THE

BRITISH WOLF HUNTERS

MILLER.

BRITISH WOLF HUNTERS *Front.*

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BRITISH WOLF-HUNTERS.

A TALE OF

England in the Olden Time.

BY

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ETC. ETC.

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PREFACE.

When writing my "History of the Anglo-Saxons," for the "European Library," I had occasion to refer to a great number of very scarce and valuable works, and it then struck me, while reading the laws made by the Saxon king, Edgar, who first compelled the conquered Britons to pay the tribute of wolves' heads, that if I gave a description of wolf-hunting in England at that period of time, with some account of the great wilderness of forest which then darkened long leagues of land, it would make an interesting book for British boys. Having now given the reasons why I have written the present work, I dismiss it with the hope that it will be as much liked as any of the other numerous volumes I have written for the youths of Great Britain.

THOMAS MILLER.

London, 1859.

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THE BRITISH WOLF-HUNTERS.

CHAPTER I.

England from the time of Alfred the Great to the reign of Queen Victoria—Danish invaders—Urien the Briton and Hubba the Dane—Scarcity of wolves—Cedric the Saxon boy—The wolf-hounds—The dead wolf—Conmail and Natonleod, grandsons of Urien the Briton—Hadrada, the son of Hubba the Dane—Description of the death of Edward the Martyr.

A CENTURY had just elapsed since the death of Alfred the Great, to the period which opens the commencement of our story—the winter of the year 1002, when Ethelred, nicknamed, for his indolence, the "Unready," sat on the throne of England. A few more years nearer our own time, and the same throne was occupied by William the Conqueror, after he had slain the last of the Saxon kings at the battle of Hastings. A few more steps down the ladder of history, and we find Henry II. doing penance at the shrine of Thomas à Becket; King John signing

Magna Charta; then Chaucer writing his "Canterbury Tales," and very soon after Caxton printing the same. Another stride, and Henry VIII. is beheading his wives, overthrowing monasteries and monks; his daughter reigns, and Shakspere is writing his immortal works. A little further on, and Charles is beheaded on the scaffold facing the Horse Guards, and the stern Protector Cromwell makes a footstool of the crown, while he sits in the headless king's seat; James II. abdicates; William of Orange comes over; and in a few more years the last Stuart is defeated, and the Scotch lords beheaded; and that was no longer ago than in the days of the great-grandfather of her present majesty Queen Victoria, whom we pray Heaven long to protect.

By such little links as these does the past become the history of the present; it is only turning a few pages back in the great book of events—the story is unbroken that brings up its records to our own times; those whom we read about as having lived eight hundred years ago, had their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, as we have now. There were then the oppressor and the oppressed, as there ever will be,

while the heart of man is evil. Ever since Alfred had first allowed the conquered Danes to settle down on our island, there had been bitter heart-burnings, and stronger discontents, among the different races. The Saxons were beforetime content to allow the Britons to boast of their long descent, as being the ancient Cymry, and the original possessors of England; and, while the Saxons listened, they pointed to the tribute of wolves' heads the Britons were still compelled to pay; and, knowing that they were the masters, cared little about the Cymry boasting of the origin of their descent, and the victories won by their great king Arthur.

The Danes, on the other hand, looked with an eye of pity and kindness on the Britons, the more so, perhaps, because, like themselves, they had been conquered by the Saxons; while they, on the other hand, were regarded with strong suspicion by the conquerors of both races, as the inroads of their countrymen, the Danes, became every day more frequent, and their demands on each invasion higher; for Ethelred the "Unready," instead of fighting and defeating them, as his predecessors had done, only assembled his Witenagemot, or parliament, to

consult about the amount that was to be paid to get rid of the invaders. The Danes received the money the timid king offered, and departed, but only to return again speedily with a more overwhelming force, and more exorbitant demands. It will thus be readily seen why the Danes, who had long been resident in England, were, at this period, looked upon with a more guarded and suspicious eye, by the Saxons, than beforetime.

This brief historical introduction is rendered necessary for the better understanding of our story, so as to give our readers a correct knowledge of the position occupied by the different characters who were opposed to each other, and played their parts in the stirring drama of that eventful period.

It was in the snowy-looking sunset of a brief winter day, when Urien, a descendant of the ancient Britons, and Hubba, a Dane, who lived in a neighbouring hut, were slowly pacing to and fro along a wild embankment beside the river Trent—a river which had long formed the silent highway of the Danes, when they entered the Humber and ravaged the midland counties —more especially those which came under the

division then called Mercia. They were both men advanced in years, though Hubba was considerably the younger, and his cheeks looked hale, rosy, and red as hard winter apples.

"I cannot pay the tribute," said Urien, the Briton; "my grandsons are but mere boys, and cannot hunt the wolf like their father. When we lost him, we lost all."

"We have all our troubles, neighbour," answered Hubba, "and the lot falls as heavily on me as on yourself, for it is hard to be compelled to take up my battle-axe, and hack and hew at the limbs of my own countrymen and near relations, every time they land; yet such is the tenure by which I hold my land; and the headborough is always on the look-out to report us to the Saxon earl if we are remiss in our duties. Besides, I have no friends among the Saxons, as you have."

"I wish I had none," replied Urien sharply; "it is, I fear, more for the love of Gunhilda's blue eyes and golden hair, that the Saxon earl's son visits our hut, than any love he has for myself or my grandsons; though he does help Conmail and Natonleod to hunt the wolf, and

pay the tribute which his father too severely exacts. But Cedric is a good boy; though I would sooner see my grand-daughter in her grave than wedded to one sprung from the race of our conquerors."

"Is the tribute then so difficult to pay?" inquired the Dane; "why, it was but the other night that four of my flock were carried off by the wolves. My son, Hadrada, saw a grey grizzly one by the forest yestermorn, and would have given it chase had he had his shaggy wolf-hound with him instead of the yelping curs now at my heels." As he spoke he pointed to two small otter-hounds, who, cold as the day was, were shaking the water out of their rough jackets, having just landed after having chased an otter into the river, which they had startled while he was making a meal off a huge pike under the reeds and willows that grew by the river-bank.

"Hadrada may have seen one or two of late," answered Urien; "but the forest is almost impenetrable now—so closely is the underwood matted together, that the boys cannot penetrate it to drive out the wolves. Neither are they so plentiful as they were in my younger years, when I have seen their whelps littered among

the sedge by this very embankment. Hunting and killing them, and sending in a tribute of wolves' heads year after year, has driven them for safety into pits, caves, and the thickest recesses of the forest. We have killed but five this year, and, by the feast of Easter, I am bound, by my bocland tenure (written charter or agreement), to deliver ten heads to the earl. In other shires they tell me that the same number of heads is not exacted as in the time of Edgar, who first enforced the tribute. But this Saxon earl will not bate a single hair of the number; and when I pleaded the scarcity of wolves, he bade me give up my bocland tenure and become servi, if I couldn't pay the tax. I would rather fall fighting in the ranks of your countrymen, at the next invasion, and see my grandsons perish in the same battle-field, than either they or I became slaves and servi to this haughty Saxon." As the old man spoke, he plunged the head of the wolf-spear he carried in his hand into the embankment, and looked as if he regretted that it was not the body of Ella, the Saxon earl, that he had buried it in, instead of our silent old mother Earth.

"Hear me," said the Dane, placing his hand

on the Briton's shoulder; "the Saxons have had their day; this 'Unready' king, as they have justly nicknamed him, who is draining us of every groat to pay my countrymen to quit this island, will not be able to furnish them with money much longer; then he will be compelled to parcel out the land; and when they once get possession, they will play him the same trick that the followers of Hengist and Horsa played your old king Vortigern—take possession of the whole, and make the Saxons serve them and pay tribute, as the Saxons now make you and I. It will be our faults, neighbour, if we do not compel them to hunt wolves for us, and do suit and service. You have many friends; nor am I without a few, and shall soon have more coming in with the first fair wind that blows towards England from the rocky coast of Norway. Take heart, our turn will yet come."

"Hubba!" said Urien, looking the Dane full in the face, "before that day comes the land will once more be reddened with blood. Our children have been brought up and have played together; and I will yet strike a blow for them, whatever may befall; though I can-

not pay the tribute of wolves' heads, I will not give up our old homestead to the Saxons without a struggle."

The conversation was here interrupted by the deep barking of two large shaggy wolf-hounds, which came running in, and began to fondle and rear up, and attempt to lick the face of the Briton, for they reached as high as his head when standing on their hinder legs. "Down, Brand! down, Belus!" exclaimed Urien; and the hounds were in a moment cowering at his feet, when perceiving that Brand was wounded in the neck, he spoke more kindly to the dog; then addressing the Dane, said, "Beshrew me, if aught less than the fang of a grizzly wolf of the wold has been near enough Brand's jaw to inflict such a bite as this. The boys have been nearer the wolf Hadrada saw than we wot of at present. Belus, too, is busy licking his bloody jaws, and shows signs of hard fighting."

At that moment they were startled by the sound of a horn, and looking towards the hills, they saw three youths descending, two of whom seemed to be carrying a heavy burden between them, while a fourth came running up at full speed, his cheek flushed with exercise, his long

auburn hair blowing out in the winter wind; he grasped a boar-spear in his hand, the head of which was stained with blood, and continued snapping his fingers, as he came along, at the noble hound which kept pace with him, and was bounding and barking at his side. "Oh, such sport!" he said, turning first to Urien, then to Hubba, and hardly able to speak for want of breath, so fast had he run to be the first bearer of good tidings. "We have killed the largest wolf you ever saw. Col and Nat are bringing the whole body of the beast to show it you, and my shoulder is almost raw through helping to carry it from the edge of the forest. Hadrada showed us his hiding-place, and we had to go creeping through the underwood like so many badgers; as for the hounds, they worked their way as well as they could, and my Thor took the tallest brambles and furze-bushes at a leap—didn't you, Thor?" The wolf-hound he addressed was one of the noblest-looking dogs human eye ever rested upon; there is no such race of dogs on the face of the earth now, though there was, until lately, one or two in Ireland that bore a great resemblance to the ancient wolf-hound. Thor

was taller than the largest Newfoundland dog ever seen, and not, in form, unlike the greyhound, excepting that his limbs had three times the strength, while his long, strong, sharp-pointed teeth were terrible to look upon; and his grey, grizzly hair was as rough and shaggy as that of a Scotch terrier, though not quite so long: he also possessed all the speed of our perfect greyhound. His bark, as he bounded and gambolled around the young Saxon, made the distant hills echo again; and when he was still for a moment, Brand and Belus took up the burthen of the barking.

A glad smile, as if in spite of his feelings, broke over the face of Urien, as he looked at the animated countenance of the handsome boy, and he forgot, for the moment, that he was the son of the stern Saxon earl who oppressed them. Then the old man sighed heavily, as he thought how soon those boys might be flying at one another's throats, and displaying fiercer courage in the human strife than the dangers of the chase had ever called forth.

"I should have caused my sister Bertha to shed a few tears, but for the ready eye and strong arm of Hadrada; and she would have

been the only one that would have missed me," added the boy in a more sorrowful tone; "for just as I was in the act of spearing the wolf, I lost my footing on the red slippery clay, and, though your Brand was hanging at his throat, and my Thor tearing his haunches, the brute made a spring at me open-mouthed, dragging the two hounds along as if they had been no more weight than the dead furze-branch that clung to him as he dashed through the bushes. I felt his hot breath on my cheek, when I heard Had's spear-head sob again as he drove it in a good ell, so there is a grave less to be dug, thanks to your brave son;" and he placed his hand on the arm of the Dane, as he looked up with a smile on his honest, handsome face.

"I am glad he has been of service to you," replied Hubba; "and it is a pity there was ever aught to divide us, for we both spring from the same old Gothic race."

Just at that moment Conmail and Natonleod came up, bearing the slaughtered wolf, suspended from their spears on their shoulders, between them; and so large was this savage lord of the forest, that although the bandages, under which the spears were thrust, bound his

legs midway, leaving his feet projecting up to a level with the boys' heads, still his head and tail draggled on the ground.

"Only four more to make up the tally, grandfather," shouted Conmail, as he threw the boar-spear from his shoulder, as if glad to get rid of the weight of the wolf, "and Cedric says, as this is such a big one, he shall try to get Bertha to persuade his father, the earl, to count it as two." And he wiped the perspiration from his fine open forehead with one hand as he spoke, while with the other he grasped that of Urien.

"Four more, my dear boy," said Urien, echoing the words in a sorrowful tone of voice, and parting the hair from his grandson's forehead as he spoke,—"four more, and mid-winter is passed, and we have but killed one wolf since the feast of St. Michael the Archangel, and this is the only one that has been seen in the neighbourhood since the wild crabs and the black bullaces fell ripe from the trees and hedges. Four more—and this is the season when, driven by cold and hunger, they draw near to our homesteads. I can remember the time when they came down in packs, and we were compelled to drive the flocks and herds into strong

enclosures during the night, such as those round stone ruins," he added, pointing with his finger to a pile in the distance, "are the remains of. But that was before King Edgar's time; we could have paid a tribute of a thousand wolves' heads in those days more easily than, with all our vigilance, we can raise a hundred now, though it is but so few years back. Edward the Martyr let us count the whelps' heads at the same tale as those of full-grown wolves, but it has never been so since his untimely death. Forgive me for alluding to it," he said, turning to Cedric; "but my son was by and saw the foul blow struck, just as he was draining the wine-cup to pledge his mother-in-law, Queen Elfrida, at the gateway of Corfe Castle."

"It was a bloody and a murderous deed," said Cedric, knitting his boyish brows; "and I have heard my father say that Dunstan denounced her openly as a murderess; that Ethelred—whom God preserve—wept bitterly at his brother's death, for which his mother seized a torch from the hand of an attendant, and beat him with it until he was senseless."

"My son was in attendance on the young, gay, light-hearted king," continued Urien,

"and no sooner saw the blow struck, the cup drop from his hand, and the horse the king bestrode start off affrighted, than he urged on his own steed in pursuit; but all in vain. Faint with loss of blood, the wounded monarch fell back in his saddle, then rolled over, and was dragged along at a furious speed, with one foot fast in the stirrup, over the rough ground, by the stems of trees, over their knotted protruding roots, leaving a bloody trail wherever he struck, until what remained was horrible only to look upon."

"It was a dastardly Norman who dealt the foul blow, was it not, father?" said Hadrada, a fine, tall, black-eyed, and dark-haired youth, who stood half a head taller than his young companions.

"It was," answered Hubba; "and when he was afterwards pointed out to your uncle Tostig, the latter cleft him from skull to chine with one blow of his heavy battle-axe, then left his carcass a prey to the grey wolves of the weald."

"The assassin merited the death he met with," said Natonleod, "and there was no arm more fitted to deal the blow than the one in which the blood of Ragnor flowed." And,

young as he was, there was a martial fire in his eye which told that he would have acted as Tostig had done, had the dastardly Norman crossed his path.

Hubba said something about "fothering" the cattle for the night, and Hadrada and Natonleod went off together in the direction of the hay-ricks that stood some little distance from the Saxon village, where the servi, or serfs, were already busy cutting out a necessary supply; for, in those primitive times, the hay and corn were generally stacked where cut, and the farm-yard or rick-yard was a place then almost unknown.

Meantime, Cedric, not without casting a timid glance at Urien, placed one end of the boar-spear upon his shoulder, and assisted Conmail to carry home the wolf, in the hope of seeing the sweet face of Gunhilda, and being invited to partake of the homely evening meal, which he ate with greater gusto under her smiles, and while listening to the silvery ring of her merry laugh, than he did the richest dainties in his father's castle.

CHAPTER II.

The British Hut—The Saxon Earl and his daughter Bertha—The King's Messenger—Saxon Scholarship—The Royal Letter—The Wolf-hound—Bertha's troubles.

THE hut, or house, into which Cedric and Conmail carried the dead wolf, was of the same shape as the rest which made up this old Saxon burgh, ham, thorpe, or village—for by the latter name it would have been called in the present day, although it was a town, had its hundred, headborough, and tythings, to say nothing of the rude round castle or tower on the hill, which the Saxon earl occupied.

The walls were built of wattle-work, such as you see in hurdles, and plastered over with mud; while the floor, on which a large wood fire was blazing on a few stones loosely laid down, was formed of the naked earth, beaten hard down. Windows there were none, that can properly be so called, though there was an opening at each point of the compass in the four walls, and these

were called the wind's-eye, or *vinögat*, so that when the hut was filled with smoke, supposing the wind to blow from the east, both the east and west wind-eyes were opened, the wind blowing in at one aperture and driving the smoke out at the other. Chimneys were at this time wholly unknown.

These huts were thatched with rushes, with which the river-banks and neighbouring marshes abounded, and which grew by millions on the borders of those inland lakes — long since drained, but at this time known by the name of *meres*.

The door consisted of three huge planks, fastened together with cross-pieces, and for hinges, twisted hazels were passed through two holes, and then bound round the post on which it swung: when these were worn out, others were cut, twisted, and interwoven to supply their places.

Broad wooden benches ran along the whole length of the wattled walls on each side of the long apartment, forming both seats and beds— for on these the skins were placed on which they slept in winter, and the leaves or rushes on which they reposed in summer. Here and

there similar benches of the same rude workmanship, only higher, stood on trestles, which could be removed in a few moments—and these were the tables.

The young and beautiful Gunhilda, who was busied in setting out the wooden trenchers and bowls for the evening meal, ceased from her household duties, and, blushing like a rose as her eye alighted on Cedric, approached her grandfather, who, parting her rich clusters of golden-coloured hair, bent his tall majestic form, and imprinted a kiss on the snowy whiteness of her forehead.

By the time she had taken the brown barley bread from the wicker baskets, and poured out the beer, brewed from the same grain, into the vessels of rudely-baked red earth, Natonleod, followed by the serfs, who seated themselves at the lower tables, entered, and the gammon of bacon, with the coleworts, or cabbages, and parsnips, was taken out of the huge pot in which it had long simmered, and the meal served up; and this, with a strong, badly-made cheese, formed the whole of the repast.

The wolf-hounds had thrown themselves on the floor, and while they basked by the fire, kept

a sharp look-out for such remnants as were from time to time thrown to them, though not one moved until its name was called, nor made any attempt to obtain the portion thrown to another.

A coarse curtain, now looped up, showed a little recess, which, from its neatness, told that the arrangements had been made by female hands, and formed the tiring-room and sleeping-place of Gunhilda—if such a term may be applied to so slight a division.

Meantime, while the boyish hunters were talking over the adventures of the day, and arranging fresh sports for the morrow, the Saxon earl was pacing his apartment with impatient steps, and grumbling at the absence of Cedric.

His beautiful daughter, Bertha, sat working by the fire-light at a piece of rude tapestry, which was intended to represent some Saxon saint or another, and was designed for an altar-cloth for a neighbouring monastery, the copy of which had been drawn for her by an old monk, who was famous, for miles around, for his illustrations of missals. One eye of the copy was a full inch higher than the other, while the

mouth seemed as if trying to run round the corner of the head and make a snap at the saintly ear. A huge wolf-hound, the brother of Thor, lay basking at Bertha's feet, and looking up from time to time at his angry master.

"Gone to help those beggarly Britons to capture a wolf!" echoed the earl, as the attendant he had summoned, and who had brought the information, quitted the room. "By the bones of St. Ethelstan, but this is too bad! I have bidden him, over and over again, to associate with none but Saxon youths of gentle blood. What will he learn of the cowardly Britons but their cowardly habits? —cravens, who submit to the tribute imposed upon them; who, instead of having courage enough to die in battle, go out into the forests and wolds, and hunt the wolves, that they themselves may be allowed to live. By the Holy Rood! an' I had been Edgar, instead of permitting these Britons to hold bocland, or land by any other tenure, I would have given up the country to those who struck with the sharpest Saxon swords, and brought in the greatest number of British heads, and left the wolves free to prey upon their carcases."

"Nay, but father," interposed Bertha, "neither Conmail nor Natonleod are cowards; for though but boys, you yourself said that they acquitted themselves manfully the last time the Danes landed and attacked our stronghold. But for them and Hadrada it would have fared ill with us, as your retainers were out guarding the Fossdyke to prevent them from reaching the burgh of Lincoln."

