the woods were so fresh and delightful to men like ourselves, who have but just escaped from the confinement of the town. Blessed, thrice blessed, are they who dwell in the woods, God's first temples, apart from strife and the turmoil of arms!

So spake I to my companions. The while the birds from each tree and bush chanted their Maker's praise, and the sweet fresh green of spring-tide enlivened the scene, as if to welcome us pilgrims to our home.

"And not less, father," said the Etheling, "need we be grateful for yon fat buck, which I mean to send an arrow after. See, we have the wind of him."

So speaking, while we all stood motionless, he crept near his victim, and drawing an arrow to its head, while all we saw was the branching horns of the stag, he let it fly. It whizzed through the air, and drank the life-blood of the poor beast, which bounded a few steps, staggered, and fell, when in a moment Alfgar ended its struggles by drawing his knife across its throat, while young Hermann, a true hunter by instinct, clapped his hands with joy.

"We shall bring our dinner with us," quoth the boy.

At this point I found great difficulty. A brook coming down from the hills had overflowed the land until a swamp or quagmire had been formed, whereon huge trees rotted in slime, while creeping plants hid the deformity of decay.

Our horses refused the path, and it took me a good hour's search, for I was guide, to find a more secure one. At last I found the tracks where others had gone before me, and we followed a winding path for a full hour, until we arrived in a deep valley, where a brook made its way between deep rocky banks, by the side of which lay our upward path.

"What a splendid place for defence!" said Edmund. "With a score or two warriors, one might hold an entire army at bay here." He pointed out to Alfgar and Hermann, who look upon him as a sort of demigod, all the capabilities of the place.

"A few more steps, and we shall see our friends," said I; and we advanced until, from the summit of the pass, we saw the valley wherein they have found rest.

They had worked well during autumn and winter, and the land was well cultivated; the brook ran through the midst of the vale, which was bounded by low hills on either side, and clear from forest growth.

In the centre of the valley the brook divided, forming an island of about an acre of ground, containing several

dwellings. From the central one, which possessed a chimney, smoke issued, and told of the noon meat.

By this time our approach was discovered, and I saw my brother, with a few serfs, advancing to meet us. It was a happy moment when we embraced each other again. And then he saw Alfgar, and embraced him as a son. They did not speak—their feelings were too deep for words. All that had passed since they last met must have rushed into their minds. Then Herstan, the Lady Bertha, Hermann, Ostryth, and Alfleda, all had their turn.

"Pardon me, prince," said I, when I introduced Edmund; "pardon brothers who scarcely expected to meet again. Elfwyn, let me introduce the Etheling Edmund as your guest."

"The Etheling Edmund!" repeated Elfwyn, with great respect; "it is indeed an honour which I receive."

"The less said of it the better," said Edmund. "I am come to be one of you for a time, and am thankful to find a free-born Englishman to welcome me to the woods. Never, by God's help, will I return to the court so long as they pay tribute to the Danes."

"It is true, then," said Elfwyn—"we hear scant news here—that peace has been bought?"

"Yes, bought for thirty-six thousand pounds, by Edric's advice. I should like to know how much of the money he retains himself. He is hand and glove with Sweyn. But I purpose deriving one benefit from the peace, upon which the Danes do not reckon."

"And that?"——

"Is to train up an army of Englishmen who shall not be their inferiors in warlike skill. In courage they are not their inferiors *now*. Perhaps you will let me amuse myself by training your own retainers in their spare moments?"

"Most willingly. I could desire nothing better," said my brother, smiling inwardly at the enthusiasm of the young warrior.

The labourers had just returned from wood and field,

and when Edmund was recognised he was greeted with vociferous cheers, which made the woods ring.

But I cannot describe the meeting of Alfgar with the mother and sister of Bertric; they were alone a long time together after the noon meat, and I saw afterwards their eyes were red with weeping; well, they were not all tears of sorrow.

On the whole it has been a day of deep happiness, hallowed rather than shadowed by the thought of Bertric, the circumstances of whose heroic death were only now fully known to his parents and sister.

The voluminous pages of Father Cuthbert's diary for the years of bitter woe and misery which followed cannot be fully transcribed; they would fill a volume themselves, and we must content ourselves with a few extracts, which will probably interest our readers, and carry on the thread of the history to the place where our narrative will again flow free and uninterrupted.

Ascension Tide, 1007.—Edmund, assisted by Alfgar, has begun his task of disciplining and training all our able-bodied men. He says, and rightly, that he is sure we shall very soon have the Danes back for more money, and that there will be no peace till we can defend ourselves properly. It is amusing to see with what zeal young Hermann takes lessons in arms from Alfgar; that boy is born to be a soldier.

September 1007.—We hear of an appointment which causes us much apprehension. The king Ethelred has appointed Edric Streorn ealdorman of Mercia; we are in his district, and fear it may bode evil to us all. Edmund is beside himself with rage; he vows that if Edric appears in these woods he will slay him as he would a wolf.

May 1008.—Every three hundred and ten hides of land has been charged with the cost of a ship, and every eight hides with the cost of breastplate and helmet; we do trust to recover our supremacy at sea, and then the Danes cannot return.

March 1009.—Alas, we are grievously disappointed of our hope. The fleet is miserably destroyed; Brihtric, Edric's brother, a man like-minded to himself, accused Wulfnoth, the ealdorman of Sussex, of high treason; the ealdorman, knowing that he had no chance of justice, seduced the crews of twenty ships, and became a pirate, like unto the Danes themselves. Brihtric pursued him with eighty ships, but being a bad sailor, got aground in a storm, and Wulfnoth came and burned all which the storm spared. The commanders and crews have forsaken the rest of the fleet in disgust.

Whitsuntide, 1009.—Poor Alfgar came to me in great trouble. He and Ethelgiva have been accepted suitors so long that he thought it time to propose marriage. She referred him, with her own full consent, to her father; and Elfwyn says, not unwisely, that he cannot consent until the land is at peace; that it is currently reported that Thurkill, a Danish earl, is at hand with an immense fleet, and that to marry might both hamper a warrior's hands and be the means of bringing up children for the sword. He fully accepts Alfgar's suit, but postpones the day till peace seems established, that is "sine die." It is very hard to make Alfgar reconciled to this. *I try* to do so.

July 1009.—Bad news. Thurkill's fleet has landed at Sandwich.

August 1009.—Worse news. Another fleet of Danes, under Heming and Eglaf, has joined the former fleet, and both together are ravaging Wessex as far northward as Berkshire; we have sent all the men we can spare to join the army, but the king, persuaded by Edric, will not give the Etheling Edmund any command therein.

S. Martin's Mass.—One of our men has returned from the army. He states that forces being gathered from all

parts of England, the Danes were waylaid, and must have been beaten, but that Edric persuaded the king not to fight when the victory was in his hands, and so they escaped.

S. Brice's Day, 1009.—This ill-omened anniversary we sang dirge and mass for the souls of those who were slain by treachery seven years ago. Our forces have returned from the south. They say the Danes have gone into winter quarters on the Thames, and that all the neighbourhood pays them tribute.

London has hitherto gallantly resisted their attacks.

Edric Streorn has married the king's daughter, Edmund's half-sister, Elgitha. Is this a time to be "marrying and giving in marriage"? Edmund is frantic about it.

February 1010.—Woeful news. Herstan and all his family, who had returned in peace to their dwelling, have come to us homeless and destitute. The Danes, as in 1006, suddenly issued from their ships. They took their way upwards through Chiltern, and so to Oxford, burning the city. Then they returned all down the river, the infantry in boats, the cavalry on horseback, burning on every side.

But, worst of all, Abingdon is destroyed; the holy house which has been a house of prayer so many generations! Keeping in their course, they burned Cliffton; but the alarm was given in time, and the people escaped. There was no chance of defence this time. Then they attacked Dorchester, and burned part of the city, but retired before all was consumed, hearing that a large force was marching against them; so onward past the ruins of Wallingford, which had not yet been rebuilt, destroying Bensington on their road. Thus they went on to Staines, when, fearing the forces of London, they returned through Kent to their ships.

Our brethren who took refuge in Abingdon have just arrived. We must find them room here; they tell a piteous story.

Ascension Tide, 1010.—A sorrowful Ascension Tide

indeed! They have landed in East Anglia. A battle has been fought and lost. Nearly all the English leaders slain.

Whitsuntide.—We can hardly keep the festival, the people are so excited by the news; all Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire (once more) are laid waste. They are on the road to Bedford.

Edmund and Alfgar, with young Hermann, and all our fighting men, have gone out on their own account against them.

July.—The Danes elude all our troops. Edric persuades the king to go eastward, and the Danes are westward. They go westward, and the Danes are eastward. There is no chieftain. A witan is summoned; it will do no good.

November.—Northampton has fallen; cruelly fallen. The town is burned, and all therein slain.

Edmund and Alfgar, with not more than half our men, have returned with the news. Hermann is seriously wounded, but bears it bravely. He is only sixteen now. There is mourning over all our fallen heroes; but they have died so bravely. Edmund says they have slain far more than twice their number of the mauraders. Still his father will give him no command. It is like private war so far as he is concerned; but many fresh recruits have joined his standard, and will go out with him in spring.

March 1011.—The king and witan have again offered tribute to the Danes; it is accepted. I do not think the peace will last long.

Michaelmas, 1011.—Woe is me! the Danes have broken the peace; and Canterbury, the chief seat of English Christendom, whence came to us the blessed Gospel, is taken and burnt. Elfmar, the abbot of S. Augustine's—O false shepherd! O wolf in sheep's clothing! betrayed it. The

archbishop is prisoner. God and the blessed saints preserve him!

Easter, 1012.—Another saint is added to the calendar; the Archbishop Elphege has suffered martyrdom. On Easter eve they told him he must find ransom or die. But he not only firmly refused to give money, but forbade his impoverished people to do so on his account. Then, on the following Saturday, they led him to their hustings (or assembly), and shamefully slaughtered him, casting upon him bones and the horns of oxen. And then one smote him with an axe iron on the head, and with the blow he sank down. His holy blood fell on the earth, and his soul he sent forth to God's kingdom.

On the morrow they allowed the body to be taken to London, where the bishops, Ednoth of Dorchester and Elfhelm of London, received it, with all the townsmen, and buried the holy relics in S. Paul's minster, where they say many miracles have already been wrought at his tomb.

Tribute has again been paid, and there is peace awhile. Thurkill, with forty ships, sweareth to serve King Ethelred and defend the country if he will feed and pay them.

Oh! that the martyr's intercessions may be heard for his afflicted country.*

August 1013.—This fatal month our own neighbourhood, indeed nearly all Mercia, has suffered the extreme horrors of war. Sweyn came along Watling Street, perpetrating the most monstrous cruelties; in short, he and his committed the worst evil that any army could do.

We found now how wisely we had decided not to rebuild Æscendune. Not a hall, farm, or cottage, escaped fire and sword, save those hidden in the forest like us. Edmund has lost many men in the course of the last few months; and with the remainder he hid in our woods, ready to

* This is copied almost *verbatim* from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

protect us "to the last breath," as he said, "in his body." Alfgar and Hermann, who have both been wounded (the latter for the second time), are with him still. But the enemy never discovered our retreat. Praise be to God for sparing this little Zoar! The saints are not unmindful how we protested against the iniquity of S. Brice's day. But of one thing we all feel sure; Anlaf cannot be alive, or revenge would lead him here.

December 1013.—Ethelred has fled to Normandy. He sent Queen Emma and her children before him. Sweyn, the Dane, is now King of England. There seems no resource but submission. We are told Edric Streorn is in high favour in the Pagan court; and still is ealdorman of Mercia. Alas! what a Christmas!

Candlemas, 1014.—God has at length bared His arm: Sweyn is no more. The blasphemer and parricide is gone to his dread account. On the eve of the festival he filled up the measure of his damnation by daring to exact an enormous tribute from the town where rests the uncorrupt body of the precious martyr S. Edmund, which even the pagan Danes had hitherto feared to do. He said that if it were not presently paid he would burn the town and its people, level to the ground the church of the martyr, and inflict various tortures on the clergy. Not content with this, he disparaged the blessed martyr's merits, daring to say there was no sanctity about him. But, thus setting no bounds to his frowardness, Divine vengeance did not suffer the blasphemer to prolong his miserable existence.

Towards evening of the day when he had held a "thingcourt" at Gainsborough, where he had repeated all these threats amongst his warriors, he, alone of the crowd, saw S. Edmund approaching him with a dreadful aspect. Struck with terror, he began to shout, "Help,

comrades, help! S. Edmund is at hand to slay me!" While he spoke, the saint thrust his spear fiercely through him, and he fell from his war-horse. They bore him to a bed, whereon he suffered excruciating agonies till twilight, when he died the third of the nones of February. From such a death, good Lord, deliver us! The bloodthirsty and deceitful man shall not live out half his days; nevertheless, my trust shall be in thee, O Lord! *

Lent, 1014.—Ethelred has returned, and is again king; he has promised to amend his evil ways, and to be ruled by faithful and wise counsellors. All England has rallied round the descendant of Edgar. Canute has fled.

Eastertide.—Edmund has returned to court. His father has received him graciously. Alfgar is with him. Elfwyn will not even yet consent to the marriage, saying, "Wait a little while; we have not yet done with the Danes." I fear he is right.

June 1015.—Herstan is here, and has brought us sad news. A great council has just been held at Oxford, whereat Edric Streorn, to the indignation of all men, sat at the king's right hand. Would this had been all! He invited Sigeferth and Morcar, two of the chief Thanes in the seven burghs, to supper with him; and there, when he had made them heavy with wine, he caused them to be cruelly murdered by hired ruffians. Instead of punishing him, the king sanctioned the deed, took all their possessions, and sent Sigeferth's widow to be kept prisoner at Malmesbury. Alas! such deeds will call down God's vengeance upon us.

Nativity of S. Mary (*Sept.* 8).—The Etheling went with Alfgar to Malmesbury a few days ago. We now hear that he has released Sigeferth's widow, and that he has married

* This account is taken almost *verbatim* from Florence of Worcester.

her. We know not what to think of the step. It is a bold defiance of his father's cruel policy. He knew the widow before she was the wife of Sigeferth, when Alfgar says he made honourable love to her. But it is a very sudden step.

October 1015.—Alas! the Divine vengeance has not slumbered long after the late cruel deed. Canute is in England again. Edmund brought his wife here, asking us to take care of her. She is a gentle lady, worn down with care. He has gone, in conjunction with Edric, to fight Canute. I dread this conjunction. Edmund would have gone alone, but his father insisted on joining Edric in the command, saying two heads were better than one.

November 1015.—Alfgar has come home, bringing messages from Edmund, with sad but not altogether unexpected news. Edric, who is steeped in stratagems and deceit, plotted against his life again and again, whereupon Edmund broke up the camp in indignation, and took a separate course with all the warriors who would follow his standard. Edric took the rest, went down to the sea-coast, seduced the crews of forty ships, and then joined Canute with his whole forces. Alas! there seems no hope now.

Epiphany, 1016.—There is war all over the land,—civil war. It is not to be wondered at. But many Englishmen have given their allegiance to Canute, who now professes himself a Christian, saying they will not serve Ethelred any more. So Edmund and Canute are both, I fear, ravaging the land, for Edmund has threatened more than once to regard those people as foes who refuse to fight against the Danes. Men know not what to do.

Eastertide, 1016.—We have received strange news.

Ethelred is dying. He has summoned his son. The tidings reached Edmund here. He had only been with us a single day, and was about to depart again for the war, for Canute threatens to attack London. It is there Ethelred lies sick unto death. Edmund seemed more moved than I should have expected. He has departed in all haste, taking Alfgar with him.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ROYAL DEATHBED.

It was the evening of a stormy day in April when a band of five hundred men, well armed and equipped, were seen approaching the Moor Gate of London. Their leader rode in front, a stalwart warrior, whose eagle eye and dauntless brow told of one born to command. By his side rode a younger warrior, yet one who had nearly reached the prime of life, and who bore the traces of a life of warfare most legibly stamped upon him. There was this difference between them, that men would have recognised the elder at once as an Englishman, while the younger had all the outward physiognomy of a Dane.

"Look, Alfgar, and see whether you can see the flag of Wessex floating over the gates; your eyes are better than mine," said the elder to his companion.

