A MAID AT KING ALFRED'S COURT

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Darleen Dove

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"'TWILL LULL THEE TO DREAMLESS REPOSE."

———

A MAID AT KING ALFRED'S COURT

A Story for Girls

By

LUCY FOSTER MADISON

Author of "A Maid of the First Century," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY IDA WAUGH

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———

"I bring, thy favor to attain,
King Alfred and his glorious reign.
No nobler hero could I bring
Than Britain's pure and gentle king.
Brighter than all, his spotless name
Shines on his country's scroll of fame.
A thousand years his bones are dust,
Yet men still name him as the Just.
A hundred kings have ruled his state,
Yet him alone she names—The Great.
To him, her noblest praise she sings,
As mightiest of her mighty kings."

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CHAPTER I—THE MEETING IN THE FOREST

Beautiful was the month of October in the year of our Lord 877. That part of merrie England called Wessex was covered, in this ancient time with a vast and extensive wood.

Only where the broad estuary of Southampton Water divided the tangled woodland, and along the river Itchen, was there any break in the forest. Formidable were the wastes of Andred's weald, and fortunate the traveler whose path lay not apart from the public roads.

Hundreds of wide-spreading, broad-headed oak trees covered the hills and valleys, and flung their gnarled branches over the rich grassy sward beneath. Intermingled with these, sometimes so closely as to hide the rays of the sun, were beeches, hollies, and copsewood of various descriptions.

The great trees were girt round about with mosses or wreaths of ivy that betokened their age, and their foliage was bright with the hues of autumn.

The leaves were falling, but through the openings thus made wider vistas of beauty were revealed. The rich burnished bronze of the oak mingled with the blazing orange of the beech. The gray branches of the graceful ash contrasted with the fir—stately daughter of autumn.

The sunshine streaming through the trees caught and intensified the vivid colorings. Red of many degrees, up to the gaudiest scarlet; every tint of yellow, from the wan gold of the primrose to the deep orange of the tiger lily; purple from lightest lilac to the darkest shade of the pansy, mingled and intermingled, until the whole forest seemed one mass of glowing, riotous color. Ever and anon the antlers of a deer might have been seen as he moved restlessly through the wold, and in the nearer glades the hares and conies came stealing forth to sport or to feed.

In the distance the mellow blasts of a horn could be heard, which grew nearer and more near until presently on the high road which wound through the wastes of forest land from Silchester to Winchester (or Winteceaster, as it was then called) appeared the forms of two people, an old man and a girl.

They moved slowly, the maiden accommodating her steps to those of her companion. Though not really old, for he was not much more than sixty, both the man's countenance and carriage indicated age. His complexion was fair and his cheeks ruddy; but his visage was deeply furrowed, and his long hair, which escaped from under his bonnet, was white as snow, as was also his large and forked beard. His dark blue woolen mantle was clasped on the shoulder by a broad ouche, or brooch; his leggins were also of blue woolen, cross-gartered by strips of leather. Blue, too, was the under tunic. His right arm encircled a harp.

The girl who accompanied him was somewhere about the age of fourteen. Her form was enveloped in a mantle of scarlet wool, to which was attached a hood of the same material. The face under the hood was wondrously lovely, and had already gained her the appellation of "The Fair."

"Grandfather, dearest," she cried as she beheld a log which lay under the overhanging branches of a large oak, "see! here is rest for thy weariness. I wot that thou art tired."

"Yes, child. The limbs of the old tire quickly, and alack! I am not so young as I was of yore. The way hath seemed long to-day, and we are yet far from Winchester. Prithee, wind the horn no longer, for I weary of its sound; and truly

if there be any within hearing, they must know of our coming."

He sat down as he spake, resting his harp on his knee. The maiden let fall the horn that proclaimed their coming, according to the law of the forest, threw back her hood, unfastened the fibula that closed the mantle, and tossed the garment on the log beside the old man. Thus revealed, she stood forth in all her beauty.

Her long yellow hair, bound only by a golden band, was parted smoothly and hung in ringlets on her shoulders. Her complexion was dazzling in its fairness; her cheeks rosy; her eyes sparkling, and blue as periwinkles. She wore a tunic of blue woolen, falling to her ankles, and bordered by a band of needlework, for which the Anglo-Saxon women were famous. Over this was worn a short gonna of scarlet, the sleeves of which, reaching in long, loose folds to the wrists, were confined there by bracelets. The slenderness of her waist was disclosed by a girdle, and over her shoulders hung a chain, from which was suspended a pair of cymbals and the horn. A picturesque figure she made as she stood there, and one fair to look upon. The old man's eyes rested upon her fondly, and then he spake:

"Art thou not cold, Egwina? The Wyn (October) month hath bright sunshine, but his breezes carry also the chill that foretokens the coming of winter. Heaven forfend that thou shouldst become ill."

The girl laughed merrily.

"Be not irked, grandfather. The mantle was wearisome, and I did but cast it aside for a time. See! Lest thou shouldst needlessly fret thy mind, I will put on the garment again, and thou shalt tell me whither we go after Winchester."

Donning the mantle she sat down beside him. The grandfather looked at her tenderly.

"Egwina The Fair art thou called," said he, "but Egwina The Good art thou also. From Winchester, dear child, and its market, we will wend our way to the royal vill at Chippenham, where the king is to winter."

"Why to Chippenham?" asked the girl. "It is not often, grandfather, that thou carest to follow the king."

"True, child; for Alfred hath scops of his own in his court, and needeth not the glee of Wulfhere, the harper. But even as yon oak hath gathered the moss of years, so have sorrows come to me, and fain am I to lay down their burthen. Of bards there are many; but few glee maidens there be who sing as thou dost. For thy sake do I hope that the king will take us under his hand."

"But if he will not, then whither?" asked the maiden.

"He will," answered Wulfhere positively. "The meanest wayfarer hath the right to bed and board for a day and a night in any house. Thinkest, then, that Alfred will not give shelter and food to a gleeman and maiden? I trow that he

will."

"Will not the court be hindrance to thee?" questioned the girl gently. "Dear grandfather, thou hast been so free always, I fear me much that thou wilt mislike to be housed with one lord."

"Were he younger, child, Wulfhere would have nought of it. I, and my father, and his father's father have always thus lived, wandering from shire to shire; from burgh to burgh; from mead hall to mead hall, with harp and song and story; and none were so welcome as they. Many lords have bestowed gifts upon them, and fain would have kept them to sing of their bold deeds. But all of us, from father to son, liked better to tell of the daring of many than the prowess of one. The song of a harp of one string becometh in time irksome both to hearer and singer. In sooth, 'tis a merry life and a free. Alack and a day that 'tis past! The Dane is abroad in the land. For a short time hath he left us in quiet, and now winter will still further stay his hand. Guthrum the old is bold, and I fear that the Northmen await only the bringing home of the summer ere falling upon Wessex."

"The saints forfend!" ejaculated the girl devoutly.

"So it is for thy weal, Egwina, that we seek the king. I would not have thee die as did thy brother, Siegbert. God wots how they could kill the pretty lad."

"Tell me of it," coaxed the maiden well knowing the tale, but thus did the old man ease his sorrow.

"Thou wert too young to mind thee now that it was seven years this harvest when Ubbo and Oskitul with the tearful Danes fell upon the abbey of Croyland. To the monks had I sent Siegbert, for the abbot had heard his singing and was pleased with his beauty. 'He shall be a second Cynewulf,' said he, 'when he shall have become learned.' I wotted not that I was sending the boy to his death. But even while the abbot and the priests, together with the choir, performed the mass and were singing the Psalter, the pagans swooped down upon them, and none were there left to tell the tale. So little do these heathen care for our holy religion. In sooth, meseems that it glads their hearts to destroy our minsters and abbeys. They cared neither for the helplessness of the old nor the harmlessness of childhood. Bright and beautiful as that Baldur whom they worship, methinks they would have spared him. But hearken! was not that a call?"

Both listened intently, and through the clear, crisp air there came a cry for help.

"Some mishap hath befallen a wayfarer!" exclaimed Wulfhere rising quickly to his feet, his weariness vanishing instantly. "Come, Egwina, wind thy horn that he may know that help is near."

The maiden blew a long, loud blast and then they hastened in the direction whence the cry had come. Soon a turn of the road brought them in sight of

the figures of a youth and a maiden. The girl was lying prone upon the sward. The youth bent over her anxiously stroking her hands. Both were clothed in the bright-colored garments of which the Saxons were so fond. The embroidery and richness of adornment of their dress proclaimed them to be of noble rank. A falcon hovered disconsolately near them, and a spear lay on the ground.

As soon as the lad caught sight of Wulfhere and Egwina, he uttered an exclamation of joy.

"Be of good heart, Ethelfleda," he cried; "here comes a gleeman and his daughter. I wot that they will help us."

"Son, wherefore thy call?" queried the bard, approaching.

"My sister hath wrenched her foot against a stone," replied the youth. "We stole away to try my new falcon with the lure, and all would have been well had not this befallen us. Wilt thou not, good harper, hasten into Winchester and bespeak for us a palfrey?"

"Edward," spoke the maiden quickly, "seest thou not that the gleeman is old? Do thou go, my brother, and leave me with them."

"Truly hast thou spoken, Ethelfleda," returned the youth, rising. "I crave forgiveness, bard, that I saw not thy years. Quickly will I go and as quickly come again. Irk not thyself while I am gone, my sister." With a bow to Wulfhere and Egwina, and a salute for his sister the youth hurried away.

"I hear the ripling of a rill," remarked Egwina. "Cooling will its waters feel to thy foot."

"But how canst thou bring the water?" asked the maiden, curiously. "Thou hast no bowl either of horn or wood."

"Nay; but I have these," and Egwina touched her cymbals. "Though they be shallow, yet enough will they hold for thy ankle."

She unloosened the shoe of the maiden as she spoke and removed the silken leggins, marveling much at their richness as she did so.

"There!" she said, after she had laved the foot in the cold water. "Doth it not feel better!"

"It doth," answered the maiden; "so well that methinks I can stand upon it. How Edward will wonder!"

"Do not so!" ejaculated Wulfhere, but the girl was up before he had spoken. Only for a moment, however. She reeled, and would have fallen had not the gleeman caught her.

"Thou wert o'er rash," he chided, gently stroking her brow while Egwina fetched more water and again bathed the ankle. The maiden was white from the pain, but she bravely repressed the moans that rose to her lips.

"Witless was I," she murmured. "Now will I lie still until help comes. O'er rashness is as bad, I ween, as not enough boldness."

"True," said Wulfhere. "Thou art young, maiden, and fearless is thy spirit. Thou hast yet to learn that valor is not all in the doing of brave deeds. To bear well is also valorous."

"Methinks that thou dost speak truly," she returned. "Thou needst bathe the foot no longer, maiden, for now doth it feel better. Wilt thou not, ministrel, out of thy good pleasure beguile the time by story?"

"What likest thou best to hear?" asked he, well pleased, for the scop delighted in his art.

"Of the deeds of our forefathers," she replied, quickly. "Well do I love to hear of them."

"Then will I tell thee of how Hengist gained the land for his castle. Hast heard it?"

"Nay; say on."

"After Hengist had driven the Picts back to the marches," began Wulfhere, "he came to Vortigern the king, and asked for a city or town that he might be held in the same honor that he was held among his own countrymen; but Vortigern answered that he could not, as it would be displeasing to his people. 'Then,' said Hengist, 'give me only so much ground as I can encircle by a leather thong.' To this Vortigern readily yielded, disdaining that which could be enclosed within a thong. Hengist, taking a bull's hide, made one thong of the whole, with which he did encircle much ground, so that he built a fortress upon it, to which he could go should need require. Vortigern was wroth at being so outwitted, but Hengist called the strong place Thancastre," which is to say "Thong Castle."

Ethelfleda laughed.

"Of merry humor was Hengist," she said. "It is pleasing to hear such things! Wittest thou aught else of him?"

"Wottest thou, maiden, how Vortigern was taken captive by Rowena?"

"Yea; but even as wine groweth better by standing, so do old tales gather wit in oft telling. Say on."

"When Hengist had made an end of building his strong place he bade Vortigern come to see it. The king was disquieted at the strength of the castle, and, unknown to Hengist, sought to list the men to himself. When they had feasted and the mead glowed in the bowl, Rowena, daughter of Hengist, came forth from her bower bearing a golden cup full of wine which, kneeling, she presented to the king. 'Lord king,' she cried, 'wacht heil!' 'What doth she mean?' asked the king of Hengist. 'She but offers to drink thy health,' was the answer. 'Thou shouldst say, 'Drink heil!'' The king did as he was told, and when the maiden drank kissed her, and then drank also. Then so stirred was he by her beauty that he gave to Hengist all of Kent for her hand. Thus through a maiden did the Saxons first get a share of Britain for their own."

"Quotha! that is good!" exclaimed Ethelfleda. "I thought not of that before, and full oft have I heard the tale. Pleasing are thy stories! I would hear more of them. Tell on, harper."

Thus entreated, Wulfhere told his choicest tales of folklore and legends, and so well was the maiden entertained that the time did not seem long until Edward returned with attendants and a palfrey for her use.

"Kind have ye been to me," said the noble damsel, "and much do I thank ye for it. Prithee take this ring, maiden. It is not only a ward against the wiles of the wicca (witch), but betokeneth purity also. Take it to keep thee in mind of Ethelfleda."

When she had thus spoken, her brother lifted her before him on the palfrey, and with many thanks for their courtesy, rode off with their servitors.

"Sawest thou, granther, how rich were their garments?" asked Egwina when the turn in the road hid them from their sight.

"Yea; they are gentlefolk," answered Wulfhere. "Of good blood comes the maiden for she moaned not but bore well the pain of the wrench, though she was white from the hurt of it."

"And the youth! How proud in bearing he was!"

"Yea; noble was his port. Yet methinks it would have been more seemly to have given us the name of their father. Now we wot not who or what they be save that they be gentle. Marry! I misdoubt not that the father is a thegn. Mayhap, one of the king's."

"But how kind of heart the maiden was!" mused Egwina. "How beautiful the ring which she gave me!" She looked at it admiringly.

"It is a sapphire, and of great worth," said the gleeman examining it. "Now, child, let us hasten to Winchester there to find some mead hall; for where there is wassail, there is welcome for the gleeman. Hasten, Egwina."

The two started off at a brisk walk, and were soon lost to view in the forest.

CHAPTER II—WINCHESTER

Under Æthelwulf, Alfred's father, Winchester had become the chief city of England; for while the other kingdoms went down before the Northern pirates, Wessex still stood its ground. It was farther off from the main points of attack, and

had the incalculable advantage of a succession of capable kings: Egbert, Æthelwulf, and—at the time of our story—Alfred.

As the Danish invasion pressed more and more, Wessex grew to be the champion of all the other kingdoms of England. For the ruin of the north made it the sole remaining home of the civilized life of the land. Happily for Wessex and for England, the greatest of English kings succeeded to the throne at the most critical moment.

The six years that Alfred had sat upon the throne had been troubled and restless. During the first year, nine pitched battles were fought with the Danes. Then Alfred was forced to pay to the Northmen money for peace, for the invaders occupied all of Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia, and the West Saxons, deeming the struggle hopeless, and fearful of being brought under their rule, responded no longer to the call to battle.

For a short time Wessex was left undisturbed. During this interval the indefatigable Alfred builded ships and met the pirates upon the sea, defeating them on their own element. In 876 the peace was broken with that facility which characterized the breaking of Danish oaths, and it was not until the beginning of the year 877, the time of our story, that peace was again restored.

In that forest, before spoken of, just beyond a circular chalk down later called St. Catherine's hill—where the valley was at the narrowest and the downs sloped gently to the little river of Ichen, stood Winchester. In the time of the Roman, a main thoroughfare, still the High Street of the city, bisected it from East Gate to West Gate. At right angles with that street ran a main intersecting road from South Gate to North Gate. The West Saxon kings did but follow the lead of the Roman in retaining this division of the town, and, up the rising ground towards the west on either side of the ancient Roman road from the eastward gate, the houses of the citizens were clustered into a street; with here and there a stone-built dwelling, and the rest of "wattle and dab" construction. In the southeastern part of the town stood the minster of St. Swithen strongly inclosed, and protected on the north by the river and marsh lands. Near this convent stood the royal vill, from which place emanated all those plans against the encroachments of the Danes, the school of justice and learning, and the bulwark of England's defense. Near the palace were the dwellings of the bishop and his clergy; the residence of the wicgerefa, which was near the site of the courts of justice, and in the centre of the town was the market with its cross.

The day after the one on which the events narrated in the last chapter had taken place, a busy scene was presented in the market. Merchandise of all sorts was exposed for sale. Stalwart Saxons, called reeves, with the badge of the king's authority upon them, had charge of the steelyards, yard measures, and bushels, and were kept busy weighing and measuring that each might receive his just due,

and the sale be legal according to the doom of the land. It was the endeavor on the part of the authorities to confine all bargaining as much as possible to towns and walled places, so that the people might be assured of fair dealing, and a warranty of what the Saxon laws called unlying witnesses.

Yet not all the citizens were occupied in trade, nor was all the market given up to traffic. On one side, quite away from the stalls, two circular spaces were set apart; one for bear, the other for bull baiting. Closer to the stalls, yet not so near as to detract from the business of the mart, some gleemen were exercising their art. One dexterous juggler threw three knives and three balls alternately in the air, catching them one by one as they fell.

Another, a short distance from the juggler, was gravely leading a great bear to dance on its hind legs, while his coadjutor kept time on the flageolet. Around each of these amusements was gathered the crowd that in every clime or age such things attract.

The merriment was at its height when from the upper end of the market appeared two figures that quietly stationed themselves near one of the stalls. It was Egwina and her grandfather. During a momentary lull the old gleeman struck his harp, and together he and his grandchild lifted up their voices in song.

The excellence of the music, for Wulfhere was a skillful harper, the sweetness of the song, and above all the wonderful beauty of the maiden, drew all eyes in that direction. There was a murmur of approval, and the crowd surged toward them, and gathered round the two, leaving the coarser attractions of baiting and juggling for the more refined ones of melody and beauty.

"Marry!" ejaculated the juggler in disgust as he found himself forsaken. "'Twere unmannerly thus to make one forego his craft."

"Be not disheartened, friend," said he with the dancing bear as he chained the animal, and quietly stretched himself out on some straw. "Fickle is the mind of man. Make use of thy leisure while thou mayst. 'Twill be but a short time ere they will come again."

"Quotha! but the gifts will be showered upon the maiden. And, fair though she be, Ælfric would gather them to his own hoard." And he gazed moodily at the crowd which surrounded the harper and the maiden.

Song followed song in quick succession, for the Saxons loved to hear of the brave deeds of the heroes of old, until at last Wulfhere declared himself unable to sing longer, and, laden with gifts, the two slowly wended their way from the city. Vainly did the juggler await the return of an audience. The balls and knives seemed to have lost their charm for the people, and, muttering anathemas upon the ministrel and his daughter, he, too, left Winchester, but in disgust.

"Well have we done, Egwina," said Wulfhere, pausing when they were some little distance from the town, to conceal the gold and other gifts about his person.

"Truly, Winchester is worthily called the first city of the Saxons. Kingly hath it proven itself to be. Were it not that I fear the Dane, beshrew me if I would ask aught better than to dwell therein."

"But why could we not, grandfather? Then might it be that we could behold again the youth and the maiden whom we met in the forest. Didst thou see aught of them?"

"No, child; and let not thy heart dwell upon them. Not long are nobles mindful of their words. Whilst thou may be in favor to-day, the morrow doth full oft bring unkindness."

"But the maiden, Ethelfleda, her brother called her, seemed not like one to forget," and Egwina twirled the sapphire ring upon her finger. "She spake as though there were truth and well-meaning in her words."

"And so there were for the time," answered Wulfhere; "but well-a-day! she is young, and the young learn easily the lesson of forgetfulness."

"Why could we not live in Winchester?" asked the girl after a moment's silence. "Methinks that we could find some thegn to take us under his mund. Why, grandfather, is not that the city where the king abideth?"

She stopped short, and half turned as though to return to the town. Wulfhere smiled.

"The king hath already sought the palace at Chippenham," he said. "Wottest thou not that by the doom of the witan he cannot dwell all the year in one burgh only? And I wish not to seek the protection of any lord but him in these troublesome times. Alfred hath shown himself able to cope with the invader, and there is surety nowhere else for life and limb. 'Tis for thy weal, child, that I fear, and to none but him will I commend thee. Besides, to whom but the king doth the protection of the wanderer belong?"

Egwina turned with a half sigh, for deep down in her heart lurked the wish to see again the noble maiden and the youth who had spoken so kindly to them the day before, and in leaving Winchester she felt that she left also the probability of seeing them once more. But unquestioned obedience from child to parent was the rule in those days, and so without further remark she trudged on, varying the monotony of the journey by frequent blasts of the horn. Presently the mellow notes of another horn floated to their ears. Wulfhere glanced back over his shoulder.

"Behold, another cometh," he said. "Stop, Egwina! If he choose to bear us company, the way will not seem so long."

They waited for him, and soon the juggler came up with them.

"Whither away, my merry man?" cried Wulfhere heartily, as the gleeman approached. "Brothers we be of the same craft. Therefore, if it seems good to thee, let us bear each other company."

The juggler hesitated a moment, and then answered:

"Willing am I for a short while at least; if it so be that the girl will wind the horn while thou and I talk by the way."