"Tush, girl; they are well enough," replied the angry earl; "that is, they would be, were they placed for a few months under old Ingar, who would teach them to handle the bow and spear, and make them familiar with the use of military weapons. There now, that is where the armour pinches: so long as Urien pays this cursed tribute of wolves' heads, I have no power either over him or them. But let him once fail —once fail," he added, setting his teeth hard, and closing the fingers of his right hand tightly, —"then will I make a stoop and sweep up the quarry. I tell thee, girl, this Briton holds the richest portion of land in the whole broad shire. But it is a frail tenure he now holds it by," he added in a lower voice, as if speaking to himself, while he looked up at the wolves' heads, which,

mingled with the antlers of deer and other trophies of the chase, were hung around the large hall in which he stood, and reminded him of the difficulties the Britons had to encounter to obtain them.

At this moment a horn sounded at the gate, and after a short interval a messenger entered, bearing a packet, which was bound round with a broad band and secured by a large seal. The messenger was bespattered with the mud of the roads, and bore the appearance of having ridden far; there was also the old pointed Saxon crown on the badge of his sleeve, which told that he had been sent either by the king or his counsellors. Along with the letter the man also delivered a thin silver coin, nearly divided down the middle, and said, "These from Ethelred, King of all the Saxons, with this token."

The earl placed the packet on the table, then taking the silver token in his hands, he bent it to and fro until it broke asunder in the middle, and giving the messenger one half, to show, on his return, that he had faithfully executed his mission, he placed the other portion of the coin in a recess, and ordered the man into the buttery to obtain refreshment.

Now, although Ella, the Saxon earl, or jarl, as the title was originally spelt, could, by cudgelling his brains, manage to decipher the Runic characters or hieroglyphics on a shield or sword, he was no more able to read a letter than the shaggy wolf-hound that had just thrown himself down again at Bertha's feet, after having risen up to smell and growl at the king's messenger. The earl took it up, turned it first on one side, then on the other, looked at the writing, the wrong side uppermost, and as he was not at that moment on the friendliest of terms with Bertha, who could read it—thanks to the old Saxon monk who had made the drawing of the saint she was embroidering for teaching her,—because she had been defending her brother Cedric, and also maintaining that Hadrada, the son of Hubba, was courageous and noble-hearted, — why, the earl was compelled to talk *at* Bertha, so to speak, while he seemed to address the packet as he said, "What new wonder have we here?"

Nor will this want of learning be marvelled at, when I tell you that there is still a Saxon charter extant, in which we find that Whitred, King of Kent, was unable to sign his own name,

so got the scribe who drew up the document, or perhaps one of his own counsellors, to write for him as follows: "*I, Whitred, King of Kent, have put this sign of the holy cross to the charter, on account of my ignorance of writing.*"

In the time of Alfred, only a century before the period of which we are writing, there was hardly a priest to be found in England who could translate into Saxon the Latin prayers which he read to his auditors.

"Shall I read it to you, father?" said Bertha, with a humorous twinkle in her star-bright eyes, which seemed to say, "If I don't, there's no one else that can, unless you send for our old friend the monk."

The earl paused for a few moments, rubbed his chin, turned the matter over in his mind, then said, "The king's affairs require secrecy, Bertha, and this," touching the packet, "more especially so, from the royal token accompanying it."

He hesitated a moment as to whether or not he should make her swear on the Saxon Gospel, which had been translated by the Venerable Bede, and of which he had a beautifully-illuminated copy on a vellum manuscript, not a word

of which he was able to read; but when he glanced again at her clear, open, beautiful countenance, and her large truthful eyes, his better nature prevailed, and he felt ashamed at entertaining a doubt about her betrayal of confidence for a moment, and said, "Read it, girl, in Heaven's name; and while you beat out the brains of its sense to yourself, before I hear it, I will just peep into the buttery, and see that the king's messenger is not served with a churl's fare."

Saying which he quitted the hall, and left Bertha to unloose the parchment-band and break the seal which secured the royal letter.

Dark shadows had by this time begun to settle on the recesses of the huge hall, and the brands, which the earl had kicked together with his foot as he went out, now shot up a sunny blaze, which was flashed back by the brazen shields, and glittering swords, and bright spear-heads that were hung on the walls; while here and there the white sharp tusks of wolf, or wild boar, caught up and reflected back the blaze as they stood grinning from out the wild trophies of the chase.

Though Bertha had been busied up to this

time with her embroidery, she now discovered, by the fire-light, that she should be compelled to undo a good many stitches, as she had joined the nose-end of the good old Saxon saint to his upper lip, making such a guy of his saintship that she could not refrain from laughing, as she held the droll caricature up to the light.

Having opened the letter, which was written on very thick parchment, as was the custom of the period, and this parchment generally consisting of deer-skin but very indifferently dressed—in proof of which one Saxon king left the whole of the deer in the royal forest to an abbey, for the monks to make books of their skins,—Bertha drew nearer to the great fire in the centre of the hall, and proceeded to read it by the light of the ruddy blaze.

She had not, however, read many lines before her countenance changed: a hue, like that of death, settled upon her face; and when she had finished reading, she dropped the letter; and as she had read it kneeling before the fire, folded her hands, and with her lovely eyes uplifted towards heaven, breathed a prayer for mercy to the all-seeing Creator.

Meantime, one corner of the letter had come

in contact with a lighted brand, which had fallen from the pile; and as the parchment on which it was written was ill-dressed, thick, and full of oil, the savour it sent out was anything but unpleasant to the nostrils of Wolf—as the wolf-hound was called,—who, regardless of the attitude of devotion in which his unconscious young mistress was now placed, scraped the royal letter a little farther from the burning brand with his huge paw, waited a second or two, as if to allow it to cool a little, then swallowed the royal letter—contents, seal, band, and all, at a mouthful, and apparently with as much gusto as if it had been the haunches of the deer itself, instead of only a portion of its skin.

When Bertha rose from her knees, she naturally looked on the hall floor for the letter; nor was it until she perceived Wolf licking his jaws and wagging his tail—as perfectly unconscious that he had done wrong as any other hound would have been had he picked up and devoured that which was thrown on the floor, probably, as he thought, purposely for him, —that she discovered her loss.

In a moment Bertha saw what had happened, and her first thought was for the safety of the

dog; for she knew that if her father returned, and Wolf was present, as soon as he ascertained that the dog had swallowed the royal document, his first act would be to pin the unconscious offender to the floor with a boar-spear; so she wisely resolved to get him out of the way.

She soon, by some sign, made him understand that he was in danger, and the instant the sagacious animal perceived her meaning, he licked her hand, and looked into her sweet face with a strange expression, as if he would fain know what he had done amiss; but hadn't time then to have it out with her, so set off, as fast as his long strong legs could carry him, to be out of harm's way.

Bertha's heart now beat like a drum; not so much at the dread of meeting her angry father as at the thought that she was in the possession of a terrible secret, which was never intended to meet any other eye or ear save his own, and those who, when the time arrived to put the purpose into execution, he might select and intrust it to. And now that secret was her own—only her tongue could reveal it! and she felt as if she would have given the wealth of worlds, had she possessed it, if she had never

read the contents of that awful letter. Why tell her father at all? The wolf-hound had swallowed the letter, and who was to know that she had read it excepting herself?

But then she had never told a falsehood in her life, nor ever once, that she remembered, even so much as harboured a thought of telling one; for Bertha had had an aunt whose grandmother knew King Alfred well, and Alfred was called the Truth-Teller; and should she, who had been taught to reverence truth next to her Maker, now utter a falsehood? The very thought made her wring her hands in agony.

Then, again, came that strange tempter, the thought of the misery she should prevent by concealing the truth. Surely, she argued to herself, in such a case, it would not be sinful? But, then, could she, with her truth-telling eyes, look her father in the face, and give utterance to a lie? Oh, that the good old monk were present to advise her how to act! But would it not be making bad worse to intrust him with a secret that was only intended to be known to her father? She felt it would, and that thought was also suddenly dismissed.

Could she trust her brother Cedric? She thought and thought until her beautiful brow throbbed again: she knew that her brother was the very soul of nobleness and honour; but then he was so young, and she loved him so very dearly, and in his open nature he might blurt something out which would lead to a suspicion of what was to follow, if the purport of that dreadful command was executed.

No; if it broke her heart she must keep it to herself, let whatever might happen. She knew not what to do; there was no one she dare trust, no one she dare consult, not a soul she could fly to for advice or comfort.

A faint light did for a moment brighten her eyes after this mental conflict, as she looked upon what the dog had done as an interposition of Providence; for, in these gray old years, God-fearing people seemed to live nearer to Heaven, and to have more faith in the interference of an invisible and Almighty Power in controlling human actions, and giving a mysterious movement to great events, than we do now.

It was well for Bertha that the tidings the king's messenger brought from the Saxon

court were of sufficient interest to detain the earl so long as they did, instead of his coming in upon her as soon as she had read the letter and discovered its loss; for this delay gave her time to think.

During this time her father was listening to news about Sirac, the new primate; and how things had changed since Dunstan died, and Elfrida had been sent into a nunnery, and Ethelred had married Emma—called the Flower of Normandy; how Olaf, the heathen king of Norway, after invading England, and taking sixteen thousand pounds to quit the country, had been baptized; and how the heathen Danes, who were present, ate up all the sacred bread, and drank up all the sacramental wine, and in the midst of the solemn ceremony became clamorous for more;—all this, and much more, did the earl listen to, of what was then the common and every-day gossip of those departed years, until at last he bethought himself of the king's letter.

Bertha sat cowering beside the fire, with her face buried in her hands, and, for the first time, trembled as she heard the tramp of his heavy foot on the hall floor.

CHAPTER III.

The lost Letter—Return of Cedric—Saxon Wolf-hunting—Poetry of the Britons and Saxons—The heathen Danes and their old Sea-kings—End of Winter.

BERTHA aroused herself as her father entered the hall: for the Saxon maiden lived in stormy times, and had seen human misery in so many of its direst forms, that she had long before come to the conclusion, it was no use meeting trouble half way, but far better to rush up and confront it at first, and by so doing know the worst, whatsoever that might be.

Having once made up her mind, she as suddenly executed what she had resolved upon. So, without "beating about the bush," to use a figurative old adage, she let loose the bird at once, by exclaiming, "Do not be angry, father, I could not help it; but the king's letter is lost beyond all recovery."

"The king's letter lost!" exclaimed the earl, standing as suddenly still as if his further movements had been arrested by a

bolt from a cross-bow. "Lost! how, where, when?"

"I let it fall," she answered, "and before I could pick it up, Wolf ate it. The poor hound knew no better—and I am sure he was very hungry. It was all my fault."

"Where is the dog?" inquired the fiery earl, seizing, as he spoke, a sharp strong-shafted boar-spear.

"Do not injure the poor hound, father," said Bertha, placing her little white hand on her father's brawny arm; "it was all through me. I have been in the habit of throwing food on the floor for Wolf; and he, no doubt, mistook it for the same. I would rather you beat me than the poor faithful dog."

"Beat you, Bertha!" he said, dropping the boar-spear with a loud clang on the hall-floor, and kicking the brands together with his foot; "the saints forbid it! yet I know not what mischief you may have done me between you. As for the letter, that is nothing—I could not have read it, if I had kept it until the crack of doom. My only regret is, that you did not possess yourself of its contents before Wolf digested the whole."

The earl laughed as the thought shaped itself into a bad pun in his brain, while Bertha remained silent, and felt thankful that he had not put a direct question to her about the contents of the royal letter.

"It would have been all the better for England," he added, "if Wolf had always been as near to the royal documents, and swallowed a few scores, the issuing of which has caused nothing but heart-burnings, discontent, and jealousy between the races. But the deer has harboured, and all I can do now will be to call the hounds out of the thicket; for if the king himself once got his head into Wolf's mouth, there would be no getting it out again. How now, Cedric, whither have you been so late?"

The earl spoke in a more angry tone, as he put the question to the boy, who at that moment entered the hall, than he had hitherto used in addressing Bertha respecting the loss of the royal letter.

Cedric told "a plain unvarnished tale," of how he had been out with the grandsons of Urien, and the son of Hubba the Dane, to assist in the capture of a large wolf, which had long been the terror of the neighbourhood;

and the boy entered into a spirited account of the chase, dwelt upon the size of the wolf, and the narrow escape he himself had had, and how his life was saved by the ready hand of Hadrada the young Dane.

Bertha's fair cheek was blanched for the moment at the thought of her brother's danger; but as he went on to recount how Hadrada had risked his own life in rescuing him from the jaws of the wolf, her cheek flushed, and her eye beamed with an unusual brightness; then she heaved a deep sigh, as she again recalled the purport of that dreadful letter.

The sigh caught not the ear of the earl, whose thoughts were carried away by the glowing description of the wolf-hunt given by his son, but it was not lost upon the sharp ear of Cedric, who, giving a quick turn of his head, gazed earnestly at his sister. But he knew that was not the time for an explanation: it must be left until they were by themselves.

"Ah, it was a royal and a noble sport, until it was made a tax of, to be paid by these cowardly Britons," said the earl, glancing at a large wolf's head on the wall, which he himself had killed; "so much so, that instead of the

name of Wolf being, as now, a term of reproach, it was borne by none but those who were right noble. The meaning of these old honourable names you will never learn from the defeated Britons, with whom I wish you would intermix less than you do at present: not but what the boys are well enough, but there is nothing noble to be gathered from an abject and conquered race. When they are boasting of the old Cymry we have conquered—of Cassivellaunus, Caractacus, and other old British kings, which the Romans conquered before our forefathers landed from their chiules [ships or boats]—tell them that wolf-hunting among the Saxons was a royal sport, not associated with a base tribute, as now paid by this degenerate race of Britons, but that kings and conquerors who landed on this island thought it an honour to take their titles from the wolf."

The earl paced the hall with long rapid strides as he spoke, while the eye of Cedric kindled with pleasure, as it dwelt upon the heroic form of his father, though the boy did not like the sneer he had thrown out against his friends the Britons.

"There is," continued the earl, raising his

voice louder at every name, "Eldwolf, the old wolf; Eardwolf, the wolf of the province; Wolfheah, the tall wolf; Sigwolf, the victorious wolf; Bretwolf, the illustrious wolf; and Ethelwolf, the noble wolf. Nor must I forget our own wolf; yes, your ill-behaved brother-animal," added he, patting Thor, who came up and thrust his sharp nose into the palm of the earl's hand—"Wolf, the devourer of royal documents, who not an hour ago swallowed the king's letter."

"Wolf swallowed the king's letter!" exclaimed Cedric, looking first at his father, then at Bertha, and adding, while his eyes were fixed on his sister, "Of course, you have read it first?"

"That is the worst part of it," answered the earl, who naturally thought the question was put to him. "Had Bertha read it to me, it might have been used for scouring spear-heads or to kindle the brands, for what I should have cared about the matter. The fact is, Cedric, the fewer you keep of these royal documents, excepting they are such as give you a rightful claim to the homestead and its broad hides of land, the better, in these troublesome times, for

many of these Danes, who have so long settled down in the land, are boc-wise [book-learned], and know more than even the heads of our brave forefathers cared to carry."

"I wish I were boc-wise," said the boy, with a sigh, "and could read the writings made by King Alfred and Ceadman like Bertha. Yet we have no poetry like that which Urien repeats to me at times, made by the ancient British bards. Why did not the Saxons learn the language of the ancient Britons, father?"

"They had enough to do to fight them, and take possession of the country," answered the earl, with a sneer. "I have heard some of their songs, translated and sung at our banquets, and they are either all about their fabulous King Arthur, or laments for the defeats they met with from the sharp swords of our forefathers. No poetry like the Britons', boy!" he added. "Bertha, take up thine harp—it was good King Alfred's once—and chant him a few lines from Athelstan's song of victory, at the battle of Brunanburgh."

Bertha accompanied herself on the harp, as with her sweet silvery voice she chanted a por-

tion of that now well-known ancient war-song beginning with—

> "Athelstan, king of earls, and the lord,
> The giver of golden bracelets to the heroes."

And the eye of Cedric kindled as the hall echoed back the sound, while she sang of "the kite, the black raven with horned beak, the eagle, the greedy battle-hawk, and the grey wolf of the wold," crouching, moaning, and howling over the dead bodies in the battle-field; and the defeated armies, while "seeking the noisy deep, and hurrying over the roaring sea in their nailed ships."

Still the boy thought, and he was right, that the description and the imagery lacked the glowing colours of word-painting, which gave such richness to the poetry of the ancient British bards. But he saw a sorrowful cloud again settle down on the brow of Bertha, and made an excuse for leaving the apartment, well knowing that she would speedily follow him.

Neither on that night, nor for days after, did Bertha reveal the terrible secret, which she alone was in possession of, to her brother Cedric,

though he saw at the first interview that something weighed heavily on her mind; and when he pressed her to intrust him with what troubled her, and she replied only with sobs and tears, he soon ceased to importune.

He could not, however, avoid noticing that her cheek, which hitherto bore a bloom like the sunny side of a ripe apple, grew paler every day—that she ate but little, and went about the castle with her head drooping and her hands folded before her, as if bending beneath some heavy inward burden.

It was indeed a heavy load which that beautiful Saxon maiden had to bear, and one which fell with a crushing weight on both heart and brain, filling the one with low, sad, aching, ever-gnawing despondency, and the other with images of fearful dread—a dark despair, through which she strained all her mental powers to look beyond, but could nowhere see the faintest glimmering of a ray of hope.

Earl Ella was either too busy following the chase or chasing the Danes to pay any regard to Bertha's looks: not that he was in any way an unkind father, but he had a great breadth of country to protect, and as the Danes fre-

quently came up the river Humber, which opens into the sea, and then stole at night up the river Trent, plundering on both sides of its banks, then sailing away again before morning dawned, they kept both himself and his followers too fully occupied for him to think about his daughter.

So daring were these old sea-kings—as the Danish chiefs were at this time called — that they thought nothing of entering the river in a single ship, and, with only fifty or a hundred men, landing, plundering, and overrunning the country in a single night, and leaving in the morning no other trace of their footsteps than blackened and mouldering ruins, around which lay the bodies of those they had slain.

Let it be borne in mind that we are not speaking of the Danes, who had become civilized, and many of them Christians, and who had been settlers in England for a full century —ever since the time that Alfred the Great conquered their grandfathers, who fought under Godrun. We are speaking of the new-comers, who were continually invading England at this period, and extorting immense sums from the treasury of Ethelred, and were all heathens to

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a man, and who had but little love even for their own countrymen—looking on such men as Hubba as renegades, because they had forsaken the old heathen creed, and left the worship of Thor and Odin for that of the True God.

Although old ties, old blood, and old names, were held in great estimation in this barbarous age, and much as Hubba, and such as he, might regret being compelled to wage war against their own countrymen, still when they did come, even if only as friendly visitors, they produced much the same effect in his quiet homestead as a wild tribe of gipsies would in any of your own homes in the present day, who intruded themselves on the strength of some scapegrace of a relative having intermarried in their wild, heathenish race.

These heathen Danes come from Norway and the very islands from which the first Anglo-Saxons, who were led by Hengist and Horsa, had come some centuries before to the assistance of King Vortigern. Both they and the Saxons were of the same Teutonic, or Gothic race; nor was there much more difference in their language than we now find in the south and north of Eng-

land in the present day—in that of a Londoner and an uneducated Yorkshireman.

For the better understanding of future portions of my story, you must bear in mind that the heathen Danes, who will soon come heaving up like dark clouds over our pages, are *not* the Christianized Danes, whose forefathers settled down peaceably in England as far back as the time of Alfred; this we again repeat, to make clearer what will follow. On this distinction hangs the secret that Bertha is in possession of, and which will shake all the land like a mighty earthquake, when it is executed and revealed. No storm that ever broke on the rocky shore of Norway, and strewed it with wrecks and lifeless bodies, ever awoke such a wail of desolation as that which did arise when the dreaded secret, which already seems bearing down Bertha to the grave, was revealed.

Who and what were these daring Danes, you naturally inquire, who caused King Ethelred to empty his treasury, and tax his subjects beyond endurance, in order to get rid of them?

British boys! it is owing to that dash of wild naval blood which they infused into our colder Saxon system, that makes us at this day the

greatest naval nation in the world. They were the first who compelled our Saxon forefathers to build ships for the defence of our coast.

These Danes called themselves sea-kings, children of the creeks; they called their ships sea-horses, and when they unmoored them, exclaimed, "We are giving our sea-horses head." The sea they named "the road of the swans;" and it was their boast that they could glide as noiselessly up the Saxon rivers as swimming swans. They called the storm their servant, who carried them just where they wished to go. Danger depressed them not, they coveted death on the sea; they said, "To die in-doors was to die the death of a dog."