"I can barely see through the driving rain and darkening sky, but I think I discern the royal banner."

"Then the city yet holds out, and Canute has not arrived. We are yet in time."

"The messenger said that their ships could not ascend the river while the west wind blew, and it is blowing hard enough to-night."

"Well, when they come they may find London a hard nut even for Canute to crack. The citizens of London are true as steel."

"See, we are espied, and they man the gates."

"Doubtless they think Canute is approaching. Ride rapidly, we shall soon undeceive them."

They rode within bowshot of the gates, which were

closed, and there they paused, for a score of bowmen held their shafts to their ears. Edmund, for our readers have long recognised him, bade his forces halt, and advanced alone, with Alfgar, holding up his hand in sign of peace.

"What, ho! men of London," he cried, "do you not recognise Edmund the Etheling?"

A joyous cry of recognition burst forth, the gates were thrown open in a minute, and as Edmund, followed by his train, rode in, cries of welcome and exultation burst forth on all sides, while women and children, sharing the general joy, kissed even the hem of his mantle. Well they might, for their need was sore. Canute was near, his ships had been seen entering the Thames, and his determination to take the city, which had so often resisted the Danish arms, had been freely and frankly expressed.

"Ah, well you know me, my countrymen, for a true Englishman!—one in whose veins your blood flows, and who will be only too happy to fight the Danish wolves at your head."

The cry, "Long live the Etheling Edmund!" had wakened the city, and the narrow tortuous streets were becoming thronged by the crowd, so that their farther progress threatened to be slow. Edmund perceived this, and, turning to the captain of the guard, inquired anxiously,

"How fares the king, my father?"

"They say he is at death's door," was the reply.

"Then I may not tarry, good people. All thanks for your welcome, which I hope I may live to repay, but just now my place is by my father's side. I may not now delay till I come to him."

So the people made way without discontinuing their acclamations, and Edmund and his train rode on till they reached the precincts of S. Paul's cathedral church. Night was now coming on apace, amidst showers of rain and hail, and gusts of wind, which caused the wooden spire to rock visibly. Here and there faint lights twinkled through the open doors, where people could be dimly seen on their knees.

"They pray for the king," whispered an officer of the guard who rode by the side of the prince. "The bishop Elfhun has gone forth with the viaticum."

Edmund replied not, but hurried his pace as he gazed at the darkening outlines of the rude structure, which stood within the outer walls, yet remaining, of the temple of Diana, which in Roman times had occupied the same spot.

They descended the hill towards the Fleet, but paused while yet within the walls. The ancient palace without the gates had been long since burned by the Danes in one of their various attempts to take the city, and the court had occupied a large palace, if such it could be called, once belonging to a powerful noble who had perished in one of the sanguinary battles of the time.

The outer portal stood open, but sentinels of the huscarles were posted thereat, who at once came forward as Edmund paused at the gate. He dismounted, saying, "Alfgar, follow me;" and commended his troops to the hospitality of the citizens, bidding them to reassemble before St. Paul's by eight of the morning. And the troops broke up to receive such hospitality as the straitened times permitted men to indulge in. The officers found a welcome in the palace, amongst the royal guard. The citizens contended who should entertain the rest.

Edmund passed through the great hall, where the general silence struck him forcibly, telling of the extremity to which the monarch was reduced, and entered an inner apartment, where several dignitaries both of church and state were waiting. They welcomed him in grave silence, and the chamberlain who was present spoke in a low voice—

"Your royal father has long pined for you, my prince; may I conduct you to him at once?"

"Who is with him now?"

"Your royal brothers, the Ethelings Edward and Alfred, the Princess Edgitha, and the Queen."*

* See Note K.—Children of Ethelred.

"Has not the bishop arrived?"

"He is in the chapel at this moment; the king declined to see him, he will not believe he is dying; but the bishop waits in prayer."

"Lead me to his chamber," said Edmund.

Re-entering the great hall, the chamberlain and prince ascended the broad staircase which conducted to the upper chambers, and passing along a passage thickly strewn with rushes to deaden the sound, for carpets were unknown, they came to a door at the end, where the chamberlain paused and knocked.

Loud ravings, as of one in delirium, penetrated the passage from the chamber, amidst which the chamberlain knocked again.

"There! there!" cried an agonised voice, "he knocks again; 'tis Elfhelm of Shrewsbury, whom Edric slew; 'twasn't I, 'twas Edric, I only shared the spoil; keep him out, I tell you, keep him out."

The door was not opened; probably those within feared to excite the king; and the chamberlain whispered to Edmund—

"He is in delirium, his ravings are very painful."

"I hear," said Edmund; "how long has he been in this state?"

Only a few hours, and he has constantly imagined that men, who are long since dead, were about him; especially he calls upon Dunstan, then upon S. Brice, then he calls for his son-in-law, Edric."

"Ah, Edric!"

"Yes; but Edric is with Canute, I hear."

"I wish he were with Satan, in his own place," said Edmund, fiercely, forgetting all Christian charity at the hated name.

"It is devoutly to be wished; but he is quiet, we may enter now."

The king, exhausted by his own violent emotions, lay back upon the bed, which occupied the centre of the room,

surmounted by a wooden canopy, richly carved, from which curtains depended on either side.

His face, which time and evil passions had deeply wrinkled, was of a deadly paleness; his eyes were encircled by a livid tint, and stared as if they would start from their orbits; his breathing was rapid and interrupted, but at the moment when Edmund entered he was silent. Standing on his left hand, wiping the perspiration from his brow, was Emma, the queen, her face yet comely, and bearing trace of that beauty which had once earned her the title of the "Pearl of Normandy." Her evident solicitude and loving care was the one picture of the room upon which the eye could rest with most contentment. Alfred, her eldest son—for Edmund was the offspring of an early amour of the king—was on the other side of the bed, a well-made youth, combining in his features the haughty bearing of his Norman maternal ancestors with the English traits of his father; but now his expression was one of distress and anxiety, which was yet more deeply shared by his younger brother, Edward, who even at this period manifested that strong sense of religious obligation and that early devotion which in later years caused him to be numbered amongst canonised saints.

He knelt at the bedside, and his hand grasped the cold damp hand of his sire, as if he would strengthen him by his sympathy.

"O father," he cried; "neglect not longer to make your peace with a long-suffering God; even in this eleventh hour He will not reject the penitent."

He was interrupted by the entrance of Edmund, his half-brother, whom he feared, because he could not understand so different a nature.

"Our father has long pined for you," he said, in a timid, voice; "I fear you are too late, and that he will hardly know you."

"I have ridden from Æscendune, day and night since the news of his danger was brought me. Father," he said, as he bent over the bed, "do you not know me?"

The dying man raised himself up and looked him full in the face, and a look of recognition came slowly. "Edmund!" he said, "I am so glad, you will protect me; take your battle-axe, you are strong. Sigeferth and Morcar, whom Edric slew at Oxford, have been here, and they said they would come back and drag me with them to some judgment-seat; now take thine axe, Edmund, my son, and slay them when they enter; they want killing again."

A look of indescribable pain passed over the features of Edmund.

The door opened, and Edward left the room after a conference with the physician, who sat in a corner of the room compounding drugs at a small table; a few minutes passed in silence, when he returned and held the door open for the bishop of London, who entered, bearing the viaticum, as the last communion of the sick was then called, and attended by an acolyte, who bore a lighted taper before him and carried a bell.

The king rose up in his bed, glared fixedly at the prelate, and then shrieked aloud—

"S. Brice! S. Brice! art thou come again? What dost thou glare at me for? 'Twas not I who defiled thy festival with blood. It was Edric, Edric! Why does he not come to answer for his own sin?"

"If he did, I would brain him," muttered Edmund.

"There! do not glare upon me. Hast thou brought me the blood of the victims to drink? Ah! there is Gunhilda. What right hast thou to complain if I slew thee, which I did not, at least not with my own hands: thy brother Sweyn has slain thousands. I did not at least kill my father; I have only disgraced his name, as you will say. O Edmund! Edmund! protect me."

"My son," said the bishop, in a deep calm voice, which seemed to still the ravings of the king, "think of thy sins; repent, confess; the Church hath power to loose in her Lord's name, Who came to save sinners."

"Yes, father, heed him," said Edward. "Father, you

are dying, the leech says; you have not a day to live. Waste not the precious hours."

The patient sank back upon his bed, and for a few minutes only the sound of his breathing could be heard; the difficulty with which he drew his breath seemed to increase each moment.

The bishop held the crucifix before his eyes.

"Gaze, my son," said he, "at the emblem of Him who died that thou mightest live, and say, 'O my God, I put Thy most pitiful passion between Thee and my sins!"

"Yes, father, hearken," said Edward.

"I bethink me now that Gunhilda clung to the crucifix, and said she was a Christian. But what of that? She was a Dane, and they did right in dragging her from it and slaying her."

"My son, my son, you throw away your salvation!" cried the bishop.

"Father, show him the viaticum," said Emma.

"It is useless; without repentance and faith 'twould but increase"—— and the prelate paused. "Let us pray. It is all we can do."

And all present knelt round the bed, while the plaintive cry arose from the lips of the prelate, and was echoed from all around,—"Kyrie eleeson: Christe eleeson: kyrie eleeson." And so the litany for the dying rolled solemnly along, with its intense burning words of supplication, its deep agony of prayer, its loving earnestness of intercession. But upon the dying sinner's ears it fell as an echo of the long, long *past;* of that day when the litany arose before his coronation at Kingston, and the prophetic curse of Dunstan.

"Listen!" he said. "I hear the voice of Dunstan. "Oh, why didst thou lay thy curse upon me? Did I murder my brother Edward? Nay, 'twas my cruel mother, who murdered her own husband that she might become queen. Her sins are visited upon me. Nay, recall thy curse. Alas! it is uttered in thunders before the eternal

judgment-seat. See, they come to drag me thither; they all come:—Edward; the victims whom I slew sixteen years agone in Cumbria; the slain on S. Brice's day; Elfhelm of Shrewsbury and his sons, with their empty sockets, and their eyes hanging down; Sigeferth, Morcar, and a thousand others. See, Dunstan bids them all await me at the judgment-seat. I will not come; nay, they drag me. Edric, wilt thou not answer for me now? Accursed be thy name, accursed!"

His frightful maledictions overpowered the supplications around his bed; but they died away in silence,—silence so long continued, that suspicion soon became certainty.

Ethelred the Unready was dead.

"We must leave him to God's mercy," said the bishop, as he closed the eyes, while the wife and children of the unhappy king sobbed around. "He knoweth whereof we are made; He remembereth that we are but dust."

Yet he trembled as he spoke, and, kneeling down, completed with faltering voice the office for the commendation of the departed soul.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT.

So soon as the news of the death of Ethelred travelled abroad, the bishops, abbots, ealdormen, and thanes of southern England, despairing of the cause of the house of Cerdic, met together at Southampton, and renouncing Ethelred and his descendants, elected Canute to be their king, while he swore that both in things spiritual and temporal he would maintain their liberties.

But the citizens of London were of nobler mould, and, disdaining submission, chose Edmund to be their king. A council was at once held, and it became apparent that the allegiance of the greater part of Wessex depended upon Edmund's prompt appearance amongst them, while, on the other hand, the rapid approach of Canute made his presence in the city very essential to the safety of the inhabitants.

Up rose a noble thane, and spake his mind. "Surely we can defend our own city until the valiant Edmund brings us aid. We have kept off Canute before, and his father before him, and we can do as much again. Meanwhile Edmund will soon have all Wessex at his back, and Canute will find his match for once."

The words of the gallant speaker found their echo in many a breast, and it was decided that Edmund should be advised to hurry into Wessex, and leave London to defend itself.

A deputation from the council at once waited upon Edmund, and in the name of the city, and, as they took the liberty of adding, of every true man in England, they proferred him his father's crown. Like the citizens of a

certain modern capital, they constituted themselves the representatives of the nation.

Edmund, who certainly did not lack confidence, and who could not help knowing that he alone was able to cope with the Danes, took scant time to consider their proposal.

"I accept the crown," he said; "a thorny one it is like to prove, but I thank you for your love and trust."

In the course of a day or two Ethelred the Unready was buried by Archbishop Lyfing in S. Paul's minster, with the assistance of the cathedral body. Emma and her children, as also Edwy, the son of Ethelred by his first wife, were the chief mourners, nay, the only real ones. Most men felt as when a cloud passes away. The sad procession passed through the streets, the people flocked into the church, and in the presence of all the "wise men" of London, they solemnly committed the frail tabernacle in which the living spirit had sinned and suffered to the parent earth, where the rush and roar of a mighty city should ever peal around it.

A few days later the archbishop was called upon to perform a very different ceremony, the coronation of King Edmund, which also took place in S. Paul's Cathedral, amidst tears of joy, and cries which even the sanctity of the place could not wholly restrain, "God bless King Edmund!" The solemn oath of fidelity was administered, and when all was over, with mingled tears and acclamations, those who had met to bury the late king greeted with joy his son and successor.

It yet remained to be seen whether the choice of the realm would ratify this decisive step on the part of the citizens of London.

Emma, the queen dowager, was deeply mortified, even while she confessed the heritage was hardly worth having. Still her boy Alfred seemed slighted by the choice, and she left England at once, with Alfred and Edward, for Normandy, while Elgitha departed secretly from London to

join her husband Edric, and tell him all that had been done.

Edmund delayed his journey into Wessex until he had duly provided for the defence of the capital, and had personally examined all the defences with a warrior's eye. At length the messengers who watched the Danish fleet announced its arrival at Greenwich, and that bands of warriors, numerous as locusts, were issuing thence, and advancing upon London.

Reluctant as Edmund was to leave the city, it was evident that if he delayed another day he might indeed share the perils of the inhabitants, but would probably lose Wessex, where his immediate presence was all-important. Therefore he called Alfgar, and bade him prepare at once for a journey to the west.

Their intended route led them, in the first instance, to Dorchester, where a large force from Mercia, including most of the men whom Edmund had so long disciplined himself, and who were under the temporary charge of Hermann, were to meet him. However, it was late before their final arrangements could be made, and the sun had already set when the citizens accompanied them to the Ludgate, and bade them an earnest farewell. They were both clad in light defensive armour, such as could be worn on a rapid journey, and armed with sword and battle-axe. Their own steeds, two of the finest horses England could produce, famous for speed and bottom, awaited them at the gate. Edmund criticised their condition with a jealous eye, and then expressed approval.

"Farewell, Englishmen of the loyal and true city! Until we meet in happier times, farewell! You will know how to guard hearths and homes. Till we return to aid you, farewell!" And, striking spurs into his steed, he and Alfgar rode across the Fleet river, and, ascending the rising ground, pursued their course along the Strand.

"We shall have a moonlight ride," said the king. "Look, Alfgar, 'tis nearly full."

"My Lord, do you see those dark spots on the river near Thorney Isle?"

"Ah! I see them, and recognise the cut-throats. They are the Danes, who are bent on surrounding the city. Had I my five hundred, I would soon give some account of that detachment."

"But now, my Lord, had we not better strike into the northern road at once, before they see us? We are but two."

"No; I should like to see them a little closer, and then across the heath for Windsor. They must have fleet steeds that catch us."

So they persevered until they had attained a rising ground from which they perceived the whole force, nearly a thousand strong, of whom one half had crossed the stream. But the figures of our two adventurers, outlined on the hill, were too distinct to elude their observation, and a dozen dark horsemen rode after them at full gallop.

"Now for a brisk ride," said Edmund; and the two dashed wildly onward, clearing ditch or hedge until they attained the rising ground afterwards known as Hounslow Heath, still followed by their pursuers.

Here Edmund paused and looked round. The speed at which they rode had separated their pursuers, as he had expected, and one was far the foremost.

"Stand by, Alfgar," he said; "two to one is not fair. I thirst for the blood of this accursed Dane."

Alfgar knew that he must not dispute the royal will, although he thought the risk of delay very perilous, with a crowd of foes upon their track. While he waited up came the Dane, powerfully mounted, swinging his heavy battle-axe. He swooped upon Edmund, who caused his horse to start aside, avoided the stroke, and then, guiding his horse by his knees, and raising his axe in both hands, cleft his antagonist to the chine before he could recover.