"With right good-will will she do so," answered the harper. "'Tis as easily wound for three as for two, and always doth she wind it to save me the toil. Wulfhere is not what he once was!"

"Wulfhere is thy name?" questioned the other, fixing his glittering eyes upon the maiden with such a look that she shrank from it, and crept close to the side of her grandsire. "Ælfric am I called in East Anglia, which is my home; but the Danes have driven us from our houses, or pressed into slavery our people, and I fled into Wessex for safety."

"Brothers we be in craft, and sibbe also in the fact that we flee from the Dane," remarked Wulfhere. "Fearful is the pirate who hath so ruthlessly destroyed the homes and laid waste the land of our people."

"Whither art thou going?" queried Ælfric.

"North into Berkshire and from thence into Wiltshire," answered the old man.

"Then together can we journey but a short distance, for on the morrow our paths must be sundered, as I go into Kent. But while our roads are one tell me of the deeds which the Northmen have done of which thou thyself wottest, and I in turn will tell thee that which hath happened to me."

Then, with emotion, did Wulfhere tell of his grief in the death of his grandson, Siegbert.

"And I," said Ælfric, after he had expressed his sympathy, "abode in Thetford of East Anglia at the house of Eldred the thegn, and was the chief of his gleemen. None was so honored as I, and the heart of my lord clave unto me with love. Alack! the Northman fell upon us, and I wot not whether my lord be living or dead. I fled from the foe. When I was far distant, I looked back, and behold the manor was in flames."

"Didst thou not fight for thy lord?" queried Wulfhere in amazement.

"Nay; why should I risk life in vain? Naught would it have availed him. I myself would have been slain, so I fled."

"It was not the old custom," remarked the elder Saxon, "thus to abandon one's lord. 'Twere shame to live were he slain."

"Times are not as they once were," returned Ælfric hastily, avoiding the glance of the harper. "Custom hath changed, and, I trow, for the better. Beautiful is thy ring, maiden! Where gottest thou it?"

"'Twas a gift," returned Egwina, as she allowed the man to examine the jewel, shrinking from his touch as she did so, for she liked not his appearance.

"A gift? I'll warrant that thou and thy grandfather have many such?" And

there was envy and avarice in the juggler's look.

"There be many—" began Egwina, when Wulfhere interrupted her:

"Wind thy horn, child, a little distance from us that our talk be not disturbed by the sound."

Obediently the girl ran ahead a little, and Wulfhere resumed the conversation with Ælfric concerning the atrocities committed by the Danes. The shades of evening were falling when at last the ministrel called to the girl:

"Child, is not that a monastery that looms in the distance?"

"Yes, granther," and Egwina ran to his side.

"Then there will we abide. Long have we wayfared, and wearied am I by the journey. Though the priests may not hearken to song, or story, or glee-beam, yet will they shelter us for the night."

Quickening their steps they entered the courtyard of the convent, which was a low building of timber, fortified by a wall.

The dwellings of the Anglo-Saxons with the exception of a few great nobles, were simple in the extreme. Yet simple as were their abodes, the monasteries were handsome, and great wealth and possessions were held by the church. Despite all this, learning was at the very lowest ebb, so much so that when Alfred was atheling, and desired to learn Latin, he could find no one in all his father's kingdom capable of teaching him. There were no inns in England at this time, and all travelers, whether on business or pleasure, were entertained by the convents.

Wulfhere, Ælfric, and Egwina were welcomed by the monks and refreshed by the bath, for the Saxons were a cleanly people, and fond of bathing; then were they called into a long, low hall, the refectory or dining-room, and invited to partake of supper. Cakes of barley, fish, swine flesh, milk, eggs, and cheese, with plenty of mead to wash it down, constituted the repast; for even the priests of this hardy race were hearty eaters and fond of good cheer.

The meat was passed round on spits, and each one cut a portion for himself with his knife, and then ate it, using the fingers to convey the food to the mouth, as there were no forks.

After the meal, all gathered round the fire which was built in the centre of the room, the smoke escaping through a hole or cover in the roof.

"It is forbidden us to listen to the songs of the people," said the abbot addressing Wulfhere, "but mayhap thou canst sing to us the songs of the Church."

"Nay, good father," answered Wulfhere, "I am not skilled in sacred song."

"Cannot thy daughter sing them?" asked the abbot. "Truly it were ill if so fair a flower should know naught of the songs of the Faith."

"I know not," replied Wulfhere in perplexity.

"There is one that I know," interrupted Egwina, softly. "It was one that my mother sang."

"Let us hear it, daughter," said the abbot.

Without hesitation, Egwina then sang the "Crist" of Cynewulf.

"It was well sung," commented the abbot, after Egwina had concluded. "Sweet is it to Him when the voice of youth sounds His praises. Knowest thou no more, my child?"

"Nay, I know none other," answered Egwina.

"Thou must not think ill of us, father," spoke the harper hastily, "that we wot not of these things. Our aim is to please the people, and the mead hall cares but for the song of the warrior or of glory."

"True," answered the abbot, "yet Aldhelm used thy art to advantage. Hast thou not heard how the good priest stood on the bridge of Malmesbury, where the ministrels were wont to stand, because the people would not come to worship, and there did he sing of war and the heroes, until attracted by the sweetness of his voice, he had gained their attention? Then did he change the words, and sing to them of the Holy One and the blessed Virgin. In which manner many were instructed in our sacred religion and brought to the Church."

"Sayest thou so, good father?" broke in Ælfric, the juggler. "Marry! but well would it please me to hear such songs! Canst thou or thy monks sing for us any of the songs that he sang?"

"There is one, brother, which is food for reflection. That we will sing thee, and then after the Te Deum. Then shall ye tell us if aught hath happened recently from the Dane."

Without further ado, the monks began singing the following dismal dirge, the brief metre sounding abruptly on the ear with a measured stroke like the passing bell:

"For thee was a house built ere thou wert born,
For thee was a mold shapen ere thou of thy mother camest.
Its height is not determined, nor its depth measured;
Nor is it closed up, however long it may be, until I thee bring where
thou shalt remain;
Until I shall measure thee, and the sod of the earth.
Thy house is not highly built; it is not unhigh and low.
When thou art in it, the heel ways are low, the side ways unhigh.
The roof is built thy breast full high;
So thou shalt in earth dwell full cold, dim, and dark.
Doorless is that house, and dark it is within.
There thou art fast detained, and Death holds the key.
Loathly is that earth house, and grim to dwell in.
There thou shalt dwell, and worms shall share thee.

Thus thou art laid, and leavest thy friends.
Thou hast no friend that will come to thee,
Who will ever inquire how that house liketh thee.
Who shall ever open for thee the door, and seek thee;
For soon thou becomest loathly and hateful to look upon."

"The saints guard us!" ejaculated Ælfric, crossing himself devoutly. "I like not thy song, father, and if it were with songs like that, it marvels me much how thy Aldhelm should draw the people to hear him. Quotha! my flesh creepeth to think of it! Doth not thine, Friend Harper?"

Wulfhere's face was inscrutable, and he made no reply for, Saxon-like, he scorned to show that the picture held any dread for him.

"It is indeed gloomy to think upon, son," said the abbot, "if that were all of death; but the religion of our Saviour hath robbed the grave of its terrors. We know that the soul is beyond, and what matters the body?"

"A truce to such talk," cried Ælfric. "Give us the Te Deum, priest. I like not to think on such things."

"It shall be as thou wishest, though much I mislike to leave the subject as I perceive that thou art ungodly."

Then all joined in the sublime, unmetrical Te Deum.

"Did thy priest but sing that," burst from the juggler, "I would wonder not at the people listening to him."

The abbot smiled, well pleased.

"Thy heart is not altogether hardened, son, if it be touched by the hymn," he said. "Mayhap thou wilt be willing yet to talk with me."

After more singing, the conversation turned upon the Danes, and the probability of a fresh outbreak discussed. The hour was late when the abbot, noting that Egwina's eyes were heavy and that it was with difficulty she kept awake, arose.

"To bed! to bed! See ye not that the maiden is aweary?"

So saying he conducted them to the guest house, a building in the courtyard but without the convent proper, and soon quiet reigned over the monastery.

CHAPTER III—A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Soft and downy was the bed in the bower chamber to which Egwina had been assigned, and grateful was it to the weary maiden, who was soon fast asleep.

It seemed to her that she had slept but a short time when something awakened her. She lay quite still trying to determine what it could be, and hearing only the soughing of the wind.

Suddenly, she felt her hand taken softly, and the sapphire ring which Ethelfleda had given her was gently withdrawn from her finger. For a moment the girl thought that she must be dreaming, and quickly clasped her right hand over the left. The ring was in truth gone. She grew numb with fear as the fact dawned upon her. There was a thief in the room.

Her heart almost stopped its beating, and then began to throb fast. Was it one of the monks? No, no; they were too good, too kind for that! It must be, it was Ælfric the juggler, who had joined them on their journey. Had he not looked covetously upon the jewel? At this moment she heard the thief moving quietly toward the door. The sound broke the spell that held her. It was too dark for her to see anything, but she sprang from the bed shrieking:

"Grandfather! grandfather! Awake! awake!"

There was a muttered ejaculation from the intruder. He turned, bounded back toward her and felled her, with a blow; then, as Wulfhere ran into the room, dashed from the house.

"Egwina! Egwina!" called the harper in alarm. "What is it? What hath befallen thee?"

There was no response, and in trying to reach the couch, he stumbled over the body of the girl.

"My child! My child!" broke from his lips in agonized accents as he recognized Egwina's form by the feel of her garments and hair. "What hath happened to thee, little one?"

Still there came no reply, and almost crazed by the darkness and the silence, Wulfhere ran across the courtyard and began to pound with all his might upon the portals of the convent, calling upon the abbot as he did so.

"What hath happened?" cried the abbot from within in response to the clamor. "Why rouse ye reverend men from needed slumber?"

"Because," cried Wulfhere, frantically, "something hath befallen my child. I know not what evil hath been wrought, but only that she lieth dead or in a swoon. For the love of heaven, good father, open unto me!"

There was a rattle of chains, and then the door swung back, and the old man was surrounded by the monks.

"What is it, son?" demanded the abbot.

"I know not," cried Wulfhere, "save only that Egwina cried out to me in terror. Now lies she there, and whether she be quick or dead I wot not. Come!"

The abbot was quick to act.

"A leech and herbs," he commanded. Without further parley, he ran rapidly with Wulfhere to the guest-house, the monks following.

Egwina still lay unconscious on the floor. The abbot and Wulfhere stroked her hands while the leech applied various restoratives. Soon the maiden showed signs of returning consciousness, and the leech gave her a drink which he prepared from the herbs. In a short time she had so far recovered as to be able to tell her story.

"And see, granther," she concluded, "the ring that the maiden gave me hath been taken."

Wulfhere uttered an exclamation as a sudden thought struck him, and he sprang to his feet. "Ælfric! Where is Ælfric?"

Several of the monks started in search of him, but no juggler could be found.

"'Tis he who hath done this!" cried Wulfhere.

"Hast thou lost aught of other treasure?" asked the abbot. "If his purpose were robbery, methinks that he would have deprived thee also of booty."

Wulfhere drew from under his tunic the pouch that he always carried strapped about his waist, and from it took a bag.

"By the bones of the holy Cuthbert," he exclaimed, "it is empty!"

And so, indeed, it proved. The gold, silver, and copper coins, and gems which had been given him, were all gone. With a groan the old man let the bag fall to the floor.

"Courage, man!" cried the abbot. "Thou hast not time to moan. Already hath the first cock crowed for sun-rising. 'Twill be but a short time ere morning dawns, and then we will seek the niddering. We will loose the hounds upon his track, and though he have a few hours the best of us, natheless we shall o'ertake him."

So, in the early morning, Wulfhere and a small party of monks on palfreys set forth from the convent. Hounds of the best English breed so famed at this time were let loose upon the trail. It was not until late in the afternoon that the man-hunt was brought to a close.

Then the hounds gathered round some alders in which Ælfric lay concealed. He was soon dislodged from his covert, and, seeing that resistance was useless, suffered himself to be led back to the monastery.

"Brother," said Wulfhere to him, more in sorrow than in anger, "I knew not before that a gleeman would deal with another as a pagan might." But Ælfric answered not a word.

A report of the matter was laid before the sciregerefa, the reeve or sheriff of the county, and Wulfhere, Egwina, the abbot, and such of the monks that knew of the affair, were summoned before him.

In the presence of this man, the bishop, and the ealdorman, Wulfhere accused the juggler of the theft.

"In the Lord," said he, "do I urge this accusation with full right, and without fiction, deceit, or any fraud; so from me was stolen the gold and gems which my craft had brought me, and of this do I complain. Also from my granddaughter was taken a ring. These things were found again with Ælfric the juggler."

Then the gerefa proceeded to examine the several persons. Ælfric looked upon Egwina with aversion as the maiden gave her simple account of the loss of her ring and the subsequent occurrences.

"I know no more," concluded she, "for when I called aloud to my grandfather, the man did strike me, and I fell into a swound."

"And this is the man?" inquired the gerefa. "Marry! Is it thus that a Saxon demeans himself?"

"Nay," said Egwina, sweetly, "I would not take oath that it was he, good gerefa; for it was dark, and I could not see. Mayhap he meant only to affright me."

The gerefa, the ealdorman, and even the bishop smiled at this artless attempt to shield the fellow.

"He doth not deserve thy pity, maiden," said the sheriff gently. "I misdoubt not that he is the man sith the booty was found upon him. Thou needst say no more."

Egwina sat down by her grandfather while the abbot and the monks deposed. Then the reeve turned to the juggler:

"Ælfric, by these witnesses thou hast been proven to have taken the ring belonging to the maiden, and the coin and gems of the bard. Hast thou aught to answer for thyself? Why didst thou this thing? Is it not enow for the Northmen to pillage our people that they must prey upon each other?"

Ælfric was silent for a moment, and then raised his head defiantly.

"Naught can be gained by saying that I did it not, for ye have proved it. Ælfric did rob the old man of his gold, and the girl of her ring. Will ye know why? They were mine by right. Ye have dooms by which a man must pay bot if he wrong his neighbor by theft or feud; but no weregeld must he pay that takes from another his trade. Yet is not that an injury? This then have the scop and the maiden done to me: 'twas in the market at Winchester that I played with my balls and knives. The people cried up the act for they were pleased. Then, before it was time for the giving of the gifts, did this harper and his daughter come. They sang, and the throng left me. Have they not robbed me? I took that which was mine own. Had they but waited until the distribution of gifts, naught would have befallen them. I have said."

He sat down as he spake, and a silence fell upon the company. Such a plea

was unusual. There was a puzzled look upon the faces of the ealdorman and the bishop. Soon the gerefa spake:

"Natheless, Ælfric, the mulct must be paid. Little did the harper and his daughter reck that they took gifts from thee. It was but a whim of fortune, and doth not condone thy fault. Thou knowest the doom. Canst pay thy weregeld?"

Ælfric shook his head sullenly.

"Then hast thou kindred who will pay it for thee?"

But the juggler clasped his hands.

"There is none," cried he, "that is sibbe to me. Do to me as ye will for none is there to pay the bot."

"If thou canst not pay thy weregeld," said the reeve, "and there is no man to pay it for thee, then must thou become a wite theow according to the doom; for thus doth it read: 'If anyone through conviction of theft forfeit his freedom, and deliver himself up and his kindred forsake him, and he know not who shall make bot for him; let him then be worthy of theowe-work which thereunto appertaineth; and let the were abate from his kindred.' Thus shalt thou be given unto a lord for his theow, and if any there be who choose to redeem thee, then let him come forward before the year hath passed; else serfdom must be thy portion for life."

The juggler advanced and laying down his sword and his spear, symbols of the free, took up the bill and the goad, the implements of slavery, and falling on his knees placed his head under the hand of the gerefa.

"Oh!" cried Egwina pityingly, her eyes full of tears. "A theowe! Nay, granther, it must not be! Prithee, give to the reeve the weregeld. I would not that he be made a wite through us. Is he not a gleeman?"

"True;" answered Wulfhere, "and a Saxon also. It is just. He hath committed a crime against the doom of the land; according to the doom let him be judged. Come, child, put on thy ring again, and let us be going. Too long have we tarried already with the good monks. The Wind month cometh on apace, and ere it wanes, I would be in Alfred's vill. Come!"

He arose as he spake, but, moved by an irresistible impulse, Egwina sprang to the side of Ælfric.

"Sorry am I and grieved," she said, gently laying her hand on his arm, "that we have brought thee to this pass. Take heart! It may be that grandfather will let me have some of the gifts, and if so I will send them to thee to pay thy were. We knew not in the market that thou hadst received no gifts."

But Ælfric shook her hand from his arm roughly, and turned on her with hate in his eyes.

"Thinkest thou that thy father alone could have taken them from me? No; it is thou that art to blame! Had it not been for thy fair face Ælfric would have

received his gifts. Wulfhere is old! No longer hath he power to charm by his harp and voice, so he uses thy beauty to drive a better man from the field. Wulfhere did it not! It is thou who hath done this!"

Egwina shrank back affrighted. Wulfhere strode forward, his face white with passion.

"What! Tauntest thou a girl? It is best for thy weal an thou art a theow else Wulfhere would make thee pay thy weregeld twice over. Wulfhere may have lost his power as harper, but strong yet is his right arm and mighty its stroke."

"Marry, son," interposed the abbot. "Be not wroth with such as he! Thou demeanest thyself."

"True;" said the harper recovering himself, "what hath Wulfhere to do with a niddering?"

At that term of reproach which no Saxon could hear unmoved, Ælfric sprang forward, his face convulsed with rage, his hand upraised. The gerefa and the abbot seized him before the blow fell.

"Niddering?" he shrieked. "Ælfric niddering! As ye be Saxons let me at him!"

But they would not, and, as they led him away, he called back in a loud voice:

"By all the saints, I swear that Ælfric shall be revenged. As I am now so shall ye be! Look to yourselves, Wulfhere, and thou, daughter of Wulfhere! For every hour spent as theow, ye shall have double. For every task assigned, two shall be your portion. The rod and the lash shall not be wanting. I swear it! Lead on; I have spoken!"

Egwina paled and trembled at the words, but the old man laughed.

"Heed him not," he said. "Doth not the beast growl when foiled? What harm can befall us if we are in the king's hand? Come!"

CHAPTER IV—IN THE HALL OF ALFRED

Wulfhere and Egwina journeyed slowly northward over Hampshire, into Berkshire, and thence into Wiltshire, so that it was not until the sixth day of the Wolf

month that they arrived at Chippenham.

The landscape was dreary and barren. The wind howled dismally through the branches of the leafless trees. The sedge by the river was silvered over by heavy rime and the frosted flag rushes seemed to cut like swords. The gray clouds hung low in the dull leaden sky until the summits of the hills in the distance were lost among them. The wide-open moors and hedgeless commons showed no sign of any living thing on their desolate wastes.

Without the gates of the city all was chill and drear, but within the sounds of music and revelry could be heard on every hand; for it was the twelfth night, and the feast of the Epiphany. For twelve days the yule log had blazed on every hearth, and as soon as the last of its embers died out life must again take on its work-a-day aspect. So loud rang the mirth and hearty the feast of the last of the holy festival.

Chippenham held one of the strongest of the royal residences. A long, low irregular building, it still towered above the other dwellings of the burgh. It was brilliantly lighted, for night was fast approaching when the wayfarers entered the gates, and Wulfhere and Egwina immediately made their way to it.

A dense throng of poor people waited without the hall for the remnants of the banquet which was going on within. Pushing their way through them, the two paused just outside the portals.

"Now, child," commanded Wulfhere, "sing as thou hast never sung before. 'Tis Alfred the king who hears thee."

And with his own nerves tingling, Wulfhere swept the strings of his harp, and they sang softly and tenderly an old ballad. The noise and the glee within ceased with the first few notes of the melody. The sweetness of the girl's clear soprano blended with the deep bass of the bard, making a pleasing harmony. When they had finished the strain, the portals were flung wide, and the voice of the warder called in ringing tones:

"Now who be ye that bring such music from the harp?"

"Wulfhere, the Gleeman, with his daughter, Egwina the Fair."

"Enter, Wulfhere, with thy daughter; and for our good cheer give us of thy melody. I wot that none of Alfred's harpers hath such power of the harp. Enter and welcome!"

Well pleased, the bard and the maiden entered. The hall was a long room whose length was disproportionate to its width, and whose vaulted roof was blackened by the smoke of the fire which burned in its centre. In the upper end was a dais raised a step above the rest of the building. The walls were covered by silken hangings richly embroidered, which served the double purpose of ornamentation and to keep the wind out. For in those days so illy built were even the palaces of the kings that the candles were ofttimes extinguished by the gusts

of air which came through the cracks and crevices of the buildings.

Three long tables were ranged down the length of the apartment, filled with Alfred's gesiths or retainers. In the centre of each table was a large boar's head with an apple in its mouth. The room was decked with evergreens, conspicuous among them being the mistletoe, to which a traditionary superstition attached.

The floor was covered with rushes and sweet herbs, and a number of dogs lay thereon close to the great fire, watching greedily for some chance tidbit, if any there were so unmannerly as to throw to them. Upon the dais stood an oval-shaped table handsomely carved, above which was a canopy of richly embroidered cloth.

Around this table, reserved for the king's family and guests of honor, were gathered two ladies and three small children, one boy and two girls. The king's chair was empty. Behind the ladies stood two youths and a maiden of high rank, who served them with napkins and mead, and with a start of surprise, Egwina saw that the maiden was Ethelfleda and that one of the youths was her brother.