They carved the heads of their ships into the forms of hideous wolves, bears, serpents, and fabulous dragons. They placed their long shields side by side for bulwarks, and laughed merrily as the billows burst upon, or broke over them. On their masts they stuck the figures of hideous birds with outstretched wings, which veered round at every gust that blowed. They fought with heavy clubs studded with spikes, and these they called "stars of the

morning." The spears they carried were long, sharp, and terrible to look upon. They lashed the heads of their vessels together, and standing shoulder to shoulder, bore down upon their opponents like one man in a single ship. They chose that man for their chief who could endure the greatest hardships, and, excepting their kings, paid no regard to birth.

One who had never slept under a roof since childhood, nor once emptied his cup in-doors, but had passed all his life on the sea, save when plundering or slaughtering on shore, was the chief they would faithfully follow to the death.

Such were the old Danes—the ancient sea-kings—the children of the creek. No marvel that, with such unwelcome visitors at all hours, the Saxon earl had but little time either to think of or look at the pale cheeks and heavy eyes of his beautiful daughter Bertha.

Meantime, matters went on much as usual; the Saxon earl and his armed followers were here one day and there another, and generally too late to succour his countrymen, whom the Danes had plundered and often slain.

Urien and Hubba met, and walked and talked

together of current and coming events, just as old neighbours do in the present day.

The four youths went out hunting together in the great dim forests that spread for leagues above the hills which overlooked the river and the old Saxon town on its banks; for both Cedric and Hadrada, the Danish boy, were as anxious that Urien should be able to pay his tribute of wolves' heads at Easter-tide, as were his grandsons Conmail and Natonleod.

But the winter passed away, and not another wolf had either been seen or heard of for miles on that side the shire. Old men said, that through the Danes landing and ravaging the country, and burning homesteads, in the night, they had scared the wolves from the neighbourhood of the river, to which they used to come in whole packs in former years to drink, and driven them farther into the forest.

CHAPTER IV.

Gunhilda and Cedric—Departure of the young Wolf-hunters—The ancient Forest—Druidical Remains—Hadrada's Misfortunes — Loss of the Provisions — Conmail left all alone.

It was now March; spring had again visited those grim old forests in which the brave Britons once dwelt, who had battled against the Romans when the latter were led by Cæsar, Plautus, Suetonius, Agricola, Adrian, Severus, and many another general and emperor, who had borne the imperial eagles and guided their forces from the great city, at whose name nearly the whole world bowed down to our wave-washed shores.

It was a mild, warm evening for that season of the year, and Cedric, with the lovely British maiden Gunhilda, was pacing the same embankment by the river Trent, where Urien and Hubba were walking and talking at the commencement of our story.

There were yellow primroses peeping out at the sunshine along that ancient bank, just as

there are in the present day; and were you and your sisters there, those that you gathered from them now would no doubt be of the same stock, and descended from a countless number of new roots, whose flowers have bloomed and died eight hundred times since they were gathered by the Saxon boy, Cedric, for that fair British maiden, Gunhilda.

"I do not like to see grandfather mope, and sigh, and walk about in silence, as he does," said the British maiden, as she fastened the primroses in her tunic, or gown, with a bone pin; "and I say to him, 'If there are no wolves, you cannot pay the tribute;' and the good monk says your father is a Christian man, Cedric, and not a heathen, like Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who forced the Israelites to make bricks without straw; and that he will not be hard on grandfather when he knows there are no wolves to be found. Do I not speak aright, Cedric?"

"Yes, dear Gunhilda, you always both speak and think what is right," answered the Saxon boy. But the sunny smile left his face as he spoke, and there was a cloud of thought on his open, handsome brow; for he knew too well

that his father would not bate a single head of the tribute; for the earl had never forgiven Urien's refusal to exchange a portion of his land, which the Saxon had long wished to possess.

"We will find wolves enough yet to make up the number, never fear," continued the hopeful youth. "The days are longer and the nights warmer than they were; and it is our intention to take good store of provisions, and penetrate into the very heart of the forest; for we have heard that there are plenty of places to harbour in for the night,—remains of old British towns and Druidical ruins, which have never been inhabited for ages, and that around these hoary fastnesses wolves are still plentiful."

"But you may be lost, and never return again," said Gunhilda, the crimson fading from her lovely cheek as she spoke; "for I have heard grandfather say that it is three days' journey across the forest, and that no one has ever made it within the memory of living man; that the roads which lead to those old British towns were overgrown with underwood and overhanging branches before King Alfred's days, and that the ruins have not been seen by living eye for a century or more. Do not go so far

away, Cedric; grandfather is very old, and what would become of me were I to lose him, and my brothers, and you?" A tear gathered in her eye, hung a moment on the lid, whose long lashes were fringed like a daisy, then rolled down the faint damask of her cheek, as her imagination filled in the terrible picture of her brothers and Cedric lost in the unexplored depths of that huge ancient forest, her grandfather dead, and she with no one left to protect her, and soon to fall a helpless prey to the first heathen Dane that came in the night, and stove in the door with his battle-axe.

"There is no fear of our being lost," replied Cedric; "and the best thing you can do to ensure our return will be to bake us a good batch of barley-bread to-night, for no one gives it so sweet and pleasant a savour as you; Bertha has made us a huge venison pasty, and with the brawn Hadrada will bring, we shall fare princely; never fear, for we are sure to find water-courses enough in the forest. We start early on the morrow."

"And will you not return to-morrow night?" inquired Gunhilda, with a troubled eye.

"No, it will be noon ere we reach our

hunting-ground," answered Cedric; "we shall not return until the evening of the second day, and with such hounds as your Brand and Belus, my Thor and Wolf, and Hadra's Woden, we shall not leave a wolf alive within many a league of the ground we pass over; never fear but what we shall bring back heads enough to make up the tribute. You must go and see Bertha while we are away; I have told her where there is a place above the hills all purple with sweet violets, and she wishes you to go with her to gather them."

"When will the earl return?" inquired the British maiden.

"Not for a week, at least," answered Cedric; "they are driving huge piles of timber in the river at Cowthorpe Stumps, to prevent the Danish ships coming up the Trent; erecting gates which will only be opened to allow Saxon vessels to pass; are going to place a garrison there, and I know not what beside; so father has enough on his hands without thinking of me or Bertha. We shall be back long before he returns. Farewell, I must go sharpen my boar-spear, and look to my bolts and bows. We shall be gone long before you have opened

your pretty blue eyes to look at the morning." Saying which he raised her hand to his lips, then hurried off at full run, with Thor barking and bounding by his side, while Gunhilda went in-doors to prepare the barley-bread for the morrow.

Long before the skylark began to awaken the folded daisies, by singing its early matin in the morning sky, the young wolf-hunters were on their way to the vast forest—a forest which at this time stretched for leagues inland, over the hills above the river Trent, spreading out towards Lincoln on the right, while on the left it reached up to the borders of the river Humber, and, excepting a few large meres, whose clear waters reflected the overhanging branches and the tall sedge that grew on the margins, together with an open glade here and a bowery hollow there, all beside was one pathless land of trees. Many of these trees were so ancient that the bearded Druids, with their golden pruning-hooks, had cut mistletoe from their knarled and hoary stems, centuries before the tramp of Cæsar's legions had wakened the echoes along our island shore. They stood then as they had stood when the maned and

horned bison awoke the forest with its roar, and the brown British bear made its lair beneath their aged and twisted roots; and even those that were dead and withered still looked fresh through the centuries of ivy that engirdled them, fold above fold—a network of gray antiquity covered with an April green.

The young hunters had threaded their way through the tangled mazes of the far-spreading forest until the sun stood midway in the blue March sky, when they halted beside a Druid altar—which had lain undisturbed through the silence of past years,—to eat their noonday meal. This hoary ruin, which had, no doubt, in the rude age when it was first reared, been stained with human blood when the unholy sacrifice was offered up, was now nearly buried beneath piles of white matted and withered grass, while portions of the gray stone were covered with green moss and silver lichen, and all those rich stains of fungi which give such melancholy beauty to decay. The silence which reigned around would have been awful to any one who had stood there alone, though it was not felt by those stout-hearted young hunters, who laughed merrily and

chatted joyously while partaking of their homely meal.

Having refreshed themselves, they again pushed onward, the wolf-hounds breaking the stillness every now and then by their loud barking, as they caught sight of some red fox or gray badger that ran off skulking under the dense underwood. Here they passed a cairn of stones, that marked the last resting-place of some British warrior; or a green mound or barrow, beneath which some nameless hero slept: for it was the custom, at these ancient burials, for every follower either to place a stone or a wicker basketful of earth upon the grave of the chief. They met huge thorns, so old that the high oaks which overtopped them were not even acorns when these grey relics of the primæval forest had twisted and welded their iron stems together, and so entwined and eaten into each other's hearts until the whole mass had become but one gnarled, hoary thorn, and you could not tell where the first stem had begun to enwreathe itself around its fellow-thorns, nor where the last fold ended. They passed gorse-bushes, which were already hung with their fairy-like baskets of gold, and whose

heads rose so high that a tall man on horse-back might have ridden between them unobserved. The fern and docks which lay in a state of red and yellow decay, but which neither the rain, frost, nor snow of the past winter had been able wholly to destroy, were such specimens of monster vegetation as have never again appeared in England since those old forests were destroyed. They made the circuit of huge meres, or vast inland lakes, where the wolf-hounds startled thousands of wild-fowl by their deep barking, and around which the sedge of reeds and rushes was so dense that in most places a road must have been cut to have reached the edge of the water.

Thor now shook the silence, and made all the forest ring again for miles around, as his deep barking announced that he had come upon the trail of a wolf. Belus and Brand took up the cry, and started off in an opposite direction to the one taken by Cedric's dogs. "Let us leave our scrip under one of these Druid-stones," said the Saxon boy, approaching a large cirque, some of which were standing, while more had fallen, and were half-buried amid the withered grass and entangled under-

wood. "Then each follow his own dogs; we may bring back a wolf's head apiece by nightfall; and this mere we cannot mistake finding again, for, come upon it from which point we may, it will be easy to work our way round it to these gray old stones; and whichever comes first will wait here until we all arrive. Take care, Hadrada, and secure our provisions, so that, should any wolves visit the spot during our absence, we may not have to lie down on our forest beds supperless."

Having thus spoken, he hurried off after Thor and Wolf, down a long wild glen, which looked almost as smooth and green as a lawn at the opening, but went deepening denser and darker every few yards among yews, hollies, and climbing screens of thick ivy, that retained their shadowy greenness, and laid the land around under a dim kind of twilight all the year round.

After a minute or two, Cedric and his wolf-hounds were as invisible to his fellow-hunters as if they had sunk fathoms down into a cavern in the earth; even the bark of the hounds came back thick and muffled, and then was heard no more.

Conmail and Natonleod just turned their heads to see that Hadrada was looking out a suitable spot in which to bury the provisions, when they walked aside into a path made through the sedge by the beasts of the chase, and having drank deeply out of the clear bright mere, which reflected the sky and showed the overhanging trees as if growing downward, they started off at full speed in the track taken by Brand and Belus, and were soon buried in the intricate windings of the forest.

Nor did Hadrada, the young Dane, remain long behind, ere, with boar-spear in hand, and Woden running on before him, he also struck into another opening between the trees, leaving the food in an empty stone cist or coffin, out of which, probably, long centuries ago, the wolves had dragged the remains of "the poor inhabitant," or it may be that they had returned to the dust from whence they came—for the young hunter was in too great a hurry to be off to examine these matters at all.

A weird and eerie-looking spot was that from which the young hunters had started, with its dismal circle of Druid-stones, its grey cairns, and green barrows, under which the ancient

dead reposed, and which, probably, had never been trodden by human footsteps since the last Britons were driven out by Offa, surnamed "the Terrible," who, says the venerable Bede, "won the kingdom of Mercia by a bloody sword." A fitting spot was it, with its opening glades, overhung by huge hoary oaks, and commanding a gloomy view of the dreary mere, for those grim Druids to offer up their inhuman and savage rites on gray altars which were sprinkled with the blood of their fellow-men. Fitting adjuncts were those ancient and mighty oaks to their hateful creed, when they roared and swung their iron branches to the dark, windy midnight; while the priest bade his trembling audience to listen to the sound, telling them, as he pointed up through the deep darkness, that those sounds were made by the souls of such as had disobeyed him while living, and that they were doomed for ever to go wailing through the dark midnights which settled down on the gloomy forests, through which they could not see their way at all, but were lashed along by the angry branches of the trees.

And the palefaced listeners believed in the

dreaded doom. A terrible place must that have been, to be alone in, at midnight, when the beasts of the forest were roaring for their prey: huge bisons, grim bears, grizzly wolves, and savage wild boars, who came to whet their tusks on the boles of the giant trees; and terrible was it even at the time when our young hunters were on the spot, for the wolves had then their hiding-places among the Druid-stones—the gray cairns and the mounds of earth which were piled above the remains of the forgotten dead.

Had those British boys but had the experience of Urien, they would have compelled their hounds to have remained as silent as the grave, when they approached those ancient wolf-lairs, instead of allowing them to bark as they had done, and by so doing alarming the wolves that harboured there, and frightening them away. They might, with caution, and such powerful dogs as they possessed, have killed wolves enough to have made up that year's tribute, had they set to work warily; as it was, the wolves had dispersed every way to other hiding-places only known to themselves; and Eastertide was now very near.

To Hadrada the Dane it was a disastrous day, for he had not gone far—and by sure signs discovered that he was upon the trail of a wolf, whose footmarks proved it to be one of large size,—before he discovered that Woden was lame, and when he stooped down to examine the dog's foot, he found a large sharp thorn in it, which broke as he attempted to pull it out. After this the hound went limping along with his wounded foot off the ground, and as he knew that there would be no chance of coming near a wolf with a lame dog, he returned, low-spirited and sad at heart, resolving to leave Woden at the trysting-place, and start off alone in search of Cedric, should he not meet him by the Druid-stones.

But short as the distance was, compared to the immensity of the forest, Hadrada found great difficulty in retracing his steps, and soon discovered that he had lost his way, nor was it until the March sun had sunk in the west, and the moonlight began to struggle through the trees that he regained the ground he had lost, and reached the appointed place.

He was about to set off again, after having ordered the dog to lie down on the spot where

he had concealed the provisions, when he discovered that the stone had been removed, and that neither bit nor crumb was left, nothing but the empty wicker-basket—for the wolf-skin bag in which the venison pasty, cheese, and meat were deposited, was carried clean off, with all its contents.

"There must have been more than one wolf," said Hadrada to himself, "to have removed that heavy stone; and their den must be somewhere near at hand." While bemoaning the loss of the larder, his ear was arrested by the sound of a dog barking in the distance, and after an interval of a few moments, Brand came up, with his tongue lolling out, and showing signs of distress, with Conmail close upon his heels.

His tale was soon told. His brother and the wolf-hound Belus had struck into a wild thicket in pursuit of a wolf, at the very moment Brand caught sight of another wolf, and he had neither seen nor heard anything of Natonleod nor the dog since.

Now, though Conmail was the youngest of these brave wolf-hunters, he neither heaved a sigh nor showed a sign of regret for the loss of

the provisions; nor of fear when Hadrada told him that he must remain there alone with the wounded dog Woden, while he himself took Brand and went in search of Cedric and Natonleod.

Conmail promised to obey, and though his heart was sad for the absence of Cedric and his brother, while he was so hungry that he would have given his boar-spear for a raw colewort, yet he sat down on one of the cold grey stones, after having ordered Brand to follow Hadrada, and resolved to await their return in patience, and drive away the feeling of hunger in the best way he could.

Although Hadrada had ordered Woden to keep watch beside Conmail, yet no sooner had his master gone than the dog, lame as he was, followed him, only pausing once, when the young Briton called him back, to give him a parting wag with his tail, before he went limping, and was lost in the darkness of the underwood.

Midnight came, and the boy Conmail sat watching alone on the cold gray stone, with no sound near but the croaking of the raven, the barking of the badger and fox, or the long

howling of wolves in the distance. At last he sank back, overpowered with sleep—that cold stone his couch, with the bright round moon overhead and shining in a sky, blue and cold as steel. That bright moonlight also shone on four wild savage eyes; but the unconscious sleeper saw them not. Two huge wolves were squatting on their haunches within a few yards of where he slept, their eyes fixed upon him.

CHAPTER V.

Ancient England described—Remnant of the Old Britons—Natonleod's Adventures in the Forest—Death of the Wolf—The Old Druid.

You will already have seen that the England in which we now live is a very different country from what it was at that period of its history which comes within the compass of our story. That it was covered with great primeval forests, huge inland meres, wide long reedy marshes, wild windy wolds, pathless tracks of moorland, that went winding away to other wolds and forest-clad hills, where neither thorpe, hamlet,

grange, nor human habitation of any description could be found within a circle of many wearisome leagues.

Sometimes, in solitary places, in those dim old years, the traveller stumbled upon the ruins of an old British town, or on the remains of some ancient Druidical temple, such as our earliest historian, Gildas, often saw with his own eyes, and which he says contained "hideous images, whose frigid, ever-lowering, and depraved countenances still frown upon us both within and without the walls of deserted British cities. We shall not recite the names that once were heard on our mountains, that were repeated at our fountains, that were echoed on our hills, and were pronounced over our rivers, because the honours due to the Divinity alone were paid to *them* [these idols and their priests] by a blinded people."

Here and there, scattered very wide and far apart, were still a few of these "blinded people," while their priests—like the Druids from whom they descended, and whose heathen creed they still taught—dwelt in lonely caves, or secret fastnesses of the forest, where they secretly performed their unhallowed rites, in the pre-

sence of the few "blinded followers" who still attended.

These "mere handfuls" of Britons, as they are designated, were the descendants of such as had refused to bow to the Roman yoke, and who had continued to live in such secluded and out-of-the-way corners, that the Saxons had not cared to disturb them, as they made no inroads on the settlements of these later conquerors. One or two of them were known to Urien, he being an old man, and having stumbled upon their retreats when out wolf-hunting in his younger years.

But Urien, and his fathers before him, were Christians, so that there was but little sympathy between him and the followers of the old Druidical creed. It was, however, different with his grandson Natonleod, whose soul burnt again to enjoy the freedom of the ancient Cymry, and who could never forgot that his forefathers were at one time sole possessors of England, and that they landed upon this island when, according to the ancient British Triads, "there were no more men alive [upon it], nor anything but bears, wolves, beavers, and the oxen [bisons] with the high prominence."

Natonleod loved to sit alone, and dream over this early record of the history of his ancestors; and he had more than once, while out hunting by himself, met an old British priest, who belonged to the order of the Druids, and who knew his grandfather—one who had told him about Prydian, from whom the name of Britain is derived, coming from the country of Summer with his followers over the hazy [German] ocean, and first landing on our English shore; also, that he first called it the Island of Honey, on account of the immense swarms of bees he found on it; but that after his death, it retained the name of its discoverer Prydian, or Britain—for the old Cymry sounded P as we do B.

But it is time we followed the footsteps of this high-souled British boy, as he wandered with his wolf-hound Belus through the intricacies of that grim old pathless forest, in the track of the wolf he had started when he left Conmail.

Twice had the wolf eluded him: the first time it entered what seemed an impassable barrier, so closely were bramble, thorn, gorse, and trails of woodbine, ivy, with prickly bushes

of holly, platted or matted and interwoven, that even Belus was unable to pass in at the small opening through which the long gaunt wolf had forced its lithe body, until the young hunter had widened the low gap with his spear, and so made an entrance into the dense underwood.

To enter himself was impossible, so wide was this natural barrier; looking as if you might have driven three waggons abreast over that closely-woven and impenetrable vegetation—the growth, no doubt, of many forgotten centuries.

Natonleod saw a tree, and thought that if he could manage to climb it, he could obtain a view of the space beyond the broad natural defence we have thus minutely described.

The tree which the young wolf-hunter prepared to climb was a huge oak of ancient growth; and you might as well try to climb up the London Monument by throwing your arms over its circumference, and so hitching yourself up that way—which would be labour in vain,—as to climb an oak with a bole of such dimensions as the one he was about to ascend. His outstretched arms would not have

grasped more than an eighth of its circumference. But he had noticed that the lower bough hung full forty feet over the wild barrier he could not penetrate, and thought that if he could but manage to reach that gigantic and far-spreading branch, and go to nearly the end of it, it would be no hard matter to let himself down into the open space he could see beyond that broad boundary of prickly underwood.

To accomplish this, he cut down several long straight hazel wands, which he twisted from top to bottom, as blacksmiths still twist them in the present day round the heads of the cold chisels, which they hold in these hazel vices while they strike them with the hammer.