"Here come two more. Now, Alfgar, there is one apiece. The rest are a mile behind them. You may take the one on the light grey, I will take the rascal on the dark steed."

Another moment and they were both engaged. Alfgar foiled his opponent's first stroke, and wounded him slightly in return. Now the battle became desperate, attack succeeding attack, and parry, parry. Meanwhile Edmund had again laid his foe prostrate in the dust, but did not interfere; such was his chivalrous spirit in what he considered an equal combat, although he cast anxious looks behind, where two or three other riders were rapidly approaching. At last victory inclined to Alfgar's side. Parrying a tremendous stroke with his axe, he returned it with such vigour that the next moment the Dane lay quivering in the dust.

"There appear to be only three or four more. I think we might engage them. By the by, Alfgar, you missed one splendid chance through your steed not answering your guidance to the moment. But I am tired of the battle-axe, and shall use my sword for a change. Ah! there come half-a-dozen more round those firs. We must ride forward and give up the sport."

Their enemies saw them and quickened their pace. They came to the spot where their countrymen lay prostrate, and the cry of revenge they raised, and the manner in which they urged their steeds forward, showed how strongly the sight appealed to their feelings.

Onward flew pursuers and pursued—onward till Windsor's height, with its castled hall, appeared in sight, and tempted them to seek refreshment for man and beast. But they dared not linger on their journey, and passed the town without entering.

They rode all night through a most desolate country, wasted by fire and sword in all directions. Only in a few spots was there any appearance of cultivation, for who would sow when they knew not who should reap? Not one lonely country house, such as abounded in the days of

Edgar the Pacific, did they see standing, although they passed the blackened ruins of many an abode, showing where once the joys of home held sway. Here and there they came upon the relics of strife, in the shape of bodies of men and horses left to rot, and in one spot, where a ford had been defended, the rival nations had left their fallen representatives by hundreds. It must have been months before, yet no one had buried the bodies. Such people as still existed without the fortified towns had betaken themselves to the woods, or the recesses of the deep swamps and forests, as the people of Æscendune had done. As they drew near Dorchester, they found yet more sanguinary traces of recent war, for the Thames had been the scene of constant warfare.

Bensington, half burned, had partially recovered, and had renewed her fortifications; Wallingford, hard by, had never risen since the frightful Christmas of 1006. Dorchester now rose before them. They had accomplished fifty miles of hard riding that night. They were seen, challenged, and recognised, by a patrol without the gates, and the cry, "Long live King Edmund!" echoed from all sides. A thousand gallant Mercians, the nucleus of an army, each man fit to be a captain, awaited them there, and Edmund felt his spirits revive within him, and his hope for England; and Alfgar met Hermann with great gladness.

It was pitiful to see the blackened ruins of churches and palace, which had not been rebuilt since the Danish raid of 1010, but the commoner dwellings were rising with rapidity from their ashes, or had already risen, for the shelter of the earthworks and other fortifications was not to be despised, and prevented the place from being utterly abandoned.

Yet it may be noted that Dorchester never fully recovered the events of that dreadful year, and that its decay probably dates from the period.

Resting only a few hours, during which they were the

guests of Ednoth, the bishop, they departed with his fervent blessing and earnest prayers for their success, and rode westward, attended by their whole troop.

Every town they reached received them with enthusiasm. They were now near the birthplace of the great Alfred, where the hearts of the people were all thoroughly with their native princes; and men left all their ordinary occupations to strike one blow for King Edmund and England. Onward, and like a rolling snowball, they gathered as they went, until they entered Wiltshire with ten thousand men, and, crossing the country, reached the opposite border with all the brave men of Wilts added to their numbers.

They were now approaching Dorsetshire, and saw before them a rising ground, with a large stone set in a conspicuous position.

"What stone is that?" inquired Edmund of a thane, whose habitation was hard by, and who had joined him with his whole household.

"It is called the county stone. It marks the place where three counties meet—Somerset, Wilts, and Dorset; it is in the village of Penn."

At this moment a horseman was seen riding wildly after them from the country in the rear.

"See that man; he brings news," said Edmund, and the whole party paused.

"Alfgar," whispered Edmund to his confidential attendant, "there is hot work coming; I have long since scented the foe behind."

The messenger arrived, bowed low to the king, and waited permission to speak, while his panting breath betrayed his haste and his excitement.

"Well, your message?" said Edmund; "you have ridden fast to bring it."

"My lord, Canute, with an army of fifty thousand men, is following behind with all his speed."

Edmund looked proudly around upon his host; it was almost equal in number. Then he looked with a soldier's

eye on the ground before him, and saw that it was the very place where a stand could be made with every advantage of ground.

"It is well," said Edmund; "we will wait for him here."

A loud cheer from those around him showed how he had succeeded in imparting his own brave spirit to others. The trumpets commanded a halt; and Alfgar and other riders bore the commands of the king to the extremities of the host.

Each division took up rapidly the position assigned; for in this domestic war men fought side by side with those they had known from childhood, and were commanded immediately by their own hereditary chieftains.

The broken nature of the ground protected them well from an attack on either flank, and they strengthened this advantage by throwing up a mound and digging a ditch, with the greatest rapidity.

While thus engaged, they saw the flashing of spear and shield in the east, reflecting the setting sun, and speedily the whole country seemed to glow with the sheen of weapons.

Edmund raised himself in the stirrups. "Englishmen! brethren!" he cried, "you see your foe, the ruthless destroyers of your land and kinsfolk; the pagan murderers of your archbishop, the sainted Alphege. God will help them that help themselves. It shall be ours to strike one glorious blow for liberty and for just vengeance on this field. I vow to the God of battles I will conquer or die."

He took off his helmet and looked solemnly to Heaven, as he called on the Supreme Being to register his vow, and a deep murmur of sympathy arose around, until it found loud utterance in the cry, "We will conquer with our king or die," from a thousand voices, until the glorious enthusiasm spread throughout the camp. Glorious when men fight for hearth and altar.

Edmund looked proudly around. "With such warriors," he said, "I need not fear Canute."

The trench and mound were completed, but the enemy did not advance. He planted his black raven banner two miles off in the plain, arranged his forces, and halted for the night.

"We must fight to-morrow at dawn of day," said Edmund. "Now, bid the camp-fires be lighted; we have plenty of meat and bread, mead and wine; bid each man eat and drink his fill. Men never fight well on empty stomachs. Then return yourself to my side, and share my tent this night; perhaps—perhaps—for the last time."

"If so, woe to England—woe!" said Alfgar. "But I have confidence that her day of tribulation is passing from her. The blood of the martyred saints cries aloud for vengeance on the Danes."

CHAPTER XXI.

EDMUND AND CANUTE.

THE watch was duly set; camp-fires were lighted, and joints of meat suspended over them; barrels of wine and mead were broached, for all the country around contributed with loving willingness to the support of its defenders; and when hunger was appeased the patriotic song arose from the various fires, and stirring legends of the glorious days of old, when Danes and Norsemen fled before the English arms, nerved the courage of the men for the morrow's stern conflict.

Around the fire kindled next the tent of Edmund sat the warrior monarch himself, with all the chieftains, the ealdormen, and lesser thanes who shared his fortunes.

The minstrels and gleemen were not wanting here, but none could touch the harp more sweetly than Edmund himself; and, the banquet over, he sang an ancient lay, which kindled the enthusiasm of all his hearers, and nerved them to do or die, so that they longed for the morrow.

Before it was over the trumpet announced some event of importance, and soon a messenger brought the tidings to Edmund that a large force was advancing from the west.

All rose to look at them, not without anxiety; as yet they were far distant, across a wild moor, but as they drew nearer, and their standards could be more clearly discerned, it became gradually evident that it was a reinforcement; and so it proved, for heralds, galloping forward, announced the men of Dorsetshire.

They were most gladly received, for now the English forces were equal in number to their adversaries, and every man felt the hope of victory strong within him.

At length Edmund bade messengers go through the camp, and cause every man to retire to rest, for they must all be stirring by dawn on the morrow.

He himself, with Alfgar, went through the host and then inspected the watch. When he came to the outpost nearest the foe he found Hermann on duty as officer of the watch, and spoke earnestly to him and his men.

"Be on your guard," he said, "as men who know that the welfare of England depends upon them; if you see the least movement on the part of the crafty Canute, rouse the camp at once; they are not unlikely to attack us by night if they can surprise us, not otherwise.

Alfgar was standing on a low mound contemplating the opposite camp, that of his own countrymen, attentively. "Well, Alfgar, my son, do you see aught?" said Edmund approaching him.

"I fancied I saw some figures seek the hollow where the ditch passes from us to them."

"We will wait and see whether aught comes of it," said the king; "how do you like our prospects?"

"Well, my lord, I would sooner be with you at this moment than in any other place in England."

"Even than in Æscendune?"

"Yes; just now."

"Alfgar, do you think your father yet lives?" said Edmund, as he again gazed upon the Danish camp.

"I think not; I fear he is numbered amongst the dead; I have over and over again inquired of Danish prisoners whether they knew aught of him; they all said he had not been known in their ranks for years."

"The chances of a warrior's life are so many that he may not improbably be gone, but remember you found another father at Carisbrooke."

"I shall never forget that, my lord."

Here Hermann interrupted them.

"My lord, would you look closely at that little clump of furze upon the banks of the brook?"

"By S. Edmund, there they are! now to catch Danish wolves in a steel trap; creep back within the mound."

The whole guard was speedily aroused.

"Shall we alarm the camp?" said Hermann.

"Not for the world, they want all the sleep they can get; this will only be a reconnoitring party; did they find us asleep they would of course cut our throats, and then bring their brethren to attack the camp. As it is, I think we shall cut theirs instead."

"They have disappeared."

"Only to appear with more effect; they will be creeping like snakes coming to be scotched; they won't find a man like Edric at the head of the English army now—one who always chose the sleepiest and deafest men for sentinels. Ah, well! he is openly with the enemy now; I only hope he will come within swing of my battle-axe to-morrow. *Ah! there they are.*"

"Where?" inquired two or three low voices eagerly.

"Creeping up the slope; now get your arrows to your ears; take the opposite men when they arise."

"A few moments, during which men could hear their own hearts beat, when up rose the Danes from the grass like spectres, and rushed for the mound. A storm of arrows met them, to which nearly half succumbed.

Swinging his axe, Edmund, followed, by the rest, jumped from the mound to meet the survivors; numbers were nearly equal, the English *now* slightly superior. Each man met his individual foe. Young Hermann's sword broke against a Danish axe; he rushed in and got within the swing of the weapon; both wrestled for the deadly steel, they fell, rolled over and over on the grass; at length Hermann grasped his opponent's throat like a vice with his mailed hand, and held till the arms of his foe hung nerveless by the side and the face grew black, when, disengaging his right hand, he found his dagger, and drove it to the victim's heart.

"Well done!" said Edmund; "you are the last, Hermann,

Alfgar has finished some time; we have been watching you; this little beginning promises luck to-morrow. You and I must retire now, Alfgar. Good night, Hermann; good night, my men; wipe your swords on the grass; keep them bright."

The morning dawned bright and radiant; and with the first appearance of the sun the horns of the English blew their shrill summons, and the whole army awoke as a man. A hurried meal was partaken of, hurried of necessity, for the Danes were already emerging from their camp, and forming their lines in order of battle. They evidently meant, as usual, to take the initiative; in fact, in the recent reign, had they not done so, there would never have been any fighting at all.

Every one, both friend and foe, expected that Edmund would await the onset in his entrenched camp. Great, therefore, was the surprise, when he led his forces without the entrenchments, with the observation that the breasts of Englishmen were their best bulwarks.

He knew his forces, that they had confidence in him; and he could not have shown better his confidence in *them*, and his feeling that the time had now at length come to assume the offensive.

Canute was doubtless somewhat surprised, yet he was learning to know Edmund.

The English hero divided his army into three divisions: The right wing, where he posted around his own person the chosen band whom he had trained during the last few years of retirement; the left wing, chiefly composed of the men of Wessex; the centre, the weakest and newest recruits, whom he posted there with as deep a design as led Hannibal to use the same strategy at Cannæ.

The Danes advanced impetuously to the attack, led by Canute himself, somewhat similarly divided, and Edmund at once advanced his forces to meet them. One hundred yards apart, both armies paused, and glared upon each other. There was no flinching. With teeth firmly set, lips compressed, and the whole body thrown into the attitude of

a tiger about to spring, each warrior gazed upon the foe.

The Danes, clad in black armour, with their ponderous battle-axes, and fierce visages, upon which no gentle ray of mercy had yet shone; the English, their minds set upon avenging the outraged national honour, the desolated homes, the slaughtered families: the Danes bent on maintaining their cruel superiority; the English bent on reversing it or dying: the Danes hitherto victorious on nearly every field; the English turning upon their oppressors as men to whom the only thing which could make life tolerable was victory.

Canute's voice was heard crying, "Now, warriors, behold the hounds ye have so often chastised await your chastisement once more." Edmund, on the other hand, "Victory, my men, or a warrior's grave! We will not live to see England prostrate beneath the tyrant any longer."

Then came the rush: the crash of steel upon steel, the hideous *mélee*, where friend and foe seemed blent in one dense struggling mass; the cries which pain sometimes extorted from the bravest; the shouts of the excited combatants, until Edmund's centre gave way.

He had expected this, and desired nothing more. The Danes pressed on deeply into the core of the hostile army, when they found their progress stopped by some of the bravest warriors who formed the rear, and at that moment the wings curved round upon them.

"Come, my men!" shouted Edmund; and with Alfgar by his side, followed by the whole of the English cavalry, burst upon the rear of the Danes. He and his cleft their way in—hewed it through living masses of flesh; trampled writhing bodies under foot; their very horses seemed to laugh at the spear and sword, until before him Edmund saw Canute himself. He struggled violently to reach him; slew two or three living impediments, and the two rivals faced each other for one moment; then came Edmund's ponderous blow. Canute avoided it, but his horse fell beneath it; the spine severed near the neck. He was dragged up

instantly by his armour-bearer, who attended upon him, as Alfgar upon Edmund, and before the attack could be renewed a living torrent separated the combatants. The victory was won; the Danes were in full flight.

O joy for England! the day of her captivity was turned; henceforward she might hope. The foe, the invincible foe, was flying before an English king and an English army.

For while on the one side Edmund had charged the foe on their left flank, on the other side the men of Wessex had imitated his example, and the foe yielded.

Still, terrible in defeat, more than half fought their way out of the trap into which they had fallen, and retired upon their camp, closely pursued, until the trump of Edmund recalled the pursuers, anxious lest they should in turn fall into an ambuscade, for reinforcements were awaiting the Danes behind.

From this time the prospects of Edmund and England brightened. Day after day fresh reinforcements came into his camp, until he followed Canute, who had retreated into Wiltshire. There, a few days later, a second battle was fought at Sceorstan,* wherein much bravery was shown on both sides. On Monday the two armies fought all day without any advantage on either side. On the Tuesday the English were rapidly getting the better, when the traitor Edric, severing the head of a fallen Englishman named Osmaer, held it up, shouting — "Flee, English! flee, English! Edmund is dead." They began to yield; and it was as much as Edmund himself could do, by lifting his helmet, exposing his features, and shouting, "I live to lead you to victory!" to restore the battle.

Canute retired upon London, followed closely by Edmund. Upon the road messengers came from Edric imploring the forgiveness of his injured brother-in-law, and offering to join him with all his forces. There was long

* See Note L.—Sceorstan.

consultation over this in the English camp ; but in spite of Edmund's own feelings it was decided to receive Edric, since Canute's fate would seem to be quite decided if England were united by the union of those southern English who had fought under Canute with Edric, and the men of Mercia and Wessex who had won the previous victories. So the two armies met together. The men of Hampshire, who had followed the Dane, were welcomed as returning to their true allegiance by their countrymen ; and Edmund did violence to his feelings by receiving Edric to his council board, if not to his friendship.

It was a joyous day when Edmund approached London, and thus fulfilled the promise of his coronation. Canute, who had made another attempt on the city, fled before him, but hovered around until two days later. Edmund engaged him the third time at Brentford, and defeated him again. Then Edmund retired into Wessex to raise more troops, and during his absence the Danes took the offensive again, once more besieging London in vain, while they harried all the neighbouring districts until Edmund returned with a large army, drove them into Kent, and gave them such a fearful defeat at Otford that they fled in despair to the Isle of Sheppey, and all men said Edmund would have destroyed them utterly, had not Edric persuaded him to stop the pursuit at Aylesford.