The tables were laden with gold and silver plate, and each person had a knife with a jeweled hilt. Pages served the meat on spits, kneeling, and occasionally passed bowls of water in which the fingers were dipped before drying them on the napkins.

Wulfhere and Egwina were given seats in the lower end of the hall among the other harpers, scops, bards, and gleemen. At their entrance every eye was turned inquiringly toward them. The reeve who had the feast in charge hastened to them.

"Thy music hath enchanted the household. Prithee delight us again. The feast is deepening."

Nothing loth, Wulfhere complied readily; then, as the song was finished, without waiting for further request, his fingers swept the strings and he half sang, half recited, improvising as he went:

"Here Alfred of the West Saxons king, the giver of the bracelets of the nobles,
A lasting glory won by slaughter in battle, with the edges of swords at Ashdown.
The wall of shields he cleaved, the noble banners he hewed;
Pursuing, he destroyed the Danish people.
The field was colored with the warrior's blood.
After that—the sun on high—the greatest star
Glided over the earth, God's candle bright!
Till the noble creature hastened to her setting.
There lay soldiers many with darts struck down,

Northern men over their shields shot.
So were the Danes weary of ruddy battles.
The screamers of war he left behind; the raven to enjoy,
The dismal kite, and the black raven with horned beak, and the hoarse toad;
The eagle afterwards to feast on the white flesh;
The greedy battle hawk, and the gray beast, the wolf in the wood.
He has marched with his bloody sword, and the raven has followed him.
Furiously hath he fought, and the Northmen fear his presence.
Then did the Dane seek his fleet.
And they sang as they coursed gayly along the track of the swans:
'Not here can the Great one harm us.
The force of the storm is a help to the arms of our rowers;
The hurricane is in our service;
It carries us the way we would go.'
Then arose the king in his wisdom. Alfred, great of understanding!
He the wise builder of ships! The giver of laws, the bestower of bracelets!
He spake, and the timbers took shape.
Then did the raven shriek on the waters.
Red ran the blood of the Northman, as the Dragon of Wessex pursued him.
Great, great are the deeds of Alfred! The wonder and glory of men!"

Thunderous applause broke forth from the retainers that shook the very rafters. Wulfhere sat down upon the settle, and glanced toward the dais from which there now advanced the royal cup-bearer.

"Later will the king grace the feast by his presence," he said. "And then, O minstrel, shalt thou receive fitting guerdon for thy words. Drink hael to Elswitha, the lady" (the correct designation of the queens of that time was "The Lady") "who sends thee cheer from her own table and in her own cup."

He presented the cup, a golden goblet, to Wulfhere as he spoke. The old man flushed with delight.

"Wass-hael," responded he, as he took the cup. "Wass-hael to the Lady Elswitha."

"She bids thee welcome, thou and the maiden, and wishes ye also to sing for her in her bower later. Meanwhile, partake of the glee and mingle as of our own household among us."

So saying he returned to his own station on the dais.

"Granther," whispered Egwina as the youth left, "seest thou not that the maiden, Ethelfleda, serveth the lady Elswitha? The youth also is on the dais."

"It may be, child," answered Wulfhere. "They are guests, likely. Methought they were gentles. But didst thou see, Egwina, that the lady hath sent her own cup? Fortune hath favored us in sooth."

The girl looked at the cup as he wished, but ever and anon stole glances toward the dais where were the youth and the maiden. At this moment from one of the settles where sat the minstrels, a voice exclaimed:

"Tell me, ye wise ones, what is winter?"

"Tell us, Witlaf," shouted the reeve. "Expect not wisdom at a feast."

"It is the banishment of summer," answered the minstrel.

"Good, good! Another! Give us another."

"What is spring? The painter of the earth. What is the year? The world's chariot. What is the sun? Quotha! Doltish are ye if none can answer."

"The splendor of the world, the beauty of heaven, the grace of nature, the honor of day, the distributer of the hours," spoke up Wulfhere. "Now thou, whom they have called Witlaf, answer this: What is the sea?"

Witlaf thought for a moment ere he replied, "The path of audacity, the boundary of the earth, the receptacle of the rivers, the fountain of showers."

"Right!" exclaimed the old bard, his spirits high, his blood coursing warmly through his veins, for it was scenes of this kind that he loved. "Right, sir bard! Now prithee read me this riddle. An unknown person, without tongue or voice spoke to me, who never existed before, nor has existed since, nor ever will be again, and whom I neither heard nor knew."

But Witlaf shook his head.

"Thou wilt have to unravel it thyself," he said, "I know not that."

"It is a dream," answered Wulfhere, and again the rafters shook with applause.

"Now, wanderer, read this for me if thou canst. It is a wonder. I saw a man standing; a dead man walking who never existed," quoth Witlaf.

"It is an image in the water," replied Wulfhere quickly.

"He hath thee, Witlaf," came from the board in a merry shout. "Thou hast met thy match."

"Nay; here is another," cried Witlaf on his mettle. "I wot that there be few men that can unravel this: I saw the dead produce the living, and by the living the dead were consumed."

Wulfhere smiled as sagely and answered:

"From the friction of trees fire was produced, which consumed."

So, fast and furious grew the fun, every minstrel or bard contributing his quota to the mirth; Witlaf and Wulfhere leading, each striving to outdo the other.

The feast thickened, and mead, pigment, and morat circled round the board, and the tongue of the Saxon was unloosened. Then did the harp pass from hand to hand and each sang. Even the nobles at the king's board lifted up their voices in song. Again the cup-bearer approached the place where the minstrels sat.

"The lady Elswitha wishes to know if thy daughter sings not alone?" said he, addressing the bard. "Hath she not some simple lay that will charm the ear?"

"She hath," answered the gleeman, "and gracious is the lady in the asking. Egwina, Elswitha would hear thee sing. Thy sweetest, child! 'Tis the Lady who asks thee."

Then timidly the maiden arose. The company hushed the noisy revel, and listened as the sweet voice of the girl sounded through the hall. Her voice quavered slightly when she began, but the maiden on the dais smiled reassuringly at her, and she took courage. It grew stronger and then pealed forth in all its strength and beauty:

"Alone sits the exile,
Alone on the plain;
And the voice of the south wind
Speaks to him in vain.

"For back hath his fancy
Flown to his lord;
When oft he had followed him
With arrow and sword.

"Again does he seem to feel
As of old his caresses;
The thought is so sweet to him.
The awakening distresses.

"No friends hath he now,
Nor lord for to follow;
Long have they been estranged,
Life seem but hollow.

"Naught doth earth hold for him;
No surcease of sorrow:
For hunger of heartache
Fails comfort to borrow.

"Cold, cold is his earth dwelling,
Care sits on his brow;
Joyless his dark abode,
Bereft is he now.

"Those he hath loved in life
The tomb now is holding;
Fain would he join them there
For rest he is needing."

The sad little strain produced a few moments of silence, and then again, after vociferous plaudits for the maiden, the uproar broke forth. As Egwina sat down, the maiden Ethelfleda descended from the dais, and came to her.

"Thou art the maiden and this is thy father who were so kind to me in Andred's Weald," she said, taking Egwina by the hand. "Often have I wondered about thee, and hoped to see thee again. Now thou shalt stay with me, and thou shalt, if thou wilt, teach me some of thy pretty songs. Sweetly dost thou sing, but it hath made my heart sad to hear thy little plaint."

"An it please thee, maiden, she shall sing another, merrier and more suited to the feast," interposed Wulfhere, "I know not why the child chose so sad a theme."[SYNC]

"It doth please me," said Ethelfleda. "But come! Before thou dost sing again, thou shalt drink hael with the lady Elswitha." To the old man's joy he saw his granddaughter led to the dais where Alfred's wife sat.

The lady graciously arose to receive the girl. With her own hand she proffered the cup. Just as Egwina was lifting the goblet to her lips, a great noise was heard without. There was the crash of arms, the hoarse shout of battle, and then the portals were flung wide, and the warder shouted:

"The Dane, the Dane!"

CHAPTER V—THE DEATH OF A HERO

Instantly the wildest confusion prevailed. The Saxons, half-dazed by the suddenness of the attack, sprang for their arms which hung upon the walls of the hall. Such a thing as a winter campaign had hitherto been unknown, and they were taken completely by surprise.

Before they could collect themselves or form any plan for defense, the Norsemen were upon them, and then there followed an awful scene of carnage. The clash of steel, the hoarse shouts and cries of the Saxons, the shrieks and groans of the women, mingled with the exultant yells of the Danes. High above all, rose the Norse battle song which contained a covert sneer at the English religion:

"We have sung the mass of the lances.
It began at sunrise, and lo! the bright star hath gone to her rest,
And the orison is not completed.
Odin awaits us in Valhalla!
The perennial boar steams upon the festive board!
Hela, the death goddess, gnashes her teeth that we escape her!
The kite and the raven scream with joy at the feast!
Red runs the blood!
Fearful the carnage!
Guthrum the old hath destroyed the great one.
The black Raven with pointed beak
Hath subdued the Dragon of Wessex."

On and on it went while the sharp-edged swords did their work. The Saxons made a brave but ineffectual resistance. On every side they fell. The tables were overturned in the strife, and mead and pigment mingled with the blood of those who such a short time before quaffed the cup so gayly.

Through the struggling combatants, Wulfhere made his way somehow to the upper end of the hall where Egwina, Ethelfleda, Elswitha, the lady's mother, Eadburga, the two youths and the little ones were huddled together, terrified at the sudden onslaught.

"Thou must not stay here," he cried to the Lady Elswitha. "It is no place for thee, or these others."

A thegn darted to them at this moment.

"Retire," he shouted. "Retire, Lady, to thy bower."

"Retire!" exclaimed the lady, "and leave my lord's hearthstone to the invader?"

"Thou must," cried the thegn in anguish. "For the love of the Holy Mary, seek thy bower. We must answer to the king for thy safety."

Without further remonstrance, the lady turned to flee with her children. It was none too soon. The Northmen pressed furiously toward that end of the hall. The few remaining Saxons threw themselves between the terrible Danes and their beloved lady.

"Go, lads," commanded the same thegn who had before spoken, pushing the youths who lingered towards the fleeing group; "ye can do naught here, and your duty lies there. Go!" and the boys obeyed him.

As quickly as possible the little party made its way into the bower and barricaded the entrance behind them.

"Now what?" asked the lady of Wulfhere.

"We must not stay here," answered he. "After the slaughter comes the flame. The Dane will apply the torch as is his wont. Let us to the king."

"The king! Alack!" Elswitha cried in sudden terror. "Where is he? I fear, oh, I fear that he hath fallen into the hands of Guthrum."

"Where went he?" asked Wulfhere.

"To Malmesbury to determine the limits of some bocland. Were he living, he would have been here ere this. Oh, I fear, I fear!"

Moaning, she drew her little ones to her while the others looked at her compassionately. At this moment a mighty shout rose from without the castle walls.

"The king! The king!"

The clash of steel, the shouts and cries which now broke forth with renewed vigor, showed that the king had indeed come. Elswitha sprang to her feet, her face transfigured with joy.

"God be praised!" she cried. "It is my lord. Now, my children, ye are in sooth safe. O thank God! Thank God!"

But even as she spoke, the door fell inward with a crash, and the Northmen burst into the room. Wulfhere drew his seax, and threw himself in front of the women and children. The youths—Edward and the cup-bearer—ranged themselves beside him.

"Minstrel, sheathe thy sword," cried the foremost of the Danes. "Arms and battle are not for thee. It is thine to sing the praises of warriors. Sheathe thy sword."

"I will, an it please thee, in thy body," answered Wulfhere. He made a lunge, and the Dane fell pierced through the heart.

The others sprang toward him, but the youths received those in the fore on their swords. Then rose the voice of Guthrum, King of the Danes, and it rang through the hall:

"Whoso brings me the head of Alfred the King, him will I hold dearer than a brother, and great shall be his reward."

The Northmen turned and ran back towards the hall, shouting as they did so:

"Safe enow art thou, minstrel. Later will our swords drink of thy blood."

Elswitha started up frantically. "Come," she cried. "Let us to Alfred. There only is safety."

"Thou art right. Let us be gone ere others of the pagans come," said the bard. "Do ye," to the youths, "lead, and let the women follow. I will bring up the rear."

The two boys went before. Elswitha and Eadburga came next with the three children. Egwina and Ethelfleda followed, while Wulfhere guarded the rear. Out into the night they went. The wind which had arisen, moaned and sobbed as though bewailing the strife. The din without the castle was fearful. The wailing of women and children mingled with the clash of swords and the cries of battle. Citizens ran to and fro, whither they knew not, seeking loved ones or refuge from the Danes. The darkness of the night was broken only by the torchlights which flitted hither and thither, or were suddenly extinguished as the bearers fell pierced by sword or arrow.

Hesitating only for a moment, the boys turned in the direction of the sound of the conflict. They had gone but a short distance, when there was a great shout, and the Saxons—warriors, citizens, women and children—went flying past them.

"Fly, men of Wessex," they cried as they ran. "Fly, and save yourselves!"

It was impossible to stem the living current. The little party was obliged to turn and go with the surging, seething mass of humanity.

And now the torch was applied to finish the awful work. Soon the ruddy flames leaped high in the air, lighting up the sky with a lurid glare, and bathing the landscape in a crimson glow.

A wail went up from the fleeing Saxons, for they knew that the light was from their dwellings, and that they were homeless. Full of anguish they redoubled their speed, and ran on, breathless and in terror, for the cries in the rear showed that the Northmen were still in pursuit; still slaying those who were unfortunate enough to fall into their hands.

In every direction ran the fugitives. It was cold, for it was midwinter; but though the chill wind pierced to the very marrow, the people thought only of life for themselves and dear ones, and heeded it not. The terror-stricken inhabitants of the villages into which they fled could afford them no asylum for they knew that but a few short hours must elapse ere they would suffer a like fate. So they, too, joined the fugitives and the crowd became a multitude.

At first our little band had no difficulty in keeping together, but as the numbers were increased, they pressed closer one to another, and called aloud frequently.

It was just the hour before the dawn, when the flames of the burning villages had died down and a thick darkness had settled over the earth, that a cry went up from those in front that the Danes were coming from that direction also. Panic-stricken, the throng knew not which way to turn. They became confused in the darkness and made a sudden dash in opposite directions, shouting and crying as they did so. The party was swept asunder by the rush.

Egwina called frantically to Ethelfleda, but the noise was so great that she could scarcely hear the sound of her own voice. Carried onward by the crowd, she did not know where she was going, or if the Danes had really fallen upon them.

At last morning dawned. With the rising of the sun—the distributor of God's blessed light—the stricken people revived somewhat from their terrors which the darkness had augmented, and proceeded more quietly. Now, too, each began to search for his relatives. To the girl's joy, her grandfather was soon found.

"Dost know what became of the others?" he inquired.

"No, granther. The maiden was carried from my side when the shout went up that the Danes were coming. Alack! where can they be?"

"I wot not," answered Wulfhere moodily. "I fear, child, that this is the end. None know whether Alfred be fallen or taken prisoner. If either be true naught is left for us but loss of life or slavery."

With the morning the people scattered into the different villages in search of rest and sustenance. Wulfhere and Egwina did likewise. As they were resting in the thatched cottage of a ceorl, there came through the village one riding hotly on a palfrey. He bore an arrow in one hand and a naked sword in the other. When he reached the centre of the hamlet he stopped and called in a loud voice:

"What, ho, Saxons! Listen to the words of the king. Alfred would have aid against the Dane. Let every man that is not niddering, whether in a town or out of a town, leave his house and come."

Never before had the old national proclamation, which no Saxon capable of bearing arms had ever resisted, been published to such deaf ears. Wulfhere sprang up with a shout: "God be praised! The king lives!"

But the mass of the people responded not but murmured among themselves that resistance was useless. If they submitted, they would be allowed to till the soil, and to live in their homes even as their brethren in Mercia and East Anglia were doing; while opposition meant death, loss of homes and loved ones.

So the message fell upon deaf ears, and the messenger swept on to other villages with the summons. Wulfhere's shout met no answering one of gladness. The old man sat down amazed and despairing.

"What hath become of the spirit of the Saxons?" he asked fiercely. "Now

shall we be conquered by the Dane, even as our forefathers conquered the Britons. The Saxons serfs? Out, I say! To what have the descendents of Woden fallen that they should submit without a blow to the pagan?"

"Friend," spoke a ceorl near by, "have a care to thy words. The land hath been ravaged by the invader for years. No rest can be obtained either by resistance or by gifts and money. We are weary of strife. Serfdom and life are better than freedom and death. Marry, let us have peace!"

"Come, Egwina," and Wulfhere rose, his form dilated, his lip curled with scorn. "Theowes already be these men. I would be no more among them. Come!"

Obediently the girl followed him. There were some mutterings from those who heard his words, but they were allowed to depart without molestation. They had not gone far from the village when they saw in the distance a party of Danes approaching on horseback. As the Danes caught sight of the man and the maiden, they spurred their horses and came up to the two on a run.

"A scald and a scald maiden," cried they in delight. "Now let song and dance be our portion. Weary are we of the fray. Let us have song."

They flung themselves from their palfreys and surrounded the two. Egwina shrank close to her grandfather.

"No song, even for thy life, girl," commanded the old man sternly.

"Strike up, old scald! Is thy harp mute that thou dost not sweep it?" spoke the leader.

"A song! A song in praise of Guthrum! Guthrum the bold!"

But Wulfhere folded his arms across his harp and remained silent.

"Silent art thou?" demanded he who seemed to be the chief.

"'Tis fear that whitens his face and makes his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth," laughed a youth mockingly.

"Haco, take the harp," commanded the jarl. "Do thou sing for us. Then will the old man be stirred to obey. He seems to forget that we war not against gleemen."

The youth stepped toward Wulfhere and reached out his hand for the instrument. Still silent, the bard drew his seax and cut the strings with one blow.

"What!" cried the chief in fury. "What doest thou?"

"No harp of mine shall sing in praise of Guthrum," responded Wulfhere sternly.

"But thy tongue shall," declared the other. "Sing, scald, else it shall be torn from the roof of thy mouth, and never shalt thou lift thy voice in praise of any other."

"Rather than it should sing in praise of the Northmen I would tear it out myself," declared the bard with energy.

"Bold art thou," cried the leader, "or it may be that thou believest that we

will be niggardly with our gifts. See! Hath the Saxon done so well?"

He tore from his arms some massive gold bracelets which were held in great esteem by the Danes, and cast them at the ministrel's feet. The gleeman thrust them aside contemptuously with his foot.

"I scorn both your gifts and your threats," he cried. "But listen! Ye shall hear a song."

Believing that he was really intimidated despite his words, the Danes stayed their hands and composed themselves to listen, well knowing that there was time enough to avenge the insult to their gifts. Then Wulfhere drew Egwina back from them a little and began:

"What shall the minstrel sing by the fireside?
What hero shall he laud to the young?
When the nights have grown cold and chill whistles the wind in the tree tops,
Close gather they to the fireside.
Then call they for the harper.
He sings, and he sings of the Northman.
Great was the feast of the raven
When Guthrum swept over the land.
Wild shrieked the kite and the eagle;
And hoarse croaked the toad that was horned
Up rose the Dragon of Wessex!
Up then rose the Deliverer!
Up rose Alfred the wise one!
Maker of ships and of laws!
Guthrum and Danes floe before him!
Guthrum the old and the aged!
Guthrum in fear of the great one!"

With cries of fury the Danes set upon him. Wulfhere received the onslaught with a grim smile, and lunging at the nearest one, chanted on:

"Fast flee the Norseman before him.
Stark fall they upon their bucklers!
Under the clash of the steel of Alfred.
Alfred, the great one! The wise one!
Maker of ships and of—"

He fell, pierced through and through by their swords.

"Grandfather!" shrieked Egwina, flinging herself down beside him. "Grandfather, speak to me!"

And Wulfhere opening his eyes, smiled, and chanted in a loud voice: "Maker of ships and of laws!" and expired.

With a cry of anguish the girl fell unconscious on the body.

CHAPTER VI—THE WOLVES' CONCERT

When Egwina recovered consciousness, two priests were bending over her. The Danes were gone, and only the pitying faces of the presbyters were in sight. Half dazed, she stared at them stupidly, and then, as her eyes fell upon the body of Wulfhere, the remembrance of what had happened returned with full force.

"Granther! Oh, granther!" she sobbed. One of the priests leaned over her, and lifted her up gently.

"Daughter, be comforted. He is at rest. No longer is he beset by Dane or foe of any kind. Calm thy grief, and be with us while we give him Christian burial. Our time is short, and we know not how soon the pagans will return. That thou wert left alive is a mercy of God."

Egwina controlled herself by a great effort. The priests, taking turns, dug a grave with Wulfhere's seax. Then they approached the remains. With loving hands, the maiden herself re-arranged the garments of the dead man, taking the bag of valuables from his person.

"Take this for the soul sceat," she said, giving it into the hands of the priests.

"But, daughter, it is too much," and the priests looked at each other, wondering at the amount. "Keep part for thine own use."

"I want it not," answered she, weeping softly. "Let it bring him as many prayers as it will, good fathers."

Reverently the body was laid within the excavation, and then Egwina brought his harp.

"Bury it with him," she said.

"Nay, daughter; it savors too much of heathenism," said one much scandalized. "Do not the pagans so, and the bard was a Christian?"