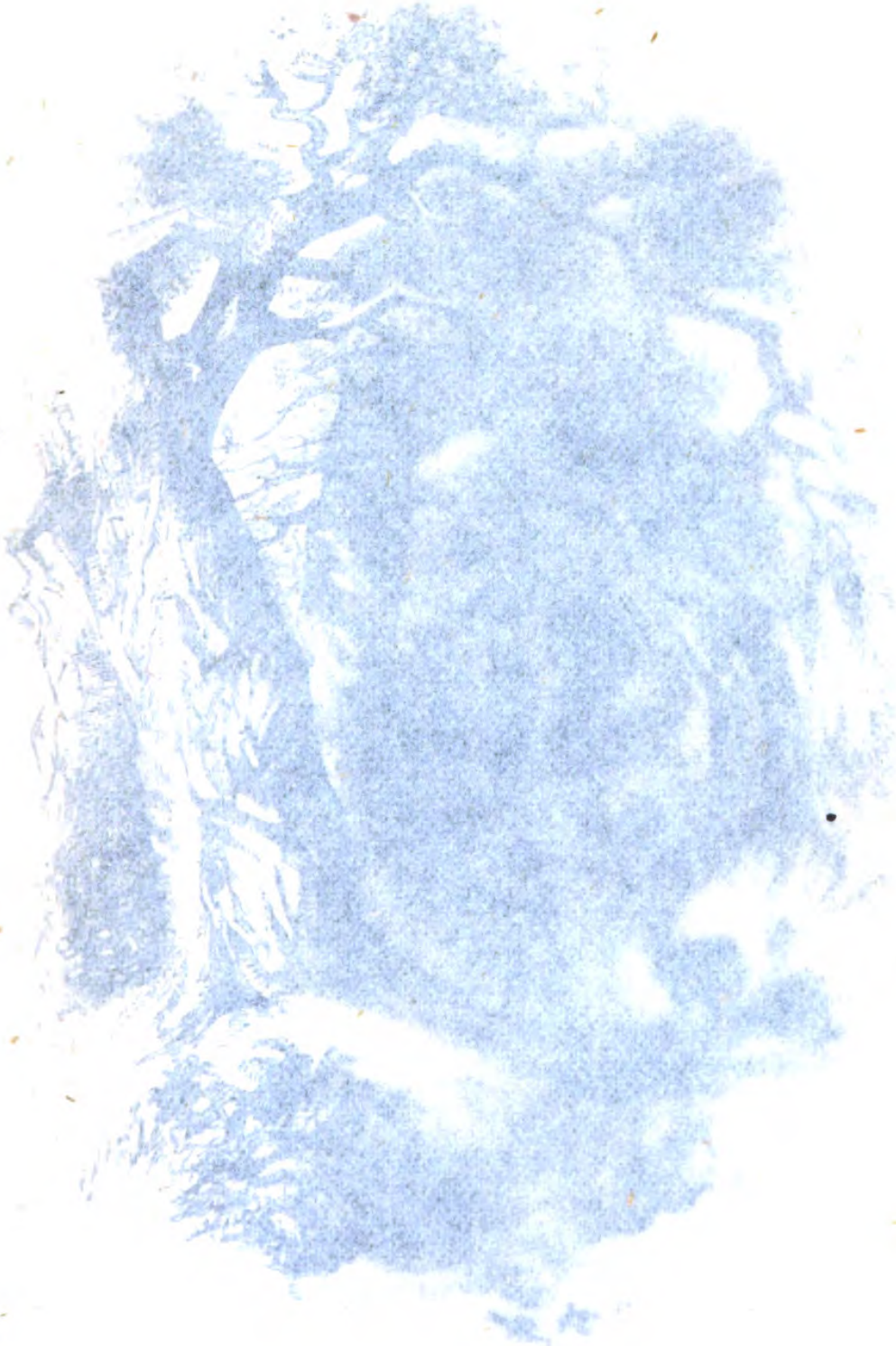
Having cut a sufficient number to go round both himself and the tree, he placed himself within his hazel rope, and by the aid of his feet and boar-spear, and by leaning back and raising the twisted band as he progressed, he soon reached the lowest branch of the mighty oak, steadied himself along the whole length of it, then, throwing down his boar-spear, dropped upon the soft mossy carpet of the glade which lay within the armed barrier.

Although the sun was setting, his eye almost

ached, through looking at the beauty of the spot he had alighted upon. The glade beyond where he stood was one vast bed of wild bluebells, bordered for several feet deep with primroses, for it had been what the Saxons called a "rathe [early] spring." It looked as if another sky, blue and bright, and fringed with golden clouds, had fallen on the ground, so deep was the blue of those wild hyacinths, so bright and yellow that broad belt of blooming primroses. Beyond this beautiful carpet of flowers, and falling back in the form of a crescent, stood a Druid altar; the wind had not yet blown the ashes from the stone, and Natonleod saw at a glance that there the Beltian fire had, within the last few hours, blazed.

Just at this moment the barking of Belus arrested his ear, and again he saw the wolf driven out of the dense covert by the dog. The young hunter hurried to an opening in the centre of the crescent, towards which the wolf seemed hastening, in the hope of meeting the panting animal full in front, and receiving him on the point of his spear.

In this he was disappointed, for the wolf saw him, made a sudden turn, struck down an em-



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bowered descent beside a water-course, which was overtopped by a long, low range of sandstone rocks, many of which were hollowed out into caves, and had at an early period been inhabited by the ancient Britons, and into the entrance of one of these caverns the wolf rushed.

"I know where you are this time," said the young Briton, as he came panting up by the side of the wolf-hound; "and now, Belus," added he, pointing to the cavern, at the entrance of which the dog had thrown himself down, "we must have him at any cost."

The spirited wolf-hound rose to rush into the cave, when the young hunter called him back and said, "Me first, good fellow: thy honest throat would come nearer his sharp fangs than my wolf-spear will. Follow me, if you like." Then, as he proceeded further, he said, "Keep close, dog! the hole is as dark as a wolf's mouth. Keep close, old fellow! I see his eyes shining like burning brands through the darkness, and now I hear his girr, girr, girr. Steady, dog! he is coming."

Another deep growl, and the wolf sprung forward with such force as to bear the hunter to the ground; but, dark as it was, he had

measured his distance well, for the fiery eyes of the wolf were a good mark, and, when he sprang upon Natonleod, the boar-spoar was held at such an accurate angle, and with such firm hands, that the wolf hastened his own end by the very force with which he rushed upon the spear, and it went, at one plunge, a full foot into the wolf's broad and shaggy chest.

Belus sprang over his young master in an instant, and hung at the wolf's throat before Natonleod could extricate himself from the struggle; and what with the blood of the wolf, the foam of the dog, and the moisture of the cavern floor, he was in what the old countrywomen call a "pretty pickle."

While he sat down on the greensward at the mouth of the cavern to recover breath, with the dead wolf on one side and the wolf-hound on the other, he was startled by the slow, measured sound of approaching footsteps, and, looking up, he saw an old man, with a long white beard, clad in loose, flowing garments, approaching. They had met before, for the old British priest, or Druid, was no stranger to the aged Urien.

"I told thee we should meet again," said the Druid, with a slight sneer on his lips; "thou seest I am a true prophet."

"So far as regards our meeting, thou art," replied the young Briton; "it needed not much power of foresight to foretell that. We might have met again at my grandsire's, as we have done beforetime. Hadst thou foretold that we should meet here, and at this very hour, thou mightest have awakened my wonderment. As it is, I attribute the fulfilment of thy prophecy to chance;" and, as the bold-hearted boy spoke, he kept throwing whithered grass and dead leaves into the clear brook that went brawling by; showing, by his sharp retort and careless manner, that he neither feared nor respected the aged Druid.

"Still toiling and working for your Saxon conquerors," said the old man, at once avoiding the subject of prophecy and pointing to the slaughtered wolf. "Would it not be better to live free in these old forests, as thy forefathers did, and as we who are not yet of a recreant race still live, than to pay tribute to those misbelieving invaders?"

"The Saxons are not misbelievers," answered

the boy, sharply; "they worship the only True God. As to paying them tribute, thou knowest well that were it only to save myself I would not do it—that it is to keep the old homestead about grandfather's ears we hunt the wolves. Were it not for that," he added, springing to his feet with the boar-spear in his hand, "you would find me in the foremost ranks of the Danes at the next invasion, let whatever might befall."

There was a fire in the boy's eye, and a firmness about his mouth, which told the watchful Druid that he was one who would execute whatever he undertook, regardless of all hazard.

"I know that what your forefathers did with pleasure and pride must be a sad humiliation to one like you, when pursued as a labour, and paid as a tax," said the Druid, making the dart rankle deeper in the proud heart of the high-spirited youth, while he seemed to sympathize with him,—"that this wolf-hunting must be a wearisome task, since you are compelled to follow it from stern necessity, and not with that joyous delight with which it was pursued by your ancestors—the old Cymry,

the original proprietors of this island—which these Saxon swine have all but rooted us out of, and overthrown the sacred altars of our ancient faith. But come in and refresh thyself, my son; though my cave is but humble, and my fare homely, thou art welcome—for the sake of the race from which thou hast sprung—to the best it can afford."

"It is wearisome," answered Natonleod, with a sigh, "to be compelled to hunt the wolves in the frost, rain, and snow of the deep mid-winter, by night and by day, and to find no pleasure in the chase, only because we are forced to follow it; are compelled to furnish so many wolves' heads at a certain day and hour, no allowance being made for their scarcity. But what is more galling, the proud Saxon deigns not even to notice us when we deliver them to him, in his large hall; nay, more, speaks to my grey-haired grandfather as if he were a dog, instead of a man descended from a long line of British warriors. I feel at times as if I should choke, or my heart burst, when I go with Urien to pay the tribute; and were it not for the love I bear to his son Cedric, I should ere this have been tempted to plunge my boar-spear into his heart.

But his son is a thousand times more gentle than the father is unkind," he added, as he eased his over-burdened heart with a long-drawn sigh.

"Thy heart rebels not more at this debasing slavery than mine, my son," said the Druid, as he led the way into the cave.

CHAPTER VI.

The Druid's Cave — The Druid reveals the ancient Druidical Mysteries to Natonleod, and tries in vain to convert him—Meeting of Natonleod and Conmail.

THE cave which the Druid and the young wolf-hunter entered was hewn of the sandstone rock, and on a table of the same material the Druid placed a clean cloth; then from a recess took out barley-bread, cheese, venison, a leather bottle of beer, and, placing them before his guest, bade him eat, drink, and refresh himself; and having done so, he lit a lamp, which was fed with the fat of deer and wild boars, then seated himself opposite his guest.

"I have observed in thee, my son," said the

Druid, "a perception keener than that of others whose years far outnumber thine own, and having seen this, I would fain speak to thee of a matter that has long sat nearest my heart. Thou knowest I am the last of the Druids; that when I die the secrets of our ancient creed will die with me; that I have hitherto found no one to whom I could impart those mysteries, which have been handed down through a long line of priests, from ages before the Romans set foot on this wave-beaten shore."

"I have heard my grandsire speak of thee," answered Natonleod, "as one conversant with all the ancient Druidical mysteries which our heathen forefathers believed in; yet he spoke not of their cessation with regret; but thou knowest, venerable father, that he and I have been taught to worship the Creator, not the creation of His hand."

"Is not the sun the source of light and life, to whom we kindle our Beltian fires?" said the Druid, rising, and extending his arm as he spoke. "Would not the earth be dark, all life cease, not a green thing grow, were he to quit his golden throne, and no longer march across the sky? Is there a greater god than Bel?"

"He who formed the sun, moon, and stars, and created the earth, is a greater God," answered the youth, "and He dwelleth invisible in the heavens. The sun and moon which you worship are not gods, no more than the white bulls you offered up were sacred, nor the mistletoe you cut from the oaks endowed with Divine virtue."

"Dost thou not believe in the mysterious egg?" inquired the Druid, somewhat angrily, "which was engendered by twining serpents in the air, that pursued the swift horseman, who caught it as it fell, and placed it on the altar, where it sent forth flames of fire, yet never was consumed. That egg I yet retain; it is cased in gold, and will swim against the strongest current—such are its hidden virtues."

"The brook that flows before this cavern is not one of the most rapid that I have seen," answered Natonleod, "yet were you to try, you would find that it would either sink at once, or only be borne along a little way by the current. Believe me, father, you are wrong. Your golden pruning hooks never dropped from the sun, neither is there any more sanctity in the mistletoe you cut with them than there

is in the colewort I cut with a common whittle."

"Thou hast knowledge beyond many, I know, whose heads are hoary," said the Druid, with deep emotion. "What mightest thou not have been hadst thou but have had me for thy teacher instead of Urien and the Saxon monk? Hadst thou been my disciple before the seeds of this Christian creed had been sown in thy young heart, I might at least have succeeded in teaching thee to have reverenced the mysteries of our ancient religion, which now, for want of better understanding, thou condemnest and scoffest at. It would have been some solace to my last days so to have instructed thee, that when called away to the Country of the Sun I might have left one behind who would have kindled the sacred fire on the altar of Bel a little longer; but it is not to be," he added, in a melancholy tone of voice. "I am the last of the race of Druids; when I am gone, no one will chant the hymn of the Cattle of the Deep, or understand the meaning of the cauldron that would never seethe the food of a coward; of the wood of iron, and the heavy blue chain that engirded it. Their meanings and their mys-

teries will lie like wrecks on the shores of an old sea, which no one can remember aught ever sailed upon; they will have a mysterious murmur of their own, like the waves, which such as I can only understand. But I tell thee, son of a degenerate race that thou art," he added, with fiery energy, "that Stonehenge, fallen though it is, shall outlast every Christian church that now darkens the land, and stand a monument, throughout all time, of our ancient creed, and of that religion which was, old ages before a Roman galley grazed the rounded pebbles of our island-shore. Now thou art refreshed, go thy way; answer me not; take thy wolf's head, and lay it at the foot of thy Saxon master, too honoured if he only plants his foot on thy neck. Begone! and leave me to die in the freedom of the forest, and in the faith in which I have lived, and which I can never forget while these hoary oaks that are sacred to our gods hem me in. Farewell, the moon shines bright, and the course of the brook will lead you to the mere from whence you came."

Natonleod smiled at his abrupt dismissal by the old Druid, and putting the remainder of the barley-bread and hard cheese into his

pouch, not having had time enough allowed him to finish his meal, took his departure.

Cutting off the wolf's head when he got outside, and carrying it over his shoulder, he followed the way pointed out along the brook, which, after a walk of several miles, brought him out by the side of the mere, that lay broad and bright as a sheet of silver in the dazzling moonlight.

As he walked along, he pondered deeply over the wild mysteries of the Druidical creed, and wondered whether the aged recluse he had just quitted really believed in the heathen doctrine which he was ever ready to instruct others in.

Unlike the Druids of old, he did not wholly bury himself in the gloom of the ancient forests he so highly extolled, but at times went forth into the haunts of men; and the young hunter had been present at more than one meeting, where Urien and Bertha's friend, the monk, brought out such a strong battery of reason to bear upon the old heathen, that they had dislodged him, and sent him boasting of the stability of Stonehenge in the same vein he had run into that very night.

"He seems to know," said the young hunter

to himself, "that his heathen creed is shaken to its very foundation, and I cannot but admire his courage, while I grieve over his idolatry, which leads him to examine with his own eyes the extent of the damage done to his fallen altars."

Fortunately for Conmail, his brother Natonleod came up just as he had fallen asleep; and the wolves, hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, hurried off into the thicket before the wolf-hound, Belus, caught sight of them.

Natonleod shook his brother, and spoke sharply to him for falling asleep in so dangerous a spot, for he had seen the retreating wolves; he also blamed him for parting with Brand. But as the poor boy pleaded weariness and hunger, Natonleod's heart smote him with remorse for not having spoken more kindly; and as he looked at him in the moonlight, it struck him for the first time how much his features resembled those of their sister Gunhilda; for Conmail had eyes of the same light blue, and wore a profusion of golden-coloured hair.

"That fragile form is but ill-adapted to bear the brunt of these stormy times," thought

Natonleod, as he gave his brother the barley bread and hard cheese which he had brought from the Druid's cave; and his eyes brightened as he saw with what avidity Conmail devoured the homely fare.

"Now rest thee, my brother," he said, "and I and Belus will keep watch; for we might as well hunt for one of Gunhilda's bone pins, if it were thrown into yonder mere, as try to find either Cedric or Hadrada." He kissed his brother on the cheek, pillowed his head upon a bundle of white withered grass, then throwing his cloak of wolf-skin over the boy, sat down at the foot of the Druid stone, with Belus beside him, and kept watch over the sleeper. Here we must leave them, and follow Cedric the Saxon into the very heart of that dim old forest.

CHAPTER VII.

Cedric and his Wolf-hounds—The Eagle—Wild Forest Scenery—Forest Animals—Cedric chases a large Wolf—The Wolf's Refuge—The ancient Mound—Disappearance of Cedric and the Wolf.

FLEET of foot as his own wolf-hounds, the Saxon boy ran along the path, that was overhung with evergreens, which grew so thick and close together, that all around for a great distance seemed half buried in a shadowy kind of eternal twilight, which in winter and summer was ever the same.

"Warm harbourage here for deer, wolves, and wild boars," said Cedric to himself. "How my dreamy sister Bertha would love a solitude like this, were it nearer home, and not infested by harmful beasts of the chase—to walk in and brood undisturbed over her Saxon poetry. Come here, Thor! back, Wolf—silly dogs! you might as well hope to find a mole on the uppermost branch of one of these huge oaks, as to hunt a wolf in such a thicket as that. Hey, dogs! this way—see these foot-

prints! look at them well—now this way. The brambles have hardly had time to bend back into their old places since the broad-footed brute passed on before us."

The dogs looked on the ground, and then in the direction towards which he pointed, as if they clearly understood every word he had spoken, and away all three went up a steepish ascent, that would have been distressing to any one who had not followed the chase, and trained himself for such hard exercise.

A huge eagle was screaming and wheeling high overhead, and Cedric unslung the bow which hung behind his back, took a bolt from his pouch, and had taken good aim at the great king of the air, who hung rather low, with his broad pinions expanded, little deeming that death stood so near—for few had a truer eye or a surer aim than the young Saxon,—when, just as he had covered the bird with his eye, he lowered his bow, shook his head, and said, "No! Gunhilda wept when I brought home the golden eagle, and made me promise that I would never again destroy one of these feathered monarchs; and I could not look straight into her great blue, truthful eyes,

which are the very colour of a cloudless summer sky, if I broke my promise."

Again he set off at full speed, to make up for the time he had lost aiming at the eagle; for the wolf-hounds were now considerably ahead, and out of sight, though they kept barking, as if to give him notice of the direction they were in — for while he was in sight they hunted in silence, saving when the chase was in view.

Cedric hurried along, and soon found that his hounds were still in the track of the wolf. He stooped down and measured the footprints; each was nearly as much as he could span with his fingers.

"What a head that wolf must have for his feet to be such a size," said Cedric; "why, it will be a load of itself, should I have the good fortune to kill him; and his skin will be big enough to make a winter bodice for my pretty Gunhilda, for I can more than half span her little waist with both hands. Heigho! I either wish my father liked Urien more, or I loved dear Gunhilda less; and yet I don't wish the latter either. But here is some of the wolf's hair on these gorse bushes. What a splendid

coat the fellow has got. This way, Thor—lead on, Wolf!—we are nearing him; his strides get shorter and his doublings more rapid. We shall come upon him. Heigh, dogs! this way."

The young Saxon had by this time reached a part of the forest unlike any he had hitherto traversed: it was covered with brambles, sloes, and bullace bushes, which were again overhung, every here and there, with broad-spreading low crab-trees, which were already in blossom, and a beautiful picture it was to see all those wild wide acres of underwood spreading round these beautiful islands—for such they seemed—of red and white bloom.

No ploughshare had ever turned up a foot of this vast wilderness since the day our island first heaved up brown and barren above the surrounding ocean.

Mingled with this dense underwood were numbers of old gray twisted hawthorns, the knotted stems coiled together like serpents, fold within fold; and as a proof of the abundance of food for the birds that built and sang amid these solitudes, thousands of hawthorn-berries or haws hung black and withered,

through wind and frost, amid the flush of emerald green made by the opening buds.

Then some withered tree, looking like the bleached bones of a ghastly skeleton, threw its white shrivelled arms over the underwood, and tossed its bony-looking head above the blossom-covered crab-trees, as if bidding them to remember death, and seeming to look as much out of place there as a naked skull would do amid the flowers that grace a banquet-table at which youth and beauty are seated.