The Danes soon emerged again, and, crossing the Thames, commenced plundering Essex, when Edmund and Edric, with all the flower of the Anglo-Saxon race, advanced to meet them once more. Nearly all the men of note in England followed Edmund's banner, for, now that his abilities were proved, there was a general enthusiasm in his favour. So all the rank and title of the realm stood by him when he drew up his army hard by the little river Crouch, near Assingdun, in Essex, then called Assandun.

There, by his side, when the tents were pitched the evening before the battle, stood many a brave ealdorman, — Godwin of Lindsey ; Ulfketyl, the hero of the East

Angles; Ethelweard, the son of the pious Ethelwine, whom men called the "Friend of God." And present at that last banquet were Ednoth, the bishop of Dorchester, and other ecclesiastics, who had come to pray for the host and to succour the dying with ghostly aid. Well nigh all the great men of England were here. But Edric supped in their midst. Their spirits were high that night, and while Edmund drank to their success on the morrow, each man responded with a fervour which augured confidence in that morrow's issue,—all save the wicked Edric, whose heart seemed far from his words.

The events of that fatal morrow are matter of history. The armies joined battle. Victory seemed to favour Edmund. The Danes were already giving way, when Edric turned and fled, with his whole division, whom he had corrupted. After *that* all was disorder amongst the English; but they continued fighting bravely until the moon arose, and they were becoming surrounded on all sides, when, in sheer desperation, they at last gave way.

Edmund would not yield until Alfgar seized the bridle of his horse, and almost by violence caused him to turn his steed, bidding him live for England, for he was its hope. It was growing dark rapidly, and the darkness alone saved Edmund and the relics of the English army. With a faithful few, including both Alfgar and Hermann, nearly all of the party wounded, the English king rode sadly from the scene, groaning bitterly in spirit.

"Why did I trust him again? Why did I trust him?" he kept muttering to himself.

"You did *not* trust him. The council overruled you. I was present," said Alfgar.

"But I might have resisted." And he persisted in his unavailing regret.

It was a sad sight to see the field of battle strewn for miles with the dead and dying, while gangs of plunderers swarmed in all directions. One sharp encounter with such

a party served to warm Edmund's blood, after which he was a little more cheerful.

But the saddest scene in the flight lay on a gentle eminence, commanding a view of the field, whose deformities night mercifully shrouded from view, although the murmurs of the wounded reached them even there in one long subdued wailing moan.

There, on that little hill, lay bishops and abbots in their sacerdotal apparel. Where they had met to pray, there they lay in death! With a deep sigh Edmund recognised Ednoth, bishop of Dorchester, lying stark and stiff in his bloody robes. A troop of Danish horsemen had surrounded the hill and massacred them all. The assassins had even hewn Ednoth's finger off for the episcopal ring.

Yet, even at this awful crisis, Edmund's lion heart did not wholly fail him, as he left the field where lay all the flower of the Anglo-Saxon race: the brave and faithful Ulfketyl, Earl Ethelweard, Earl Godwin, Elfric the ealdorman, and well nigh all the great men of England, all sleeping in death. He rode to the south till he reached the vale of the Thames, which he pursued until he reached the neighbourhood of Gloucester—Alfgar and Hermann still by his side. And now it was seen how his merits were recognised, and how he had already gained the love of his people, for, from the territory of the Hwiccas, and all the extreme west of Mercia, men flocked to his standard until he was at the head of an army almost as numerous as that he had lost at Assingdun, only less perfectly disciplined and officered.

But Canute followed hard upon his heels, hoping to crush him while yet weak in numbers, until he discovered, to his great mortification, his rival's camp on the banks of the Severn, and saw that the forces were again nearly equal.

Then even the Danish chieftains shuddered at the thought of another battle. Five great battles had been fought, in *three* of which they had been defeated. There

was no Edric now with Edmund to play into their hands, and they hesitated to engage a *sixth* time.

At this moment an embassy was seen approaching from Edmund's army. Alfgar bore Edmund's personal defiance to Canute, offering to spare the effusion of blood, and settle their differences by single combat.

Canute's brave and impetuous temper caught the suggestion at once. Such appeals to the God of battles were common in the north, and he accepted the challenge.

There is an island in the Severn, then called Oleneige, now called Olney Island. The following day both armies gathered together on opposite banks, and the two kings, clad in splendid armour, were wafted thither. Alfgar, having landed his lord, retired with beating heart to the English bank. Edmund and Canute were alone on the island. The battle began; no words can describe the dread emotion with which the two nations watched the event.

They continued a long time without any apparent advantage; at length, King Edmund's fury adding strength to him, his blows were so thick and weighty, that Canute, perceiving his own strength to diminish, conceived a resolution to attempt ending the quarrel by a treaty.

But being crafty, and fearing lest his disadvantage should be apparent to Edmund, he collected all his energies and rushed furiously upon him, then withdrew himself aside, and desired Edmund to suspend the conflict for a while.

"Generous prince," said he, "hitherto I have had a covetous desire of your kingdom, but now I do yet more earnestly covet your friendship; your father and my father have each reigned over the land, let us divide the inheritance like brothers."

Edmund's generous spirit led him to accept the offer, and he threw his battle-axe to the ground and extended his right hand, which Canute eagerly grasped.*

* See Note M.—Combat between Edmund and Canute.

So the land was divided; Edmund was to be head king, and to have Wessex, Sussex, Kent, East Anglia, and Essex, with the city of London, while Canute had Northumbria and Mercia.

Canute professed himself a Christian, and swore to govern his people according to the old English laws, and to preserve their temporal and spiritual privileges, a promise which, upon the whole, he well observed.

And so England entered upon a peace of fifty years, only broken by an event yet in the womb of time, the Norman Conquest.

"Come, Alfgar," said Edmund, one day soon after these events, "let us go to Æscendune and fix thy wedding day; Elfwyn need fear no longer that the sword will be the portion of his grandchildren.

Peace! sweet, sweet peace! oh how joyful it was to be once more in the deep woods of Æscendune, to hear the sweet song of the birds, and to fear no evil! Sweet, ineffably sweet were those days to Alfgar and Ethelgiva!

So the day was at length appointed; it was to be the feast of S. Andrew, and to take place at Oxenford, which had been assigned to Edmund's dominions; for he insisted that it should be celebrated with all the pomp the presence of a king could lend.

It was now the season of the falling leaf, and there were only a few weeks longer to wait.

CHAPTER XXII.

SMOOTHER THAN OIL.

It was the latter end of November, and S. Andrew's day drew near, when a small but select party of friends met together in an old mansion hard by S. Frideswide's Cathedral, at Oxenford, to enjoy the evening banquet.

First and foremost was the king of Southern England, the valiant Ironside, and his attendant and friend Alfgar; Elfwyn and Father Cuthbert from Æscendune, with the Lady Hilda and Ethelgiva; Herstan, his wife Bertha, and son Hermann, from Cliffton, with his sisters; and Ethelm, the new bishop of Dorchester, the successor of the martyred Ednoth.

These, our old acquaintances, had all been gathered together in view of the approaching union of Alfgar with Ethelgiva, which was to be solemnised on S. Andrew's day, in the presence of the king. They were a happy party; all the woes of the past seemed forgotten in the happy present, or were only remembered in the spirit of the well-known line—

"Hæc olim meminisse juvabit."

The more substantial viands were removed, generous wines from warmer climes were introduced, but there was no need of a harper or of minstrels, save Edmund himself, or of legends and tales to those whose lives had passed amidst scenes of excitement. They were such as *make* history for future generations.

"How the wind howls without to-night!" observed

Edmund; "it makes one value the blessing of a quiet home and a cheerful fireside. How often, Alfgar, have you and I lain on such nights under the shelter of a canvas tent, or even of a bush!"

"Often, indeed, my liege; but those days are gone, perhaps for ever."

"They had their joys, nevertheless. There is something in a life of adventure which warms the blood and makes time pass swiftly; my goodwife and I sometimes tire of each other's company, as I expect Ethelgiva and you will in time."

"Never!" said Alfgar, so fervently that there was a general smile.

"Well, time will show; meanwhile, how is the new hall at Æscendune getting on, Elfwyn?"

"It will be ready by next spring; then the young people must make it their home. Our home in the woods has proved a shelter to us through such troublous days that Hilda and I are loath to leave it. But, meanwhile, they must live with us."

"And how about the priory?"

"It will be ready before the hall."

"That is well," observed the bishop, "and as it should be—God's house first, and then man's."

"Well, Hermann," said Edmund, addressing his young friend, whose career in arms he had closely watched since the attack upon the hall at Cliffton, "how do you like the prospect of a long peace?"

"A peaceful life has its delights," replied Hermann, "but war has also its charms."

"Well, thou hast passed unscathed through five great battles, or at least without any serious wound; but remember all are not so fortunate, and many a poor cripple sighs over Penn, Sherston, Brentford, Otford, or Assingdun."

"The excitement of war blinds one to the risk."

"So it should, or there would be no war at all. What does my father the bishop think of the matter?"

"That wars are necessary evils, only justifiable when fighting, as you, my lord, have done, for home and altar, but they are no true children of the Prince of Peace who delight in bloodshed and strife."

Edmund pondered. "And yet I fear I must plead guilty of delighting in a gallant charge. It stirs the blood, till it flows like fire in the veins. The feeling is glorious."

"Yet not one to be encouraged, save when it enables one to perform necessary deeds of daring for some worthy object, such as holy Scripture praises in the heroes of old."

The conversation now became general. Elfwyn and Herstan talked of the old days of Dunstan; Alfgar and Hermann of the events of the recent war; the good bishop and Father Cuthbert on ecclesiastical topics; the ladies upon some question of dresses and embroidery for the approaching festivity, which seemed to interest them deeply, when an attendant entered, and approaching the king, whispered a message in his ear.

"What! in this house? I will not have it. He knows how hateful his very presence must be."

"Your sister, the Princess Elgitha?"

"Well, I will see her. No, I will not."

"It is too late, Edmund. You *must* see me," said a sweet voice, and a lady, attired in mourning weeds, stood beside him. "It is but seven months, Edmund, since we lost our father. Shall his children rend and devour each other?"

"I do not want to rend and devour. I am no cannibal; but, Elgitha, your wicked husband"——

"Stay, Edmund, do not slander the husband before his wife."

"This is a business! What am I to say? I cannot dissemble, and pretend to love him, were he ten times my brother-in-law."

"Nor can I ask it," said a deep voice behind, and Edric stood before Edmund, his eyes cast down, his hands meekly clasped. "Edmund, I have often deeply injured you, and betrayed your confidence."

"You have indeed."

"But now I repent me of my wickedness. It burdens me so heavily that, but for your sister, I would retire into a monastery, and there end my days."

"It would be the best thing you could do."

"It would indeed."

This conference had taken place at the end of the great hall, which was a very spacious chamber, and the speakers were separated by a screen from the company.

"Edmund," cried his sister, "I see what you will do. You will make me a widow; for Edric cannot live if you refuse him forgiveness. Night after night he tosses on his uneasy bed, and wishes that it were day. Surely, Edmund, you have need of forgiveness yourself, yet you refuse to forgive."

"You preach like a bishop, but"——

"Well, you have a real bishop here. Call him, and let him judge between us."

Edmund mechanically obeyed, and he called Father Cuthbert also, in whose judgment he had great faith.

"What am I to do?" he said. "My country's wounds, inflicted by this man, yet bleed. Am I to give him the hand of friendship?"

"I do not deserve it," said Edric, meekly.

"My lord," said the bishop, gravely, "man may not refuse forgiveness to his fellow worm; but, Edric, hast thou truly repented of thy sin before God and his Church?"

"I have indeed. I have fasted in sackcloth and ashes, I have eaten the bread of affliction."

"Where?"

"In my sad retreat, my castle in Mercia."

"But some public reparation is due. Art thou willing to accept such penance as the Church, in consideration of thy perjuries, thy murders, which man may not avenge, since treaties protect thee, — but which God will surely remember, if thou repent not,—to accept such penance, I say, as the Church shall impose?"

"I submit myself to your judgment, most reverend father."

"It shall be duly considered and delivered to thee; and in consideration of that fact, I think, my lord, you cannot, as a Christian man, refuse to be reconciled."

"O Edmund, my brother, be merciful!" said Elgitha.

"I yield," said Edmund, "but not to-night," he said, as Edric stretched out his hand, reddened by many a dark deed of murder; "to-morrow, before God's altar. I shall be at S. Frideswide's at the early mass." And he returned to the company.

A cloud was evidently on his spirits that night, which did not wear off the rest of the evening. The party separated at what would now be called an early hour. The bishop and Father Cuthbert lodged at the monastic house of Osney; Elfwyn, his wife and child, as also Herstan, with his little party, were accommodated in the mansion.

The chamber occupied by the king was a long roomy place, containing a single bedstead of carved wood, surmounted by the usual distinctive canopy, from which tapestried hangings depended, and upon which scriptural subjects were woven; the furniture of the room partook of the usual meagreness of the times. The entrance was through a small ante-chamber, wherein, on a humbler bedstead, Alfgar slept. Both rooms were hung with tapestry, which concealed rough walls, such as a builder would blush to own as his handiwork in these luxurious days.

Before retiring to rest, Edmund turned with much affection to his attendant.

"Alfgar, I have promised to forgive our enemy."

"Edric Streorn?"

Alfgar added no more.

"Couldst thou forgive him?"

"I would try."

"His hand is red with blood. Think of Sigeferth, of Morcar, of Elfhelm, nay, of a hundred others; then think not how he has plotted against my life, but how

he made my own father hate and disown me; while he, the pampered favourite, swayed all the councils and betrayed the land. O Alfgar! couldst thou forgive him?"

"He plotted against my life and my honour too," said Alfgar, "and strove to deprive me of both; yet I am too happy now to harbour revenge."

"Well, I meet him at S. Frideswide's to-morrow, and we shall be formally reconciled in the presence of the bishop and his clergy, wherewith I trust he will be content, and not trouble me too often with his presence."

"Where is he staying now?"

"I hardly know; but after the reconciliation I must admit him as my guest, for my sister is with him, if he chooses to stay; but I hope that will not be the case."

"His ill-omened presence would cast a gloom upon S. Andrew's day."

"It would indeed; it shall be avoided if possible. And now let us commend ourselves to the Lord, who died that we might be forgiven. 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.'" And they slept.

On the morrow before the altar of S. Frideswide, the king and Edric had their places in the choir.

One very touching ceremony, handed down from early times, was still observed in England—the "kiss of peace," occurring at some period before the close of the canon of the mass, when all the members of the cathedral chapter, or of the choir, as the case might be, solemnly saluted each other.

And for this reason Edmund and Edric had been placed next each other. So when this most solemn moment arrived, they looked each other full in the face, and gave and received the sign of Christian brotherhood.

After this they both communicated.

When the holy rite was ended, Edmund invited Edric and Elgitha to become his guests. Edric knew the old palace well. He had occupied it one well-remembered season, during which, in that very banqueting-hall where

we have introduced our readers, Sigeferth and Morcar, the earls of the seven burghs, were treacherously murdered at the banquet after Edric had previously made them heavy with wine.

There was the usual gathering that evening. Did Edric remember the place, and the bloody event which only he and one other present connected with the spot? — for Edmund had been far away, and the matter had been hushed up, as far as was possible, by all the power and influence Ethelred could exert in his favourite's cause, or rather his own, for he, the royal villain, shared the ill-gotten spoil.

If he did remember it, he took care not to show it that night. He was as calm and self-possessed as a man could be—as a smiling sea under the summer sky—smiling so that the heedless voyager knows not what hideous trophies of past storms the smiling depths conceal.

So was it with this treacherous penitent.

His presence, however, somewhat chilled the conversation, and they broke up early; the more so as it was a vigil, the vigil of S. Andrew, and men strictly observed the law of the Church on such subjects in those days.

When he bade Edmund good-night, Edric said,—"You cannot tell how true a peace has found its home in my breast since our reconciliation, which I feel I owe greatly to the intercession of your patron S. Edmund, to whose tomb I made a pilgrimage, where I besought this one grace—our reconciliation."