"True," said the girl through her tears. "True, good fathers, but granther loved it so. I could not bear that other than he should use it. And if it so be, as ye tell us, that we will sing praises in the heavenly land then will he have need of it."

The priests were touched, yet still they hesitated. It savored so much of the heathenish custom of the Danes they were loth to consent to the act; yet did they mislike to deprive the maiden of this small comfort.

"See," said the girl showing them the mutilated strings. "When they would have taken it from him to use it in praise of Guthrum, he cut the strings rather than have it so defiled. If the harp be left, we wot not but that some of the Northmen may find it and use it. Grandfather could not rest if that were to happen. Always it hath been with him. It was his friend, his glee-beam. I know that he will be lonely without it."

"Brother," said one to the other, "what sayest thou?"

"Do as the child wisheth," replied the second one. "It will comfort her, and doth not bewray the church at such a time. Besides 'twere pity that the Northman should get the harp sith the bard hath given his life so nobly."

So, to Egwina's relief, the harp was interred with the gleeman. Prayers were said over the grave, and then the priests turned to the girl.

"Now, daughter, respect hath been shown to the dead, and now is our duty to the living. Whither goest thou? Where are thy friends?"

"Alack!" returned she, bravely checking her tears, "I wot not. None but granther did I have."

"But were ye not under some lord's hand?"

"Nay, ye know the custom of the wandering gleemen. From mead hall to mead hall did we go, and we have always done so. At Chippenham, we came to put ourselves under the hand of the king for fear of the Danes; but now—"

"Now," said the elder priest, "thou art like others of people and priests. No friends, no home; thou hast nowhere to go. God help and comfort thee and us in our affliction."

"We would best take her to the abbess Hilda at the priory," said the second one.

"Yea; we will take her there, brother, though thou wottest that it may not be safe for the maiden. Even Christ's altar is not safe from the defilement of these pagans. Methinks they are fiercer towards priests and monks, and ravage the churches and convents with greater fury than elsewhere, if that be possible where no mercy is shown to any. But eat and drink, child. Thou art weary."

For Egwina suddenly felt spent and faint. A sense of forlornness that she was unable to control was taking possession of her.

"I feel no desire for food, holy father," she said weakly.

"Natheless thou must eat, daughter. Keep up thy heart. Be not troubled or concerned for thyself. Thou art in God's hands. Whatever he sends is for the best. Eat these."

He took from the pouch which he carried under his chasuble some barley cakes, and Egwina ate of them obediently. When she had finished they took up their staffs, and declared themselves ready to take her to the priory. Thus did they journey.

It was late in the day when the priests joyously announced to the maiden that there was but little further to go.

"Then shalt thou find peace and rest for thy weariness, child," said they comfortingly to her.

But as they drew near to the building, their ears were greeted with cries and screams of terror.

"The Northmen!" ejaculated the priests with pale faces. "Stay thou here, daughter, while we see if aught can be done."

They went forward, leaving Egwina in the copse. Time passed. The priests did not return, and finally, unable to endure the suspense longer, the girl crept forward.

In an open glade of the forest stood the priory. Egwina's terror-stricken eyes saw naught but the forms of the slaughtered nuns whose bodies lay everywhere in the courtyard, and even beyond it. In front of the gates were the corpses of her two late companions—the priests.

A party of the Northmen were busied in carrying out the treasures of the priory ere setting fire to the building. The girl gazed on the scene with horror. Was there no safety, no retreat from these barbarians anywhere? Her blood congealed in her veins. A numbness of despair crept over her. Forgetting that she might be heard, a gasping cry escaped her lips. Some of the Danes paused in their work to listen.

"Heard ye not a sound?" asked one.

"'Twas naught," responded another impassively, as he placed some golden vessels on the ground. "Didst thou think that a nun had escaped? By Odin, no! Careful were we that not one should live to say mass."

"Many masses have we sung under Guthrum," laughed another. "But a short time and no priest, monk, or nun shall be left of all the English. Joyously doth the death cry of such fall upon my ear. No music is sweeter than the prayer that priest or nun utter at the point of the sword."

The conversation roused the girl from the stupor into which she was falling. With an effort she shook off the lethargy that was numbing her faculties, and stole away into the wold. When out of hearing of the Norsemen, she broke into a run, and did not stop until forced by sheer exhaustion to do so.

Deep into the wood had she penetrated. There was no sound save the sighing of the wind through the leafless boughs. Where should she go? What should she do? She knew not. On every side was the Dane. No safe shelter was to be found in hut or abbey, even if she had known where to go to find either. In the wold lurked the wild beasts, and the chill of the winter. Death was on every hand. If not from the Dane, then from cold or brute of the forest.

In agony of mind she buried her face in her hands and groaned aloud.

The sun set and the twilight threw among the trees long, dark shadows that caused the girl to cower in fear.

"Blessed Heaven aid me," was her agonized appeal, "for I know not what to do."

Even as she strove to find comfort in prayer there sounded upon the air the dismal howl of a wolf. It was answered by another and then another until the whole forest resounded with their yells.

Egwina bounded to her feet, her heart beating wildly, her eyes dilated with terror. Now she could hear the soft pat, pat of their feet as they came closer, and soon the bushes round about seemed filled with a thousand gleaming eyes. With an energy born of despair, the girl began to climb the tree under which she had been crouching.

It was an oak with low-spreading branches. Into these she clambered and ensconced herself on one of the boughs. It was not a moment too soon. Snarling and howling, emboldened by the shadow of the deepening twilight, a whole pack bounded into the space under the tree. The girl clung desperately to the bough, watching in terror the attempts of the animals to reach her, and shuddering at the glare of their ferocious eyes.

[image]

SHE BEGAN STRIKING THE CYMBALS TOGETHER.

One, bolder than the rest, made a great spring and narrowly escaped touching one of the lower branches.

Egwina started with fear and the start jarred the cymbals that were attached to the chain worn across her shoulder and breast. The instruments gave forth a musical sound. Instantly the tumult below ceased. The wolves fell back and looked up inquiringly. Hope arose in the girl's heart.

Passing one of her arms around the branch to keep herself from falling, she grasped the cymbals and began striking them together. The effect was magical. The animals settled themselves on their haunches to enjoy the music.

Never had she performed to so attentive an audience and never had she done so well. On and on she played until her arms ached, and she would fain have stopped but that at the least cessation of the music the wolves began their leaping and snarling again.

It grew darker and darker. The shadowy outlines of their bodies became indistinct and at last melted into the darkness, and only the fiery gleam of their eyes told the girl that they were still below.

Would she be obliged to pass the night thus? she asked herself. Could she hold out until morning, or would she become so wearied that she would finally lose her hold and fall into that savage pack? Resolutely she put such thoughts from her, for they took the courage out of her heart and sapped the strength of her body.

How long she played she did not know, but after what seemed to her a very long time she heard the winding of a horn drawing near. Presently through the woods came the flickering glow of torches.

With a cry of gladness Egwina called loudly:

"For the love of Heaven, who ever ye be, succor me, I pray you."

"What have we here?" shouted a voice in reply, and a man ran forward. "Where are ye that called?"

"Here, here!" cried the girl joyfully. "In the tree."

The wolves, as the music ceased, began howling again, and, as a party of men with dogs dashed among them, attacking them with clubs, the most of the pack took to their heels, while the remaining few ceased their yells and in sullen silence let the ceorls club them to death. As the last one was dispatched, the trembling girl descended from the tree. No sooner had she reached the ground than she fell into a passion of weeping.

"There! there!" said one with gruff kindness. "Thou art safe now. The wolves cannot harm thee."

But nature had been too severely tried, and Egwina sobbed on. The ceorls, seeing that she could not control herself, wisely left her alone, and presently when her sobs had subsided she looked up.

"'Tis unmannerly, I wot," she said sweetly, "but I could not keep back the tears. I thank ye all for your kindness. Had ye not come when ye did, I fear that I should not have held out much longer."

"Fleest thou from the Dane?" asked one.

The girl nodded, her heart swelling at the thought of her grandfather, and then she told them of the attack on the palace at Chippenham and all that had followed.

The men listened in silence until she had finished, and then one said, "Where is the king? What hath become of him?"

"I know not," answered Egwina. "I trow that he liveth, for when granther and I rested in one of the villages, his messenger of war passed through. But the Saxons would not hearken to the summons."

"Sayest thou so?" exclaimed he who seemed to be the spokesman. "Sayest thou so? Then, are we in sore straits in sooth. Alfred is a wise king and would drive out the Dane if the Saxons would follow him. But what is the throne without men? Of himself he can do naught. Evil hath surely come on the land. But thou art cold, little one!"

Egwina was in truth very cold. She trembled in every limb for she was chilled to the marrow and faint from weakness.

The ceorl wrapped her in his mantle and lifted her in his arms.

"Nay," he said with good-natured raillery as she remonstrated; "a Saxon maiden who can keep a whole pack of wolves enthralled by her music must be treated gently."

The others laughingly assented and thus was the girl borne to the ceorl's home.

CHAPTER VII—THE COMING OF A STRANGER

The party of Saxons who had so opportunely come to the rescue of Egwina proved to be swineherds, returning from their day's work in the forest. Deep into the woodland did they go. At last a light shone through the darkness, and towards it the ceorl who bore Egwina walked rapidly.

With hearty farewells the others left him, and each wended his way to his own home, promising to meet betimes on the morrow. The light came from a rude cottage, and soon the swineherd reached it. He knocked loudly on the door. It was opened quickly, and the shrill voice of a woman exclaimed:

"'Tis time thou wert coming, Denewulf! For a long while hath thy supper been waiting. Cold is it as the home of the Northman. Complain not if it be not to thy taste."

"Nay, Adiva; I will not grumble," returned the Saxon as he entered. "Full well do I know that the hour is later than its wont; but much hath happened to

hinder me."

"Holy Cuthbert of blessed memory!" ejaculated the woman. "What have we here?"

Denewulf unfolded the mantle from the girl as he answered:

"I have brought thee a daughter for thy loneliness, Adiva."

"But where gottest thou her?" demanded the dame in astonishment. "I wot that I have not seen so fair a maiden in many a day."

The Saxon laughed.

"Serve us the meat, good mother, and while we sup, I will tell thee all. Sit, maiden."

Egwina sat down upon one of the rude benches, and looked about her. The good woman still muttering in her surprise, bestirred herself about the supper.

The cottage was low and mean. It was made of turf and sticks, and thatched with rushes. The furniture was of the simplest. A broad, low bench back in one corner was covered by a tick or sack filled with straw. A goat's skin was thrown over it. This served for a bed. A loom and distaff were on one side, with great bunches of yarn beside them. The seats were but crude settles of wood. A square table was drawn up near the fire which blazed genially in the centre of the room. The dog immediately stretched himself before it. From the roof were suspended the sides and hams of meat—the bucon or bacon of the Anglo-Saxon—and numerous bunches of herbs. The walls and rafters were blackened by the smoke which escaped through a cover in the roof.

Through the doorway the maiden caught a glimpse of another room. These two were all that the cottage contained. The one they were in served as a bed-room, sitting-room, kitchen, and dining-room, all in one. Simple and homely as it was, there was an air of warmth and comfort in it that stole over her senses gratefully.

Soon the supper smoked on the table, and Adiva pressed her hospitably to sit up, and to partake of it. Broiled eels, swine meat, honey and barley cakes, and the inevitable mead, constituted the repast. Adiva served the meat on spits, and each cut for himself slices with his own knife into trenchers of wood. The mead was drunk from horns which were filled from a tankard.

The color came to the girl's face as she ate and drank, and was warmed by the fire. There were no vessels filled with water for the fingers, nor napkins to dry them on, nor table-cloth on the table, such as were used in the halls of the nobles; but there was kindness and good-will, and a homely hospitality that made amends for what was lacking in accessories. Not a word would the dame allow them to say until hunger was appeased. Then she looked up and said:

"Now, Denewulf, be thou the first to speak and tell how and where thou didst find the maiden. Then shall she tell what happened before."

"Well," said Denewulf quaffing a huge draught of mead, "as I and the others were coming through the wold with our hounds, what should we hear but the sound of music. Wondering much, we wound not our horns but stopped to listen. It ceased, and the howling of wolves smote our ears. Beshrew me, if I thought not that the wiccas were holding a conclave in the forest. Again the music started, and the howls ceased. We wound our horns again for our own comfort, for we wotted not but that the Norns were weaving our fates—"

"Out upon thee, Denewulf," interrupted the dame. "Have done with thy heathenish talk, and tell thy tale more simply."

The Saxon laughed, drank again from his horn, and resumed:

"Then heard we a cry for help. We ran forward with our hounds. May I be bewrayed, but there in a tree was this maiden, who was performing to a whole pack of wolves below. Scold an' thou wilt, Adiva, but methought at first that it was Jamvid and her sons."

Again the wife interrupted him, crossing herself devoutly as she spake.

"Wilt never forget thy foster mother's superstitions, man? Marry, thou art more Dane than Saxon now! What would the priest say to thy heathenism?"

"Be not wroth, Adiva," laughed Denewulf. "Thou wottest that at heart I am as good a Christian as thyself. I trow the Dane would think so."

"Well-a-day, have done with thy witless talk and go on with thy tale," cried the wife impatiently.

"Whether she were Jamvid or no," went on the swineherd, "we set upon the brutes with our clubs, and such as did not take to their heels are left out under the tree. Then the maiden descended, and we found that she was not the hag of the Iron Wood, but a Saxon girl fleeing from the Dane."

"From the Dane?" ejaculated the dame. "Poor lamb! would the Dane bother such as ye? Tell me of it."

Thus adjured, Egwina in turn told her story, beginning with the desire of herself and grandfather to place themselves under the protection of Alfred, and continuing until the time that Denewulf had found her in the tree playing to the wolves.

"Dear heart!" burst from the motherly woman hurrying round to the girl. "I'll warrant thou art tired and spent. To think of a girl going through all that! But thou art safe here."

"Why, will not the Danes come here?" queried Egwina in amaze.

"They cannot, child. None but Saxons can penetrate into these wolds and fens," spoke up the swineherd quickly. "And not even Saxons if they be not accustomed to it. I and others of my kind can go through the fastnesses as easily as thou canst follow a path; because we wot of them, but the Northmen would become weary and wander aimlessly about, unwitting whither to go until they

would perish in the forest."

"It glads my heart to hear it," breathed the maiden. "I want no more to see them. They are so fearful! None do they spare, neither youth nor age. I would, oh, I would that the king were here. Then would he be safe from them."

Denewulf and Adiva both laughed long and loud.

"The king!" cried the swineherd when he could check his merriment. "The king? Quotha! I should like well to see the king in the hut of a swineherd. I must tell that to the others to-morrow." Again he gave vent to a peal of laughter.

"Out upon thee, man! Seest thou not that thou dost tease the maiden?" chid the wife.

"Nay; I wonder not at his mirth," said the maiden gently. "'Twould be a rare sight, I wot, if the king would dwell here; yet I would that he were here. I like not to think of him slain or in the hands of the Dane. My grandfather said the land depended upon Alfred."

"It may be," returned Denewulf. "Come Saxon or Dane, it matters not here. But I would also that the king were here, for I would see him. Never have I seen a king. Hast thou?"

"Once," said Egwina, "when I was seven, grandfather and I were in Sherborne when King Ethelred passed through. Methought that he was handsome and noble in appearance, but granther said that I was too young to know much about it, that the atheling, Alfred, was handsomer by far and that the land would be better when he was king; not only for his talents, but also because our holy father, the pope, had crowned him king in Rome."

"Well! Drink hael to the king's coming," and the swineherd tossed off another horn of mead.

At this moment footsteps were heard outside, the hound arose from his place before the fire with a low growl. There came a loud knock at the door.

"Who goes there?" cried the Saxon striding to the entrance, fitting an arrow to his bow as he did so.

"A wanderer in search of food and shelter. Open as ye be Saxons."

"The king has come," laughed Denewulf, turning round with a broad wink at them. "Your best mead, Adiva."

Then throwing wide the door, he called heartily, for the Saxons were very hospitable:

"Enter, wanderer! Thou art welcome to such as we have. Enter and find rest for thy weariness, and food for thy hunger."

Into the room there came a man whose manner was so commanding and his form so stately that he might in truth be king. He was tall, and his long hair of ruddy auburn fell in ringlets from under his bonnet on his shoulders. When the firelight fell upon it, it shone like burnished gold. His eyes were blue, very

bright and penetrating in their glance. His countenance fair and at present pale from fatigue. His brow was high, noble, and thoughtful. In short, his mien was so august, his port so noble that Adiva and Egwina both gazed upon him with awe.

Not so Denewulf. The simple-hearted Saxon found something in the stranger that answered to himself, for he smiled graciously upon him, and seated him near the fire.

"Sit here, stranger, and warm thyself while the wife prepares the meat for thee. Sorry am I that thou didst not come sooner, for the meat was hot, and it would have pleased us well to have had thy company."

The stranger smiled a sweet, grave smile as he answered:

"It matters not if the meat be cold. Trouble not thyself, good dame. He who hath fasted since yesterday will not find fault though the food lack heat."

"Dear heart!" exclaimed the dame bustling about. "And hast thou taken nought since yesterday? Marry, but it must be piping hot for thee, man. Thou shalt have a good supper."

In a short time the stranger sat down to the table and partook of the repast. Egwina could not but notice the difference in his manner of eating and that of their hosts, who, kind people though they were, still lacked refinement. When the stranger's hunger was appeased, Denewulf filled a horn from the tankard, and passing it to him, said:

"Drink hael, man! 'Twill warm thee, and chill blows the wind in the forest."

"Wass hael," responded the guest, courteously including Egwina and the wife in the health. "To ye both, good dame and gentle maiden, and to thee also, ceorl, for thy kindness," and he quaffed the horn. When Denewulf would have replenished the cup, he shook his head.

"Nay," he said. "I care not for more."

"Then," said the swineherd, "tell of thyself, and how thou art alone in the weald. Didst lose thy way? I trow that thou didst, for few there be who dwell not among the fens that can find the way out when once within its depths."

"Is it so impenetrable?" inquired the stranger.

"So much so," replied the swineherd with a chuckle, "that if the whole Danish army were lost in its fastnesses, they would die before finding their way out; unless some Saxon were niddering enow to show it."

"Then I would that the Danes were within its depths," ejaculated the stranger with fervor. "Vain have been the efforts of the Saxons to resist them, and it would be a happy ending of the matter."

"Thou fleest, then, from the Dane?" queried Adiva.

"Yes; they are ravaging the whole of Wessex."

"Good stranger, knowest aught of the king?" cried Egwina. "I hope that he

is safe."

"I trow that he is," returned the stranger, smiling sweetly at her.

"She was wishing that the king were here with us when thou didst knock at the door," chuckled Denewulf.

"Why fearest thou for the king? Dost know him?"

"No; but if the king be safe then is there hope for the land. Doth he not carry the hearts of the people with him?"

"I trow not, maiden. Hadst thou seen him as I saw him last, thou wouldst know that he did not. Forsaken and alone, Alfred hath gone none knows whither."

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, the tears coming to her eyes, "sayest thou so? The king forsaken! How could they leave him, so noble, so good is he! Is not their allegiance his? Methinks that were I a man naught but death could make me unleal to the king. As it is, I am but a girl and can do naught but pray for him every day that he be kept safe, and that the people will rally around him again."

"Do so, child! Thy pure prayers may accomplish that which the king hath not the power to do. If all Saxons were like thee the Dane would seek another land to ravage."

"The maiden hath cause to pray for the king," broke in the dame, who had remained silent as long as she could.

"What cause hath she?"

"Well—but what shall I call thee?" demanded Adiva.

"Call me Wilfred."

"Well, Wilfred, I will tell thee her tale, and then Denewulf shall tell thee how he found the child." And the good dame related the maiden's story. Then Denewulf told again of the wolves, and Egwina listened blushingly to their praises.

"Of brave heart art thou, maiden," said Wilfred with compassion in his look and voice. "Brave was thy grandfather in his death. 'Twas such that a Saxon might be proud of. 'Tis pity that the king knew not of it."

"My grandfather would like best to know that the king were safe," returned Egwina.

"And what art thou called, child?" asked Adiva.

"Egwina."

"Egwina, and I shall call thee 'the fair' also," said the dame.

"And I, Jamvid, mother of wolf sons," laughed the swineherd; "for so I found her."

"And I, noble heart," said Wilfred. "With maidens like thee to grow into wives and mothers, the land could survive the ravaging of a thousand Guthrums."

Egwina flushed rosy red with pleasure.

Then cried Denewulf, "Let us to bed, good people! With the breaking of morn must I to the forest."

The men drew their coats around them and lay down by the fire on the floor, while the dame and the maiden reposed on the tick of straw.

CHAPTER VIII—ADIVA GROWS ANGRY

Life in the cottage was simple in the extreme. Each morning Denewulf looked after his nets and traps, and then repaired to the forest where he tended the swine. The stranger exerted himself in the chase and proved to be very proficient in woodcraft and the lore of the forest.

Adiva took Egwina at once into her heart, and taught her all the simple housewifely arts that she knew. The girl soon became an expert in the use of spindle and distaff, and busily did the shuttles fly through the long winter evenings.

"Howsomever did I do without thee, child?" she would say as Egwina flitted about singing at her tasks. "Dark will be the day that thou dost leave me. I pray that it will never come."