Nobler, grander, and more sublime, heaved up some giant oak, whose haughty head had been struck by the thunder-bolt, while its branches were burnt and blackened with lightning, telling that, like the rebellious angels, it had battled against high Heaven, and that the scars it bore were not dealt by an earthly hand: nor was it wholly dead, for there were signs of stirring life in the new branches it was sending out—a burgeoning as of hope, which seemed to tell that other centuries might roll past more in number than those it had then stood, and that it would still be found a sturdy veteran of the forest, overtopping all its compeers.

Fern, blackthorn, gorse, woodbine, bramble, ivy, hazel, holly, were all intertwined, overlaced, underlaced, and matted together in such a way, that it would have taken days to have cleared a single acre; nor would a destroying fire have wholly obliterated the features of the scene, for thousands of hard blackened stems would have still remained, which no body of flame could have entirely devoured.

Here wild cats, foxes, foumarts, stoats, weasels, martins, and all that class of destructive quadrupeds which prey on hares, rabbits, and birds—and when these are not to be found, on one another,—abounded in thousands.

Some of these wild cats were formidable monsters, limbed and clawed like tigers, and by nature equally as savage as the striped terror of the eastern jungles.

There are a few of the same race still existing in our old English forests at the present day; and it is nothing unusual to meet with accounts in the newspapers of their having flown at some poor gamekeeper or another, who has had the misfortune to fall in their way.

But impassable and impenetrable as this portion of the primitive forests appeared, Cedric's staunch persevering hounds dislodged the wolf from the covert, and within a few yards of the spot where the young hunter was stationed. The grey grizzly monster stood at bay for a second or so before the bold Saxon youth, making that terrible snarling sound which, when coming from a whole pack of wolves, causes the blood of the bravest traveller to chill; and he would no doubt have given battle on the spot, for he shrank not from the uplifted boar-spear which Cedric held ready to receive him; but the baying of the wolf-hounds sounded too close to be pleasant to his ears, as they followed close upon his heels from out the underwood; so, hearing this, the wolf no doubt decided that it would be better for him to make all he could of the little start he had in advance, and look out for another hiding-place.

Having come to this conclusion, the wolf set off in another direction, which, from the light behind the trees, Cedric concluded to be more open than the one he had just abandoned.

Large the young hunter made sure the wolf must be, from his slot, or footmark, but he was not prepared to see such a monster as had, a minute before, met him face to face—for the wolf's head stood on a level with his own, while his chest looked broad and strong as that of a lion.

"A boddice for Gunhilda!" said Cedric, as the wolf went galloping off with his tongue lolling out, his eyes gleaming like fire, and his powerful limbs showing signs of great distress; "why, his skin would make a coverlet for her couch. I must have him; for all the wolves I have hitherto seen are but dwarfs compared with this fellow—though the one we killed by the forest-side above the burgh was a formidable chap to grapple with. Heigh, Thor! on, Wolf! The gorse and brambles have carried off a fine toll from your rough jerkins; but, never mind, we shall have him yet, and he's a prize worth contending for. On, dogs! he draws his feet closer together than he did an hour ago, and, if my eye does not deceive me, has a limp in one of his hinder legs. So-ho! one more good run, dogs, and we shall bring him to bay long before the sun has thrown the

shadow of yonder giant oak upon this green and silver bed of lilies of the valley."

He gathered a rough handful of those sweet-scented and beautiful flowers as he spoke to his dogs, and put them in his jerkin for his sister Bertha, who was a great lover of flowers.

On went the wolf-hounds once more, true and stedfast, never swerving a jot to the right hand or to the left, but treading at times even in the very slot the wolf had imprinted on the rain-moistened ground—for there had been a heavy shower over the forest on the previous night. They showed no signs of weariness, although the chase had been so severe; for in their doubling to dislodge the wolf they had run over several more miles of ground than the bold-hearted hunter himself had traversed.

The chase was now all up-hill, and many a rich harvest has since that day been reaped from those breezy slopes, which, with few exceptions, were at this time one dark, unbroken land of trees.

The pace at which the wolf-hounds went began to tell upon Cedric, who was anxious to be in at the struggle which he knew must soon

come; and he felt tired as he went at a sharp run over the last mile of ground which led to the summit of the wooded acclivity.

Here the forest scenery again changed, and bore but little resemblance to any he had hitherto passed through, for the open space he now gained was for a considerable distance free from trees; a few wild low bushes sprang up in clumps or clusters here and there, but, excepting these and a few spots brightened with the yellow bloom of the gorse and broom, the whole space was carpeted with that soft dark-green, silky-looking grass, which grows nowhere naturally excepting in the glades of a few of our old English forests.

Cedric looked before him, and saw what appeared to be a large mound rising in the centre of this green glade, and at the first glance he concluded that it was some old encampment, such as both the Saxons and Danes threw up for defence, and hundreds of which are to be found within our island at the present day.

An artificial hill, or mound of earth, too high and too steep for any one to climb up the sides of, with a deep fosse, or dyke, cut steep

round the whole base of the mound, was the strongest defence reared by the Saxons and Danes, excepting their fortified dwellings. Nor was it easy to carry such a simply-built citadel, as those on the summit were armed with long spears, with which they were able to pierce the assailants below if they were bold enough to come within reach of them. Added to this, the fosse, or dyke, brought the heads of the assailers so near to the feet of the defenders as to be within reach of their sharp swords and heavy battle-axes.

"If it is an old encampment," mused Cedric, "it is one of the smallest I ever saw; and, as for a beacon, it is much too low for that. But whatever it may be, the wolf has made a stand beside it, as I hear by the baying of my hounds."

Another minute brought him full in sight of the green mound, and he stood speechless with amazement as he beheld the wolf standing on its summit in bold relief against the ruddy gold of the western sky, down which the sun was fast descending.

The animal looked more like the sculptured figure of a wolf than a thing of life, so darkly

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and solidly did it stand out from the golden background of that splendid spring sky.

When he came up, he found his hounds barking at the base of the mound, while the wolf, with his head down, stood snarling at them, and showing such formidable teeth as made the stout-hearted Saxon boy wish that he already had the wolf's head in his hand, without the remainder of its carcase.

"It must have been a desperate spring," thought Cedric, "to have attained that summit, so steep as the sides are, and from so deep a fosse. Neither Thor nor Wolf are capable of taking such a leap, or they would have been at his throat before this time. I may manage to creep up somehow—then, old wolf! it will be a single combat between you and I; for if I have a sharp spear, you have a sharper set of teeth. Yes, I see them plain enough, and will be nearer to them in a minute or two. They don't frighten me at all; and remember, wolf, if you turn tail, down you come into the jaws of Thor and your own namesake! You may girr, girr, girr; I am coming! but no snapping at my hands, remember, as I pull myself up. We'll fight fair, if you please."

And so saying, and with as light a heart as he would have carried had he been climbing an apple-tree, to gather Gunhilda some sunny-streaked branch of fruit which she coveted, he began to dig hollows in the mound, in which to plant his feet, and by such means endeavour to gain the same eminence as that occupied by the wolf.

The hounds watched him wistfully, and seemed to understand him when he made a sign for them to engage the attention of the wolf, which they did by attempting to spring up, and so keeping his head in a different direction from that by which Cedric was ascending.

Having made two or three places for a foothold, he stuck his boar-spear into the mound, and drawing himself up by it, gained the summit with ease, and so noiselessly that the wolf had not even seen him, nor turned its head from the direction of the dogs.

Nothing would have been easier than for Cedric to have sent the wolf rolling down the mound into the jaws of his hounds, had he stolen up while the animal's head was turned from him, and struck it behind with his spear. But this he would have considered a cowardly

blow; so, before attacking the wolf, he poised his spear, and gave a loud shout.

The wolf made one spring, Cedric another—they met in the centre of the mound, both at the self-same instant of time, and then nothing was seen but a cloud of dust, nothing heard but a crash—a fall as of earth or ruins, for both wolf and hunter disappeared, and were buried from the sight under the high-piled hillock, which, instead of being an encampment, was the round dome of one of those subterraneous chambers or vaults in which the ancient Britons stored their corn, together with their salt, which was brought over by the Phœnicians, who exchanged it for tin.

Several of these ancient underground chambers have been discovered in different places, and at various periods; and in more than one the simple mill has been found in which the Britons ground their corn.

The cloud of dust had subsided just as the sun was disappearing behind a golden embankment of clouds; and as the night heaved up, nothing broke the silence of the solitude that reigned around, excepting the melancholy wail of the wolf-hounds for their lost master.

CHAPTER VIII.

Hadrada sets out in quest of Cedric—Woden, the wolf-hound, wounded — Discovers the Saxon boy — The under-ground Chamber—Rescue of Cedric—The Deer and Wolves—The midnight Supper—The Return.

Our story now carries us back to the young Dane, Hadrada, who, accompanied by Brand, and followed—though he was not aware of it—by his wounded wolf-hound, Woden, which came limping far in the rear with his fore foot off the ground, threaded his way in the March moonlight through the intricate mazes of that ancient forest, in search of Cedric or Natonleod, for the latter had not returned when he left Conmail by the Druidical ruins.

At length his attention was arrested by a piteous whine, as if entreating him not to hurry along so fast; and while he halted a few moments and stood listening, Woden came limping up, then lay down at the feet of the young hunter, as if perfectly conscious that he had done wrong in following him, after being bidden to remain behind with Conmail.

Hadrada was at first angry with his faithful wolf-hound for having disobeyed him, but his better nature prevailed when he thought of the pain the poor dog must have endured to come hopping all that distance on three legs, so he stooped down and patted him; and, seeing a water-course glittering in the moonlight through the underwood, he bathed Woden's wounded paw, which was inflamed and swollen, and, though the hound still limped, he afterwards seemed to get over the ground as well on his three legs as Brand did on four.

Woden was of a different breed to that of either the Saxon or British wolf-hounds, having a cross of Danish blood in his veins, and a more delicate sense of hunting from scent, while the others pursued the chase more from sight; and it was well that the hound had followed Hadrada, for Brand would never have been able to have scented the track of Cedric through the dark avenues of the forest with the true and unerring instinct of Woden.

The latter understood his young master the instant the track was pointed out to him, and knew as well that his task was to trace the footsteps of Cedric as Hadrada himself did; as

for Brand, he had many times hunted wide of the slot.

After a time the barking of Brand was answered in the far distance; and as Hadrada put his hand to his ear to catch the sound more distinctly, he said, "On, dogs! that is the voice of either Thor or Wolf;" and hurried on in hot haste.

When he arrived at the mound in which Cedric was engulfed, he was alarmed and amazed at not finding the young Saxon, the more so as both the wolf-hounds were there; he called aloud, but his voice was almost drowned by the deep clamour of the dogs.

At last his call was answered; but from what direction the voice came which made the reply, he could not for a time make out at all, as at one moment it seemed to sound as if it came out of the earth, and the next as if hovering in the air.

"The saints shield me!" muttered Hadrada; "I feel as if some evil fiend was mocking me."

Woden, however, had neither knowledge nor fear of the foul fiend; and his keen ear no sooner detected the sound of Cedric's voice, than he reared his long body up the side of the

mound, and, with his head half turned towards Hadrada, soon made the Dane understand where the young Saxon was imprisoned.

Hadrada looked up in astonishment, and thought that Cedric must have lost his way, or have climbed the mound to look around him, and see if he could discover any path by which he could retrace his steps. "And yet," argued the Dane to himself, "the top of a tall tree would have commanded a more extensive prospect. It cannot be that." So he planted his boar-spear in the ancient mound, and, by placing his feet in the interstices between the stones, soon reached the summit.

Deep down, hollow, and sepulchral came back the voice of Cedric, in reply to the greeting of Hadrada. "The place is dark as a wolf's mouth, and cold as a well," shouted back the young Saxon, "and I would give my father's richest baldric for a loaf of barley bread and a flask of water. Get me out, somehow, Hadrada, for I am as ravenous as a famished hound, and cold as an icicle. I have been trying to climb out for this hour or two, but the roof arches over like the inside of a beehive, and only a fly or a spider could get along it back downward."

"How deep is it?" inquired Hadrada, leaning over and feeling about with his wolf-spear.

"From what I can judge, by the glimmer of moonshine," answered Cedric, "there are twenty good feet between us; and I see no other means of escape but by waiting patiently until you twist me a chain-ladder of green withes. You will find plenty of willows by the brook hard by. You haven't got a dry crust in your wallet, I fear? I was afraid not. Never mind; I will take in my belt, pillow my head on the wolf I have got here, and try to dream of sweet Gunhilda's barley cakes and savoury cheese, while you work out my release."

He further told Hadrada how he had ascended the mound in pursuit of the wolf, and how the roof of the deep subterraneous chamber fell in at the very moment he had driven his spear through the shaggy hide of the huge monster, adding, "I might have fared worse, you see, had I missed my blow before we fell together; for he would have had the best eyesight in the dark, and might have been picking my bones for his supper, and none of you discovered where I perished. The very name of

supper makes my mouth water: but be quick, good Had. Bertha would not smile on you for a long moon if she knew that you were a laggard when her brother was famishing."

Hadrada had not the heart to tell him that the Druid stone had been removed, and the whole of their store of provisions carried off by the wolves.

"It will be time enough to make the worst known when I have got him out," reasoned the young Dane with himself; "for the hope that he will enjoy a hearty meal, when I have liberated him, and we reach the mere, will be some solace to him while I make the withy ladder. Heigho! what would I not give for a wallet of ripe blackberries? a colewort would now be a luxury; but I must not think even of a raw cabbage, though my hungry stomach grumbles as if a pack of hounds were baying for a meal."

It did not take Hadrada long to cut down about thirty tall straight willows, every one of which would have made a capital fishing-rod, so long and taper were they all, running to about thrice the thickness of his thumb at the butt-end, and, at the length of some seven or eight feet, diminishing to a beautiful point.

Having selected his material, he planted his foot on the thick end, and twisted each withe from top to bottom—same as you see the bands twisted which bind together bundles of faggots —and by this means every fibre of the willow was split open, and twisted together, until it was pliable as a whip-thong, and strong as a thick rope. Having twisted the first into a ring of three thicknesses and about a foot in diameter, he placed the second through it, twisted it the same way: and so went on, willow after willow, link after link, something after the manner in which country children make chains of the stems of dandelions—with this difference, that each of his links was formed of three strands of the whole willow, one falling within the other with all the regularity of a finished rope, and strong enough to have supported the weight of a horse.

Another thing, the harder they were pulled the closer did each twist of the willow bind into the adjoining furrows, and thereby become stronger. The last three withes Hadrada wove into one, large enough to go over his shoulder and under his arm, so that he might have some portion of the weight on his own shoulders when

Cedric ascended, instead of depending wholly on the strength of his wolf-spear, planted between the mossy stones of the ancient mound.

Such a ladder as the young Dane made, any boy could easily manufacture out of a bundle of long green osiers; and if it were fastened to the gallery above, might ascend the Monument of London by it easily, for not a link could either break or become untwisted; and it would take a strong blow from a sharp axe to cut through the coils of a single loop.

Woden, the wolf-hound, had been lying down beside the brook, as if intently watching the whole operation, and when he attempted to rise, he gave a dreadful howl; the poor dog was too lame to walk, and Hadrada was compelled to carry him, heavy as he was, together with the willow ladder.

When he again went up the mound, he was obliged to call more than once before he aroused Cedric; for the latter had fallen asleep, with his head pillowed on the wolf, showing that the security he felt in the effort which the young Dane would make to release him was so great as to enable him to slumber as soundly as if he had been resting on his own bed at home.

Firm faith in friendship is a strong anchor to moor to, and those who trust to it feel not the little ebbings and flowings which seem to set closer-guarded barques in motion.

"Is the ladder long enough?" asked Hadrada, having fastened the topmost link around himself, and broken a good deal of the weight by attaching it also to his wolf-spear, the head of which he had driven in between the stones.

"It touches the floor," shouted Cedric, in reply. "I hope you have a firm hold, for I have got the wolf's head fastened round my shoulders; and that is pretty heavy, I can tell you."

"You may bring his body too, if you can carry it," answered the young Dane; "for I'll warrant my withes to bear the biggest bull that ever bellowed in our broad marshes."

The young Saxon hung on the willow ladder with all his weight for a few seconds before commencing the ascent, and finding that there were more links than he needed, he fastened the bulky body of the wolf to those that fell on the cavern floor, so as to steady the ladder, and prevent himself from swinging as he climbed out.

The ascent scarcely occupied a minute, nor did he appear the least excited when he stood at the base of the mound, but began patting his wolf-hounds as if nothing unusual had happened.

That brave Saxon boy lived in perilous times, when human life was hourly in danger, and he who went out in the morning knew not whether he should fall a prey to savage wolves, or be hewn in pieces with the battle-axes of the ever-watchful Danes, before the grey hour of evening.

Though the wolf-hounds found no difficulty in retracing their steps, it was well for the young hunters that the bright round March moon threw down her silver light on the wild forest, and enabled them to avoid the dense masses of underwood, amid which they would have got entangled had the night been dark.

Woden was so lame, that Hadrada, out of pity, carried him over his shoulders, in the same way you have often seen drovers carrying spent sheep; and every now and then the faithful dog kept licking his master's cheek, as if to tell him how very grateful he was for so much kindness.

As they walked along, Hadrada made Cedric acquainted with the loss of their provisions.

"And you have never broken your fast since we first parted!" said Cedric, placing his hand gently on his friend's arm, "though you have been on foot ever since morning without resting yourself for a single minute, and it is now past midnight. Dear Had, I take shame to myself for having even thought of my appetite, after the labour you have undergone, while I was lying down yonder like a lazy drone, only thinking of the honey we had stored up in our stony hive. But for your sake, and that of Conmail and Natonleod, I should feel glad that I have been so justly punished in the loss of my food, for thinking so much about indulging my own selfish appetite. Let me carry poor old Woden!"

"Many thanks for your kind offer," replied Hadrada, with a smile; "yet he would not sit in his saddle so easy were he to change his steed. But what are the hounds after, that has caused them to turn aside so suddenly?"

The howling of wolves was heard near at hand, mingled with the baying of the wolf-hounds, and the young hunters quitted the

path they were pursuing, to call off the dogs, for they themselves had had enough of the chase for one day.

They had not stepped out of their track more than a hundred yards or so, before they discovered the object which had attracted and drawn off the wolf-hounds. It was a large deer, which the wolves had hunted down, and were fighting over, when the hounds rushed in and scared them away from their battle and banquet.

"The good saints be praised!" exclaimed Cedric, pulling out his long hunting-knife; "this will do something towards making up for the store of provisions which these gaunt and hungry thieves, no doubt, carried off." And while he spoke he cut out the offal of the deer, which he threw to the famished dogs. Even Woden was put down to partake of the unexpected luxuries, and made so hearty a meal that Hadrada laughed, and said,—

"All I shall get by putting down my load will be a great increase of weight when I take it up again."

Having embowelled the deer, and seen the wolf-hounds well fed, Cedric threw the carcass

over his shoulders, and, as they were not now more than a mile from the Druid stone, stepped out lightly under his heavy burthen, all fear about hungering much longer having vanished. Hadrada, in addition to his dog Woden, carried the large wolf's head, which Cedric had hitherto borne.

Hungry although they were to painfulness, the young hunters announced their arrival with a glad shout, which was echoed back by the forest, and answered not only by Conmail and Natonleod, but every wolf-hound joined in the welcome cry, which the wolves in the far distance took up, as they hurried off, howling and affrighted, to seek the silence of more secluded thickets.

A fire was speedily kindled, for Gunhilda was too careful a provider to send them out into the wild forest without a supply of dry tinder, which a spearhead and a flint soon ignited; when the dry grass rose up in a high column of flame, kindling the broken branches which they had speedily gathered, and were in a few minutes reduced to red-hot embers, on which huge slices of venison were seen broiling.

Bread they had none; but the wolves had not carried off the handful of salt which Gunhilda had screwed up and placed in the wicker-basket. So they broiled away, with the red firelight flashing on their happy faces, and ate until they were compelled to unclasp their belts; for, with the exception of Natonleod, and the morsel he had given to Conmail, they had fasted from noon until past deep midnight.

When they had finished their rude meal, and drunk heartily of the clear water of the neighbouring mere, they lay down and slept before the expiring fire, the dying brands of which every now and then sent up a fitful flame, that gilded, for a moment, the adjoining forest trees, revealing the forms of the young hunters, and the couchant wolf-hounds that kept guarded watch around the sleepers.