Edmund thought of the holy thorn; but Edric continued—

"And you will be glad to hear that the bishop has decided upon my penance. It is to be a pilgrimage to the Holy Land."

"I am heartily glad to hear it," said Edmund, speaking the very truth, although he did try to forgive as he hoped to be forgiven.

And they separated.

Meanwhile happiness and expectation were high in the

breasts of the happy lovers, Alfgar and Ethelgiva. The morrow was to unite them. The ladies sat up nearly all night making the wedding robes complete, and richly adorning them—Hilda, Bertha, and Ethelgiva, with many skilful handmaidens.

They had almost finished their task, and were about to separate, when S. Frideswide's bell tolled the first hour of the morning (one o'clock).

"We are very late," said the lady Hilda, as well she might, for our ancestors generally retired early, as they rose early; and they bade each other good-night.

"Happy, happy Ethelgiva!" said the mother as she kissed her darling, not without a maternal sigh, for she felt as if she were losing her only child, who had for so many a year been the light of their woodland home,—her only child, who had filled not simply her own place in their affections, but as far as she might the place of the loved Bertric.

But the kiss was suspended. The whole party stood silent and breathless; for a loud and bitter cry, as of one in extreme anguish, broke upon the silence of the night.

Ethelgiva uttered but one word as she bounded towards the staircase, for she knew the voice—

"Alfgar!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHO HATH DONE THIS DEED?

ALFGAR never saw his beloved lord enter his chamber with a look of greater weariness than he bore that night.

"It has been a hard fight, old friend," said the familiar king, "but we have conquered; for my part, I would far sooner have stood out against him, battle-axe in hand, than have met this struggle, could I have foreseen it beforehand; but now I have given him the kiss of peace, *peace* it must be; he has no more to dread from me."

"Nor you from him, I trust."

"I *must* trust so, or I should not feel I had really forgiven, and I cannot give my hand where my heart is not; but yet it was such a fight. 'Tis easy to stand in the deadly gap and keep the foe from a beleaguered citadel: men praise the deed, and there is a feeling of conscious pride which sustains one, but the truly great deeds are those which no chronicler records. It requires more bravery to forgive sometimes than to avenge."

"I can well believe that, my lord."

"Well, if my path has been beset with foes, so has it with friends. Such love as yours, Alfgar, I say as yours has been!—well, few kings share such affections."

"My lord, you first loved me; at least you saved me from a fearful death."

"And you have warded off death from me again and again in the battlefield; nay, deny it not, nor say it was merely your duty, men do not always do such duty."

"My lord, you praise me more than I can feel I deserve."

"Not more than *I* feel you deserve, and yet were not this your last night as my companion, were not to-morrow's ceremony to separate us, perhaps for ever, I do not think I should thus overwhelm your modesty. You blush like a girl," said he, laughingly.

He lingered some time, and seemed loath to undress; at last he said—

"Have you seen the messenger Canute sent me?"

"Yes; I entertained him at the buttery as you requested."

"Well, he came with a proposal from Canute that we should join in building and endowing a church at Assingdun, where a priest may ever say mass for the souls of our dead, whether English or Dane. Of course I have accepted the offer, but Canute added another and more mysterious message."

"And what was that?"

"'Beware,' he said, 'of Edric; his apparent desire of reconciliation cannot be trusted;' and he added that Edric was like a certain person who wanted to become a monk when he was sick."

"I fear he speaks the truth."

"But I cannot act upon his advice; it is too late now. I have striven to do what I thought, and the bishop said, in his Master's name, was my duty — well, I have my reward in the approbation of my conscience. Good-night, Alfgar, good-night; I shall sleep soundly to-night; I hope some day I may lay me down for my last long sleep as peacefully."

Alfgar followed his example, and, commending himself to God, slept.

About half-an-hour after midnight Alfgar awoke with a strange impression upon his mind that some one was in the room. It was very dark and stormy, and the wind, finding its way through crevices in the ill-built house,

would account for many noises, but there was something stirring which was not the wind, and the impression was strong on his waking senses that between him and the window, which was opposite his bed, a figure had passed.

Not fully trusting impressions produced at such a moment, yet with a heavy vague sense of evil weighing him down like a nightmare, Alfgar lay and listened.

At length he heard a sound which might have been produced by falling rain percolating through the roof, drop, drop upon the floor, but it was strange, for there was no sound of rain outside at that moment.

At length a cold draught made him turn his head, and he dimly saw Edmund's door open and disclose the window within the room, then shut slowly again.

He could control his apprehensions no longer, and rose gently from his bed, so as not to warn the foe, on the one hand, should one be present, or if, as he strove to believe, all was fancy, not to awake Edmund. No one was in his own little room, that he felt rather than saw in a moment; but some one might be in Edmund's, and he passed through the door, which he remembered, with a shudder, was shut firmly when Edmund said "good-night." At that instant he heard a low click, as of a spring lock, but very faintly; hesitating no longer, he passed into the monarch's room, and advanced to the bed-side. "My lord!" he gently whispered, but there was no answer; he spoke again in vain. Just then he felt his naked feet come into contact with some wet substance, slightly glutinous, on the floor, and shuddered at the contact. All trembling, he put his hand to the pillow, and drew it back; it was wet with the same fluid, which his reason and experience told him was blood. He could hardly refrain from crying for help, but first sought a light. The process of procuring light then from flint, steel, and tinder was very slow, and it was some minutes before he had a taper lighted, when its beams disclosed to his horror-stricken sight Edmund, weltering in his blood; a dagger had been driven suddenly

and swiftly to his heart, and he had died apparently without a struggle. The weapon yet remained.*

Here his affliction and grief overpowered him; he threw himself upon the body from which he had withdrawn the weapon; he kissed the now cold lips; he cried, half distracted, "O Edmund, my lord, speak!" Alas! those lips were never to speak again while time lasted. At length the first deep emotion passed away, and left the unhappy Alfgar comparatively master of himself, whereupon he left the chamber, and cried aloud for help.

It was his cry which the ladies heard in their distant bower.

The piercing cry, "Help! Edmund, the king, is slain!" roused the household—Elfwyn, Herstan, Hermann, the ladies, agitated beyond measure; the household guard; and, last of all, Edric. They beheld Alfgar in his night dress, all bloody, holding a dagger in his hand, and with his face blanched to a death-like paleness, uttering cry upon cry.

"Help! Edmund, the king, is slain!"

They (the men) rushed to the chamber, and, passing through Alfgar's little room, beheld, by the light of many torches, Edmund bathed in his own blood, which still dripped with monotonous but terrible sound on the floor.

Edric entered, and with woe, real or affected (no one could tell), painted in his face, approached the body; and Elfwyn and Herstan beheld, or thought they beheld, a prodigy: they thought they saw the eyes open, and regard Edric, and that they saw the blood well up in the wound. But doubtless this was fancy.

"One thing we all must do," said Edric; "we must all help to find the murderer. The first step to that effect will be to note all present appearances. First, where is the weapon?"

"Here," said Alfgar, extending it.

"Why, Alfgar, it is your own dagger," said Elfwyn; "one which *he* gave you himself."

* See Note N.—Death of Edmund.

Alfgar uttered a plaintive and pitiful cry.

Edric possessed himself of the blood-stained weapon.

"Alfgar," said he, "you must have slept soundly. Tell us what you heard and saw."

He briefly related the particulars with which the reader is acquainted.

"But how *could* they enter? Was your door unfastened?"

'No; it was bolted on the inside, even as I left it last night."

"Bolted on the inside! then they must have entered through the window," said Edric, noting the words.

"Impossible," said both the thanes; "they are barred, both of them,—heavily barred."

"We can no longer assist our departed lord save by our prayers," said Edric. "God be thanked, he died friends with me. I shall value the remembrance of that kiss of peace in S. Frideswide's so long as I live. And now I, once his foe, but his friend and avenger now, devote myself to hunt the murderer. So help me God!"

"So help me God!" "So help me God!" said all present, one after the other.

"We are then of one heart and soul, and no tie of kindred, no friendship, shall bar our common action. And now we must rouse the reeve and burgesses; the gates of the city must be closed, that none escape. I will send members of the guard to do this, and when they have assembled we will all take counsel together."

"O Alfgar," whispered Elfwyn, "how came your dagger there?"

"I know not. I feel as one distracted," said the faithful and loving Alfgar, who had lost by this fell stroke a most faithful friend, with the warmest heart which had ever beaten beneath a monarch's breast. Oh, how the thought of the conversation last night came back to him now,—the warning of Canute, the loving words of affection which had been spoken to him by those lips now cold in death!

All the imperfections of his character now faded away; he seemed so brave, yet so loving, so invincible in combat, yet so gentle and forgiving, as he had shown in forgiving even—even—even—said Alfgar to his own wounded bleeding heart—even in forgiving his murderer. For in his eyes it was Edric, and none but Edric, who had done this deed.

But a terrible suspicion of a very opposite nature was rapidly assuming sway in other men's minds.

A council met before daybreak,—the reeve or mayor, the chief burgesses, two or three thanes then in the town, the officers of the royal guard, Elfwyn, Herstan, and Edric. After a few preliminaries Edric rose and spake as follows:—

"We have met together under the most awful responsibility which could fall upon subjects. Edmund, our king, has been murdered, and by whom we know not." All were silent. "I grieve to say," he continued, "that there is but one upon whom our suspicions can now fall with any shadow of probability,—one who is now absent, for I thought it well not to summon him to this council; and before naming him, I must recall to you, Elfwyn, and to you, Herstan, the solemn oath we have all three taken to disregard all appeals of natural affection, and to ascertain the truth, God being our helper."

"We have," "we have," said they with bursting hearts, for they foresaw what accusation Edric was about to bring.

"I grieve, then, to say," he continued, "that this natural affection must be bitterly tried, for there is but one to whom my words can apply. Meanwhile, I will put a few questions. With whose dagger was the deed committed?"

"Alfgar's," replied those who had been there the previous night.

"Whose chamber commanded the only entrance to the royal chamber?"

"Alfgar's."

"Who incautiously, as if forgetting himself, stated that he found the door bolted on the inside?"

"Alfgar."

"But the motive,—the motive? The poor fellow loved him as he loved his own father."

"I cannot explain that difficulty, but I can suggest one motive which may already have suggested itself to several. But let me ask of what nation is Alfgar?"

"A Dane; but an Englishman by long habit."

"I can answer for that," said Elfwyn.

"Once a Dane always a Dane. *Now* a secret messenger arrived from Canute yesterday, and had a long private interview with Alfgar. In short, I dare not say all I know or suspect, for there can be little doubt who will reign in England now."

All were silent.

At length Edric continued, "None can deny that we have grounds for our suspicions."

"Yes, I do deny it," said Elfwyn, "the more so when I remember who makes the accusation."

"You do well to reproach me; I deserve it, I confess, and more than deserve it. Yes, I was Edmund's enemy once; but perhaps you remember yesterday and the early mass at S. Frideswide's."

"We do, we do," cried all but Elfwyn and Herstan; but they were utterly outvoted, and the order was given to the captain of the huscarles to arrest Alfgar.

Alfgar, desolate and almost distracted, not heeding that he was not summoned to the council, as he might so naturally have expected to be, wandered mechanically about the palace until the bell summoned him to the early mass. The bishop was the celebrant, for Father Cuthbert was to have officiated at the celebration of the marriage of his son in the faith. The solemn pealing of the bell for the mass at the hour of daybreak fell upon Alfgar's ears, and

he turned almost mechanically to the cathedral, yet with a vague desire to communicate all his griefs and troubles to a higher power than that of man, and to seek aid from a diviner source.

He entered, knelt in a mental attitude easier to imagine than describe, but felt some heavenly dew fall upon his bleeding wounds; he left without waiting to speak to any one at the conclusion of the service, and was crossing the quadrangle to the palace which occupied a portion of the site of modern Christ Church, when a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder.

He turned and saw the captain of the guard; two or three of his officers were beside him.

"It is my painful duty to arrest you and make you my prisoner."

"On what charge?" said the astonished Alfgar.

"The murder of the king."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ORDEAL.

THE news of the murder of Edmund spread far and wide, and awakened deep sorrow and indignation, not only amongst his friends and subjects, but even amongst his former enemies, the Danes, now rapidly yielding to the civilising and softening influences of Christianity, following therein the notable example of their king, Canute, who was everywhere restoring the churches and monasteries he and his had destroyed, and saying, with no faltering voice, albeit, perhaps, with a very inadequate realisation of all the words implied, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Ealdorman and thane came flocking into Oxenford from all the neighbouring districts of Wessex and Mercia. The body of the lamented monarch was laid in state in S. Frideswide's; there wax tapers shed a hallowed light on the sternly composed features of him who had been the bulwark of England; and there choking sobs and bitter sighs every hour rent the air, and bore witness to a nation's grief. And *there*, two heartbroken ladies, a mother and a daughter, came often to pray, not only for the soul of the departed king, but also for the discovery of his murderers and the clearing of the innocent, for neither Hilda nor Ethelgiva for one moment doubted the spotless innocence of Alfgar.

They were refused admittance to the cell wherein he was confined by Edric, who had assumed the direction of all things, and whose claim, such is the force of impudence,

seemed to be tacitly allowed by the thanes and ealdormen of Wessex.

But Elfwyn and Herstan could hardly be denied permission to visit him, owing to their positions, and they both did so. They found him in a chamber occupying the whole of the higher floor of a tower of the castle, which served as a prison for the city and neighbourhood, rudely but massively built. One solitary and deep window admitted a little air and light, but the height rendered all escape hopeless, even had the victim wished to escape, which he did not.

"Alfgar, my son!" said Elfwyn, finding the poor prisoner did not speak, "do you not know us?"

"Indeed I do; but do you believe me guilty, nay, even capable of"——. He could add no more, but they saw that if they doubted they would hear no more from him—that he scorned self-defence.

"Guilty!—no, God forbid! we alone in the council asserted your complete innocence."

"I thank you; you have taken away the bitterness of death;—and Ethelgiva?"

"Would die for her conviction of your truth."

"Thank God!" he said fervently, his face brightening at once; tears, indeed, rolled down his cheeks, but they seemed rather of gratitude than grief.

"We wanted to see, my son, whether you could aid us in discovering the real assassin—whether you can in any way account for his possession of your dagger, for your door being still, as you asserted, fast inside."

"I knew it made against me, but I couldn't lie, it *was* fast inside."

"Then how could the foe have gained admittance?"

"I could not discover that, but I think there must have been some secret door. Edric had perhaps lived in the place before; he once resided in Oxenford."

"He did, and in that very house," said Herstan. "I was here at the time when he assassinated Sigeferth and Morcar in the banqueting-hall."

"That may supply a clue, I know no other possible one."

"But how, then, did he get your dagger?"

"I think our wine was drugged the night before, or I should not have slept so soundly. I remember with what difficulty I seemed to throw off a kind of nightmare which oppressed me, and to come to myself."

"Then I will get a carpenter and search the wainscoting; and I will see whether I can learn anything about the wine," said Elfwyn.

"Do so cautiously, my father, very cautiously, for if Edric suspects you are on his track, he will plot against your life too, and Ethelgiva will have no protector. Oh, this was to have been my wedding day, my *wedding* day!" and he clasped his hands in agony; then the thought of his master—his slain lord—returned, and he cried, "O Edmund! my master, my dear master, so good, so gentle, yet so brave; who else could slay him? what fiend else than Edric, the murderer Edric? That they should think I, or any one else than Edric, could have done such a deed, such an evil deed!"

Elfwyn and Herstan both left the scene, the more convinced of Alfgar's innocence, but yet the more puzzled to convey their impression to others.

Meanwhile the arrangements for Edmund's burial were made. It was decided, according to the wish he had more than once expressed, that he should rest beneath the shadow of a shrine he had loved well; and on the second day after his death the mournful procession left Oxenford for Glastonbury, followed by the tears and prayers of the citizens. There, after a long and toilsome winter journey, the funeral *cortège* arrived, and was joined by his wife Elgitha, his sons Edmund and Edward. They laid him to rest by the side of his grandfather, Edgar "the Magnanimous," whose days of peace and prosperity all England loved to remember. There, amidst the people of Wessex who had rallied so often to his war-cry, all that was mortal of the Ironside reposed.