One day the girl was in the cottage busily spinning when Wilfred the stranger entered. He threw some fagots on the fire and sitting before it, drew from within the folds of his tunic a little book which he perused intently, as was his wont. The maiden observed him with interest. Presently he turned toward her with a smile.

"Why dost thou watch me so, Egwina?"

"I was wondering what the book contained that thou dost read in it so much," returned the maiden in some confusion.

"It holds much that is full of solace," answered he. "Tell me, Egwina, dost know how to read?"

"To read? No; why should I?" asked the girl in surprise. "Granther knew not how; nor does Denewulf, nor Adiva; nor any of the gentles. In truth, none I have ever known, save thee, have known how. Why should they? There was no need. Granther said that it was only for priests or monks. The gleemen need it not for singing or the harp. The ceorl needs it neither for ploughing, or for sowing, or for tending his herds. And how would it help the gentle in hunting or any of his pastimes? Weaving and embroidery for women, sports and war for

men. There is no need of reading."

Wilfred smiled and sighed as he answered: "As thou speakest so do most think. In truth, I misdoubt if there are not priests even of thy way of thinking. Few are they south of the Humber who can translate their daily prayers into English. Yet once in all Gaul could not be found the learning of our land. Alack! that Bede, Alucin, and Aldhelm were not now alive. Yet, perchance, it is better so. Mayhap they would not have flourished had they lived at this time. Dark, dark is the outlook."

He relapsed into a moody silence. Egwina timidly approached him.

"I meant not to offend thee, good Wilfred," she spake, gently.

"Nay, little one; thou hast not offended me. I thought not of thy words, but only of the decay of that learning for which we were once so famed."

"Dost thou think so much of learning?" inquired she. "Prithee show me the book, that I may see what it is that so charms thee."

She took the book, and looked at it intently before handing it back to him.

"I see naught in it," she remarked, with a sigh; "that would hold me for hours as it doth thee. What is its spell? It sings not, neither does it speak, nor is it illuminated."

"But it does speak, Egwina. Listen, and thou shalt hear something that it says: 'Go now, ye brave! where the lofty way of a great example leads you. Why should you, inert, uncover your backs? The earth, when conquered, gives us the stars.'"

"Does it truly say that?" cried Egwina, in delight. "Show me, Wilfred."

Wilfred placed his finger on the page, and said: "Art sure that thou understandest, little one?" The girl nodded her head sagely.

"I cannot just tell it," she said; "but it is like this: should the king do some noble thing his example would incite others to follow where he would lead."

"True, maiden. Thou hast given the thought in mine own mind. Bright art thou, and methinks would prove an apt pupil. Wouldst like for me to teach thee to read, Egwina?"

"Dost think that I could learn, Wilfred?"

"Of a surety. Long years had passed over my head ere I knew. Methinks that it was in my twelfth year that my mother called her children to her, and, showing a pretty book brightly illuminated, said: 'Sons, that one of you who first learns to read in this book, he shall possess it.' 'Shall he really have it for his own, mother?' I said. 'For his very own,' she answered, well pleased at the question. My brothers cared not for it, so full were they of the chase and sports, but I learned the verses contained therein, and she gave it me."

"Is this it?" asked Egwina, with interest.

"Nay; it is at—" Wilfred checked himself, and then resumed. "So thou seest

that thou canst learn if a dullard such as I could. Thou hast an apter mind than I. But thou must not care if it prove tedious?"

"I will not care, and I will learn," said Egwina, with determination. "It may be that I shall then know many things of which now I do not dream."

"Thou wilt, thou wilt!" cried Wilfred, in delight. "Forget not, dear child, that 'The earth, when conquered, gives us the stars.'"

"I will not forget," said Egwina, thoughtfully. "How beautiful the idea! I shall never see the stars again that I will not think of it."

And so it came about that each evening thereafter the time was spent by Egwina and Denewulf also in learning to read. Adiva would have none of it for herself, and muttered grumblingly that it was nonsense, and of no use to any but priests.

When the lesson was over Egwina would sing for them, and the hut would ring with laughter and merriment. Wilfred, the stranger, listened eagerly to the songs, and soon proposed that the maiden should teach them to the others.

"Alack! gladly would I do so, but what are they without a harp?" and Egwina looked sad.

Consternation seized on the little household the next morning after this remark was made to find the stranger gone. Denewulf and Egwina were loud in their lamentations at his departure. Adiva grumbled openly, but secretly missed him as well as they. On the third day thereafter he returned bearing a harp. The cottagers received him with acclamations of joy. He seemed touched by their greetings, but offered no explanation of his absence or where he had obtained the harp.

Egwina wondered much at the instrument, for it was of the finest workmanship. She soon taught him all the songs that she knew, and already was he skilled in the use of the harp.

"Thou dost well," she said, "but I wish that thou couldst have heard granther. Thou shouldst have seen his sweep. There! that is something like," as Wilfred, after some trials, executed it to suit her.

So the time passed until at last the Length month (March) came. One day Egwina went forth to see if she could find some sprout-kele for broth. Enticed by the beauty of the day, she stayed longer than she had intended, and hurried back to the house, for the dame was very busy. As she drew near the cottage she heard the voice of Adiva raised high in anger.

"Drat the man! Never to turn the loaves when thou seest them burning. I'll warrant that thou wilt be ready enow to eat them when they're done."

"I crave thy forgiveness, dame." The tones of Wilfred were contrite and full of humility. "I thought not once of them."

"Couldst thou not smell them when they lay at thy very feet?" demanded

the dame.

"Nay; I noted naught," returned the stranger.

"Good mother, be wroth with him no longer," cried Egwina entering. "His mind is full of graver matters than woman's work."

"Graver matters!" echoed Adiva, who was evidently in a bad way. "Graver matters! I wot that they fall not heavily upon him at meal time. 'Tis pity that a body can't leave the house for a minute without a wite's letting the loaves burn."

"Thou speakest truly," said the stranger humbly. "He who eats should also work. That I have not done, but I will mend my ways, good dame."

"There! it may be that I spake too quickly." Adiva was somewhat mollified by his evident contrition. "After all, there's no great harm done, and thou hast truly a good heart. I should have known better than to trouble thee. Thou hast brought us many a fine buck, and marry, that is man's work more than this."

"Natheless, I will be more careful another time," said Wilfred, reseating himself, and all went as before.

Shortly after this, Egwina was much troubled about a strange dream that she had. In some confusion and much distress of mind, for, like every one of the time, she was superstitious, she unfolded it to Adiva.

"Good mother, I fear I know not what, so queer a dream had I."

"Tell it, child. Once I could unravel the meaning of night fancies, but it hath been long since I tried my skill. The young care more for such things. Denewulf looks with awe upon a Morthwytha, but he laughs to scorn a reader of dreams. But dear heart! Here do I let my tongue run on and thou hast not yet spoken thy dream. Say on, child."

"I dreamed," said Egwina, "that I was in a lofty hall. Around me were silken hangings, and the tables and chairs were carved with fine workmanship. Many were my thegns, and they served me from vessels of silver and gold. As I feasted many came and bowed down before me. All at once a great light, that shone glorious as the sun, burst from my body. The eyes of all men were uplifted toward it, and they were dazzled by its radiance."

Adiva raised her hands.

"May the blessed mother preserve us, child! What a wonderful dream."

"Canst thou tell what it doth portend, Adiva?" questioned the maiden eagerly.

"Child, child, I dare not tell thee that which I think; but if thou wilt say naught before the stranger or Denewulf, thou and I will go to Gunnehilde. She is a Dane, Denewulf's foster-mother, and a wicca."

"I like not the fact that she be Dane," and Egwina shrank back a little, for the Northmen held a painful place in her memory.

"Tut, child! She is more Saxon than Dane, though I tell not that to De-

newulf. She came with her husband years ago when Egbert, the present king's grandfather, was on the throne. No Christian is she, but a good woman, though she hath been a vala in her own country. Denewulf hath she reared from a lad. Her husband brought him home a Saxon boy of tender years, whose father fell fighting the Welsh and whose mother died soon after. She will tell thee all that thou wishest to know of things to come. I countenance not Denewulf when he speaks of her foretellings, for it is not wisdom to humor a man in aught that savors of heathenism. She reads the runes for me often, though he wots not of it."

"If it be not wrong then, Adiva, and thou thinkest best I will go with thee."

"Then to-morrow will we go," said the dame, and so it was planned.

CHAPTER IX—WOULD YOU STRIKE YOUR KING?

Early the next day Adiva and Egwina started for the cottage of the foster-mother of Denewulf, Gunnehilde, the Danish woman.

It was not without misgivings that Egwina accompanied the dame, but the latter laughed away her fears.

"Wicca is Gunnehilde in truth," she said, "but pleasant spoken. Fair will be her greeting, and I wot that thou wilt like her." So calming her fears, Egwina fell in with the mood of her companion, and a brisk walk soon brought them to the dwelling of the woman.

It was built in the centre of a knoll in a glade of the forest, and seemed in appearance not unlike the rude huts occupied by the swineherds, except that it was more compact. The turf was not intersected with twigs, as were those of the Saxons, but placed compactly against a firm foundation of board. Adiva knocked on the door while Egwina devoutly crossed herself.

"Enter," said a voice as the door was thrown open. "Enter, Adiva! Greetings to thee, and to the stranger, also, whom thou bringest with thee. With the rise of the sun knew I that thou wouldst come, and bring the maiden with thee."

Again the maiden crossed herself. Adiva went into the dwelling without hesitation, and the girl followed, although with fear and trembling. But there was

naught displeasing to the eye, nor anything that would inspire awe in the room. The woman who welcomed them was tall and commanding in appearance. Her hair was dark as the raven's wing. Her brow was thoughtful, and her eyes, dark also, shone with the calm, steady light of a student. In her right hand she carried a wand, the seid-staff of Scandinavian superstition.

"Sit thee here, wife of Denewulf," she said to the dame. "And thou, maiden, be seated upon this bench, where the light may fall upon thy brow. I would see where the Fylgia (tutelary divinity), whom Alfadur gave thee, leads thee. Thou hast come to consult the runes?"

She made the statement more as a declaration than a question. Without waiting for a reply she went on:

"I knew that ye would be here. When the sun rose I awoke and placed all things in readiness for ye."

"Gunnehilde," spake Adiva, "the maiden hath had a dream. Thou wottest that it is somewhat in my ken to unravel such, but I feared to give what it seemed to me to portend."

"Dreams are oracles more potent than wicca can charm with wand or rune," spake Gunnehilde. "Unfold it, and let me read the rede. Prophetic are the visions of the night."

Timidly Egwina told the dream. The Danish woman listened, leaning her head on her staff, her eyes never leaving the maiden's face. When she had finished there was silence for a few moments, and then the wicca raised her head, and her eyes glowed strangely.

"Maiden, no runes have I graven for thee on the bark of elm, nor Scinlaeca (spirits of the departed) have I called from the graves of the dead; but easy is it to read thy rede. Listen! for Skulda hath passed into the soul of her servant, and fast doth thy fate run from her lips. Thy vision portendeth great honors to thee. None greater than thou shall live in the land. Retainers many shall be thine, with honor and riches also. After thee shall thy son come, and he shall be more glorious than thou. All men shall look up to him and bow before him for his greatness and wisdom. Dangers will be thine, many and dire; but the web of thy fate is spun. Heed well; speed well. And forget not the bode of the wicca. Thou shalt truly come to thy glory. Hail to thee! Hail to thee! Gunnehilde hath spoken."

She arose and bowed thrice before the trembling maiden.

"But what dost thou mean?" inquired the girl when she could command her voice. "What glory is it that shall be mine? I fear that I do not understand."

"Thou hast no further need of galdra or witchcraft. Bright is the woof of thy fate. The skein of thy life is interwoven with those who are great. No need is there for thee to consult the runes. Ask no more of the wicca. Glorious will be

thy last hours."

Egwina dared ask no more. Gunnehilde brought forth meat and drink and placed it before them.

"Eat and drink," she said, "ere ye go back to your abode. Busy will ye be from this on, and ye shall both have need of your strength. Many they be who come to your dwelling."

"Dear heart!" cried Adiva in some anxiety. "Howsomever I can manage with more, I cannot see!"

"Adiva, thou hast not asked me to read the runes for thee, but I have done so. Give greeting to Denewulf, and hail, thrice hail to the stranger whom ye have harbored."

"Tell me, good wicca," said the dame, "who is he? Of gentle blood, I dare say, for he hath the port of such. Denewulf hath become wrapped up in him, and Egwina is no better. Tell me of him."

The woman looked at the maiden with a curious, intent glance, and then said abruptly:

"Through him will thy fate change. 'Tis for the weal of thy house, Adiva, that thou hast sheltered him. Ere the set of sun, shalt thou know who and what he is. Even now, do friends seek him in thine abode."

"Marry!" ejaculated Adiva. "In my dwelling at this moment, sayest thou? Egwina, 'twere best that we were going."

She rose as she spoke, and Gunnehilde rose also. An arch smile parted Egwina's lips.

"I thought that thou didst intend staying longer," she said.

"Nay, child; 'tis high time we were going. Besides, if any there be at the cottage, I should be there to give them greeting."

The smile on Egwina's face was reflected on Gunnehilde's, but the Danish woman offered no remonstrance to their departure. The two were soon on their way back.

"Thinkest thou that there will in truth be guests at the cottage?" asked Egwina of the dame.

"Did not Gunnehilde say so?" returned Adiva; "and is she not a wicca? I wot that it will be even as she hath said. Child, then thou canst not help but believe in thy rede. Was it not wonderful what she told thee?"

"Yes; but—" Egwina looked a little troubled.

"But what, child?"

"I did not understand clearly just what she meant. She seemed to mislike questions else I would have asked further."

"She told thee all she would without questions," returned the dame. "Often do I consult her, and always hath it been as she hath said. But Denewulf wots

not of it."

"Tell me of her," said Egwina. "Hath she always been a wicca? There seemed to me to be much of the noble about her, and she spake not as do the ceorls."

"A vala was she in her own land," returned Adiva. "A vala, honored by chiefs and revered by the nation, who foretold the future to heroes. Even the king of her land hath led her to the high seat in the hall where he wished to consult her. Now doth she read the runes and consult her galdra for the vulgar. But of all that e'er I met, Gunnehilde reads truest the wizard's lore."

Soon they drew near the cabin of Denewulf. When within a short distance of the hut, the hum of voices floated out upon the air. The dame turned a triumphant look upon the maiden.

"Did I not tell thee? True are the words of Gunnehilde. Now shall we know who the stranger be. ''Ere set of sun,' she said, and that is not far distant. And guests many! I wonder who they are? Come, let us hasten!"

She quickened her steps, and the maiden must perforce do the same. In haste, Adiva threw open the door, and paused at the sight which met her gaze.

A half dozen Saxons were grouped about the deal table in easy attitudes. Wilfred, the stranger, sate a little apart attentively observant of them. Denewulf was busily serving the guests with mead. By the costly fur-lined gonnas and the golden-hilted swords, Adiva knew them to be nobles.

"By my troth!" cried one of the youths merrily as the dame and the maiden entered, "I have not seen so fair a face in days. Mickle and sore would it repent me should I leave it without a kiss. A mancus, fair maiden, for such favor."

Egwina drew back from the doorway.

"Fear not, little one," spoke the deep voice of Wilfred. "Enter in peace. Niddering is he who speaketh so to a maiden. Fill not the ears of a child with such trifling," he added sternly to the youth.

"And who be ye, good sir, that tells me what to do? Wot ye not that I am Ethelred of Mercia?"

"I care not who ye be," answered Wilfred calmly. "Thy words are unmeet for a maiden's ear. Therefore thou shalt say no more of them."

"Shalt not?" The youth was on his feet instantly, and flashed his sword from its scabbard. "Draw, man! I wish not to strike thee as thou sittest."

"Foolish boy, sheathe thy sword!" The stranger surveyed him with a deep intense look of power. "Thinkest thou that I would draw against thee? Thou didst merit the reproof; profit by it."

There was so much of command in his manner as he spake that the youth hesitated, not wishing to be thought deficient in courage by his comrades and yet unable to proceed against this calm stranger.

"Abide by his words, Ethelred," cried one of the others. "Thou wert in truth too bold in thy speech, and hast thou not partaken of their hospitality? Out, man!"

Sullenly the one called Ethelred sheathed his sword, resumed his seat, and soon the episode passed from the minds of the party. Egwina slipped into a seat on the other side of Wilfred. The dame joined the swineherd in the serving of mead, and preparing meat for the guests. Soon the hut rang with their glee.

"How bear the people the rule of the Northmen?" asked Wilfred during a lull in the mirth.

"Hardly," spake one who was a man about his own age. "Those who lived near the coasts have crossed into Gaul or other countries for the succour which they obtained not in their own land. Others seek by submission to mitigate the ferocity of the pagans. Others still, seek to retain part of their property by the sacrifice of a portion. Others again, seek refuge and safety in the recesses of the forest. All groan under the rule of the oppressors, and none there be to oppose them sith the king is gone."

"None?" shouted the youth Ethelred, springing to his feet. "None, sayest thou? None! Nay; here is one!"

"And here is another," and another Saxon flashed his sword in the air.

"And another!" "And another!" shouted each and every one of the party, until all were on their feet.

"Let us seek the king, and form an army!" shouted Ethelred. "Then, with him as leader, will the Northman make food for the raven. Drink hael to the death of the Dane."

All drank. Another cried:

"Drink hael to the king!" "Drink hael to the king!" All drank but Wilfred.

"Marry, man! Drinkest thou not to the king?" cried Ethelred in wrath. "Drink to the king, else thou shalt answer to me."

But Wilfred touched not the mead.

"Drink," shouted all together as their swords flashed in the air. "Drink or defend thyself."

Even Denewulf and Adiva looked inquiringly at the stranger who stood so calmly in their midst, and still drank not to the king. Egwina crept close to his side, fearful of his safety.

"Drink," cried the Saxons again, "drink," and they made a dash at him.

"Back! Would ye strike your king?"

[image]

"BACK! WOULD YOU STRIKE YOUR KING?"

CHAPTER X—EGWINA GOES AS A MESSENGER

"The king!" The Saxons fell back, their swords still half-suspended, and looked at him incredulously. Denewulf stood aghast. Adiva sank on a bench near her, while Egwina's face lighted up in joyful amazement.

"The king!" cried the youth, Ethelred. "How wot we that thou art the king?"

"Know ye the signet ring of the king?" The stranger drew a ring from his finger. It was of massive gold, the bezel being engraved with a dove within an olive wreath.

"I know it!" cried the one called Athelnoth. "Once the king's gerefa came to me as I abode in mine house at Taunton with commands for a palfrey for his lord. He bore with him the royal signet ring, and this is it." He knelt before the stranger.

"The king! The king! It is in sooth the king!" The glad cry went up with a shout as the Saxons pressed round him. They knelt before him, kissing his hands in their joy. Alfred turned to Denewulf:

"Old friend, hast thou naught to say? Well have ye done for your king when ye thought that he was but a poor wayfarer. Is he less welcome because he is a king?"

"No!" cried Denewulf, recovering himself. "By all the saints, no! That thou hast honored my dwelling by thy presence when in Wessex there were many so much more worthy, gives pleasure to my heart."

"But none more leal," returned Alfred, gazing on him kindly.

Denewulf pressed the king's hand again and again, while over Adiva's face

came a curious look. It was a blending of triumph at the thought of having sheltered no less a personage than the king, awe at his presence, and fear of the sharp words which she had more than once addressed to him.

"My lord," she cried, "thou wilt not hold against a poor woman the sharpness of her tongue, wilt thou? Thou wottest how pointed it becomes when the temper is overwrought. And to think that I asked thee to mind the loaves. Ah, me!"

The king laughed.

"Fear naught, dame. I should have heeded the bread. That was the task assigned me, and he who would do well in great things must look after the little ones."

"True; but thou must have had much upon thy mind, and then to be pestered with woman's work."

"As thou thyself said, 'Cares of state burthened not my mind at mealtime,'" laughed Alfred. "Nay, nay," as Adiva grew red in her confusion, "heed not the sport, good dame. Kind hast thou shown thyself, and thy king holds thee in tender affection."

The good woman swelled with pride. Just then one of the Saxons cried: "The sun is setting! Come! let us away, and proclaim that we have found the king."

Adiva started, and turned to Egwina. "Child," she whispered, "did not the wicca say that we should know who he was 'ere set of sun? And it is the king! Well-a-day! I knew that he was gentle. But listen!"

"No," the king was saying, "go not yet, dear friends. There is much that I would say, and if these kind people will bear with us, I would that ye should remain the night. Much discourse would I have with ye."

"Use my poor hut as thou wilt," said Denewulf, heartily. "It is thine, my king."

Alfred smiled at him a smile full of sweetness.

"Then, by thy good pleasure, they stay. Come join us, friend Denewulf, and help us by thy counsel, for thou art ready of wit and wise in the lore of the forest."

So saying, the king sat down by the fire, and the others sat with him. When Egwina would have withdrawn, he hindered her.

"Stay, little one, at thy accustomed place. Am I not still thy friend?"

Thus adjured, the maiden sat by his side as was her wont, while the king turned to the Saxons.

"Ye have said that the people murmur at the oppression of the Danes," he said. "Think ye that they would rise against them?"

"When the people know of thy whereabouts," returned the oldest of the

group, whom the others called Athelnoth, "naught can prevent them from rising. Oft have they wondered what had become of thee, and some mourned thee as dead. It will glad their hearts to know that thou art alive."