Scarcely had the early sunbeams of a bright March morning thrown a golden glow around the miles of yellow primroses, purple violets, pearl-coloured lilies-of-the-valley, sky-stained blue-bells, pale anemonies, and gaudy celandines, which everywhere carpeted the floor of that vast and ancient forest, before the young

hunters arose from their cold and hard couches, and held counsel as to the course they were to pursue during the day.

It was soon resolved that Conmail was to remain with the wounded hound Woden, to keep guard over the two wolves' heads, and the remainder of the venison; an ample supply of which he was to have ready broiled by the time the sun reached the mark they cut upon an adjoining tree, while they again set off in pursuit of the chase.

As they had no choice of fare, they made a hearty meal off venison cutlets before they departed. But though they were away for many hours, and made a circuit of several miles, not a single wolf crossed their path; the fire which they had kindled over night had driven the wolves long leagues away, and, as Urien afterwards told them, they would not return for many months to the spot in which a fire had been lighted.

Wearied and sad at heart, they reached home in the twilight of evening, bringing with them only two wolves' heads, which made but eight out of the ten Urien had to pay as his share of the tax; and now but few days

remained; and if the number of wolves' heads were not made up by Easter, Urien's estate would be confiscated.

CHAPTER IX.

Return of the Saxon Earl—Urien's Troubles, and Conversation with Hubba the Dane—Their Surmise about the King's Letter.

THE Saxon earl had returned from his expedition—of surveying and strengthening the fortresses along the river Trent down to the mouth of the Humber—in an angry mood of mind, for everywhere he found the land bearing marks of the ravages of the Danes, and in no single instance had he been able to come to blows with those daring invaders.

The Saxons and Danes, who had long been settlers beside the river, demurred at paying the taxes the earl demanded, since their property was no longer protected from the ravages of the sea-kings and their followers; so the Saxon chief had to return with light money-

bags, and had not, in fact, half the sum which he was bound to pay into the king's treasury on a given day.

Nor was this all that soured his temper; for he found that the Danes had thrown up intrenchments in many places along the river's banks, and by the Humber, where they had left a small force to protect the plunder and the ships, while the larger body of invaders marched for miles inland, plundered anew, and slew wherever they went, seizing even the horses to carry their spoil to these intrenchments, nor once retreating until their ships were laden deep with the rich produce of the plunder.

The earl and his followers rode up just in time to see a fleet of these richly-laden vessels steer out into the German Ocean.

He found traces of the Danes in every little willow-shaded creek beside the Trent, and all the tiny bays that indented the shores of the sea-like Humber.

But everywhere they had been too quick for him—had packed up their plunder, unmoored their ships, spread their sails, and, with many a jeer and gibe, sped along their way over "the

road of the swans on their sea-horses," as they poetically called the sea and their ships.

These occurrences, at the time of which we write, furnished matter for everyday gossip among the Saxon and Danish settlers who inhabited the burghs beside the river Trent, and were the subject of conversation between Urien the Briton, and his friend Hubba the Dane, on the evening in which we resume the subject of our story.

To Urien it was the evening before an eventful day; for the morrow was Easter-tide, when he had to appear before the Saxon earl with his annual tribute of ten wolves' heads, and, up to the hour of which we write, he had but obtained eight to meet the demand, or else to forfeit his little freehold.

No wonder that the old man was low, and sad at heart; and all the more so through hearing that the Saxon chief had returned home in an evil mood, for it was rumoured in the neighbourhood that he even spoke snappishly to the beautiful Bertha; and the old Saxon gossips wondered how so sweet a rose as she was could ever have sprung out of so sour a thorn, as they called her father.

Still, there was one ray of hope shining faintly through all the darkness that seemed then to have gathered around Urien, and this ray was the promise that Cedric had made to blue-eyed and golden-haired Gunhilda, that two more wolves' heads should be placed in Urien's hands long before they were wanted on the morrow.

Urien had looked with a kindlier eye on Cedric during the last few weeks than he had ever done heretofore; and it was his beautiful granddaughter's sweet pleading voice, together with the Saxon youth's noble conduct and self-sacrifice for the weal of all that belonged to the aged Briton, that had wrought this favourable change.

"But where are the two wolves' heads to come from?" This was a question that Urien had more than once put to his friend Hubba the Dane, as they took their accustomed walk along the river's bank, which was now bathed in the golden rays of the setting sun.

"Trust the boy for knowing that," answered Hubba; "the shire is broad and long, and there are many wolf-hunters in it beside our boys; and if he has said they shall be forth-

coming, they will be there at the appointed time, so sure as that sun which we now see setting over the Ham of the Beck will rise above the green hills of the east on the morrow."

"He is a good youth, and a brave one," replied Urien, "and I never knew him break his promise, not even when difficulties have intervened in its accomplishment. But he is enslaved by Gunhildha's beauty; and when I was young and in love as he is, to win a smile from my sweeting, I have pledged myself to hard matters, which cost me many a pang afterwards to fulfil. It was ever so, neighbour, with youth—the tongue is readier to pledge than the arm to execute."

"There I differ from thee," answered Hubba, throwing a stone into the river as he spoke; "a high-minded and honourable youth will not pledge himself hastily, nor thoughtlessly; but what he does promise, he will as surely perform as those ripples where I have cast the stone will continue to extend their circle until they break upon the river-bank and are no more, for then their motion will have ceased. Thou wilt have thy ten wolves' heads to deliver

to the earl to-morrow as sure as that outer circle will break on yonder distant bank. Another stone thrown in would make other eddies, and the liquid rings it has formed on the river would be blotted out before they reached the bank. Such a stone death might throw at Cedric, and there would be an end; but if he lives, he will keep faith with thee, no matter at what sacrifice. Truth glitters in his eyes; and were I thee, and had a granddaughter, it would make my pillow soft when I came to lay my head upon it for the last time, to know that I had left her in the safe keeping of one so good and noble-hearted as this Cedric."

"Thou mayst take much of the same comfort to thyself, if rumour reporteth aright," replied Urien; "strange that it should be so; that not one among all the Saxon youths who muster for suit and service throughout the shire at the earl's summons, should find the same favour in the eyes of this proud Saxon's gentle daughter Bertha, as thy son has done. To my dazed and aged vision, it seems as if some power beyond human control works out this blending together of opposite nations,

races, and creeds, for some great purpose, which neither thou nor I will be permitted to see. But what is this whisper throughout the land about some great and secret object contemplated by the Saxon king?"

"I know not," answered the Dane; "and no one about here seems wiser than we are. The king's messengers have been speeding through all the length and breadth of the land, from Kent to Wessex, from East Anglia to the Deiri.* But unless it be to summon together

* Up to the period of which we are writing, England still bore the names of the eight kingdoms it was divided into by the different Saxons, who landed, fought, and became kings through conquest.

The kingdom of Kent, where Hengist and Horsa first landed early, contained the Isle of Wight, and a portion of the opposite coast of Hampshire.

Then came the South Saxons, under a chief named Ella, who founded the kingdom of Sussex.

Third and next, the East Saxons, led by Erkenwin, who in time spread his kingdom over the counties of Essex, Middlesex, and the south of Hertfordshire, and became king of Essex; for by that name only were these counties then called.

Fourth, the West Saxons, headed by Cedric, who conquered Surrey, part of Hampshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire, Dorsetshire, Somerset, a portion of Devonshire and Cornwall, and founded the kingdom of Wessex.

a Witenegemote (Parliament) with men from every shire, to make us easier and more just laws, which we greatly need, I cannot see what good will come to us in the matter."

"Laws, forsooth!" said Urien with a sneer; "if I tear off a man's nail, or drive out his tooth, the law only compels me to pay one shilling; if I tear his hair off by handfuls, I have but to pay a fine of twelve shillings; should I smite him on the ear and leave him deaf as a door-sill for life, I pay but twenty shillings; nay, if he is a serf, instead of a free man, and I kill him outright, the penalty of such a murderous deed is only thirty shillings.

East Anglia formed a fifth kingdom, containing Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridge, the Isle of Ely, &c.

Deiri was the name of the sixth kingdom, which included the counties of Lancaster, York, Westmoreland, Cumberland, and Durham.

Bernicia was the seventh, where Ida first landed, and extended from Northumberland into Scotland.

The eighth and last was Mercia, divided into north and south by the river Trent, and contained most of the Midland counties, though all were now ruled over by one king, and had been ever since the reign of Egbert, which was a little before the time of Alfred the Great. It is in Mercia, where the river Trent divides Lincolnshire from Nottinghamshire, that the scene of our story is laid.

But if I procure not a given number of wolves' heads by a certain day, I lose my freedom, all my goods and chattels, and the very land which has descended to me through a long line of ancestors, from time out of mind. Law, forsooth! but they are many a bow-shot from the right hand of Justice, and that you wot (know) well."

"It is but truth what thou sayest," replied Hubba; "yet if I err not, neighbour mine, we stand on the brink of a moving landslip; these messengers hurry not about on the king's errands for nought. I have heard a whisper of a royal mandate sent to our earl here, which his wolf-hound swallowed, seal and all, before Ella had mastered a line of the matter in the missive (letter). I would give a broad gold piece only to know the purport of that letter, for it is rumoured that hundreds have been dispersed over the land from Essex to Bernicia; yet in no corner hath the contents of a single epistle oozed out, and, as I said heretofore, no one seems a jot the wiser than we are on the matter."

Urien made no reply, as with contracted brow he walked homeward with Hubba, seem-

ing, by his silence, to muse deeply over the subject; nor did he open his lips until he reached his own door, when he said, "I fear me these royal mandates augur us no good; but courage, neighbour, our children have grown up side by side, and we will stand or fall together."

The two wolves' heads were delivered by Cedric before sunrise, and while Urien still slept; and Cedric uttered not a word as to how or where he had obtained them.

CHAPTER X.

The Tribute of Wolves' Heads paid to the Saxon Earl by Urien the Briton — Ella discovers the stolen Wolves' Heads—Urien sentenced to suffer the Ordeal of Fire.

It was a custom in the time of Edgar for the Britons to muster in procession, and march to the sound of horns, trumpets, flutes, drums, and cymbals—for these musical instruments had been used long before this early period,—when they paid their tribute of wolves' heads.

But a brawl, in the reign of Edward the Martyr, who succeeded Edgar, in which blood was shed by both the Saxons and Britons, called forth an edict forbidding all such processions in future, and ordering the tribute to be delivered in silence and order. The Saxons, on the other hand, were to be punished with stripes and imprisonment if they jeered or taunted the Britons, as was their wont beforetime; such as exclaiming, "There come the cowards with their beggarly load!"—a cry which had caused the Britons to sheathe their dirks in the hearts of the Saxons, even at the very doors of the king's palace.

In the village-like neighbourhood in which Urien resided, no such show had ever been made; and he now prepared to deliver his wolves' heads, accompanied by his grandsons, his domestics, and the two wolf-hounds, Brand and Belus.

The servants, bearing the wolves' heads, headed the procession; and, when they reached the castle, Conmail rushed foremost, boy-like, that he might blow the horn, which always hung suspended by a chain at the earl's gate.

"What a boastful din those churls make,"

said the earl, as he seated himself in the chair of state, surrounded by his attendants, ready to receive the tribute. "By the mass, I thought the old man would approach humble enough this time, instead of sounding a note almost of defiance; for I heard yesternight, from one who keeps a wary eye on his actions, that he was not prepared with the tribute. We must sally out ourselves with hound and spear, ere another winter snows on the earth, so as to make the tax more difficult to collect than it is, and rid the land of every wolf for many a long league round us. But for your aid, sirrah, and that of my good hounds," he added frowning, as he addressed Cedric, "the tribute, if I am not misinformed, would not have been forthcoming this Easter! Answer me, is it so?"

"I have aided Conmail and Natonleod in hunting down the wolves," answered Cedric; "and you have told me, many times and oft, that it is better for me to hear the howl of the wolf in the forest than sit listening to the chirrup of the cricket by the hearth. I have but done your pleasure."

At this moment Urien and his grandsons approached the foot of the dais; for the chair

in which the earl sat was placed above a flight of steps, so that he sat high above those to whom he gave audience on days of state.

The earl frowned at Urien as he looked at him, and the aged Briton returned his glance with a fixed courageous stare; for the fire in the old man's eyes was not extinguished.

"Count them, Wolfmor," said the earl sternly to one of his attendants, who descended from the dais to do his bidding, "and if the tale is right, sign the old man his deed of quittance."

Then, addressing himself to Urien, he added, "It is time that I had suit and service from your grandsons; they are now strong enough to draw a bowstring up to the arrow-head, and the king hath need of strong arms and willing hearts. They must serve under me."

"And you take them from me," answered Urien, "you must release me from all further tribute of wolves' heads, for my limbs will not do me the service that they were wont, fifty winters ago. I cannot pay the wolf-geld without the aid of my grandsons."

"That is no business of mine," replied the earl; "the king demands their service, and must have them. The law which sanctions

our sovereign's claim was made at the last Witenegemote, and I am here to see it fulfilled. As to the future tribute of wolf-geld, you know by what tenure you hold your estate, and what the consequence will be, should not the wolves' heads be forthcoming at the next Easter-tide. I am but his highness's servant."

"I know not what new law the Witenegemote may have made," replied Urien; "but by the tenure under which our house did service, under the great Alfred, we are but bound to serve the king three months within the year—one month's suit and service, and then three months to till our lands, for so it is written, unless when the king himself is at the head of his army in the field; and that," he added with a sneer, "I have heard no rumour of King Ethelred doing."

The earl bit his lips, and smoothed his brow at the retort, for he had as great a contempt for the cowardice of Ethelred the Unready as Urien himself had. But there were graver matters behind, and the earl said, "The tenure of Alfred the Great is a good tenure, yet no mention is made of the wolf-geld in it: that was the work of Edgar and his Witenegemote.

As to this law, which claims suit and service from your grandsons, it is the law of Ethelred and his wise men in council assembled. One king cannot make laws which shall be binding on his successors and their subjects, though there are many made by the great King Alfred which can never be amended; and he, be it remembered, adapted the laws made by Moses as much to the wants of his subjects as the Jewish lawgiver did his to suit the necessities of the Israelites, inserting such as he, with his council, approved of, and blotting out from his Domboc* such as his clearer judgment rejected."

"St. Neot, to wit!" shouted Cedric, in an affected tone of voice; then stood as mute and attentive as the rest of the listeners, while the earl said, "Who spoke?" but no one replied; while the Saxon chief looked confused: in fact, he was passing off for his own wise remarks those made by St. Neot, who wrote a life of Alfred, and was himself intimately acquainted with the great Saxon king.

* Doom-book: book of laws. When sentence is passed on a prisoner, we still say he has received his doom—his sentence, what the law meets out to him. Doom, or dom, is a pure Saxon word.

This interruption, rendered all the more poignant because he was found out, again ruffled the always hasty temper of the earl; and while he was considering, to use a homely phrase, "how he could best get out of it," his eye fell on the wolves' heads, which lay on the floor below the chair of state; and, as his countenance underwent a strong change, he exclaimed, "Wolfmor, reach me that head to the left, with the large projecting tusk." He took it in his hand, and then added, "I thought so. Villain," he shouted aloud, addressing Urien, "you have stolen this head from my hall; it hung above the shield and boar-spear: it was there yesternight. Behold! there is the royal brand upon the left ear!" And, as he spoke, he pointed to the spot which was marked with the Saxon E.

Urien replied not, but looked reproachfully at Cedric; and Conmail and Natonleod grasped their boar-spears tightly, and gazed with flashing eyes at the angry earl; while the British wolf-hounds, discovering from the countenance of Urien that something was wrong, commenced a furious barking, which was taken up and answered by the earl's dogs.

"I gave those wolf-heads to Urien," said

Cedric, pointing to the one the earl held in his hand, then to another which Wolfmor handed up to him. "They were mine; I slew the wolves with my own hand, and the brand was placed upon their ears without my knowledge or consent; and I had a right to give away what was mine."

"They are neither thine nor mine," answered the fiery earl; "but the king's, branded with the royal brand, and paid for to our house from the royal treasury, as the king's books show, and the register, kept by Wolfmor, will prove. And to bring forth again as tribute a wolf's head bearing the royal mark is punishable by death, without trial of appeal, unless the receiver will undergo the ordeal of fire to prove that they came into his possession without his having any knowlege that they ever belonged to the king. Had this old man failed only in paying the tribute, he would but have lost his estate. As it is, he hath forfeited his life, unless he is willing to abide by the judgment of Heaven. That is the law, and there is none other."

"If they are the king's, it is all the same," answered the high-spirited boy. "I alone took the wolves' heads, knowing them to be

mine, for as such they were always pointed out, and my name was coupled with them; and it is cowardly, and unjust, and unworthy of a noble Saxon to charge and punish another for what I myself have done. I feel that I had as much right to give the wolves' heads to Urien, or any other person I choose, as I have to give my cast-off gaberdine to one of our serfs. I pay not tribute of wolves' heads to the king, nor ought mine to have borne the royal brand without my consent."

"Silence, boy," exclaimed the earl, rising from his seat of state, and looking black as a starless winter midnight—"silence, or I shall forget that thou art my son. It is paying them in as a tribute with the king's brand on them that makes the offence unpardonable, and for which there is neither redress, nor forgiveness, nor appeal, saving such as I have pointed out, namely, the ordeal of fire. How say you, Urien, do you claim the fiery trial, and are you prepared to swear before you take up the red-hot iron, in our old and holy church, that, at the peril of your soul, you had no knowledge that the wolves' heads bore the king's brand, when you paid them in as a tribute?"

"I am prepared to submit to the judgment of God," answered Urien firmly; for such was the trial of ordeal considered.

"Then let it take place in the church three days hence," said the earl, pronouncing judgment. "Let the weight of the bar of red-hot iron, which is to be borne in the naked hand, be three pounds, and the distance it shall be carried be nine paces, the accused to measure the distance himself. And may God defend the right."

"I will protest against this judgment, though you smite me dead at your feet," exclaimed Cedric, striking his boar-spear heavily on the hall-floor as he spoke, and looking as grim and firm as a lion. "I demand the trial of ordeal on my own behalf, for if there is guilt, I alone am guilty; and in the face of Heaven I denounce this judgment as unjust and iniquitous, and such as it will be an eternal disgrace on holy Church to see executed, excepting upon myself. May the judgment of God descend upon all who oppose my righteous demand!"

"Thou hast not numbered years enough to be allowed the trial," answered the earl, with a grim smile; "if thou hadst, son of mine

although thou art, by my hope in heaven, thy demand should be satisfied. I do not ask thee to find bohr or surety for thy appearance at the appointed time and place," continued the earl, addressing Urien, "but shall be content with thy word of promise that, if alive and well, thou wilt be there."

"I will," answered the aged Briton, in a firm voice.

Then the earl made a sign with his hand, that the court was at an end, and in a few moments the castle hall was silent and empty.

CHAPTER XI.

The early Christians—The monks—Saxilby church—The solemn oath—The ordeal—Power of the priest—The challenge.

THE Christian religion, which had been established in England some four centuries before the period of which we are now writing, was still solemnized after a rude and primitive manner, and its forms and ceremonies carried

out very differently in many ways to what they are in the present day.

Though so far back, they still talked of Augustine and his monks landing in the Isle of Thanet, bearing a banner, on which was emblazoned the figure of Christ on the cross, and beneath which they marched with grave looks and measured steps chanting the Litany. From sire to son, through many generations, the description of that solemn procession had been handed down; from old men who then stood upon the beach, and had seen the vessel, while she was yet far out at sea, long before the founders of our old and holy creed landed to spread the Gospel tidings along the wild, wave-beaten shores of England.

Up to that time, hymns to Odin only were sung, and heathen rites offered up on Pagan altars; for, excepting among the defeated Britons, who had heard of the Redeemer through the Roman invaders, there was but little or no knowledge of the true God among the misbelieving Saxons. The first Christian rites were then offered up in pagan temples, for there were none other, and Pope Gregory, with his great charitable eye, saw that it was

better to allow the half-heathens to continue their sacrifices, and mix up even a portion of their pagan ceremonies with the true and holy religion which he sought to spread, than startle them all at once, by hauling down their hideous idols, and rasing their rude places of worship to the ground. But these events, even at the period of which we are writing, belonged to the past, though the Danes were all heathens, who from time to time invaded England up to the hour at which our story commences.

The little church in which Urien had to undergo the ordeal of fire might be considered old even at that time, for it was amongst the first that had been purposely built for the performance of Christian worship. Some good old Saxon, the very one which Bertha was still busy working in her embroidery frame, with one of his eyes a good inch above the other in the pattern she was copying, had first settled down on the site of that ancient church, where he scooped a little cave out of the hill-side, tied two sticks together to resemble the cross; and there, without being ordained by either Pope or bishop, pattered his prayers and counted

his beads from matin to vesper, and died at a good old age.