Meanwhile the crafty Edric, who excused himself from attendance on the solemnities, tarried at Oxenford, and with him tarried also Elfwyn, Herstan, and the other friends of the unfortunate prisoner, to secure, as they were able, that justice should be rendered him.

A special court of justice was speedily organised, wherein Edric presided as ealdorman of Mercia, for Oxenford properly was a Mercian city, although, lying on the debateable land, it was frequently claimed by Wessex as the border land changed its boundaries.

The court was composed of wise and aged men, ealdormen, thanes, and burgesses had places, and the bishop of Dorchester sat by Edric as assessor.

The court was opened, and the vacant places in the room were occupied at once by the crowd who were fortunate enough to gain entrance. The general feeling was strong against the prisoner, the more so because he had been loved and trusted by Edmund, so that ingratitude added to the magnitude of his crime in their eyes.

But amongst those who stood nearest to the place he must occupy were his betrothed, her mother, Bertha, and young Hermann, who had already got into several quarrels through his fierce espousing of the cause of the accused.

He entered at last under a guard, calm and dignified, in spite of his suffering. He met the gaze of the multitude without flinching, and his general demeanour impressed many in his favour. Compurgators, or men to swear that they believed him innocent, a kind of evidence fully recognised by the Saxon law, were not wanting; but they consisted chiefly of his old companions in arms and his friends from Æscendune. In a lighter accusation, his innocence might have been established by this primitive mode of evidence, but the case was too serious; the accusation being one of the murder of a king.

The charge was duly read; and to the accusation he replied, "Not guilty!" with a fervour and firmness which caused men to look up.

The chamberlain was first examined.

"Were you present when the late king retired to rest?"

"I was."

"Who shared his chamber?"

"The prisoner slept in an ante-chamber."

"Was there a fastening to the outer door of the ante-chamber?"

"Yes; a strong bolt."

"Could it be opened from the exterior?"

"It could not."

"Was there any other entrance to the royal apartments?"

"None."

The dagger was produced, and Elfwyn was examined.

"Do you recognise the weapon?"

"I do; it was Alfgar's."

"How do you recognise it?"

"It was richly carved about the handle. The letter E is stamped upon it, with a crown."

"Whence did the prisoner obtain it?"

"The king gave it him." (Sensation.)

"Did you see it on the night of the murder?"

"I did."

"Under what circumstances?"

"The accused held it dripping with blood in his hands, and said he found it sticking in the corpse."

Other witnesses were also called to prove these facts.

The accused was then heard in his own defence, and he repeated with great simplicity and candour the circumstances so well known to our readers; and concluded—"I can say no more. None who knew the love he bore me, and that I bore him, could suspect me."

The bishop here spoke.

"It is my office," said he, "by the canons of King Athelstane, to assist secular judges in purging away accusations, therefore I will ask the accused a few questions."

"Had you any cause of suspicion against any other person—anything to point out the doer of this evil deed?"

"All men loved him save one."

"And who was that one?"

"He sits to judge me."

"Nay," cried the bishop, "we all beheld the reconciliation in S. Frideswide's church."

"The king himself was warned not to trust to the reconciliation."

"By whom?"

"His brother sovereign."

"Canute?" And here Edric perceptibly changed colour.

"Even so."

"Your proofs," said the bishop;—"nay, my lord Edric, trust your reputation to the justice of God and the court."

"The messenger from Canute, who came here on the vigil of S. Andrew."

"Where is he?"

"He has returned to Canute," said Elfwyn.

"Aught else?"

"Only I would bid you remember that the ealdorman Edric sought in like manner reconciliation with Elfhelm of Shrewsbury, and all men know what followed."

Here Edric interrupted—

"I do not sit here to be judged, but to judge. These accusations cannot be heard."

"There is a judgment-seat above where you will not be able to make that plea," said the prisoner solemnly.

"Alfgar," said the bishop, "this counter-accusation cannot be received; have you aught else to urge?"

"None. I commit my cause to God."

The court retired.

The pause was long and painful. It afterwards transpired that the bishop pleaded in Alfgar's favour, while Herstan ably seconded him; but all was in vain. Edric's eloquence, and the strong circumstantial evidence against the prisoner, carried the day, and the ealdorman even pro-

posed that execution should be speedy, "lest," he whispered, "Canute should interfere to screen his instrument." It was a dangerous game, but he thought the services he had rendered the Danish cause enabled him to play it safely.

"They returned. All men saw the verdict in their faces. Edric spoke with great solemnity.

"We find the prisoner guilty."

There was a dead pause.

"I appeal to the judgment of God. I demand the ordeal of fire," said Alfgar.*

"It cannot be denied," said the bishop, who had anticipated the appeal. "I myself will see to the preliminaries; and it may take place to-morrow morning in S. Frideswide's church."

Edric and his sympathisers would fain have denied the claim, but they could not resist the bishop, backed as he was by the popular voice, for the cry, "The ordeal! yes, the ordeal!" was taken up at once by the populace. While he was hesitating, his brother Goda appeared amongst the crowd. "Canute," he whispered, "draws nigh Oxenford. He has heard what is going on."

Edric trembled, but soon recovered himself. However, it was not a time to deny justice.

The following morning the church of S. Frideswide was crowded at the early mass. All the friends of the accused were there, and Edric with all his party. The holy service was about to commence, when the crowd at the church door moved aside; a passage was speedily made through the crowd, and three or four ecclesiastics, one habited as a royal chaplain, escorted a stranger, to whom all paid instinctive reverence, yet hardly knowing why, for he was only clad in the ordinary robes worn by noblemen amongst the English.

He was led to the choir, and placed where Edmund had knelt by Edric's side some days previously. Edric saw

* See Note O.—The Ordeal.

him, and exchanged glances, after which the ealdorman looked uneasy.

On the other side knelt the prisoner, with Elfwyn and Herstan on either side, and his colour heightened. Well it might. He had last seen that figure when he fought by Edmund's side at Penn. But it was not *that* meeting. Words spoken ten years before came back to him with marvellous force—

"Tell me what is the secret of this Christianity?"

And Alfgar knew that Canute had found that secret at last.

"Why was he here? Did he come as his friend or foe?"

The mass was over. Alfgar had followed the whole ceremony with rapt attention, for it was in God alone that he could now put his confidence.

Then a furnace was placed in the church, containing nine bars of iron of red heat, and the fire was blown till the bars, quivering with heat, glittered in the sight. The bishop approached, and said the appointed prayers, that God would detect the innocence or guilt of the prisoner by their means, and reveal the truth known only to Him.

Then a lane was formed up the church, and the friends of Alfgar kept one side, while those of Edric kept the other, after which the bars of iron were laid down about two feet apart.

The bishop approached.

"Are ye all fasting with prayer?" he inquired.

The friends of accused and accuser from either side replied

"We are."

"Humble yourselves, and pray to God to reveal the truth," said he, and sprinkled them with holy water, after which the book of the Gospels was passed all round to be kissed.

"Pray that God may reveal the truth," said he again.

"We do so pray."

Then Alfgar, who felt full of divine confidence, took his place at the end nearest the porch. He was given the book of the Gospels.

"Swear thy innocence upon the holy Gospels," said the bishop.

"I do swear that I am innocent of the crime they lay to my charge;" and he kissed the book; then holy water was sprinkled upon his feet, and given him to drink.

The decisive moment approached. He looked round, he saw Ethelgiva, her eyes full of tears, her lips moving in prayer.

All fear departed from him.

The bishop blindfolded him.

"My son, trust in God, and in His strength go forward," he whispered.

Alfgar could see nought now. A line of red string was stretched from the bishop's hand to that of a priest at the other extremity, to guide him. Canute advanced, took the end from the priest's hand and held it. Alfgar started one step. The first iron is passed safely—two, the second cleared. The excitement is intense. Three cleared—four, five. Ah, he nears the sixth! No, he misses it!—seven, eight—one more—nine! SAVED BY GOD!

Ethelgiva fainted. A deep sound of applause, not even suppressed by the character of the place. Elfwyn received his adopted son in his arms.

"Saved, saved!" he cried.

"Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory!" replied Alfgar.

When the first congratulations were over, and Alfgar had somewhat recovered from the excitement of the shock, and from the congratulations which were heaped upon him upon all sides, he was told that Canute awaited him in the audience chamber, and at once repaired to the presence of

his future king with less emotion than may be imagined; for he was worn out by sensation, and becoming callous to impressions.

He was formally introduced by the officer in waiting, and the king at once dismissed that functionary.

"Alfgar, son of Anlaf, we have met before," observed the monarch.

"We have, my lord."

"I did not refer to later occasions, when we have met on the battlefield, but to a far earlier one. Need I recall it? Surely there are some moments in one's life never to be forgotten."

"There are indeed, my lord. Pardon my confusion. You refer to a scene in Carisbrooke."

"Yes. When I asked you, 'What is this Christianity?' you had not much time given you to answer me then, but your deliberate choice of a bitter death, in preference to abandoning it, showed me there was somewhat deeper in it than I had imagined. Alfgar, there are seeds lightly sown which bear fruit hereafter, and your words were of such a character,—so that I, your future monarch, owe you already a debt of gratitude, and I had come hither to fulfil it when you saved me the task by appealing to the ordeal. I for one had full faith in the justice of God. But had you not so appealed, I should have stepped in between Edric and his victim."

"You did not then, my lord, believe in my guilt?"

"Not for one moment. The lad who defied my unhappy father in the frantic fury of his power,—the warrior I had seen fighting by the side of his king,—the faithful attendant of many years!—Nay, it was monstrous; who could believe it?"

"Many, alas! found it possible to believe it, my lord. But who *has* been the murderer? You will not permit your brother's blood to fall on the earth unavenged."

"Wait. Be patient. God, in whom you trust, will direct the bolt in His own time. Edmund's blood will not

be unavenged. And now, farewell! Remember, if you have lost one royal friend, you have found another." And Alfgar left the presence.

The next day the whole party from Æscendune returned home. Oxenford was too full of bitter memories now. One grief of Alfgar was this,—he had not been able to stand by Edmund's grave.

CHAPTER XXV.

FATHER CUTHBERT'S DIARY.

CHRISTMAS-TIDE 1017. Ten years ago, this very day, God in His mercy delivered us from the raging Danes at Clifton, on Tamesis, and now He hath delivered us again out of the hands of the raging lion, even of Edric Streorn, and we are all spared to keep our Christmas in peace in the woods of Æscendune.

It is probably the last I shall keep in this place, for the hall and priory are fast rising from their ruins, and we shall soon return to our old home, from which we have been banished ten years and more. It will be sweet to be there once more, serving the Lord in peace, with none daring to make us afraid.

Here we *are* all of us who are near and dear by the ties of blood, in this woodland Zoar, which hath indeed been a Zoar in the late troublous years, utterly untouched, which again we regard as a proof that Anlaf does not live, for he could have found us out had his revenge led him to do so when Sweyn was in Mercia. Neither has he appeared to claim his own estate, which he might easily regain now a Dane is king.

Alfgar and Ethelgiva are now speedily to be united. Theirs is to be the first marriage solemnised in the new minster church by my unworthy hands. To see them now, one would think they had forgotten all the past peril. The old people do not mean to abandon their woodland abode; they love it all too well, and call it the Happy Valley. But they say that a good road, now the times are safer,

shall be made to the old site, where we are again rearing hall and priory.

There is now quite a colony here, nearly 300 people. The church is very commodious, and every day, for the whole period of these late dreadful wars, mass has been said therein for our suffering brethren "contra Paganos." Thank God that he hath at length heard our prayers; our late foes are no longer *Pagans* but *Christians*, and are as eager to build up as they were to cast down; in fact, several of them have offered their zealous aid in the rebuilding of our priory.

We had such a happy Christmas evening. We sat by the fire, and Alfgar was made to relate the whole story again of his escape with Edmund from Carisbrooke, of his imprisonment by Edric in the Synodune woods, of the attack and defence of Cliffton. We had all heard it before, but still we wanted to hear it again, just to contrast present peace and joy with the danger and trials of those days, and to make them sweeter by the contrast. Truly our Christmas worship had need to be praise and thanksgiving, not only for the great mystery the church commemorates, but also for present mercies so freely bestowed upon us all.

Second Sunday after Easter, 1017.—We have just received intelligence that Canute has been solemnly crowned at S. Paul's Church, in London, by Archbishop Lyfing. He called a council of the whole kingdom previously, to which both my brother and I were summoned, but I cared not to attend. Elfwyn, however, went, and wanted Alfgar to go, but he begged hard to be excused, I imagine for two reasons. First of all, he laments Edmund too deeply to welcome his former enemy as his successor; and secondly, he does not care to leave Ethelgiva again.

Well, Elfwyn tells us that when all were present—bishops, ealdormen, thanes, and the noblest of the people—Canute solemnly proposed that they should accept him as their king, giving them to understand that, by a tacit

understanding with Edmund, it had been agreed that the kingdom should not be permanently divided, but that the survivor should inherit and govern the whole realm.

The wise men replied that, since Edmund's children were too young to govern, they could not desire a better monarch than Canute; they committed the little ones to his care, and acknowledged him as king of all England.

And on the morrow Archbishop Lyfing, who had so shortly before crowned Edmund, placed the emblem of regal dignity on the head of Canute in S. Paul's Cathedral.

I hear Edric Streorn is confirmed in the earldom of Mercia. I still fear that man.

Sunday after Ascension, 1017.—On this happy Sunday it has pleased God to restore us to our home once more. The priory is rebuilt in more than its former beauty, and the hall beside it stands conspicuous in its splendour. They have not changed the appearance much, for it was the especial wish of every one concerned that it should remind one of old associations as much as possible.

The good bishop of Dorchester, the abbot of Abingdon, and many others of my friends amongst the brethren there, the neighbouring clergy and thanes, all met together to dedicate the new house to God. High mass was solemnly sung in the minster church, and the whole building was hallowed with psalm and prayer to God; after which followed a temperate banquet.

The bishop was very kind and loving, and spoke most affectionately to our poor people on the subject of their past trials; especially he commended their new lord, Alfgar, to their allegiance, saying that in all his deep trials he had shown himself a most perfect Christian, doing his duty both to God and man.

Monday.—The abbot and brethren from Abingdon are gone back, and we poor happy brethren have entered again

upon our regular duties. Ah me! what a gap time has made in our ranks. Of the twenty brethren who were driven out by the Danes eleven years ago, only twelve yet live, and eight brethren from Abingdon supply the place of the others. God be praised that Father Adhelm yet lives! He has been my right hand in so many perils and trials.

It is so delightful to be at home once more. Surely never were monks happier. My heart swells when each morning we sing the three last joyful psalms at lauds.

It is settled that Alfgar and Ethelgiva are to be married on the Monday after the Whitsun octave. O happy pair! O ter felices et nimium beati! I only hope they will not love earth too well.

Octave of the Ascension.—To-day we have had a special messenger from Canute, who is in the neighbourhood, to express his royal intention to grace the approaching marriage with his presence. It will indeed be an honour. Ah! but if Edmund could be there.

Whitsunday.—I hardly know how to express my intense surprise and joy. Alfgar's father has returned—a Christian.

While all the people were assembling for mass this morning, an aged man, clad in palmer's weeds, evidently worn by toil and travel, came from the bridge over the river, which has been rebuilt, towards the minster church, and entering, knelt down wrapt in devotion. Many remarked his quaint attire; his face, once stern, now softened by grace; his hair, once black as the raven's wing, now white as snow; his dark eyes gleaming beneath thick white eyebrows. I fear he caused many wandering thoughts, and he would have caused yet more, could they have known that they beheld the penitent destroyer of the old hall and priory. Now I preached, not knowing at the time who was amongst my hearers, from the words of Isaiah, "For thy waste and desolate places, and the land of thy destruction, shall even now be too narrow, by rea-

son of the inhabitants, and they that swallowed thee up shall be far away. The children which thou shalt have, after thou hast lost the other, shall say again in thine ears. The place is too strait for me; give place to me, that I may dwell."

Oh, how touching the words seemed; for our waste and desolate places are indeed peopled with joy and gladness, and many must have thought of dear Bertric, our martyr boy, when they heard those words, "the children which thou shalt have, after thou hast lost the other." They seemed a divine prophecy of joy and gladness unto us.