"Yet they came not at my summons," mused the king. "And I must hide, perforce, lest any, knowing of my whereabouts, should bewray me to Guthrum."

"Think not too hardly of them, my lord and king," cried Athelnoth eagerly. "Fruitless seemed the task of resistance. Their brethren in Mercia and East Anglia dwelt among the Northmen in seeming peace. Now they see that 'Death is preferable to the shame of servitude.'"

"I think not less of them," said the noble Alfred, "but only how best to relieve them of their bondage. I think it not wise that ye should spread broadcast the news that I live and meditate an uprising, lest it reach the ears of the Dane. Everything depends upon secrecy and the suddenness of attack."

"What then shall we do?" queried Athelnoth.

"Have any of ye aught to suggest?" Alfred glanced at the group around him. "Ethelred, thou art quick to think, what sayest thou?"

Ethelred had remained silent since the king had declared himself, and beyond the greeting given to him had said nothing.

"Naught, my lord," he now replied. "Why shouldst thou heed the words of him who hath twice this day drawn sword on his king?"

"Marry, boy! 'Twas but the hot-headiness of youth. That thou art leal to the king was shown when thou wouldst have slain him who refused to drink to him. I trust thee, Ethelred. Thy quickness in a few short years will be replaced by maturity of judgment. The one precedes the other. Think not ere the down on thy chin hath given place to one of manlier fashion that thou wilt have the wisdom of a sage. Sit up, man, and help us."

"Then," said the youth, mollified, "I would advise, my lord and king, that the people be not yet told of thy whereabouts. Tell only those ealdormen and others whom thou mayest need who can be trusted. In this way can we know those who are leal, and if aught can be done."

"Well and wisely hast thou spoken," declared the king. "If the Saxons will rally round my standard as of yore, the Dragon will sweep the Raven from the land. But there should be some place of meeting—some spot to become ready."

"My king," spoke Denewulf, "if I may be so bold as to suggest something. Not far from here, at the meeting of the Thone and the Parret, there lies an island surrounded by morasses. A whole army might lie concealed in its fens and none be the wiser."

"Denewulf, thou, too, art wise, and hast spoken well. To-morrow will we wend to this island, and see it for ourselves."

Long into the night did the little band confer. Bright and early the next

morning the whole party traversed the woods until they came to the island spoken of by Denewulf.

On the eastern boundary of the forest, on rising ground, was the isle, surrounded by dangerous marshes formed by the little rivers, Thone and Parret. The marshes were not fordable, but Denewulf brought from the rushes a little coracle, capable of bearing four, and soon the entire party stood on the island itself and examined it.

It contained about two acres covered with vast brakes of alder bush filled with deer and other game.

"The marshes are fordable only in summer, my king," said Denewulf, "and then only by those who know the secret."

"'Tis an ideal place for a fortress," returned Alfred, his keen eye taking in every detail. "Athelney will I call it. See, Denewulf, here will I build my fort. Then when the spring hath set in truly, will we sally forth."

Thus planning, the party returned to the cottage, and then with hearty farewells the Saxons started off to tell the glad news to those who were trustworthy.

During the days of waiting, matters at the hut went on as before. The lessons were resumed, and, though Adiva did not soon recover from her awe in the presence of the king, Egwina regarded him with a loving reverence.

One day he laid down the manual which he was conning with a sigh.

"What is it, my king?" asked Egwina. "What is it troubles thee? Dost think that the Saxons tarry too long in their coming?"

"Nay, child. I thought not of them, but of my family. Long hath it been since I have seen them, and I fain would know how they fare."

"The Lady Elswitha was with granther and me at Chippenham," remarked Egwina. "She was borne from us by the press of the throng during the night. She and the maiden whom they call Ethelfleda, and Edward the youth."

"Egwina, sayest thou so?" cried the king in surprise. "Why, child, thou hast never spoken of this before!"

"Have I not?" and the maiden was surprised in turn. "When we left the palace we were with the lady and her children." Then she proceeded to give an account of the matter, closing with, "Oft have I wondered what became of them."

"I can tell thee that," answered the king. "When morning dawned, as I searched for them, fearing that they might have been slain by the Dane, a bode came running with the tidings that they had taken refuge in the house of a ceorl in one of the villages. Quickly did I hasten to them, and then sent them into Somersetshire where they could dwell in safety. 'Twas not well for me to be with them, for thus would they be exposed to danger. Once only have I heard from them. That was by chance when I obtained the harp. I would send them some

bode, but that I know not if the Saxons who come can be trusted, and Denewulf must be here. None know the secrets of the forest as he." He sighed again.

"My king," Egwina spake timidly.

"Yes, child."

"Why not send me? Much have I learned of the forest since I have been here, and can thread my way through its mazes in safety. In burghs I am still safe, for gleemen and gleemaidens are welcomed everywhere. Let me go to them."

"Thou, little one?" Alfred laid down his book in surprise. "Child, I could not send thee."

"Thou canst trust me. Thou wottest that life itself should be given ere I would bewray thee," spoke the girl earnestly. "Prithee let me be thy bode, my king."

"Child, thou art leal and true. I will send thee as thou wishest. Take this jewel; among Saxons it will pass thee without question from any if they be true to the king."

He gave her a jewel of gold as he spake. It was elaborately carved, and bore the inscription on one side, "Alfred had me made." Egwina took it reverently, and placed it in the folds of her tunic.

"Have no fear, my king," she said. "I shall reach them in safety."

With many misgivings on the part of the king, Egwina set forth on her journey.

Meanwhile, the Saxons were gathering at the cottage, and Alfred began to prepare Athelney for them. Spaces were cleared, and huts soon dotted the surface of the island. Under the eye of the king men raised strong fortifications, for these were to be made so that no Norseman could penetrate through them. Nerved by the hope of regaining liberty, the people worked cheerfully, spurred on by the example of their chief. Trusty messengers were sent to others of their countrymen, and each new accentuation of their numbers was hailed with acclamations, and the Saxons thus coming were greeted as brothers.

And while axes rung merrily in the woods, the people were not idle without. The smiths welded new and strong weapons; or, leaving those at home which they had, erected new forges on the island, and there, with no fear of the Dane, applied themselves to the task of supplying arms for the army.

The Northmen were conscious of something going on, but believing the king dead or his whereabouts unknown, connected not the stir among the people with him. While the hides were tanned for shields, and the iron melted for the swords, Adiva brought Gunnehilde to her dwelling, and there the two women spun a standard of pure white on which shone the golden dragon of Wessex. Many a spell did Adiva bid the wicca weave within its web that should bring victory to the royal Alfred. The Danish woman foreseeing the advantages that

would accrue to her foster child, Denewulf, should the Saxon be victorious, read her runes and wove her spells as the dame wished.

Now it was drawing near Easter which fell upon the twenty-fifth day of March of that year, and Alfred, in order to facilitate access to the island, ordered a communication to be made with the land by means of a bridge, the entrance of which he secured by a fort.

Food was procured by hunting and fishing, and sallies forth upon the Danes who grew troubled as the inroads of this new foe became more frequent.

And the king uneasily awaited the return of Egwina.

CHAPTER XI—SOME DANISH TALES

The knowledge that Egwina had gained of forest lore during her residence in the cottage of Denewulf, now stood her well in hand. With it she was enabled to thread her way through the intricate mazes of the great wood. At last, emerging from its eastern border, with brave heart the intrepid girl struck boldly into Wessex, now overrun by the Danes.

Stopping at the houses of ceorl and thegn alike for shelter and refreshment, she gave her merriest smile and sang her gayest songs. But the Saxons were in no mood for festivity. Willingly they succored her, and listened to her songs; but grave were their faces and heavy their hearts, for the rule of the invader bore heavily upon them. Everywhere the maiden heard the wail of the oppressed people: "Oh, that King Alfred were here!"

Often and often was she tempted to tell them the glad news that Alfred lived and was even then endeavoring to gather those to his standard who were willing to peril life for liberty.

Restraining her ardor, however, for she knew not whom to trust, with a heart burthened by the sorrows of the people, she went on her way.

One day, it was drawing near the evening and Egwina was trying to find some place of shelter for the night, she was overtaken by a Danish man and a young woman.

"Whither away, maiden?" queried the man, as they came up with her.

"I am a gleemaiden seeking shelter for the night," returned Egwina boldly. "Who are ye, and whither do ye wend your way?"

"Sigurd the skald am I," answered the man, "and this is Gyda, my daughter, who is a seid woman. A gleemaiden, thou sayest, in search of shelter? Then hie with us to the dwelling of Hakon the jarl who hath a feast to-night. Much glee will there be, for Gyda doth tell each and every one his fate."

"What would a Saxon gleemaiden in the halls of Hakon the jarl?" cried Egwina, knowing not how to be rid of her companions.

"It will be music to his heart," answered the skald. "Little doth he reck whether thou beest Saxon or Dane so that thou dost make merry. Join us, for sibbe are all gleemen and maidens whether they be skalds of the Norseman, bards of the Welsh, or scops or gleemen of the Saxon. But thou art alone, girl? Why travelest thou so?"

"There is naught else to do," answered she. Then, continuing after a slight pause, "My grandfather and I for many years wandered the length and breadth of the land. Now doth he lie dead, and alone do I follow the harp."

"Thy grandfather! Alack! He was old then?" Sigurd declared rather than questioned. "'Tis pity that Hela the death goddess comes to us all. Methinks the Æsir should have bestowed the apples of Iduna upon man that he might eat and be young again."

"Iduna? The apples?" Egwina looked bewildered. "Be not wroth, good Sigurd, but I understand not what thou meanest."

"Hast not heard of Iduna?" asked the skald in surprise.

"Is she not a Saxon?" sneered Gyda, the seid woman, speaking for the first time. "And are not the Saxons Christians? She hath been too busy with mass and priest to have heard of Iduna."

"Then shall she be enlightened," cried Sigurd, while Egwina looked hastily away from the coal-black eyes of the seid woman. Their gaze filled her with a sort of nameless terror. Inviting she was not in aspect, as was Gunnehilde in the forest, and involuntarily the girl crossed herself. The woman's eyes glittered as she saw the action, but she made no comment.

"Iduna," went on the skald, "lived in Asgard, the city of the Æsir. To her care was given the apples of youth, which gave strength again to the body, and color and light to face and eyes. She kept them in a casket and never were they renewed. When the Æsir had need of them, she drew forth from the case the apples which were small as peas until her hands touched them. Others took the place of those taken out, so that the casket was never empty. Always was it filled, and none knew whence they came.

"But Thyassi Jötun looked with covetous eyes upon the apples of Iduna, and sought how to get them. Once Odin, together with Loki the evil one, and

Hoenir, went from Asgard over the mountains to an uninhabited land, and it was not easy for them to get food to eat. When they came down into a valley they saw a herd of oxen, took one of them and prepared it for the fire. When they thought it was cooked they took it off, but it was not cooked. A second time, after waiting a little, they took it off, and it was not cooked. They considered what might be the cause of this. Then they heard a voice from the tree above them which said that he who sat there caused this. They looked up, and a large eagle sat there. The eagle said:

"'If thou wilt give me my fill of the ox, it shall be cooked.'

"They assented. The bird came slowly down from the tree, sat on the hearth, and at once ate up the four shoulder pieces of the ox. Loki got angry, took a large pole, and with all his strength struck the eagle. At the blow the eagle flew into the air. The pole adhered to its body, and the hands of Loki to one end of it. The eagle flew so that Loki's feet touched the rocks, the stone heaps, and the trees. He thought his hands would be torn from his shoulders.

"He shouted eagerly, asking the bird to spare him, but it answered that he would never get loose unless he promised to make Iduna leave Asgard with her apples. Loki promised this, got loose, and went home.

"At the appointed time, the evil one enticed Iduna to go to a wood out of Asgard, by saying that he had found some apples which she would prefer to her own, and asked her to take her apples with her to compare them. Iduna went with him willingly, for he was one of the Æsir. As she left the walls of Asgard behind, a fear seized upon her, and she would have returned, for now it came to her that Bragi, her husband, the wise and the eloquent, had told her never to leave the city. Even as the fear seized upon her, Thyassi Jötun came in eagle's shape, took Iduna, and flew away to his abode in Jötunheim.

"The Æsir were much grieved at the disappearance of Iduna, and soon became gray-haired and old for the apples of youth had gone from them. Hela the death goddess came from Niflheim, and abode among them also. Then did the Æsir grieve more for the apples of Iduna. They held a Thing (the parliament of the Norsemen is so called), and asked each other for news of her. Then was it made known that she was last with Loki. Odin, the fierce one, ordered Loki before him, and declared that if he did not return Iduna, he should be put to death or torture.

"Then did the evil one fear, and consented to bring Iduna from Jötunheim if Freyga would lend him the hawk skin which she owned. When he got it, he flew north to Jötunheim, and one day came to Thyassi Jötun who was sea-fishing. Iduna was at home alone. At first, she had been glad when her bond maidens were always smiling; but soon she discovered that they had no souls, and could not sympathize with her in her sorrow.

"Often did Thyassi Jötun try to get the apples, but when he would touch them they disappeared, and he could not. Angrily had he threatened Iduna if she gave him not them, and now, full of wrath at her refusal, he had gone sea-fishing. So Loki found her alone.

"He changed her into a nut, held her in his claws, and flew away as fast as he could. But Thyassi Jötun in the form of an eagle pursued them. The Æsir saw the hawk flying with the nut and the eagle pursuing, and they went to the Asgard wall, and carried thither bundles of plane shavings. When the hawk flew into the burgh, it came down at the wall.

"The Æsir set fire to the shavings, but the eagle could not stop when it lost the hawk, and the fire caught its feathers and stopped it. The Æsir were near, and slew Thyassi Jötun which was a very famous deed. So did they have again the apples of youth.

"For my own part, I would that men might partake of them, for I like not to get old."

"'Tis a pretty tale," remarked the maiden who had listened with interest.

"Thinkest thou so?" cried the skald, much pleased. "Once such tales were heritage of Saxon as well as Dane; but now have they turned aside from the old gods, and taken up with mass and rood until their strength has waned, and no longer have they courage in the strife. Truly, to the followers of Odin doth the victory come."

"It hath not been so always," cried Egwina, stung out of caution. "I trow that King Alfred hath borne the victory often from thee. What he hath done, that will he do again."

"Maiden, what knowest thou of the king? Bracelets the most massive, many gifts, and a place on the high seat would Guthrum give thee for tidings of Alfred. Speak!"

"Naught, naught," answering the girl, realizing her mistake. "I speak only a Saxon's hope. Is it unseemly that we should wish our king victorious in place of thine?"

"Nay; 'tis natural," returned Sigurd. "But methought that thou didst speak as if thou wert ware of the king's doings."

"I would that I were," answered the maiden with fervor. "What should a simple maiden wot of the king?"

"Speaketh she the truth?" demanded Sigurd of his daughter.

"In seeming, but not in deed," returned the seid woman. "Be patient, my father. This night in the hall of Hakon the jarl will Gyda perform the seid. Then shalt thou know all that lieth in the maiden's heart."

"Sainted mother be with me!" murmured the girl under her breath.

"Knowest thou the fate songs, maiden?" asked Gyda.

"Nay; I am a Christian," answered the maiden simply.

"Then will I teach thee," remarked Gyda. "If thou hast a good voice thou couldst he useful to me in singing the spell songs; for few they be that know them. Listen, and thou shalt hear one now."

"Nay; rather let me hear more of thy tales," and Egwina looked appealingly at the skald. "Well dost thou tell them, and I wonder not that thou art welcome where there is glee."

"Thou shalt hear them then," cried Sigurd, flattered by her words. "Later, daughter, canst thou use her for thy art. Now let her listen to mine, for I have need to refresh my memory. Wise is she in the lore of our craft; for a daughter of a skald, and a skald maiden is she. Then knowest thou, maiden, how Skadi, the daughter of Thyassi Jötun, came to Asgard to avenge her father?"

"No; I know but the tales of my own people," said Egwina, rejoiced that she was not obliged to listen to the spell songs of the seid woman.

"Listen then! All Asgard rejoiced at the death of Thyassi Jötun, when Skadi, his daughter, took helmet and brynja (shield), and a complete war dress, and came to Asgard to avenge her father. The Æsir offered her reconciliation and a weregeld, but first that she might choose from among them a husband. Then was the heart of Skadi made glad, for a live husband is better than a dead father; so she consented to the reconciliation.

"The Æsir could not agree among themselves as to which one she should take, so they made Skadi choose from among them, not seeing more than the feet. They stood behind a large curtain, and only their feet could be seen below it. Now Skadi wished very much to have Baldur, the beautiful, for a husband, so she looked very carefully at the feet, and chose the most beautiful pair, saying, 'This one I choose. Few things can be ugly in Baldur.'

"But it was not Baldur at all, but Njord, the old one, whom she had chosen. Then did the Æsir laugh and exult. Skadi was angry, but she was fain to abide by her choice, for she alone had done the choosing."

Egwina laughed, interested in spite of her fears.

"Methinks I would rather choose by the countenance than the feet," she cried merrily. "Men's looks reflect their deeds, and a clear eye doth oft show a kind heart as well as a brave one."

"True, child. Much wisdom is there in thy speech. Remember well thy words, and when Skulda doth mingle another's golden thread with thine, look well to face and heart as well as strength of arm, and well-shaped feet."

"Already is the web of her fate woven," declared the seid woman. "Skulda hath already interwoven with hers the warp and woof of greatness."

"How dost thou know?" cried Egwina. "Thou canst not know such things. I believe it not. Little care I for my fate until I come to it, and I wot that my life

depends not on thy tongue roots."

The ghost of a smile flitted over the face of the woman.

"Thus didst thou not speak when the vala unraveled for thee thy dream. To-night thou shalt know more of thy future, and we shall know more of thee. Thy design and what of import that is which thou dost carry in thy bosom."

Involuntarily the maiden's hand went to the bosom of her tunic, for there did she carry the jewel that the king had given her. A light flashed into Gyda's eyes, and again did the maiden cross herself.

"Here are we come at last to the dwelling of Hakon the jarl," said Sigurd, turning into the courtyard of a large wooden dwelling which had belonged to a Saxon thegn. "Here do we dwell for the night."

"I will pass on," said Egwina, trying to speak calmly. "I see in yon distance the house of a ceorl. Happier far will I be to abide with mine own people. I thank ye both for sweet and gracious entertainment, and bid ye God-speed."

So saying, she started onward, but the seid woman was by her side instantly.

"Too gracious hath been thy company, maiden," she cried with glittering eyes, "for us now to be deprived of it. Besides, hath not my father entertained thee with tales of our people? Now them must listen to the spell songs of Gyda."

"Prithee insist not upon it," entreated the girl. "I would go onward."

"Be with us for the night, maiden," spoke Sigurd. "Naught of harm shall befall thee if thy intent be good. Darkness hath begun to settle over the earth, and it is not meet for maiden to be out alone. Thou art of my craft, and Sigurd will ask of thee only thy songs and glee. Unless it so be that thou hast some mission to perform and must be on thy way, I entreat thee to stay with us."

So much against her wish, Egwina was forced to enter the dwelling of Hakon the jarl.

CHAPTER XII—THE MAGIC SLEEP

The great mead hall was crowded with Danes, feasting and drinking, and on the high seat sat Hakon the jarl. Merrily did they greet the skald and the maiden,

but the seid woman they welcomed with words of respect. Hakon himself came from his high seat, took her by the hand, and led her to the place which had been prepared for her, and asked her to run her eyes over the household and over himself that he might know the fates of them all.

Then did they set before her porridge made with goat's milk, and a dish made of the hearts of all kinds of animals. She had a spoon of brass, and a knife of brass, and whatever she called for the same was brought to her. All feasted. Egwina ate and drank but little for she was afraid. Anxiously she felt of the jewel to see if it were safe, and uneasily did she await coming events.

After the feast Hakon the jarl called for the skalds, and many there were who sang of his deeds and his bounty. When all had sung, the jarl cried:

"Methinks I see a skald maiden who hath not yet sung? Norse doth she look but Saxon is her dress."

"Right art thou, O Hakon," cried Sigurd. "Keen as the eagle's are the eyes of Odin's son that see afar off. The maiden is fair enow for Norse, but is a Saxon. A skald maiden is she, and I misdoubt not knoweth well many songs."

"I would hear thy harp," said the jarl, and Egwina stood forth and sang a quaint little Norse song that her grandsire had taught her.

"Good, good," cried the jarl delighted. "Sweet is thy harp, fair maid, but not so sweet as the voice that accompanies it. Come nearer."

Egwina advanced hesitatingly toward the high seat.

"Wondrously wrought is thy harp. Where would skald maiden get so beautiful a one? It might be gift from royal hand."

"It is the gift of a king," came from the seid woman.

Hakon looked at the maiden.

"It is true, O jarl," she said in answer to the look. "'Tis the custom of the Saxon thus to reward those who make glee for them."

"'Tis custom in all lands," said Hakon with a smile, taking from his neck a chain of gold. "Take this, maiden; as thou playest on the harp of a king, it is fitting that thou shouldst receive royal gifts. 'Tis a chain of gold that hath never known alloy. Behold, from its centre hangs an amulet that ever faithful guards the wishes of the wearer."

"My thanks I give thee, Hakon," murmured the girl as the jarl threw the chain over her shoulders.

"I'd hear thy harp again," said he, "but sing of Saxon and Dane. Canst give us a song of victory of Dane over Saxon?"