His successor had a longer beard than the good old father of the cavern, and as he preferred a little sunshine to too much shade, he made a cupboard of the cave, where he kept his food cool during the heat of the dog-days, set to and built himself a wattled shed, which he thatched with rushes that grew in abundance all round; set up a good substantial sign of the cross which he hewed out of a solid tree, got the toenail of a saint from somewhere or another—though perhaps, after all, it was one of his own—gave out that it worked miracles, and; excepting that he was too fond of the worthy thane's brewing—who took care that the jolly old priest was never without a barrel of good beer and a venison pasty—he led a very quiet kind of useless life, and died in the odour of sanctity.

The third was a different person; his soul was in his work; he looked only for his reward from the great Master whose servant he was, and he set about letting light into the heathen darkness that surrounded him in earnest; and his true piety was not lost upon the humble

herdsmen who pastured their flocks and herds in the wide marshes.

The Saxon chief, a God-fearing man, gave him many a rood of ground along the sunny hill-side, with green stretches of sweet meadow-land in the valley; and there the good father built a wooden church, which he thatched over; and many came from far and near to aid in the good work, labouring from morning to night "for the love of God," and refusing all remuneration for their toil.

The good man died in the course of years, the wooden edifice decayed and went to ruin, then a real church was built—the one to which our story now conducts us.

Timber was hewn in the great forest on the hills, stone was quarried, and a forge erected; and in time a tower rose, like a holy landmark, above the wild marshes, from which a bell sounded at intervals, proclaiming that there stood the house of God; and thither they went to be married, and thitherward they were borne to be buried, and so the work of life and death went on over that road which was made to lead heavenward—to a land of happiness beyond the grave.

Into this church, around which lay many a brave Saxon who had fallen in the wars that were waged against the invading Danes, Urien came on the third day after the delivery of the wolves' heads, having lived in the interim on only bread and water, for such abstinence was forced upon all who accepted the fiery trial.

The Saxon earl, with a large train of attendants, was present, but neither Bertha nor Gunhilda could be prevailed upon to witness the ordeal; while, on the contrary, the young wolf-hunters would not have missed the sight on any account; and as all of them knew that Urien was innocent, they had so much faith in what was then solemnly believed to be "the judgment of God," and which, as we have before stated, the trial by fire was called, that they had not even the shadow of a doubt but that the old man would escape scathless, and that the fire would have no more power over him than it had over those lion-hearted Israelites of old, who refused to worship the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar set up "in the plain of Dura," and came out of the fiery furnace uninjured.

Two priests in their flowing robes stood at

the altar, one with the book of prayers open in his hand, the other feeding the fire from time to time from a bottle of oil, to heat the iron, which was thrust among large billets of resinous wood in a brazen grate, rich in metallic groups of imps and angels tugging for the mastery; though the embosser, with sly humour, had managed to give the graven devils the best of the battle. One imp had got a cherub under his arm, and was giving him brimstone without treacle, and the little celestial looked as if he didn't like it at all.

There was a silence like death in the church when the priest said, "Let the accuser and the accused come forth."

Urien and the earl at the self-same moment of time stepped forward from opposite sides of the church, and stood at the front of the altar.

The crackling of the fire in the brazen furnace roared audibly and awful amid the breathless hush that intervened.

"You, Ella, Earl of Saxilby and the shire that borders the river Trent, are the accuser. Take this Book—the Book of God—in your right hand, and swear solemnly, that so may the salvation of your soul in your dying-hour,

rest upon the truth of the oath you now take, that you believe the accused to be guilty of the crime he is charged with, and appeal to the judgment of God to confirm it on this your solemn oath."

For a second or two the earl turned pale as a maiden in a swoon, then, recovering himself, he answered, "No, sir priest; I will make no such oath. The ordeal was his own choice; it is true the other alternative was certain death; I refuse the oath, let the accused swear that he is innocent."

There was a low murmuring of disapprobation in the church at this refusal, and the crackling of the fire was no longer audible, as it was never supplied with fuel after the accused and the accuser were summoned before the altar; the fiery earl turned round to see from whence the murmur arose, when his eye encountered that of Hubba, the Dane, who returned his glance with an undaunted defiance; and when the earl said, "Was it you that dared to express your dissent at what I have done?"

The Dane boldly answered, "It was."

The earl laid his hand on the dagger he

carried in his belt, and would, no doubt, have sheathed it in the body of Hubba, had he not been called back to the remembrance of the holy place in which he stood, by the voice of the priest summoning Urien to make solemn oath that he was innocent.

The old man took the solemn oath, on an ancient volume of the Evangelists, the binding of which was emblazoned with the crucifix and other holy emblems, so as to give it a sanctity in the eyes of the humble worshippers, when they looked up to the richly-bound volume, as it was read by the priest on the days of sacred service.

After having sworn, Urien was besprinkled with holy water, a portion of which he drank; then all drew back, and left a clear space in the aisle of the church, along which he was to carry the bar of iron in his naked hand the distance of nine paces.

And now a solemn prayer commenced, in the midst of which the priest who read it made a signal with his hand, when he who had poured oil on the fire took the heated iron from the brazen grate with a pair of polished pincers, and presented it to Urien, just at the same instant

when another priest lifted up an engraved cup containing holy water, in which to plunge his hand before grasping the heated bar of iron.

Urien dipped his hand in the water, and, seizing the bar tightly, carried it the allotted distance without even a change of countenance, or showing the least sign expressive of pain.

There was a low murmur of applause when he laid the bar on the edge of the old Saxon font, which was the limit of the space measured.

The priest then stepped forward, and bound up Urien's hand in a white bandage that had been steeped in the water of the font; a seal was also affixed to the bandage, which was not to be removed before the expiration of three days, for which purpose he would again be summoned before the priests.

This done, the priest, who was one of those stern firm men from which sprang the race of divines who, on a later day, sacrificed their lives for conscience' sake at the stake, turned full upon the earl and said, "Should the accused, at the expiration of three days, show no mark of burning, the judgment of God will have been fulfilled. But you, Ella, Earl of Saxilby, having refused to take the solemn oath, must then go

through the fiery trial, for such is the law. Still there is this choice left you, as you have not challenged the trial, namely, the ordeal of boiling water, when you shall with bared arm bring out a stone weighing three pounds from the cauldron holding six gallons as soon as the sign is made that the water boils. Or, having sat in the King's Witenagemot, there is still the right of challenge to single combat left, on condition that it is accepted by some one of noble blood, who will step forth as champion for Urien, for the latter cannot accept it."

"If I refuse, what then?" said the earl, looking fixedly at the priest.

"Refuse the bidding of holy Church!" exclaimed the monk, elevating his voice, while the colour mounted to his cheek. "Refuse, proud earl, and from this altar will I curse thee with bell, book, and candle, and all who hold communion with thee—either strangers, friends, or those of thine own household—all shall be cursed and excommunicated; all who offer thee a crust of bread, or a drop of water, shall be accursed. Nor shall the ground on which thou liest down be again cultivated until it has been exorcised; and when thou diest,

the rite of Christian burial will be refused thee, and thy body left for the wolves of the wold and the raven to feed upon."

The priest looked more than mortal as he stood erect, and hurled this solemn denunciation at the earl; which, had it been accompanied by the ringing of the bell, the closing of the book, and blowing out of the candle, instead of being only a threat, would have left the earl accursed, shut out for ever from the Church and all association with his fellow-men, unless some had been found bold enough to have drawn down upon their heads the same terrible anathema, with all its awful consequences.

The earl turned pale, and his lip quivered; then, remembering that there was no one of noble birth present, he said, "I challenge any one of noble birth present to single combat, who will stand forth as champion of Urien, and here lies my gage;" and he threw his hunting-glove on the floor of the church.

"I accept the earl's challenge," said Hubba, the Dane, stooping, and picking up the glove; "the more so since the earl has his own son's solemn word that he himself took down from

the wall the wolves' heads, and brought them to Urien, who had no knowledge that they were branded. I here, before this holy altar, proclaim myself Urien's champion to the death; and may God defend the right."

A low "Amen" was uttered by the whole assembly, excepting the earl himself, who said, "I combat not with one who has only churls' blood in his veins."

"My blood is more pure than thine, proud earl," replied the Dane; "the wife of Earl Byrhtnoth is my sister. Thou knowest now that noble blood flows in my veins, and how nearly I am allied to Swein, king of Denmark. I throw the churl's blood back in thy teeth, and will do my devoir unto the death. Holy father," he added, giving the glove to the priest, "I commit this gage to the charge of Mother Church, whose champion I now declare myself, and will redeem the pledge with my body, in doing battle when and where it shall be appointed."

"Holy Church accepts thee as her champion in behalf of Urien, the Briton," said the priest, hanging up the earl's glove above the altar, which made the pledge sacred.

"Our quarrel is now beyond the pale of the Church," said the Saxon earl; "whether the result of the ordeal shows itself favourable or otherwise on the hand of the Briton, I hold him craven who shrinks from the combat."

"That is a name which none of my race ever yet bore," replied Hubba; "and were it for no other cause, I would maintain the quarrel, knowing, as I know, and as thou also knowest, proud earl, that Urien was as unconscious of the wolves' heads bearing the brand as the infant that but yesterday saw the light. Were there guilt at all—which I hold there was not—the punishment ought to have fallen on the head of thine own son, though woe worth the father who would inflict it for giving to a friend the spoils which he hath taken with his own hand in the chase. It was not this, and I tell thee to thy teeth, as Heaven is witness, and thine own conscience the accuser, it is the possessions of Urien thine heart covets, and his falling short in the tale of the shameful tribute of wolves' heads thou thoughtest a favourable opportunity for stripping him of all he hath. He has passed the ordeal, I hope

and pray Heaven favourably, and saved his possessions."

The earl muttered something, which was not distinctly heard, and quitted the church with darkened brow; first turning round before he passed out of the low arched doorway, under its shark-tooth ornaments, as he heard a disapproving murmur behind him, and shaking his clenched fist in the face of the whole assemblage, a threat to which Hubba replied not by look or sign.

As Hubba walked home by the side of Urien, he said, "I am no heathen, as thou knowest well, Urien, but it seemeth to me that this ordeal is as much a pagan rite as was ever practised by any of our old idol-worshipping Norsemen, and I trust thou wilt come to no harm by it."

"The prayer was so lengthy, the dispute so long, and the ceremonies so many," replied the aged Briton, "that the bar of iron would have retained as much heat as it had in it when grasped by me, if it had only lain in the sun of a hot day in June. A child might undergo the trial, after the fire had died out so long, as it had done to-day, before the iron was pre-

sented; though it may be, that the priest favoured me, for there is no doubt they would have made it hot enough, had the earl himself passed through the ordeal. He will wreak all his long-cherished vengeance on thy head, good and tried friend of mine," continued Urien, placing his unbound hand kindly on the Dane's shoulder, "and I should grieve to the death should aught befall thee, the more through knowing it happened for my sake."

"Fear not for me, my friend," replied Hubba, "right and justice are on our side; and with a strong arm and a stout heart, I shall, Heaven willing, maintain mine own. The earl hath already made apology to me on the matter of my birthright, and though I hold, with King Alfred, that all men are born alike noble, I am not the less pleased that even on this ground I am his equal. I have no fear, but am full of hope that out of this struggle we shall come safely, and find ourselves all the better for it."

As they were walking by the river-side in the evening, Hubba said, stopping suddenly,—"Surely mine eyes have not deceived me, but the grey willows on the opposite bank do at

times assume strange shapes in the evening twilight, when tossed about by the wind. I fancied but now that I saw a large boat gliding beneath those branches."

"It was no fancy," replied Urien, "for I, too, saw it plainly, and it seemed as if filled with armed men. It must be hiding now in the little creek, between the willows and the embankment."

"That boat bodes us no good, friend," said the Dane. "I like not its movements. Bid all you know sleep with open eyes to-night."

CHAPTER XII.

The Course of Time—Cedric and Bertha—The Secret—Preparations—The Enemy's Camp—The Boat Adrift.

THINK not, my young readers, although it is so long ago since the events transpired of which I am now writing, that England appeared anyways different to those who then lived to what it does to us who live now. The changes which have since taken place the dead

know nothing of; or if the dead do, in their state of spiritual existence, it never can, while we are here, come to our knowledge, as we are not permitted to hold communication with that Dark Land of Forgetfulness which lies beyond the grave; and these changes have come too slowly and silently to startle us who now pace the island which they once trod.

Summer and winter came and went then as now. The flowers of spring drooped and died, and the trees of autumn hung like mourners over the fallen leaves which lay buried at their feet. The speckled lark soared as high and sang as sweetly as he hath ever since done; and the rainbow (which the old Saxon poets called the Bridge of God) spanned across the great blue sea of heaven in the same rich hues which we still behold, and will do so until the destroying angel startles the dead with his earth-shaking trumpet, and proclaims that "time is no more."

Brightly were the stars mirrored in the silver Trent, and not a sound disturbed the deep silence that brooded over the waters of "the thirty-armed river," as Milton has called it, when Bertha stood gazing from the chamber

window, and listening for the footsteps of her brother Cedric.

He came at last in hot haste, for she had sent for him, and looked on his fair sister with silent amazement, when she seized his hands and pressed his cheeks with her lips. He looked into her troubled face, and saw the tears falling fast, but she spoke no word saving "Oh, Cedric, my brother!" Then she held him back at arm's length, and stood like him "who drew back Priam's curtains in the night to tell that Troy was burning."

"What is it, my dear Bertha, that troubles you, and makes you weep?" said Cedric, speaking in a tremulous voice, for he had much ado to keep back his own tears, so deeply did he sympathize with her sorrow. "Tell me what is amiss, and if I cannot remove the cause of your grief, let me at least be a sharer in it."

"I cannot tell you all," answered Bertha,—"I dare not; but one thing you must do, Cedric, even if blood is shed in doing it; you have seen that long boat filled with armed men, which is now hidden in the willow-creek on the other side of the river? Those men must not

land here—they must exchange no word with our father; they are sent from the king, for a purpose only known to myself, for the wolf-hound swallowed the written secret—not a word of which I ever whispered to my father, though I read every line of the king's letter. You may well look at me in wonderment, my brother, that I have not even intrusted you with this terrible secret, but you shall know all when you return; and if you can but prevent these men from landing—who know too well upon what bloody errand they have come—you will bless me, your sister, with your last breath, for concealing what has weighed so heavily on my heart thus long."

Imagine not that she spake as we have here written.

There was many a pause and many a sob between. Sometimes it seemed as if the effort of speaking would choke her; then she pressed her hand to her throat, and overpowering the strong emotion, began again, and so went on to the end: and when she had ceased, threw her arms round her brother's neck, and, with her beautiful head resting on his shoulder, sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Nay, weep not, then, my dear sister," said Cedric; "all that can be done I will do, and seek to know nothing further until thou informest me of thine own accord. I saw the boat as well as thyself, and what kept me later than usual, was sitting in concert with Hubba and Urien and their sons, and trying to find out, if we could, their mission. Believe me, sister, we have not been idle, for we all felt, somehow, that the arrival of those armed men boded none of us any good."

"Their business is that of murder," said Bertha, "though they seek not us; and what is more, it is done by the sanction of the king, whose commands extended to our father, to place himself at the head of the murderers."

"That he would never have done for either king or priest," answered Cedric; "but I must not linger a moment longer, after what thou hast made known to me. Try and sleep, my sweet sister, and believe me, not a foot shall they set on this shore to-night without blows being exchanged. I saw, as I came, a fire reddening the willow-holt, which tells me they are preparing their evening meal; and if their mission be, as thou sayest, a murderous one,

the cup will be emptied many a time before they again embark; and it shall go hard if we do not, at least, carry off their boat, and if they will come, leave them to swim for it, which will be no easy matter if they are heavily armed. There, dry thy tears, and let me be gone to execute the plan I have devised." He kissed her once more, and stole out noiselessly, for fear of the earl hearing him depart.

"This must be our own work," said Cedric, having called up Hadrada, Natonleod, and Conmail, and made known to them his plans. "Suffice it that Bertha is in possession of the secret business that brings them here, and that it is one of evil purport. More you shall know when the danger is over."

The dark eyes of the young Dane lighted up when he heard that the perils they were preparing to encounter would be rendering service to Bertha, and he swung his huge battle-axe in the air, and lopped off the lowest branch of a huge tree, as if to show what he would do in the service of his lady-love; for these young people remained firm friends in spite of the quarrels between their fathers—as young men and women still do in the present day.

"There may be more than one swimmer amongst them," said the young Dane, "and methinks it were well to first sink the fishing-boat, which lies somewhat too handy to leave us safe, should we succeed in casting their chiule* adrift, and some half-score of the enemy swim across."

The fishing-boat, which was moored to an alder that overhung the river, was soon filled with heavy stones by the young wolf-hunters, and sunk; as for the rest of the boats belonging to the earl, they were kept in a creek, the entrance to which was secured by strong flood-gates, and were therefore safe.

"I will now reconnoitre, and see how the enemy are employed," said Cedric; and, without waiting to hear a word of remonstrance, he dashed into the rapid river—for the ebb was then running very strong in the direction of the Humber—and swam across as lightly and swiftly as any waterfowl that ever shook the crystal drops from its plumes. Both Natonleod and Hadrada dashed into the water at the

* Chiule, sounded "kewl," from whence "keel," a word still retained, and which was the Saxon name for a ship or boat.

same moment; but Cedric kept on his way alone without once looking back, so they again swam back and sat down upon the river-bank, in shelter of the willows, too excited to pay any regard to their saturated garments.

"It is better to wait his return," said Hadrada; "we shall then know how to proceed. They are keeping up a merry blaze."

The reflection of the fire the Saxons had kindled came reddening and shimmering far out across the rippling eddies of the river, through the openings of the willow-holt.

While they listened, they could hear the voices of the Saxons, as their song was borne upon the wind across the water.

"They are making merry over their cups," said Hadrada, whistling to the chorus of "Derry down," which they were then trolling, and which was used by the ancient Britons ages before the period of which we are now writing.

The swineherd, who slept on his bed of rushes beside his grunting charge, was awakened by the sound; and, as he rubbed his heavy eyes, and saw the red light of the fire,

he felt thankful that so broad and rapid a river rolled between them and his herd.

"Cedric is a long time," said Natonleod, becoming impatient. "Had I not better swim across, and see if anything evil hath befallen him? I can carry my bow on my head, so as to keep the string dry, and keep the feathers of my arrows out of the water. There is no knowing what service a well-aimed shaft might be to our friend at this moment."

"Patience, a little longer, good Nat," said Hadrada. "I know, when a shaft is needed, there is no one in the whole broad shire who can send it with a truer aim than thyself; and wert thou now at a killing distance, I would wager my strong-jawed wolf-hound, Woden, against thy deep-chested Brand, that thou didst feather a dozen arrows in the heart's blood of as many of yonder noisy revellers. But see—what is that? By the rood, it is the enemy's chiule drifting down the river! and, at the rate it is going, it would breathe a good runner to keep abreast of it. That is a daring deed to be done single-handed; and I envy Cedric the praise he will receive from pretty Bertha for having done it. She will but con-

sider me craven for permitting him to peril himself alone—heigho!" and the young Dane sighed heavily.

A few minutes after, and Cedric returned; and while he rubbed dry his long hair, and made a wet circle on the spot where he stood, as the water dripped from his saturated garments, he said, "It is a pity to send so splendid a ship into the Humber unmanned; but thither she will go, unless they miss her at once. I never saw a finer craft hewn out of the solid trunk of a tree; and it must have been a goodly tree before it was shaped and hollowed. Her bow was as sharp as a wedge; I felt of it before I cast her adrift. By the mass, she was tugging at her mooring-line like a spirited horse that wants to go ahead; and I said to her, 'Wait a moment, my beauty, and you shall have it all your own way;' then I slipped the noose, and she glided off as silent as a shadow. There are at least a score of armed men. I was within a stone's throw of where they were seated; and, parting the sedge, had as clear a view of them by the strong firelight as if they had been seated in my father's hall. They were all armed heavily. I saw some of

the finest swords, shields, spears, and battle-axes, all lying together on the greensward, that ever I have looked upon. We should but have stood a poor chance against them had they landed, unless we had first raised a hue-and-cry, and roused the whole hundred, and picked out the bravest men from every tithing. Some of their faces, too, were seamed with scars, telling that they had been where blows were rained down plentifully. But, oh! I heard that which chills my blood only to think of it. Three of the savages who were sitting apart, as if shunned by the rest of their comrades, were laughing over and imitating the shrieks of women and the wailings of helpless children they had murdered no longer ago than yesternight; and from what I could gather, Hadrada, it was at the Danish village beyond the hoary oak, and where the gray stone marks the burial-place of some ancient British king, that this wicked deed was done."