And so I preached after this manner, and as I did so I saw the stranger was deeply moved, and marvelled who he could be, that he entered so deeply into so personal a sermon, which treated of a peculiar joy which a stranger intermeddleth not with.

Now after the mass was ended, we came forth from the church, and Alfgar, with Ethelgiva, walked down the path to the Lychgate, when Alfgar's eyes fell upon the stranger, whereupon, to our astonishment, he started, then stepped forward, fell on his knees, and cried, with a choked voice, "Father, your blessing!"

At first we thought it was reverence, somewhat exaggerated, to a pilgrim, but when the aged man cried aloud, "The God of Abraham bless thee, even thee, O my son!" and the tears streamed down the furrows of his aged cheeks, we knew it must be something more than this, and so it proved.

It was none other than Anlaf—Anlaf, who had disappeared from all the knowledge of friend or foe for ten years!

We all received him, especially my brother Elfwyn, with great joy—for we shared Alfgar's happiness—and we led him into the house, where we tendered him all the offices of hospitality.

It was by degrees that we learned his story. He was really converted to Christianity by the example of his son,

whose words produced a far deeper effect upon him than either he or Alfgar suspected at the time.

And when he saw that son prefer a cruel death to apostasy, his heart was moved—deeply moved, so that he pondered over all he had heard from him and from a once loved wife, whose words had seemed lost, but whose prayers perhaps watered them into growth after she was dead and gone. So he left the army without telling any one whither he went, and sought instruction from a Christian.

And he found a Christian priest hidden in the woods, where he administered the word and sacraments to a starving few, but secretly, for fear of the Danes; and from him he learned the truth and was baptized.

Then, feeling himself unhappy in this distracted land, —separated from the English by blood, from the Danes by religion—he determined to go on pilgrimage.

Once in the Holy Land, he had to undergo much contumely from the pagan Saracens, who, to the disgrace of Christendom, defile the Holy City by their presence, and maltreat the blessed pilgrims; but he had learned to glory in humiliation. At last he retired to the woods on the sources of the Jordan, weary of earth, and there he joined an aged hermit, with whom he lived for two years, and when the hermit died he took his place, and dwelt as an ascetic, ministering, however, to the necessities of pilgrims who journeyed that way to the Holy Land.

From some of these pilgrims he learned, at length, that English and Danes were united in peace, and a great desire of revisiting England and searching out his son seized upon him. On the road he heard that Edmund was dead and Canute reigned alone, and so he came hither at once, and has arrived, God so willing it, in time to see his son married to the heiress of Æscendune.

We have provided him lodgings in the priory. The new hall is not to be dwelt in till the night when the happy pair enter it and make it their home.

Alfgar's cup of joy is full.

Monday after the Whitsun Octave.—At last it is over. The weary waiting of ten years is ended. Alfgar and Ethelgiva are man and wife.

Canute gave away the bride in person. Elfwyn, Hilda, Herstan, Bertha, and Hermann, with his sisters—indeed all the kindred of the bride were there. Of the kindred of the bridegroom but *one*, so far as we know, is living—his father Anlaf. It has been a warlike race, and nearly all the members of the family have found a warrior's grave.

I performed the ceremony, assisted by all the brethren in the choral portions of the mass and the order of the marriage service. Ethelgiva was pale and composed although she shed a few natural tears, but wiped them soon. Alfgar was simple and unaffected, as he always is. All he does is so naturally done. Like Nathaniel, he is a man without guile.

The church was crowded. All the retainers and all the neighbours were present, and when the bride and bridegroom left the sacred building, they saluted them with cheers which made the welkin ring.

Then the whole party adjourned to the hall, which was crowded to the fullest extent. And for the poorer guests, who could not find admittance, tables were spread in the open air, beneath the shade of spreading trees, for the day was lovely even for June.

Canute remained throughout the entertainment, and, by his unaffected condescension and his cheerful sympathy, won the hearts of all. His general demeanour tends to efface his foreign descent from the mind. Yet we sighed for Edmund, for which even Canute would pardon us. *He* should have presided at the board.

When the night was far advanced the whole party broke up and retired to rest, after a day calculated to efface the recollection of many a hardship past.

For my part, when I returned to the priory, I mused for a long time on the dark paths through which our Lord has conducted us to this happy day. I thought of the

period of Alfgar's conversion and baptism, of S. Brice's night, for which England has paid so heavy a penance, now, we trust, happily over. And while I thus thought, my musings led me to the tomb of Bertric, whose sacred relics, as those of a martyr, now lie interred beneath our high altar, and I wondered whether his blessed spirit could sympathise in our earthly joy. Yes; I doubt it not; and that he witnesses it from above. Through suffering to joy has been our lot; through suffering to glory his.

Tuesday.—The king left this morning. His engagements are too numerous to permit him to give much space to recreation. Before he left he summoned Alfgar, Anlaf, and Elfwyn, to a conference in the library,—for they have a library as of old in the hall,—and then he told Alfgar that he had talked with Anlaf, who wished to convey the manorial rights of his former patrimony, and all its revenues, to his son, and to join our brotherhood, and that he desired him to witness the deed. Now, all the former charters of Æscendune were destroyed in the old hall, and the king had caused a new one to be drawn up, supplying all the defects caused by the loss of the earlier documents; conferring and securing, by royal charter, all the lands of Æscendune, and those formerly appertaining to Anlaf, upon Alfgar, and his successors for ever, not, as he said, as a deed of gift, but as a charter securing and defining their rights and liberties, for him and his successors, to all future generations; and adding all the waste land of the adjacent forest, formerly holden of the crown, to their domains, with right of all temporal jurisdiction, and with the title of *Earl*, which title is common in the northern and more Danish districts, more so than ealdorman, which obtains in the south.

"Thus much," said he, "I know my brother Edmund would have done for you, and in his place it has fallen to my lot. Would," he added, "I could be all to you which Edmund would have been had he lived; that, perhaps, is

not possible; but I know, Alfgar," he added, "how to esteem faithfulness, even when it has been sometimes exercised at my expense, for one once a rival, now only thought of as a brother."

Then he turned to Anlaf. "Old companion in arms," he said, "this makes up for Carisbrooke; well, Alfgar, hadst thou yielded then, thou hadst not been here now. Thy father and I owe thee something for the example thou didst set us."

And then he turned to Elfwyn and wished him joy of his son.

After that he came to the priory and prayed awhile in front of the altar; his devotions ended, he came to my cell and made me a startling offer of a bishopric in Denmark, saying he thought there was much work to be done for God there, and he thought Englishmen would do it best; and thus, he added, after their Master's example, return good for evil.*

But an old oak such as I am cannot be uprooted, and perhaps it is a carnal feeling, but I fear my earthly affections bind me here while life lasts, so, thanking him warmly for the distinction implied in the offer, I respectfully but firmly declined it.

And so the king and his retinue left Æscendune. Elfwyn and Hilda return in a few days to their happy valley; men have been at work for weeks making a good road there from the hall, and the journey will only occupy two or three hours to a good walker.

Herstan and his family leave for their home on the Thames (which has been rebuilt, together with the little church of S. Michael) to-morrow. Anlaf takes his vows as a novice next Sunday, his novitiate will be as short as the rules of our order allow; we shall all then welcome him as a brother.

Soon our days will flow tranquilly on. May God merci-

* It was a subject of complaint against Canute in Denmark that he gave away most of the bishoprics to Englishmen.

fully continue peace in our days. "*Stablish the thing, O God, that thou hast wrought in us.*"

Christmas, 1017.—Strange news greet our festival, Edric Streorn has gone suddenly, unhouselled, unanointed, unabsolved, to his great account. Hermann, who is now an officer in the royal huscarles, has arrived from court, and from him we have learnt all particulars.

Edric was alone with the king in a chamber overlooking the Thames. Hermann was on duty without, with some of the guard, when he heard voices within in hot contention. "You will grant me no favour, not even the life of this traitor, who, I tell you, is conspiring against you, and desires to place Edwy, the Etheling, Edmund's brother, on the throne in your place."

"Your proof lies, I suppose, in the hatred you have always borne him," was the king's reply.

Hermann could not help hearing, they spoke so loudly, but the next words enchained his attention.

"I tell thee the name 'Alfgar' is first and foremost amongst the signatures of the men who have conspired to cast thee from the throne."

"Then I conclude you placed it there; tush, man, I know thee of old!"

"Why should you suspect *this?* was not he Edmund's faithful friend, worshipping him as a god, and would he not do all he could for his brother?"

"I thought you held him guilty of Edmund's murder."

"That was only because I wished to remove two enemies from your path instead of one; you will not remove *one* from mine; lo! I forsook Edmund my king for thy sake, and for thy sake I slew him, and thus thou rewardest me."

Then Canute waxed furious, and he shouted, "Guard! guard!" Hermann rushed in; and amongst others Eric, the Earl of Northumbria.

"What, wretch! murderer! apostate! blasphemer of the saints! didst *thou* murder Edmund, my brother Edmund, who was dear to me as Jonathan to David, seeing we were bound to each other by an oath? Thou didst stretch thy hand against the Lord's anointed, and thou shalt die the death. Cut him down! cut him down, Eric! cut him down, Hermann."

Eric stepped forward in an instant, and with his huge battle-axe cleft the unhappy traitor, who had fallen to his knees to obtain mercy, from the head to the shoulders.

"Throw the carcase out of window," cried the furious king; "let the fishes have the carrion. Never shall he find a grave, the vile regicide; and that *he* should think I would reward his guilt! Nay, I have served him as David did the Amalekite."

Eric and Hermann, between them, raised the corpse, and flung it, all bleeding and disfigured, into the Thames, the tide just running out beneath the walls.

I ought to write, "So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord!" But the awful doom of his unrepentant soul saddens me, much as he has hated me and mine.

Lent, 1018.—A strange discovery has been made which interests us all greatly. At the time of Alfgar's trial at Oxford, Herstan fancied there must be a secret staircase communicating with Edmund's room, but sought it in vain. Now that Edric has avowed the deed, Hermann has obtained the king's permission to make a thorough search all through the house, and in the thickness of the huge stone chimney a secret staircase has been found, with a door opening through the thickness of the wall and panelling into the room in which Edmund slept, as well as another door opening into the banqueting-hall, where Sigeferth and Morcar were murdered. It is all clear as day now. Edric must have entered the royal chamber from the banqueting-hall in the dead of the night, and thus, when no human eye beheld, have accomplished his evil deed. Ah, well! he could not

escape the eye of Him who has said "Vengeance is mine, I will repay."

Eastertide, 1018.—A son is born to Alfgar and Ethelgiva; and to-day, Low Sunday, they presented their babe to Him who said, "Suffer little children to come unto me." They have named him Edmund. The grandparents, both well and happy, were present; and the proud and happy father's eyes sparkled with joy over his little Edmund, glistening from the baptismal font. It fell to my happy lot thus to enrol the dear child amongst the lambs of Christ's fold. God grant him length of days here, and endless length of days beyond the skies when time shall be no more!

Here we close our extracts from Father Cuthbert's Diary; but, before taking leave of him, we are sure our readers would like to hear a few more words about his future fortunes, and those of the house of Æscendune.

Better king than Canute, saving only the great Alfred, and perhaps Edgar, had never sat on the English throne. Under his auspices a change became visible throughout the whole country: villages again gladdened the blackened wastes; minsters and churches were rebuilt, whose broad, square Saxon towers yet hand down the memory of our ancestors. Agriculture revived; golden corn covered the blood-stained scenes of warfare; men lived once more in peace under the shadow of their homes, none daring to make them afraid. Peace, with its hallowed associations, gladdened England for fifty long years.*

Anlaf was the first of the group we have introduced to our readers to leave this transitory world for a better one. He died a few years after the accession of Canute. Father Cuthbert survived him many years, and died honoured and lamented in the last year of the great king.

* See Note P.—Character of Canute.

His brother Elfwyn, and the lady Hilda, full of years, having outlived the natural span of man's appointed years, followed him shortly—not till they had seen their grandchildren, a numerous and hopeful progeny, grow up around them, and so perpetuate their race upon earth.

And for Alfgar and Ethelgiva, they lived to see "their children's children, and peace upon Israel," surviving until the close of the reign of Edward the Confessor, the son of Ethelred and Emma. Their days were days of peace, in strange contrast to their youthful years.

"Peace! and no more from out her brazen portals
The blast of war's great organ shakes the skies;
But, beautiful as songs of the immortals,
The holy harmonies of peace arise."—LONGFELLOW.

NOTES.

NOTE A, p. 3.—*Genealogy of Æscendune.*

THE reader may be glad to have the genealogy of the family in whom it has been the author's aim to interest him placed clearly before him. The following genealogical table, including the principal names in "The First Chronicle of Æscendune," as well as those in the present book, may suffice, the date of decease being given in each case.

- Offa, 940
  - Oswald, 937.
  - Redwald, 959.
  - Ella, 959, *m.* Edith.
    - Elfric, 960.
    - Alfred, 998, *m.* Alftrude.
      - Elfric, 975.
      - Elfwyn, 1036, *m.* Hilda.
        - Bertric, 1006.
        - Ethelgiva, 1064 *m.* Alfgar.
      - Cuthbert, 1034.
      - Bertha, 1050. *m.* Herstan.
    - Edgitha, 990.

NOTE B, p. 4.—*Curse of Dunstan.*

"In the year of our Lord's incarnation 979, Ethelred, son of Edgar and Elfrida, obtaining the kingdom, occupied, rather than governed it, for thirty-seven years. The career of his life is said to have been cruel in the beginning, wretched in the middle, and disgraceful in the end. Thus, in the murder to which he gave his concurrence he was cruel, base in his flight and effeminacy, miserable in his death. * * * *

"The nobility being assembled by the contrivance of his mother, and the day being appointed for Dunstan, in right of

his see, to crown him, he, though he might be ill-affected to them, forebore to resist, being a prelate of mature age well versed in secular matters. But, when placing the crown on his head, he could not refrain from giving vent, with a loud voice, to that prophetic spirit which he so deeply imbibed. 'Since,' said he, 'thou hast aspired to the kingdom by the death of thy brother, hear the word of God. Thus saith the Lord God: The sin of thy abandoned mother, and of the accomplices of her base design, shall not be washed out but by much blood of the wretched inhabitants; and such evils shall come upon the English nation as they have never suffered from the time they came to England until then.' Nor was it long after, that is in his third year, that seven piratical vessels came to Southampton, a port near Winchester, and having ravaged the coast fled back to the sea. This I think right to mention, because many reports are circulated among the English concerning these vessels."—*William of Malmesbury, English Chronicle,* Bohn's Edition, pp. 165-166.

NOTE C, p. 26.—*Chronology of Father Cuthbert.*

The Christian era did not come in use until about the year 532, when it was first introduced in the code of canon law compiled by Dionysius Exiguus, and, even then, the year of the world was still frequently used, as in some cases in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. When at length the Christian computation became universal, some began the year with the Incarnation (Christmas), others with the Annunciation; a custom not wholly abolished in England till 1752, when the "New Style," or Gregorian Calendar, was introduced.

But in the latter part of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the portion upon which our tale is based, the year invariably opens with the Nativity—hence this reckoning has been used in the text, and the Christmas day on page 26 begins a new year.

NOTE D, p. 49.—*Death of S. Edmund.*

There are two stories (or more) concerning the Danish invasion in which the saintly Edmund met his death; the first,

alluded to in the song of the Etheling (p. 93), tells how Ragnar Lodbrog, a great sea-king, invaded England, but his fleet being shattered by a storm, fell into the hands of Ella, King of Northumbria, who threw him into a pit full of toads and serpents, where he perished, singing his death-song to the last, and calling upon his sons to avenge his fate. Those sons were Hinguar and Hubba. They invaded East Anglia after they had avenged their father upon Ella, and King Edmund fought against them, but was taken prisoner. They offered him his life and throne if he would forsake Christianity, and reign under them. But he steadfastly refused, whereupon they put him to death after the manner described in the tale in the case of Bertric, while he called steadfastly upon Christ until his latest breath.

The other tale, given at length by Roger Wendover, tells that Ragnar Lodbrog, with only his hawk in his hand, was driven by a storm to the coast of East Anglia, that King Edmund made him his huntsman, but the former huntsman, Beorn, slew him through jealousy ; that King Edmund put Beorn bound in the boat which had brought Lodbrog over, and sent him adrift to perish at sea. But the storm in turn blew him to Denmark, where he told the sons of the man he had slain that Edmund had murdered their father. Hence they came to avenge him. The remainder of the tale agrees with the former narrative, and is the only portion which *certainly* possesses historical truth.