Then the heart of the maiden swelled within her as she thought of that dear grandfather who had given his life because he would not so sing, and her soul grew strong and she spake boldly:

"I am a Saxon, Jarl Hakon, and niddering would I be to sing of my country's

shame. Willing am I to make glee for thee if aught in my harp or voice doth please thee. Many are the skalds that can sing for thee thy countrymen's victories. Gracious hath been thy gift; gracious thy present to the skald maiden; but take it back and ask not this thing of her."

"Keep thy bauble," and the jarl thrust it back upon her. "Would that our maidens would prove so true to their land. Sing not so, maiden, if thou dost not wish, but something Saxon. One that is true to his own land never bewrays another."

The Danes watched the affair in surprise. Jarl Hakon was an austere man, and never had he been known before to countenance the least crossing of his wishes. Egwina thanked him gratefully, and then, as he desired, swept the strings and sang. She chose the song of The Phœnix, a subject very popular with the Saxon poets; the mystic life, death, and resurrection of the fabled bird.

Her thoughts flew to the little hut in the woods where the king of the Saxons lay concealed. Should he, like the phœnix, rise above the funeral pyre of the dead hopes of his people, and again rule the land as king? A quaver crept into her voice, and then, as she recalled his words, "The earth, when conquered, give us the stars," hope swelled her bosom. No matter the difficulties, the dangers that beset his path, Alfred would reign again. God's chosen king was he, anointed by the holy pope himself. Her voice burst into the triumphant refrain as the assurance came home to her.[1]

"Lo, from the airy web,
Blooming and brightsome,
Young and exulting, the
Phoenix breaks forth.

"Round him the birds troop
Singing and hailing;
Wings of all glories
Engarland the king.

"Hymning and hailing,
Through forest and sun-air,
Hymning and hailing
And speaking him 'king.'

[1]Bulwer Lytton's versification. By some this poem is placed in the tenth century. Morley puts it in the eighth.

"Hymning and hailing,
And filling the sun-air
With music and glory
And praise of the king."

Silence fell upon the retainers as they listened. The seid woman's eyes glittered strangely.

"Well hast thou done, child," and Hakon took from his arm a massive bracelet.

"Thou hast already given me sufficient," said Egwina, modestly refusing the gift.

"Tut! Refuse naught that is offered thee. Not always wilt thou find me so generous. I liked the spirit of thy song."

"'Twas filled with thought of the king," came from the seid woman. "Nourish not a viper, Jarl Hakon. Seek from the maiden the whereabouts of the king whom ye seek. Uncertain is the tenure of the Northman unless the Dragon of Wessex be put down. Ask of the maiden the whereabouts of King Alfred."

The jarl turned to Egwina.

"Is this true that thou dost know where thy king is?"

"Gracious wert thou, O jarl, when thou didst say that I sing not against my country! Gracious be in this also. I could not sing the shame of my country, Hakon; neither can I bewray my king."

Hakon knitted his brows, and became thoughtful.

"Thou needst not to ask aught of the girl," spoke Gyda again. "Hath the seid woman power to tell thee that which thou wishest? Quotha! Let the incantation be prepared."

"It shall be as thou sayest," said the jarl, rousing himself. Then did he order some young men to bring a large flat stone which was placed upon four posts set in the centre of the room before the high seat.

Upon the platform the volva took her place. Women formed a circle round it, and sang the fate song. When these were finished, the seid woman began to mutter and gesticulate violently as the revelations came to her.

"I see thee, Jarl Hakon," she cried.

"On the broad heath thy bow strings twang,
While high in air the arrows sang;
Thy iron shiner brings to flight
The warder of great Odin's shrine,
Thou, the long haired son of Odin's line,
Raises the voice which gives the cheer,

First in the track of wolf or bear."

She writhed upon the stone ghastly pale, and burst forth again.

"In battle storm ye seek no lee,
With skulking head and bending knee,
Behind the hollow shield.
With eye and hand ye fend the head,
Courage and skill stand in the stead
Of panzer, helm and shield
In Hild's bloody field."

"Tell me, Gyda, that of which ye spake," said the jarl. "Tell me of the Saxon King Alfred. Lives he yet?"

"Westward doth the gray wolf run,
Westward toward the setting sun;
Follow fast and seek ye him
In the forest dank and dim."

"Then he doth live!" and the jarl turned to his followers. "Heed well the words of the volva. Heed well and fasten them upon your hearts, for to-morrow do we seek for the Saxon king." He threw a gold ring on the high seid platform, and said, "Knowest the maiden aught of the hiding place of the king?"

"Well knows the maiden
Where Alfred lies hidden.
By that in her bosom
Is she forth on his bidding."

Hakon started towards the maiden, who nervously clasped her harp to her breast. At this moment the voice of the vala rose high in a shriek and the jarl ran back to hear the frenzied utterances. Egwina felt her hand touched, and a voice whispered:

"Start not, maiden, nor tremble. I am Ethelred, the youth who beheld thee in the forest with King Alfred. Be of good courage. Thou hast one friend here."

Egwina turned her head for the moment, and when she did she beheld near her the form of what appeared to be a young Dane. He looked towards her and smiled slightly, and then did she see that it was indeed the Saxon youth. Now hope infused into her heart, and, with better courage, she listened to the ravings

of the seid woman.

"'Ware, 'ware of the forest, Jarl Hakon,
The dragon steals forth from his lair,
He tears thee and thy people asunder,
And leaves ye as food for the bear.

"Then take from the vala a warning;
Seek not the Saxon's great king;
The forces of Wessex are gathering,
The dragon of Wessex will spring."

She ceased, and no more came from her lips. In vain did the jarl throw gifts upon the platform. Whatever the power of the volva, it had left her, and she lay motionless on the stone.

Finding that it was useless to inquire further, the jarl turned to the hall and called loudly for four cups of mead.

"The cup of vows do I drink," he said. "To Odin, who giveth the victory; to Frey and Nïord, for a good year and peace, and to Bragi. I vow by these drinks that I have drunk to the Æsir that I will do some great deed that shall be worthy the song of the skald. And that deed shall be the hunting of Alfred. If it so be that Odin hath sent the choosers of the slain to bear me to Valhalla, then welcome will be the warrior's death. Who pledges with me the Valkyrie?"

"I!" "I!" shouted the Northmen, leaping to their feet, each lifting a horn of mead to his lips.

"To Hela, who will mourn in Niflheim, that she is robbed of her prey!"

Again they drank.

"To-morrow will we set forth to seek the Dragon in his lair, the king in his hole. The Raven hath driven the Dragon from his throne. Shall he not tear him in pieces? Who goes with me to hunt King Alfred?"

Again the hoarse shouts of the retainers filled the hall.

"Whether she will or no, the maiden shall lead us," cried the jarl. "Sweet will her songs come to us as, wearied by the march, we tarry for rest."

But Egwina was silent, a resolve growing in her heart that, though death might be her portion, or, worse yet, the severest torture, she would not lead these men to Alfred's hiding place.

The seid woman came down from the platform and glided through the Danes, who, now that they had pledged themselves to Odin, began to hold high revelry, to the side of the maiden.

"Within thy breast there rests a jewel," she said, in a low tone, to the girl.

"It is wondrously wrought, and Gyda wants it. Give it to her and she will help thee to escape from Hakon."

"I cannot. It is the—" began the girl, and paused.

"Yea; the king's. I know, maiden, the word that thou wouldst speak. Well do the runes read for Alfred the king. Let me but have his jewel and thou shalt go free."

But Egwina shook her head.

"Wondrous will be thy fate, maiden. Dost wish to know it? Gyda will tell thee, and will help thee on that mission on which thou art bent."

"Why dost thou wish for the jewel of Alfred the king? Saxon thou art not. Why dost thou wish it?"

"It bringeth good fortune to him who carries it. Wisdom and all the magic of galdra will be mine if but I possess the jewel of Alfred. Long, long ago, the runes told me that but one thing I lacked, and then all things would unfold to my view. That was something belonging to a Saxon king of the line of Cerdic who should be driven from his throne by my people. Give it me, maiden. All thy fate will I unfold, and more. I will compel Guthrum to extend his frith (peace) over thee so that thou mayest find those whom thou seekest in safety."

"No;" said Egwina boldly. "Let me know of my fate only as it comes to me. I will not aid thee in thy wicked art. Naught of King Alfred's should be used in so base a cause; and not this jewel while I hold it."

"Have a care, girl," hissed the woman. "If thou wilt not give it me, then will I obtain it by guile. Think not that Gyda hath no art."

"I will seek Hakon the jarl. He will take me under his hand," and Egwina rose to her feet.

"Do so," sneered the other. "His frith will he give thee, if thou wilt but lead him to the king's hiding place. Choose ye."

The maiden hesitated. It was even as the witch woman said. Helplessly she looked for Ethelred. He had disappeared from the hall. In despair she sank back upon her seat, and leaned her head upon her harp.

"Look at me, thou Saxon maid," commanded the wicca.

Almost without knowing what she did, Egwina looked at the woman.

"Heed, maiden, my words. Listen to the song of the witch woman, Gyda. Heed the words which she sings to thee, and sleep, maiden, sleep."

She made some passes over the maiden's head singing a low crooning song as she did so. Vainly Egwina made the sign of the cross. In vain did she strive to hold the sapphire ring which Ethelfleda had given her before her vision. The crooning song repeated its rhythmical measures in her ears. The eyes of the seid woman blazed. Living sparks seemed to leap from them to the eyes of the girl. They burned into her brain. She felt her senses reeling, going.

Faintly the voice of one of the Northmen sounded in her ear:

"Gyda, the seid woman, hath caused the maiden to fall into the magic sleep."

Faint and far off as a whisper they reached her, and sounded in her ears, "The magic sleep," and she knew no more.

CHAPTER XIII—VICTORY SITS WITH THE SAXONS

When Egwina awoke from her sleep, the sun was shining, and she did not know where she was. She was lying on a tick of straw which seemed to be moving under her. To her amazement, on sitting up, she found that she was in a rude cart with two Danish women and some children. As the memory of the events of the night before rushed upon her mind, she felt for the jewel of the king. It was gone. A torrent of bitterness gashed into her soul.

"Where is Gyda?" she demanded of the women fiercely.

"She went with Sigurd the skald we know not whither," answered one of them. "To thee, maiden, she bade us say that as she had obtained the jewel, she had kept her word, and sent thee from the hand of Hakon Jarl, so that thou mightst not have to lead him to thy king. Also she bade us say to thee that naught else of thine adornment was touched save the jewel only. Behold the chain which the jarl gave thee; the bracelet, and thy other ornaments are untouched."

"Tell me where we are and whither we go?" cried the girl eagerly.

"We go into Devonshire to join Hubba, who hath wintered in Demetia, and now cometh into the land of the Saxon from the west. It draws near the time for the feast of the spring. Then will the Northman sweep over the whole of the land, and finish that which he hath so well begun."

Egwina groaned. And none was there to warn the king.

"See," she said to the women taking from her throat the chain which the jarl had given her; "here is this, and the bracelet also. Both are of much value. Ye shall have them if ye will let me go from ye unmolested."

The women shook their heads, and the one who had done the speaking spake again:

"We durst not let thee from us. Of that did the seid woman bid us beware.

Neither doth it lie in our power so to do, for the Northmen are on every hand. See for thyself."

Egwina looked, and her heart sank as she beheld the long line of horsemen and men on foot before and behind. Many carts were there filled with women and children, and the supplies of the Danes. Everything gave evidence of preparations for a long march. Burying her face in her hands, Egwina resigned herself to the inevitable.

The march was long and of several days' duration. At last they came to the extreme western part of Devonshire. Here they were greeted by another large party of Norsemen under the renowned Hubba, one of the sons of Ragnar Lodbrock. The Saxons fled in terror at their approach. Some few, taking their wives and children with them, repaired to the castle of Kynwith.

The Danes followed after these last rapidly, and, seeing that the castle was impregnable, would not risk an attack upon it, but sat down before it in a camp, hoping thus to make the Saxons surrender either from famine or want of water; for there was no spring near the castle.

Vainly did Egwina seek to join the Saxons in the castle. Her every movement was watched, and she was forced to abandon the idea. Listlessly she mingled with them, listening apathetically to their songs. Often did they try to force her to join in their mirth and gladden their hearts by music, but she looked at them with unsmiling face and would not sing.

Thus the days passed. The pagans waiting only for the surrender of the castle which they thought must come soon through the dire necessity of the Christians.

Early one morning, just as the first faint streaks of dawn were tinting the sky, Egwina was awakened from slumber by the shouts of men and the clash of steel. In alarm, the Danes sprang to their arms, but the Saxons had surprised them too completely for anything but a furious resistance. From the first they cut down the Northmen in great numbers, for they were filled with the inspiration of despair, deeming death inevitable and preferring to fall in battle rather than by starvation.

The trembling maiden prayed fervently in her tent for the success of her people. While she was thus engaged, the flap was pushed rudely aside, and two men entered. They seized her before she was aware of their intention, and dashed out of the tent and into the thick of the fray where Hubba their king was.

"Take this for thy shield, Hubba," cried one, thrusting the maiden before the Danish king.

"If, then, thou art slain it must be through the body of the girl. They will not slay one of their own maidens."

But Hubba haughtily put the girl aside, making the sign of Thor as he did

so.

"Am I not strong in mine own strength? Why should I use a living buckler when mine own is better? Sköfnung (the name of his charmed sword) hath already drunk the blood of many who cannot find relief from its life stein. Besides, stand I not under the magical banner woven by my sisters in a single day? I need no maid for protection."

Proudly he turned from them and hastened again into the conflict. But the Norsemen stood looking at the magical standard, and suddenly they cried out, "Behold the raven lieth motionless! No longer doth he flap his wings in token of victory. We are doomed."

A wail of anguish went up from the ranks as they beheld the motionless raven. Above it came the voice of Hubba:

"If die we must, then die as sons of Odin should. The one-eyed one prepareth the feast of Shaehrimnir the boar. Fast floweth the mead from the goat. Welcome awaits us in Valhalla. Welcome and good cheer! But take with ye many of the Saxon warriors. Thus doth the Alfadur bid ye."

Roused to further exertions, the Danes raised their war chant and rallied round the fatal standard. Those who had brought Egwina to the combat now left her standing, and joined the others.

The bewildered girl stood, not knowing what to do or which way to turn. Everywhere Saxon and Dane mingled together in battle. The Norse women and children had withdrawn to one side. The women screamed or shouted encouragingly to husbands or fathers, or chanted the battle songs of their land. In the midst of the contest, the skalds' voices could be heard reciting the deeds of heroes and inciting the Norsemen to greater achievements.

The girl stood an unwilling, fascinated spectator, with no thought of danger to self. Bravely and fiercely fought the Dane. Bravely and fiercely fought the Saxon. True sons of Wodan they, and to the fighting blood of the old Norse heroes was added the lofty exaltation of striking for home and country.

Suddenly one of the Danish women caught sight of Egwina standing there in the midst of the battle. With a cry of fury she dashed toward her, and seizing her by the hair began dragging her back to where the women and children were.

Egwina cried out at the assault, and strove to tear herself from the grasp of the woman. At her cry, some of the Saxons turned. One, a youth, left the others and bounded toward the two.

"Unhand the girl," he commanded.

"Nay," cried the woman; "she shall serve as an offering to Odin. The battle goeth against us, and the fierce one demandeth a victim. Away!"

The youth grasped the woman by the wrists. "Release thy hold," he shouted; "or, by St. Peter of blessed memory, I will forget that thou art a woman."

"Forget it, then! Strike if thou durst! Strike, and upon thy head fall the curse of Odin."

"I care not for Odin's curses," cried the Saxon, "but I war not with women. Unhand the girl!"

The woman only tightened her grip the more on the long beautiful hair of Egwina.

"There is but one way, maiden." The youth let go one of the woman's wrists to draw his seax. The woman thought that he meant to cut off her hands. Egwina was of the same opinion, and suffering though she was, exclaimed, "For the love of Heaven, maim not the woman!"

There was a grim smile on the youth's face. He raised the seax and the stroke fell. With a scream the woman let the bright hair of the maiden fall, and fled to the others.

"Oh, didst thou hurt her?" cried Egwina, as the young man assisted her to her feet.

"No;" and he held up two fair locks of her hair. "I meant only to sever thy hair from thy head."

"And thou didst not intend to cut off her hands?" cried Egwina, relieved.

"Am I not a Christian? Do Christians treat others so?" demanded the youth. "Come, let us to the Saxons, for the battle is ended."

[image]

HE RAISED THE SEAX AND THE BLOW FELL.

It was true. Elated by their triumph, the Saxons pursued the flying Danes, and great was the slaughter. Great also was the booty they obtained from the camp, and, among other things, the magical banner of Hubba, under which the chief lay dead.

"Now," said the youth to Egwina, "the slaughter is done. Great will be the joy of Alfred when he hears of this day's prowess. A bode am I to thee from the king. Mickle and sore doth he repent having let thee go from his sight as bode for him to his family. He bids me, with others, to accompany thee on thy journey, and bring thee back in safety to him."

"Oh, hast thou seen him?" cried Egwina. "Heavy was my heart that I could not warn him of Hakon's intended search. Heavy did it lie in my breast when I knew that Hubba was to come from the west to overrun the land. I feared that the king's hopes were vain."

"That was the reason, maiden, that I left thee in the house of Hakon the

jarl," said Ethelred. "Niddering did it seem to leave thee, a girl, in the hands of the foe, unwitting what might befall thee. But in the king lieth all our hopes. 'Twere better that thou shouldst perish than that the king be not warned."

"Thou didst right," declared the girl, warmly. "What am I to be thought of in comparison with the king? Better, oh, better a thousand such as I should perish than Alfred."

"Thou art a true Saxon, and so I deemed thee," cried the youth. "Would that thegn and coerl were filled with thy spirit, and the Dane would no longer uprear his raven standard in the land. But to tell thee all: Hakon went forth with a goodly company. Alfred, who had been joined by numbers of the Saxons, sallied forth, took the jarl by surprise, and the bones of him and all his company lie whitening on the field."

"Dost thou not remember what the seid woman said?" asked Egwina in awe-struck tones:

"'Ware, 'ware of the forest, Jarl Hakon,
The dragon steals forth from his lair;
He tears thee and thy people asunder,
And leaves ye as food for the bear.'

"Dost thou suppose, Ethelred, that the vala doth really see what the future holds?"

"I wot not. There are many things that I understand not, but this do I know, that 'tis a heathenish practice, and little use have the good priests for it," and he crossed himself piously.

"True; but oft have I wondered whence came the power that seemed to belong to them."

"Think not of it," answered the youth, hastily. "Whatever of power they may have, 'tis of evil. Concern not thyself with such pagan doings, for unseemly doth it become a Christian. Come, let us to the castle. Bode must be sent to the king to tell him of this victory. Then thou, and I, and others will wend us to the depths of Somerset, where the king's family abide, and then back to Athelney."

And Egwina accompanied him to the castle.

CHAPTER XIV—A PLEASANT

SURPRISE

Somersetshire was the only county that had remained true to Alfred. Throughout all Devonshire the news of the victory of the Saxons at the castle of Kynwith brought great rejoicing. While everywhere the Saxons were open in their manifestations of delight, it was not deemed wise to precipitate matters by letting them know that the king was preparing to issue forth from his hiding place. Somerset alone was considered worthy to be trusted, and here the secret was told, and many left their homes to go to Athelney.

In the heart of Somerset, at the abode of the thegn, Oswald, a trusted and tried retainer of the king, the family of Alfred was hidden. With light heart did Egwina now go on the journey, for it was shared by Saxons true to the king, and hope had made glad their hearts.

"Dost know the family of the king?" inquired Ethelred of the maiden as they neared the dwelling of the thegn.

"I have met the lady Elswitha, and I saw her mother and children the night of the attack on Chippenham," answered Egwina. "Hast thou?"

"Nay;" replied the youth. "My father was of the royal family of Mercia, and, when the pagans overran the country, perished by the sword. With him I should have attended the great Witan at Winchester this Easter, and thus have seen the king, and mayhap his family also. Tell me of the lady Elswitha."

"She is fair and beautiful. Right worthy is she to be the noble Alfred's wife, for bravely did she bear herself on the night of the assault."

"Often have I seen Eadburga, her mother," remarked Ethelred, "and her father also, Athelred the Large, for they were of Mercia. Elswitha I have not seen, for she married the king—he was the atheling then—before I was old enough to remember. Much have I heard of the present atheling and his sister. Marry, I would like well to meet with them."

"Naught do I know of the atheling or his sister," said Egwina. "There were only some young children with the lady and her mother."

"And was there no youth of my age, nor maiden, near them?" queried Ethelred.

"Nay," returned Egwina. "There were a youth and a maiden there that night, but not the atheling nor his sister. The lad was younger than thou, and the maiden older than I. It could not be they. Besides, I met this youth and maiden in Andred's weald some time ago. See the ring that the maiden gave me."

She extended her hand with the sapphire upon it.

"And thou art sure that it was not the atheling's sister?" asked Ethelred as he examined the gem.

Egwina laughed.

"So sure am I, sir youth, that I will give thee this chain of gold that Hakon, the jarl, gave me if they be the same. Then, by this amulet, thou canst have all thy desires."

"Marry! if there be aught in the charm, I would that they be the same," returned the youth, falling in with her merry humor. "But hath it given thee thy wish yet, maiden?"