Hadrada's black eyes flashed with anger, and, with the battle-axe in his hand, he was about to plunge into the river, and hew his way into the centre of the enemy, where he would, beyond all doubt, have left his own

mangled remains, had not Cedric seized him with a firm grasp.

"Art thou mad to-night?" said Cedric. "What would your single arm do against such odds? Thou mightest as well try to drag up that tree by the roots, from which thou hast already hewn a limb. Be calm, my good Had. I have seen Bertha shed tears enough for one night. Brave thou art, as the noblest falcon that ever stooped on a quarry. But I have seen even the high-spirited hawk retreat when the odds have been too great against him. Let us be thankful that thou and thine have escaped. The murder of those we all mourn will be revenged, as sure as yonder rounded moon, which is now rising above the hills, will ere long silver the ripples of the water with her beams."

As he spoke, the moon, which had been partially hidden by a passing cloud, shot a light upon the scenery, which revealed the long dark chiule, as it drifted away between the sedgy banks, then was lost in a bend of the river.

"It would take a well-mounted horseman a good hour to reach yonder boat, now she has passed the turning of the jetty," continued

Cedric; "for there the river shoots along with the speed of an arrow. They will not land on this shore to-night in yonder boat."

"I fear not," said Hadrada; "for never did I feel such a longing to cleave my way through a whole forest of human skulls as I do at this moment. Heaven send some of them across, and I will deal them a few such blows as will never leave them the inhuman power again to mock the shrieks and wailings of the helpless and innocent women and children which thou sayest they have so brutally butchered. I hope to God, Cedric, thine ears have deceived thee. Were my father here, and heard what thou hast but now given utterance to, though there were a thousand assembled on yonder bank, and he alone, he would throw himself into the midst of them, though certain that he should be hewn into as many pieces as there are leaves on this overhanging bough. But, as thou sayest, the hour of vengeance will assuredly come, and were thou and thine but left alive, and a few others that I love, I should not shed a tear if all the rest of thy race were sunk in the deepest caverns of the sea."

"There spoke out the soul of the old savage

Sea King, thy ancestor," answered Cedric; "and such a speech would have been in keeping with the race who worshipped Thor and Woden; who believed in a brutal heaven, which they called Valhalla, where the delights they pictured consisted only of the savage and unnatural pleasures which they indulged in while on earth; where they hewed off limbs, which they believed were replaced at the next sunrise; ate off a great boar whose flesh never diminished, and drank mead out of cups made of the skulls of those they had slain. But I forgive thee; thou art not thyself to-night; neither am I altogether; but let me tell thee, friend of mine, were our race to be destroyed, the Christian faith, which thou and thine are believers in, would receive such a blow as it would not recover from for many a long year to come. Nay more, such a wish is really as far asunder from thy true heart, as yonder star is from the folded daisies I now stand upon."

"Thou art right, and I am wrong," said Hadrada, pressing the hand of Cedric; "yet were any of yonder band of murderers to set foot on this shore to-night, the Valhalla of which thou hast spoken, if there are such

shambles, should open its dim doors before the dawn for a new-comer."

"Thy boast will yet be put to the proof, if my ear deceives me not," answered Cedric; "seest thou not how they are hurrying to and fro along the opposite shore? They have missed the chiule. Let no one show his head above the sedge. The first of the enemy that swims across, strike him dead, then he can tell no tales. But mark me, Hadrada, I saw noble countenances on yonder bank, that looked no more like murderers than my sweet sister Bertha. It was from the three ruffians who sat apart that I heard what I have made known to thee."

Natonleod crept on his hands and knees, where the steep embankment lay in deep shadow, and as there was an opening between the screen of willows, he kept a sharp look out on the movements of the enemy on the opposite shore.

The tall head of Hadrada was seen by the enemy, and the young wolf-hunters were soon aware, from the curses that came loud and deep along the river, and the splashing of the water, that more than one enemy was swimming across.

"It is too late to think of hiding ourselves now," said the excited young Dane, striding out to where the full moonlight lay clear and bright on the low level shore. "I can already count three who are coming up with the speed of a shoal of black porpoises, and it shall go hard with me if I do not send more than one to feed the hungry fishes before the morning star rises."

"Look to thy bolts and bow, Natonleod," said the young Saxon, "and as soon as ever thou seest one head within reach, shoot, and be sure thy aim is true."

"Were it but a water-hen," answered the Briton, "I should not miss her in this bright moonshine;" and as he spoke he drew his bow to full stretch, for the first swimmer was already within length of a bow-shot.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Attack — Courage of Cedric — Challenge of the Trumpets—The wounded Enemy—The Muster.

THERE were a few seconds of breathless silence, during which the young wolf-hunters could hear the very breathing of their hearts; so strong was every nerve, so compressed every lip, as if their very souls seemed to listen. But nothing was heard, saving the lapping of the tiny waves upon the shore; nothing seen, but a rippling and rising, as of boiling silver springing round a dark centre, where the strong swimmers struck through the water, and left a shining wake in the quivering moonlight.

Another moment, and there was a sound of deep breathing, and the pattering of soft feet on the grass. Then the deep bark of the Saxon wolf-hounds, Thor and Wolf, who had made their escape, and now reared up to fondle Cedric, each reaching to his face as they stood on their hind legs.

"In, Thor—in, Wolf!" exclaimed Cedric, pointing to where the swimmers were in sight. A bark, and a dash from the bank—a rising as of loosened silver in the moonlight, as the strong hounds cut the water and threw it up in their headlong plunge—and in a few more seconds commenced the struggle for very life.

At that self-same moment of time, a twang was heard from the cross-bow of Natonleod, and the bolt had shot, unerring as the arrow of Death, and lodged in the brain of one of the swimmers, who threw up his arms with a loud shriek, drifted along the current for a second or two, like a log of wood, and then was seen no more.

Meantime Wolf had seized the nearest swimmer by the throat, and both man and dog disappeared for a second or two under the water; when they arose the hound was uppermost, and the man appeared senseless when the dog landed him on the river-shore, where he remained for a time unnoticed.

The last of the three swimmers seemed the strongest, for when Thor approached him, he made a long stroke with his head down, and came with such force against the nose of the

wolf-hound, as made Thor shake his head, as if he didn't like it at all; but the enemy had hardly taken two more strokes, before the hound was on him, and its sharp teeth fastened in the nape of his neck. The weight of the powerful dog, who placed his fore paws on the man's shoulders, forced down his head, and, although he struggled with the wolf-hound until he felt the bottom with his feet, and was again able to breathe, it was but a brief respite, for the battle-axe of Hadrada came down upon him like a thunderbolt; there was a groan, a darker colour in the water where the young Dane stood, with clenched teeth and frowning brow, the lifeless body gave a turn as it was caught by the eddies, and was borne out a little way, then the silent water closed over it for ever.

Thor lay down panting on the shore, and watched the body disappear. No sooner was it gone than he was up and commenced barking, and at the same instant Wolf sprang up from beside the body over which he had been keeping guard, and commenced barking louder than his shaggy companion.

"We shall soon have more enemies ap-

proaching," exclaimed Cedric; "but thanks be to the saints for the aid of my staunch wolf-hounds; they will keep one or two at bay, if they do nothing more. I have seen thee draw thine arrow to the head, and hit the mark, Conmail; try what thou canst do now, as soon as another foe comes within bow-shot. As for thee, Natonleod, thy aim is sure. Were he the foul fiend himself, Hadrada, and he came near enough, I have no fear but what he would feel the weight of thy heavy battle-axe, and that thou wouldst send him off howling, as our brave-hearted Dunstan did, when he seized his nose with the red-hot tongs for intruding in his saintly smithy. As for myself, I will do what I can with my sharp spear. But remember, on no account must we retreat, unless overpowered by numbers—that if we leave our bones to whiten the shore, we shall have perished in a just cause, and that my sister Bertha's prayers and tears will consecrate the spot on which we fall."

He bowed his head for a moment, and breathed a prayer after he had spoken; then took his stand on the brink of the river, with Thor on one side of him, and Wolf on the

other—his sharp boar-spear poised ready in his hand, and the dagger which he wore in his girdle loosed in its sheath.

Between the pauses, when the willows on the shore gave a silvery shiver as they turned the white of their leaves to the moonlight when stirred by the night breeze, they could hear the voices of the soldiers on the opposite shore, and see, from the hurried movements of the figures, that some sudden measure was about to be adopted.

After a few moments the sound of a trumpet rang out, clear and shrill,

"Over the wide watery shore."

"That is the trumpet blast of a Saxon earl," said Cedric; "none of less title is allowed to sound those three sharp notes. And, hark! those last notes proclaim that he is on the king's business. We shall have my father here in a few minutes, for, by night or day, the warder has orders to rouse the earl whenever the trumpet sounds the royal summons, and to make answer to it without a moment's delay."

Cedric had scarcely ceased speaking before the trumpet-sound was answered by a long,

loud blast from his father's castle, which woke the echoes far and near, as it reverberated from bank to bank, until it seemed to die away, repeating itself as it dropped into the dim gray distance.

"A chiule will be sent across from the creek," said Cedric, "and I begin to fear it will go hard with us for this night's work unless I have an interview with the chief before he meets my father. You hasten off, all of you, and summon Hubba, Urien, and all the friends they can muster, while I swim across. It will be enough that I announce myself as Earl Ella's son. I fear, after all, my sister Bertha has misled us somehow; but I will make the best of it."

Without waiting for a reply, the young Saxon dashed into the river, and soon gained the opposite bank.

Natonleod and Hadrada hurried off to summon Urien and Hubba, and such friends as they could depend upon in the little burgh, while Conmail remained behind attending to the wounded Saxon, whose throat the wolf-hound had lacerated, and who had by this time shown signs of returning sensibility.

After a time, the wounded man, who lay groaning heavily under the sedgy embankment, pointed to where the broad river lay like a sheet of silver in the calm moonlight, then touched his lips as a signal for drink. Conmail took up a large empty shell, numbers of which were scattered about the river shore, and gave the wounded man water.

Few such shells are found now, saving deep down in the river bed when the dredgers are at work, for they were relics of an older period than that about which we are writing, and had lain there ages before a Roman eagle was reflected in our island seas.

The gray dawn began to dapple the east, as the chiule of Earl Ella shot out of the creek to fetch over the Saxon chief and his followers. The same cold, gray light also fell upon a score or more of sturdy Britons, Saxons, and Danes, who stood shoulder to shoulder, as if resolved to stand or fall together, whatever might betide.

Many a battleaxe, wolf-spear, bow and arrow, had been drawn out of the smoky recesses, where they were secreted by the owners, who to a man were ready to follow the aged Urien and Hubba to the death.

Natonleod and Hadrada looked with anxious eyes across the river, and wondered how matters stood with their brave comrade, Cedric.

They had agreed amongst themselves, before separating, to make no mention of the two men they had slain, unless driven to confess the fact. Not to have saved their lives would one of the four have uttered a falsehood; but they were too discreet to blab out a fact that was uncalled for, and which might bring down the same consequences on all alike.

But our story carries us across the river to Cedric and the Saxon chief.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Parley—Massacre of the Danes—Meeting of the two Saxon Earls—Purport of the King's Letter—Message to Swein, King of Denmark.

DRIPPING like a water-spaniel, but erect as a spear, Cedric landed on the opposite bank of the river, and addressing the Saxon chief, said, "I am the son of Earl Ella, and have come of mine own accord, to be the bearer of

any tidings you may wish to convey to my father. The flood-gates of the creek are closed, and it will be some little time before a chiule arrives, so I adopted our old Saxon adage, which says, 'Neither wait till the bridge is built nor the boat launched, but take the way of the swans, unless you can find a ford, when duty calls.'"

"Thou art a brave youth," answered the Saxon earl, with a smile, "and worthy of the name of the long line of chiefs from which thou hast descended. But my business is with the earl, thy father, and it is from him I am to receive my commands—for such are my instructions from the king. Had not our chiule either broken adrift, or been unmoored and carried off, perhaps, by three wretches, whom it was my intention to hang at sunrise, and on whom my followers kept not sharp guard enough, I should have been with the earl at moonrise."

"Might I ask what crime these three men have committed that you had doomed to death?" inquired Cedric, his heart a good deal lightened by the knowledge that the earl had beforehand sentenced them to be executed.

"I took them red-handed," answered the earl, "at a Danish village we passed, higher up the river, murdering helpless women and children. All the rest escaped, saving those three. They say they had the king's orders, under his seal, for what they did, and that their instructions were to place themselves under your father, after they had destroyed every man, woman, and child in the village. But for one of the three—who seemed to hate the bloody work I found him busy with—I would have hung them all there and then on the nearest oak, had he not shown me the token he was to present to the earl, your father."

"I see my way dimly to the terrible end," said Cedric, with a sigh; "my sister Bertha knows all. And you, Sir Earl, know not what your business was with my father?"

"No more than that I was to meet him to-night with my followers well armed," replied the earl, "and to place myself under his command, to execute some commission he had received from King Ethelred. In my own mind, I concluded it was some fresh invasion of the Danes I had to aid him against. What else could I surmise?"

"Would to heaven that that might be all," replied Cedric, mournfully. "But my father's chiule is near the shore. And, see, there is another dropping down the river, from which come sounds of low lament and moans of misery. The rowers are steering for the creek, and we shall soon know all. I fear the murderous hand hath been busy this accursed night."

"The letter the earl your father received from the king will explain all," said the Saxon chief, touching the shoulder of Cedric lightly, as the latter offered him assistance on entering the boat. The followers of Hubba and Urien had borne the wounded Saxon towards the castle or fortress of Earl Ella, for thitherward they had all hastened, as was their wont at the sound of the trumpet, in expectation of having to oppose some new incursion of the Danes, at that time no uncommon occurrence.

Meantime Earl Ella had taken his seat in the hall of audience, to which we have before introduced our readers, when Urien paid the tribute of wolves' heads.

When the Saxon earl, to whom Cedric introduced himself, landed from the chiule, which

had been sent by Ella, to ferry him and his followers across the river, the first object that arrested his eye was the wounded man whose throat the wolf-hound had lacerated.

"That is the man," said the earl of Wodensfield, — for such was his title, — addressing Cedric, "who bore the token he was to deliver to your father. Pray seek out a leech, and let him be cared for; his evidence may yet throw some light on this night's mysteries."

Cedric communicated Earl Wodensfield's commands to Urien, who was looked upon as the chief leech in the whole shire, and who promised, after examining the wounded man, that he would be hale enough to answer any questions that might be put to him within the course of an hour or so, as the man had been more frightened than hurt,—"nearer drowning," as the old man said, "than being worried to death."

Two other Saxon soldiers, who had made their escape at the time Earl Wodensfield came up and captured their three comrades, whose fate our readers are already familiar with,—the one the wolf-hound had wounded being the only one of the three remaining alive,—were waiting

for an interview with Earl Ella. One of these had the command of a small body of Saxon soldiers, and, therefore, bore what would now be called the king's commission.

This man, seeing Earl Wodensfield approach, beckoned to his companion, and they were among the first to enter the hall of audience.

Earl Ella sat in his chair of state, looking fidgetty, restless, and ill at ease. He had neither had time to get through his morning ablution, nor yet swallow his breakfast; and as the morning sun streamed in upon him, he yawned, rubbed his eyes, and looked much like a modern rake, who had been up all night, and was not at all fitted for the business of the morning.

But the first words uttered by the Saxon soldier, whose name was Siwold, woke the earl up thoroughly and in a moment, as the latter exclaimed, "In the name of my liege lord, Ethelred, king of all the Saxons, I demand that justice be done by you, Earl Ella, on the Earl Wodensfield, now present, who has this night attacked me, and slain several of my followers, while we were executing the king's commands, in accordance with the mandate you, Earl Ella, received from the king some

few months ago, and for which one of my men had the token—a gold coin broken at the centre of the cross—which to-night was to have been delivered into your own hands from the king, you having in possession the other half of the token."

"Token—letter from the king!" said Ella; "I remember the token well enough; but as for the letter, one of my wolf-hounds swallowed it before I was acquainted with a single line of its contents, as my daughter Bertha can testify. What was its purport?"

"That every Dane, man, woman, and child, was to be put to death to-night—this present feast of St. Brice—and not one left alive throughout the whole length and breadth of the land. Such were the commands I was executing when Earl Wodensfield attacked my followers."

The hall was by this time pretty well filled; and no sooner was this announcement made by Siwold, than loud yells and groans arose, mingled with cries of "Down with this cowardly king!" "To the death with this murderer of helpless women and children!"

"And all who execute his commands," ex-

claimed Hubba the Dane, uplifting his battle-axe, and cleaving Siwold from chine to chine on the spot. The man died without a groan, while a portion of his blood spurted out, and stained the robes of the Saxon Earl Ella.

"Thou hast but acted as I myself should have done, had King Ethelred himself stood in my presence," said Ella, "and confessed himself the cold-blooded murderer of helpless women and innocent children."

Then a great cry rose in the hall of "Long live Ella, earl of Saxilby," which was redoubled when Hubba mounted the step, and seized the Saxon earl by the hand, bidding God bless and preserve him.

"God is witness," exclaimed Ella, with deep emotion, "that had I been apprised of the contents of this cowardly king's letter, instead of fulfilling his commands I would have mustered every soul in the shire capable of bearing arms, and done battle against him, and thanked Heaven if I had had ten thousand Danes like Hubba at my back to have driven the royal murderer out of England. Bertha," he added, turning round to his daughter, who now stood pale as death by his side, "tell me, didst thou

read King Ethelred's letter, and is what thou hast now heard the truth?"

"It is, every word," answered the Saxon maiden, in a low voice, every syllable of which was heard, so still was the silence which at that moment reigned over the listening assembly.

"Then, on this side the grave, I will never draw seax in his cause again;" and Earl Ella took the short sword which had been presented to him by the king's own hand, broke it, and threw it on the floor of the hall.

"In the face of Heaven, I, Edwin earl of Wodensfield, vow the same vow, and will never more take up arms for Ethelred the murderer;" and the earl broke his short crooked seax as he spoke.

Just at that moment a wounded Danish chief entered the hall, who had landed from the chiule which was rowing in the direction of the creek, when Cedric and the earl of Wodensfield crossed the river.

"I have brought my murdered wife and children to your door, Earl Ella," exclaimed the excited chieftain; "their dumb wounds open, and with bloody lips cry aloud for revenge against this blood-thirsty king, and against all

who have this night murdered the sleeping and the innocent. We lived within a bow-shot of your friend the earl of Thurshire, who married the sister of Swein, king of Denmark. With my own eyes I saw her murdered, after they had first dragged her little son from her arms, and slain him before her face. I stood by, powerless to save, with my murdered wife and children lying at my feet. Cursed through all time will be the remembrance of the feast of St. Brice."*

Earl Ella buried his face in his hands unable to reply, and Bertha would have fallen head-

* "On the Feast of St. Brice, in the year 1002, this massacre took place; and the accounts of the ancient chroniclers state that nearly all the Danish families scattered throughout England, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, down to the smiling infant that pressed the nipple with its 'boneless gums,' were, within the space of a few brief hours, mercilessly butchered. For nearly five generations had the Danes been settled down in England. Yet we fear the king's savage mandate spared not even those whose forefathers had been born on the soil. Through the eye of imagination we look with horror upon such a scene. We picture near neighbours who had lived together for years—who had, when children, played together—who had grown up and intermarried, slain before each others faces, some looking on in mute pitiful horror, yet powerless to save!"

long down the steps of the raised dais, as she fainted away with horror, had not Hadrada rushed forward, and caught her in his arms.

"Let my swiftest chiule be manned instantly," said Earl Ella; "and you, Edwin, earl of Wodensfield, will sail with my commission to Swein, king of Denmark, as soon as the tide serves. Hubba and Urien—both of whom will forgive whatever I have done amiss—will find stout hearts to accompany you. As for myself, I will remain here and hold my own against this murderous king, should he approach my fortress. The wind is fair, and before many days the king of Denmark will arrive, and avenge the death of his sister and of all who have been murdered."

That night the ship was in the Humber, on its way to Denmark, with Hubba in command, and history tells how Swein arrived, conquered, and drove Ethelred out of England.

THE END.

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