S. Edmund has been much venerated in the eastern counties, and his shrine at Edmundsbury was greatly reverenced. The tale of the death of Sweyn, given on page 161, is a proof of this feeling, in which perhaps the legend partly originated.

Note E, p. 71.—*The Rista Örn.*

This punishment was usual among the Northmen, and was called " at rista örn," from the supposed resemblance of the victim to the figure of an eagle. The operation was generally performed by the chief himself. It is thus described by Snorre :— " Ad speciem aquilæ dorsum ita ei laniabat, ut adacto ad spinam gladio, costisque omnibus ad lumbos usque a tergo divisis, pulmones extraheret."—*Snorre*, p. 108.

NOTE F, p. 95.—*First appearance of Edmund.*

The first mention of Edmund in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the commander of the English forces is A.D. 1015, where he was joined with Edric in the command, as related in the text, page 163. The date of his birth is uncertain, but the comparison of authorities appeared to the author to justify the ascription of the character and actions, with which he is credited in the tale, to the English hero who first taught his generation to assert their equality with the fierce Danish invaders.

NOTE G, p. 97.—*The early name of Abingdon.*

Johnson, the compiler of the famous collection of English canons, is of opinion that Cloveshoo, where the famous provincial council was held A.D. 803, is identical with Abingdon, and that the town lost its ancient name simply owing to the growing notoriety of the famous abbey; for "no one," says he, "can doubt that the name Abingdon was taken from the abbey." The first memorial, he adds, in which he finds the name Abingdon, is in the Chronicle wherein the burial of Bishop Sidesman, A.D. 977, in S. Mary's Minster, " which is at Abingdon," is mentioned, who was honourably buried on the north side of that fane in S. Paul's Chapel.

On the other hand, some learned antiquarians have maintained the opposite opinion, that the name Abingdon existed even prior to the foundation of the monastery ; thus the Rev. Joseph Stevenson, in his edition of the " Chronicle of the Abbey of Abingdon," says,—" Abingdon derives its name, not, as might at first sight be supposed, from the abbey there founded—Abbey-dune or Abbots-dune : philology forbids it. The place was so called from Abba, one of the early colonists of Berkshire."

NOTE H, p. 106.—*Bishops of Dorchester.*

There appears to have been much uncertainty concerning the succession of the bishops of this important see, owing, per-

haps, to the confusion caused by its having been the seat of two totally distinct jurisdictions—the one over Wessex, the other over great part of Mercia.

The names of the bishops in the narrative are taken from a list kindly furnished by the Rev. W. Macfarlane, the present vicar of the Abbey Church, whose indefatigable efforts have restored to the ancient fane much of the glory of its ancient days.

According to this list, Ednoth was bishop from 1006 to 1016, when he was slain by the Danes as recorded in the text, and Ethelm succeeding, ruled the see till A.D. 1034, through the comparatively happy days of Canute.

NOTE I, p. 152.—*End of the Campaign of* 1006.

The following extract from the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" gives the further history of the campaign very concisely:—"Then went the Danes to Wallingford, and that all burned, and were then one day in Cholsey: and they went then along Ashdown to Cuckamsley-hill, and there abode, as a daring boast; for it had been often said, if they should reach Cuckamsley-hill, that they would never again get to the sea: then they went homewards another way. Then were forces assembled at Kennet, and they there joined battle: and they soon put that band to flight, and afterwards brought their booty to the sea. But there might the Winchester men see an army daring and fearless, as they went by their gates towards the sea, and fetched themselves food and treasures over fifty miles from thence. Then had the king gone over Thames into Shropshire, and there took up his abode during the mid-winter's tide. Then became the dread of the army so great, that no man could think or discover how they could be driven out of the land, or this land maintained against them; for they had every shire in Wessex sadly marked by burning and by plundering. Then the king began earnestly with the witan to consider what might seem most advisable to them all, so that this land might be saved, before it was utterly destroyed. Then the king and his witan decreed, for the behoof of the whole nation, though it was hateful to them all, that they needs must pay tribute to the Danish army. Then the king sent to the army, and

directed it to be made known to them that he would that there should be a truce between them, and that tribute should be paid, and food given them. And then all that they accepted, and then were they victualled from throughout the English nation."—*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bohn's Edition.

NOTE K, p. 167.—*Children of Ethelred.*

By his two wives—(1) Elfleda—(2) Emma, Ethelred had fourteen children, of whom only four or five have been mentioned in this narrative, or are of importance to the student :—Edmund Ironside and his brother Edwy (p. 229), by Elfleda, and Alfred and Edward by Emma—the last well known in history as Edward the Confessor, and introduced in Chapter XIX. of this tale. The following genealogical table from Edgar to the children of Edmund may be of use. It will be remembered that the lineage of the present royal house passes through the last-named son* of Edmund Ironside to Egbert :—

- Edgar
  - Edward the Martyr, *d.* 979.
  - Ethelred the Unready, *d.* 1016.
    - Edmund Ironside, 1016.
      - Edmund.
      - Edward,* *who became the great-grandfather of Henry the Second.*
    - Edwy.
    - Elgitha.
    - Alfred, 1036.
    - Edward the Confessor, 1066.

NOTE L, p. 187.—*Sceorstan.*

Antiquarians differ much about the site of this famous battle. Sharp thinks it was near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, and Thorpe, in his notes to "Florence of Worcester," says—"May not Chimney be the spot, a hamlet in Oxfordshire, in the parish of Bampton-in-the-Bush, near the edge of Gloucestershire, the name of Chimney being merely a translation, introduced after the Norman Conquest, of Sceorstan, which may probably have owed its origin to a Saxon house or hall, conspicuous for having a chimney when that luxury was of rare occurrence?" Others say that Sceorstan was not in Anglo-Saxon "a chimney," but "a

graven stone," and make the site that of a boundary-stone, still separating the four counties of Oxford, Gloucester, Worcester, and Warwick, near Chipping Norton. Bosworth says it is Sherston in Wilts.

NOTE M, p. 191.—*Single Combat between Edmund and Canute.*

The following account is from Roger of Wendover :—" A few days after this lamentable battle (Assingdun), in which so many nobles fell, King Edmund pursued Canute, who was now committing ravages in Gloucestershire. The said kings therefore came together to fight at a place called Deerhurst, Edmund with his men being on the west side of the river Severn, and Canute with his men on the east, both preparing themselves manfully for battle. When both armies were now on the point of engaging, the wicked Earl Edric called together the chiefs and addressed them as follows :—' Nobles and warriors, why do we foolishly so often hazard our lives in battle for our kings, when not even our deaths secure to them the kingdom, or put an end to their covetousness ? My counsel then is, that they alone should fight who alone are contending for the kingdom ; for what must be the lust of dominion, when England, which formerly sufficed for eight kings, is not now enough for two ? Let them, therefore, either come to terms, or fight alone for the kingdom.' This speech pleased them all ; and the determination of the chiefs being communicated to the kings, received their approbation. There is a small island called Olney, in the mouth of that river. Thither the kings, clad in splendid armour, crossed over, and commenced a single combat in the presence of the people. Parrying the thrust of the spear as well by their own skill as by the interposition of their strong shields, they fought long and fiercely hand to hand, his valour protecting Edmund, and his good fortune Canute. The swords rung on their helmets, and sparks of fire flew from their collision. The stout heart of Edmund was kindled by the act of fighting, and as his blood grew warm his strength augmented ; he raised his right hand, brandished his sword, and redoubled his blows on the head of his antagonist with such vehemence, that he seemed rather to fulminate than to strike. Feeling his strength failing him, and unable long to endure such an onset, Canute meditated peace ;

but as he was crafty, and afraid lest if the youth perceived his weakness he would not listen to his words of peace, drawing in all his breath he rushed on Edmund with wonderful valour, and immediately drawing back a little, he asked him to pause awhile and give him audience. The latter was of a courteous soul, and, resting his shield on the ground, he listened to the words of Canute, who thus proceeded:—'Hitherto I have coveted thy kingdom, bravest of men; but now I prefer thyself not only to the kingdom of England, but to all the world. Denmark serves me, Norway yields me subjection, the King of Sweden has shaken hands with me; so that, although Fortune promises me victory everywhere, yet thy wonderful manliness hath so won my favour, that I long beyond measure to have thee as friend and partner of my kingdom. I would that thou in like manner wert desirous of me; that I might reign with thee in England, and thou with me in Denmark.' Why should I add more? King Edmund most graciously assented and yielded to his words, though he could not be forced by arms. The kingdom was therefore, by Edmund's direction, divided between the two, the crown of the whole kingdom reverting to King Edmund. The whole of England, therefore, to the south of the river Thames, was ceded to him, with Essex and East Anglia, and the city of London, the capital of the kingdom, Canute retaining the northern parts of the kingdom. Laying aside, therefore, their splendid armour, the kings embraced each other amidst the rejoicings of both the armies. They then exchanged their garments and arms in token of peace, and Edmund became Canute, and Canute Edmund."—*Roger of Wendover*, Bohn's Edition.

NOTE N, p. 204.—*The Death of Edmund.*

This lamentable occurrence is involved in much mystery. Edric Streorn was generally credited with the deed, although some writers, *e.g.* William of Malmesbury, think he used the aid of attendants on the king, whom he bribed. The Chronicle is silent as to details. Henry of Huntingdon ascribes the deed to a son of Edric. Roger of Wendover agrees with him, adding the facts that the place was Oxford, and the time S. Andrew's night, as in the text. Amidst these conflicting statements fiction perhaps most legitimately takes its place.

NOTE O, p. 215.—*The Ordeal.*

This ancient custom was observed by Simplicius, Bishop of Autun, so early as the fourth century, and was very generally in use during the period of our tale. Although never formally recognised by the Church of Rome, and forbidden by many edicts on the Continent, it was administered in England under the direction of the clergy, and its details prescribed by the canons during a period extending from the laws of Alfred to the directions given in the ecclesiastical laws of Edward the Confessor, the year before the Norman Conquest, A.D. 1065. The first prohibition of its use in England is in the third year of Henry the Third.

There were three principal modes of its administration. In the first, the ordeal by water, the accused had to take a heavy piece of iron from a boiling caldron placed in the church—in the second, to carry a bar of heated iron nine feet. The hand or arm was bound in linen, the bandage sealed by the priest, and on the third day the limb was uncovered. If the burn or scald had healed the prisoner was pronounced innocent, otherwise he had to suffer the punishment due to his offence.

The details given in the text are chiefly taken from the Canons of Athelstane; but the mode of purgation therein described is similar to that by which it is said Queen Emma repelled an accusation made by Robert, Bishop of London, in the year 1046. This mode of administration was perhaps more frequently used when a prompt appeal was needed to the judgment of God, or in the case of persons of rank, were they ever, as was seldom the case, compelled to appeal to its decision.

NOTE P, p. 231.—*Character of Canute.*

The great change in Canute's character after his accession to the throne has been noticed by all writers. Each year he seemed to grow in self-command and in the practice of virtue, while all men were edified by his strict attention to his religious duties. Later in life he made a pilgrimage to Rome, and a letter written thence gives a good idea of his general affection for his people. It is addressed to the archbishops and bishops and great

men, and to all the English people, and is written in the familiar style a father might use to his children, especially telling them all he had seen at Rome, and about the way in which he spent Easter with Pope John and the Emperor, whom he persuaded to abolish certain dues exacted from English pilgrims. In the last portion of the letter he tells them how he has made up his mind to amend his life in every way, and to atone for all the wrongs committed in the violence of youth. He forbids any person to use violence or to make the royal needs an excuse for wrongdoing, saying, "I have no need of money gathered by unrighteousness." He concludes by saying that he is sure they will all be glad to hear how he has fared, and that they know he has not spared himself any trouble, and never will, to do all that lies in his power for the good of his people.

There is something in the whole tone of the letter which warms one's heart towards the writer, and one cannot help contrasting the reigns of the two conquerors, Canute and William: the first, beginning with violence and bloodshed, grew daily in justice, mercy, and the love of God, and so passed lamented to his grave; the latter, promising at first to govern justly, grew worse and worse in oppressive cruelty and all sorts of wrongdoing, until the sad and hopeless death-scene in the abbey of S. Gervase. But the delineation of the latter period must be reserved, all being well, for the "Third Chronicle of Æscendune."

January, 1880.

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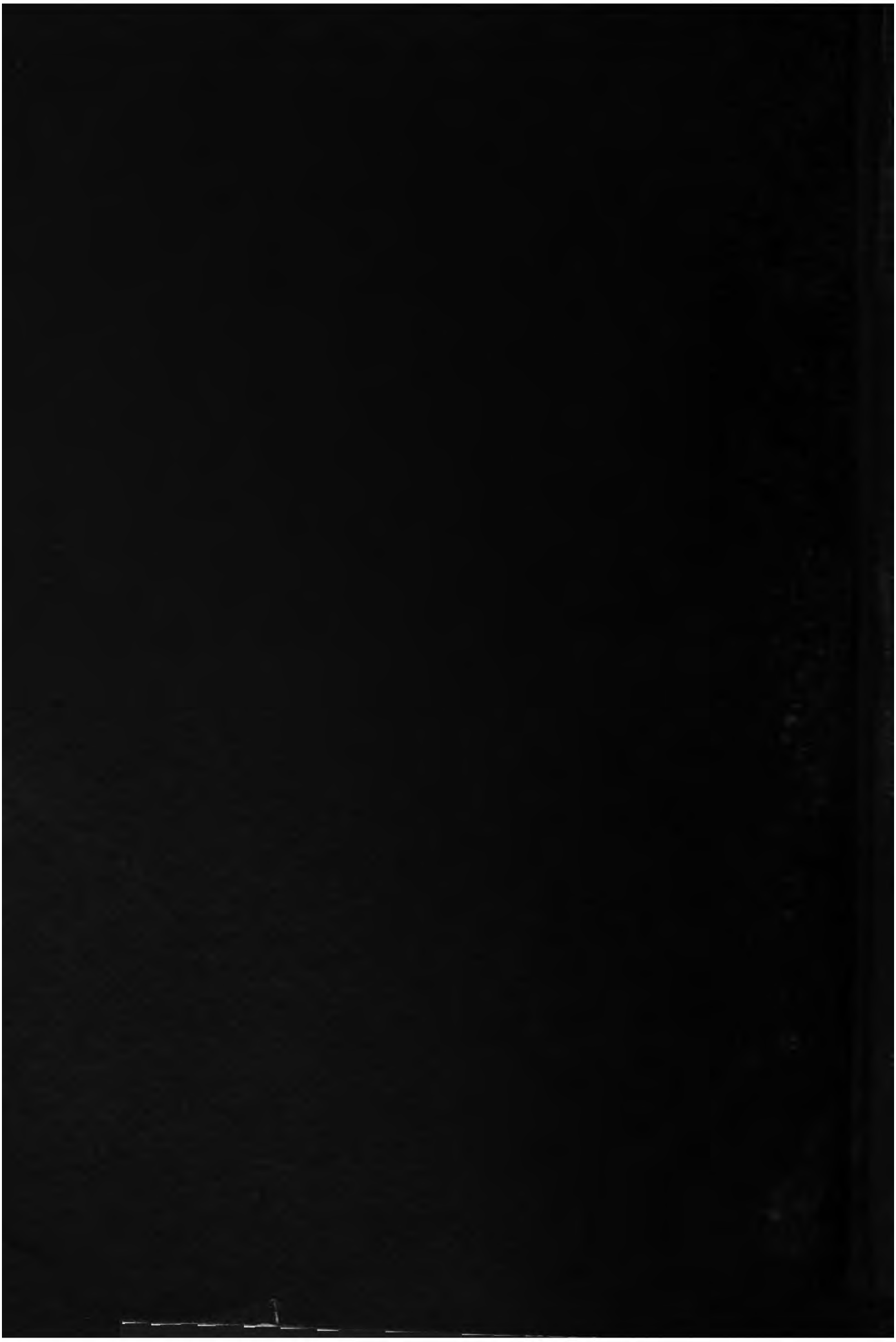
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