"Well-a-day! I wot not what it hath granted, but this I know: I wished myself well away from the dwelling of Hakon, jarl. That came about. I wished that the king be warned, and that also happened. Then did I wish that I could reach the lady Elswitha, and yon turrets tell me that that also is about to come to pass."

Ethelred laughed.

"Almost dost thou make me wish that I could obtain the chain."

"Gladly would I give it thee if only the maid of the forest and the atheling's sister were the same," returned the girl. "Oft have I wished to see them again. Oft have I wondered if the invader hath despoiled them of home, or where they be."

Over the girl's bright face came a cloud, for well did she know of the devastating work of the ravagers.

"Here we are!" cried the youth. "Now, maiden, thou art the bode from the king. Seek thou the lady first. We will tarry without until she bids us enter."

Egwina advanced through the courtyard, and then somewhat timidly to the portals. In answer to her knock, a warder opened the door and asked her in.

"I would see the lady Elswitha," spake she. "I bear to her a message from the king."

"From the king? From Alfred?" ejaculated the warder. He ran from the room without bidding her welcome. Egwina smiled at his evident delight, and seated herself near the entrance. She had scarcely done so when the lady Elswitha hastily entered. As soon as her eyes fell upon the girl she gave an exclamation of joy.

"Is it thou, little one? Glad am I to see thee safe. Oft have I wondered about thee and thy father—the good harper—who so bravely tried to lead us to King Alfred. Is he safe also?"

"Nay, lady," returned the maiden, touched to the quick by the gracious thoughtfulness of the lady, who could forget her own anxiety in care for the welfare of others. "Nay; he fell by the hand of the Dane. Anon will I tell thee of it, but now do I bear thee a message from the king. He is safe. Followers are rallying around him. Victory hath already crowned the Saxons against Hubba, and

ere the bringing home of the summer the king hopes again to rule over Wessex."

The lady clasped her hands. Her lips moved as if in prayer. Then, impelled by a gracious impulse, she stooped and kissed the maiden.

"Sweeter than softest music is thy message to my heart. I rejoice in my lord's safety, and that his people are coming to his call. Now can I wait further news until thou hast refreshed thyself."

"No, lady; I am not aweary, and it glads my heart to tell thee of the king," spoke the girl.

Then, as Elswitha drew her to her side, she told of the cottage in the woods, the occupations of the king, and everything of her journey hither. Many exclamations of joy, and pity, and terror did the kind lady utter as she listened to the story.

"And thy companions—the noble Saxons who brought thee thither? Where are they?"

"They await without thy bidding."

"They must be welcomed," cried the lady, warmly. "Sit thee here, child, until my return."

She hurried forth and heartily greeted the Saxons, bidding them come into the hall. Then she summoned Oswald the thegn, and bade him make a feast for the good news that was brought, and for the refreshment of those who had brought it. Into the hall came the three young children, two girls and the youngest, a boy: Ethelgiva, Ethelswitha and Ethelwerd, by name.

"Oh, my children," cried the lady, embracing them. "Good news have I for ye from your father. Haste to the bower chamber of your grandmother Eadburga! Bid her to come to the hall at once and all the household also, that I may tell them the joyful tidings."

The children ran quickly out. Egwina cast a hasty glance at the youth Ethelred. He wore a slightly disappointed look on his face, for he had heard so much of the atheling that he had supposed him older than this boy.

At this moment, the door was thrown open and into the hall there stepped a youth somewhat younger than himself—a falcon on his wrist, hounds at his heels.

"Edward, my son!" Elswitha rose excitedly. "Give good welcome to these friends who hath glad news of thy father."

Edward! Egwina looked up in amazement. It was the youth whom she had seen in the forest. The recognition was mutual.

"'Tis the gleemaiden!" exclaimed the lad, advancing toward her. "Truly, maiden, thou dost appear to be the good Flygia of our family, as the witch-wife would say. Thrice hast thou brought to us succor. Once in the forest; again on the night of the attack of the Danes didst thou and thy father strive to save us

from their fury; now thou art a fair bode from my father."

He took her hand gently, and Egwina grew rosy in confusion, more overwhelmed by his simple words than those of the others, because of her surprise at finding him the atheling.

Elswitha's mother, Eadburga, now entered and with her Ethelfleda, the maid of the forest. Egwina was not astonished at beholding her. Nothing, it seemed, could surprise her now. Not even did she see the quizzical smile with which Ethelred regarded her.

Ethelfleda took charge of her impetuously.

"Hast thou kept the ring?" she asked, after she had thanked and caressed the girl.

"Yes; though once I came near losing it," returned Egwina, showing it to her.

"Losing it? Tell me, and tell all that hath befallen thee since the people pressed us asunder," urged Ethelfleda.

"My daughter," spoke Alfred's wife, "let the maiden with the others refresh herself. Then shall all tell of themselves."

And so it was arranged. Elswitha would suffer nothing more to be said until they were rested. Then the maiden recounted all that had happened from the time she met them in the forest until the present.

"Beautiful is the chain which the Danish jarl gave thee," said Ethelfleda, examining it. "Curiously wrought, and of pure gold. I wot that it be charmed, as many of their ornaments are."

"Yes; the amulet, the jarl claimed, brought to the wearer the realization of every wish—" began Egwina, and then paused in some dismay, remembering Ethelred.

"It belongeth no longer to her," laughed the youth, joining them.

"Doth it not? How does that come?" asked Ethelfleda.

"She said that she would give it me were the youth and the maiden of the forest the same as the atheling and his sister," said Ethelred, merrily. "So ye see that it is hers only by my will."

"And it is thy will, is it not?" insinuated Alfred's son, gently.

"Nay, brother," spoke Ethelfleda, who was of sterner mold than the atheling, "if the maiden hath promised it, the word should be kept."

"And that right gladly," said Egwina. "Little did I reck when I spake that ye were the same, but it delights me to have met with you again. Take the chain, Ethelred, and may it bring to pass thy every wish."

"No, Egwina;" and the youth returned it. "I did but sport with thee. I wish not thy chain, though I thank thee for thy good wishes."

"But I gave thee my word," said the maiden. "I like not to break it. Prithee

take it, Ethelred."

But Ethelred shook his head.

"This is the solution," and Ethelfleda took up the chain. "Thou, Egwina, shall have the chain, and Ethelred the amulet which gives him his desires."

"Wise art thou, Ethelfleda. Worthy to be thy father's daughter!" said Ethelred, taking the amulet. "I take it with thy well wishes, Egwina, and from thee, Ethelfleda, that I may realize a wish that hath lately sprung up in my heart."

"Art thou pleased, Egwina?" asked Ethelfleda.

"Yes," answered she. "And I would that the amulet may bring him his wish. I am glad that he hath taken it."

"But not I," remarked Edward, detaching an amulet from his own chain. "Bare is it without an ornament. Take this in its place, Egwina. No charm hath it but the well wishes of the donor."

He clasped the amulet on the chain, and threw it over her shoulders.

Egwina's eyes shone.

"I cared not for the amulet of Hakon jarl," she said, "but this will I prize because thou, the king's son, hath given it."

"Ye must to your rest now, people," called Elswitha, coming up to them. "To-morrow will we set forth to join the king in the forest. So hie ye to rest, for we must start early enough to end the journey by nightfall."

With merry good-nights the group separated, Ethelfleda carrying Egwina with her to her own bower.

CHAPTER XV—THE BEGGAR OF ATHELNEY

Joyfully did Alfred greet them on their arrival at Athelney.

"Well hast thou done, little one," he said to Egwina. "Never will Alfred forget how leal thou hast been to him."

"But the jewel, my king? I grieve that I have lost it."

"'Tis nought," reassured the king. "A trifle like that can be replaced. And thou wouldst not, for thy life's sake, give it of thine own free will. Loyalty and honor hast thou shown—two of the brightest virtues in friendship's crown."

Glowing with pleasure, Egwina hastened to greet Denewulf and Adiva, who were overjoyed at her return. A cottage had been built on Athelney for Alfred, and to this he now repaired with his family. Ethelfleda would not be separated from Egwina, so the gleemaiden also went with them, much to the sorrow of the swineherd and his wife, who made her promise to return to them for a part of each day.

The island had been well intrenched and numbers had flocked to it. So many were there that the scant resources of the place were soon exhausted, and so dire was the necessity of the king that he was forced to forage for provisions.

Now, too, did he begin a series of skirmishes; attacking the enemy without ceasing, wherever he found any parties or camps accessible to his attempts. Whether his object was achieved, or did he meet with repulsion, he retired with a celerity that baffled pursuit to his unknown asylum. The Northmen became terror-stricken at the ravages which this secret foe was making upon them, and finally came to believe, with the superstition of the age, that the attacks were of a supernatural character.

Gradually the king extended his assaults, harassing the Danes with hostility in a distant quarter as well as those near. By day and by night, at dawn, in the evening twilight, from woods and marshes, he was ever rushing on the Northmen with all the advantages of selection and surprise. But still the provisions grew less, and the king was sore put for supplies.

One day, while it was yet so cold that it was frozen, the king's people had gone out to get provender, fish or fowl or whatsoever they should happen upon, while Alfred himself remained in the cottage. The king was discouraged. Despite the successful issue of his forays against the Norsemen, they still remained in such numbers that it seemed an impossible task to ever rid the land of them. At last he took from his bosom the little manual which he always carried with him, and began reading one of the Psalms of David for comfort.

A knock at the door brought Ethelfleda and Egwina from an adjoining room.

"Open, my daughter," said the king.

"But it may not be one of thy followers," said the girl, dubiously.

"Open; keep not one without who may need shelter from the wind. Piercing is the blast. Open unto him whomever it may be."

Ethelfleda opened the door not widely, as was the wont of the Saxons, for she feared that one might be without who sought the king.

"Bread, maiden! Give me bread to eat for Christ His sake," pleaded a man who stood there. He was poorly clad and he shivered in the chill breath of the March wind.

"Enter, in His name," cried the king, heartily. "Enter and warm thyself by

the fire."

Murmuring blessings, the man crept close to the fire and huddled over the blaze.

"Food for him," commanded the king to Ethelfleda.

"But, my king," remonstrated Egwina, speaking in a low tone, "there is but one small loaf of bread which is all the food that there is left. Wilt thou that it be set before the man, and thereby leave thee naught to strengthen thee for the sally to-night?"

"Give it anyway, little one," bade the king. "We have eaten to-day; it may be that he hath not. The poor man looks as if he needed it."

Thereupon he returned to his reading, while the maidens served the beggar. Hungrily did he eat. Soon the last morsel of bread disappeared before the voracious appetite. Then he arose, gathered the folds of his mantle more closely around him, and turned to the girls.

"Ye have heard the words of the master," he said. "'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' I thank ye, maidens, for your kindness. Most of all do I thank him who hath ministered to me from his own necessity."

He turned to the king as he spake, but Alfred had fallen asleep over his book. An expression almost of adoration passed over the beggar's face. Over the sleeping form then did he make the sign of the cross while the girls watched him in something like awe.

"Whoe'er thou art," he murmured, "Christ is with thee. For that mercy which thou hast meted to another from thy dire want, may it be returned fourfold. Art thou brought low from high estate? Be comforted. Low though the heavy clouds hang, above the sun is shining. Forsaken it may be that thou art now, but to thy call shall rally hundreds."

He bent before the sleeping form of Alfred, and pressed his lips to the king's hand. Then drawing his bonnet over his head went slowly from them.

"Almost," said Ethelfleda to Egwina, "could I believe that some saint hath visited us. Glad am I that my father bade me give him the food."

"He is some holy man," returned Egwina in a low tone. "But how he spake of the king? And how he loves him!" She touched the king's hand reverently. "How they all love him, Ethelfleda!"

"And worthy is he of their love," returned the daughter, gently kissing his forehead. "My noble father! I care not, Egwina, that he be king; but that he is wise, and tender, and so good. When he speaks, his words are unlying always, and men know that his word requires no oath to bind him. My heart bounds with pride when they call him 'The Truth Teller.' There have been many kings before him, but none so great as my father."

"I wonder not at thy love," said the gleemaiden. "Well doth he merit it. And Ethelfleda, as thou dost feel, so do all his people. Pride in his wisdom, and love for his tenderness, even to the beggar that hath left us. It hath given me new hope, for it is said that a poor man's wish is better than the gift of a rich man."

"Into my heart, too, hath crept new hope," said Ethelfleda. "Methinks that soon the days will really become brighter."

At this moment Alfred awoke, and started to his feet.

"Methought that a poor man but now asked for food," he said.

"One hath been here," answered Ethelfleda. "We fed him, and he is gone. Dost thou not remember, dear father, that there was not food enou' left for all but thou didst bid us bring it to him? He hath partaken of it, blessed thee, and gone."

"He blessed me?" The king's eyes grew dim. "'Tis strange! And then my dream!"

"Didst thou dream, my lord and son?" said Eadburga, entering the room. "I, too, have just dreamed. Speak, and let us hear thine, son."

"I dreamed," said Alfred, "that St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne stood beside me. He spake and told me he had been my guest. He said that God had seen my affliction and those of my people which were now about to end. In token whereof Edward will return with the Saxons with a great take of fish."

"Sayest thou so?" cried Eadburga, much agitated. "Why that is mine own dream. Was any one here at all?"

"There was a beggar," declared the girls in the same breath. "He blessed the king when he left, and made the sign of the cross over him."

"That was the reason that I did dream that it was St. Cuthbert," said Alfred, who nevertheless was much impressed by the dream.

"Thy difficulties are fast nearing an end," said the aged lady impressively. "I think, son, that this has been sent thee for comfort to thy heart, and cheer to thy drooping spirits."

"And comfort hath it brought," said the king heartily.

"I would that Edward would come with the others," cried Ethelfleda. "I would like to see if he bringeth a great take of fish."

"Look not always for a sign, daughter," reproved Alfred. "Well hath the vision served, if it but raise our courage. 'Twas induced by the blessing of the poor man. I would that he had remained with us, for it is chill and raw without. I wot that he was some holy man. Whatever he be, little doth he reck how he hath blessed us in return for the poor food which we gave."

"But still do I wish for Edward's return," declared Ethelfleda in a low tone to Egwina. "Supper will there not be unless the fish be taken. I am hungry. Art thou not, Egwina?"

"Not since I have seen that poor man eat," replied the maiden. "He ate as if

naught had passed his lips for days."

Just then came the tramp of many feet from without.

"Open, father," cried the voice of Edward. "Open and see what I have brought thee."

Ethelfleda flew to the door before Alfred could move, and threw it open.

"Welcome, welcome, Edward! What dost thou bring? Oh, father, see the fish!"

"Enough to feed an army," and he laughed as the Saxons tried to bring them in, for it was truly a great take. "Blessed be St. Wilfrid, who taught the Saxons to fish! He must have been with us to-day."

"No, son; a greater than Wilfrid was with thee," said Alfred solemnly, a joyous light shining in his eyes. "Wonderful hath been thy catch, and wonderful, too, hath been our experience."

"Let us have a feast," cried the practical Ethelfleda; "hungry must ye be, good people, and hungry am I also. Art thou not now, Egwina?"

"Since there is so much," answered she, "I wot that I am."

"And dost thou not feel hunger save when there is plenty?" laughed Ethelfleda. "Strange, Egwina! Would that my appetite would accommodate itself to the supply. But marry! the less there is, the more do I wish."

"'Tis the heart of Egwina that molds her appetite," commented Edward. "At the morning meal I could but notice how she broke off the larger part of her bread, and gave it to Ethelwerd and Elswitha. The meat did go in the same manner."

"Didst thou?" Ethelfleda looked up from the fish she was preparing in amaze. "Thou shouldst have eaten thy portion. Each had the same."

"True; but the little ones wished for more," said the girl simply. "And I need not much. Then, too, Edward gave me part of his."

"'Twas naught," said the youth hastily. "Thou wouldst retain nothing for thyself if thou were not watched. Besides, I am a man, and stronger than thou."

"A man?" teased his sister. "A man, yet thou hast not yet naught but down upon thy chin; nor art thou of age to wear buckler."

"Yet in truth a man," said Alfred, laying his hand kindly upon his son's head. "A man such as I wish to see, my son. Tender to the weak, and gentle to the helpless."

Edward's face flushed at the praise.

"Come, Ethelred," he called, to hide his confusion, to the young man who stood by the fire. "Come help us to prepare the fish."

"Gladly," returned Ethelred. "I have been warming by the fire, for chill hath the wind proved, else I had been with ye ere now. Marry! glad will I be when the Lenat (March) month hath passed."

Thus busily and merrily, despite hardships and dangers, did they prepare

the fish, and with hearts knit more closely together for these same hardships, the king and his retainers sat down to supper. As merry and gleeful were they as when in other days they had gathered round the festive board in royal hall with wassail and song, so now sat the Saxon king and his people in the rude cabin.

After the meal, Egwina sang, for to-night hope had entered into their hearts, and their hunger was satisfied as it had not been for days. Early the next morning, the king crossed to the mainland. But twice wound he his horn, when from the alders and forest there came many men.

"The king! The king!" they cried. "We rally to his standard!"

"Here is the king," came the reply, and thus five hundred more men were added to Alfred's number.

CHAPTER XVI—IN THE CAMP OF THE ENEMY

Easter had passed, and the first faint breath of spring was in the air. Rapidly the numbers in Athelney increased. The whole people had by this time been apprised of the king's plan, and were making preparations to join him in the final blow. Guthrum with his Danes grew aware of the unusual stir and activity among them, but found it impossible to discover its cause.

Still Alfred knew not the strength of the enemy. Guthrum had removed from Chippenham, and was now encamped at Westbury. Into the king's mind there came a bold idea. Calling Egwina to him, he said with his winning smile, "Little one, darest thou to accompany me on a journey?"

"Gladly, my king," was the response.

"I will not hide from thee, Egwina, that it may be fraught with peril both to thee and to myself. But it will advantage me to take it, though little do I reck of the outcome. Thou needst not go unless thou wilt. I will not think the less of thee if thou dost not choose to go."

"It matters not, my king, whither, or into what it doth lead. If thou dost desire me with thee, then will I go."

"Thou leal little one! I knew that I could trust to thy courage. Listen to my plan, Egwina, and then shalt thou say if thou wilt. Thou and I will go as minstrels

into the camp of Guthrum, and I shall see for myself his forces and supplies. Now, what sayest thou?"

But before she could answer, Ethelfleda, who had joined them, broke in with, "My father, take me with thee. Did I not sing to thy harp? I am thy daughter, and it is more fitting that I should share thy danger than Egwina."

"Thou art too proud in thy port for a gleemaiden," returned the king. "Far too proud for my purpose. Thou couldst not be one in seeming. Egwina hath always been one, and so will give more of the appearance of truth to the affair? Thou seest, my daughter, that it were better for Egwina to go?"

"I see," answered Ethelfleda slowly. "But, oh, my father! Mickle sorrow doth it give me that I have done naught for thee in thine affliction!"

"Thou hast done much," and the king soothed her tenderly. "Much! Thou hast cheered and comforted me by thy presence and brightness, and that is much, for I wot how thou hast chafed at the inactivity, my lion-hearted daughter. This also do I promise thee: the beacon that bringth all the Saxons together thou shalt light with thine own hands."

"Oh, may I?" cried Ethelfleda, delightedly. "Then, Egwina, no longer do I grudge thee thy place, but wish all good to befortune thee."

"Wilt thou go, Egwina, now that thou knowest what thou will have to encounter? If it should so be that there are any in the camp of the Dane who know me, then I wot not what will become of thee."

"Think not of me," returned the girl earnestly. "Is not the gleemaiden wont to endure trials? Think not on me, but reflect on thyself. How shalt thou act, my king?"

"As a gleeman. With harp and song shall we delight them; then with tricks of mimicry, and knives and balls, will I excite their mirth."

"But thou hast also a proud bearing," and the girl looked anxious.

"Not more so than thy grandsire," said Elswitha with a smile. "He did deport himself full of pride."

"And the gifts," went on the maiden. "Canst thou receive them humbly and gratefully from the gift stool?"

"Never fear, little one. Alfred hath been forced to pillage for food itself lately, and his pride hath been brought very low."

So the king disguised himself as a minstrel, and with Egwina, the gleemaiden, set forth for the camp of the Dane. After they had emerged from the forest, they began singing and playing as they wended their way through the villages. The people flocked after them, and many were the invitations extended to tarry at some hall, but the supposed minstrel and his daughter refused them, and kept steadily on their way to the Danish camp.

It was a well fortified place, and, as they approached, the keen eyes of the

king noted how impregnable its walls were.

"Should we ever succeed in freeing the land from the invaders," he said thoughtfully, "the lesson will not have been in vain. Behold those walls, Egwina! How staunch and firm they be! If God so pleases to bestow peace upon us for a time, fortresses shall be reared, ships made, and the coasts defended; so that never again shall Norseman or foe of any kind ravage the country."

They came to the gates, and there paused, singing their sweetest melodies. The warders listened and opened to them. Minstrels were held in such esteem that Saxon and Dane alike looked upon them as non-combatants, and admitted them freely to the halls of either side. So it happened that the king and the maiden were soon amusing the warriors within the camp.

They roared with merriment at the tricks of the minstrel, and listened entranced to the singing of Egwina.

"To Guthrum! To Guthrum they must go!" cried one of the crowd which surrounded them. "'Twill warm the heart of the king to hear them!"

So to the abode of Guthrum were they taken. The king sat on his high seat at meat when the warden spake to him:

"A Saxon minstrel is without, good king. The strings he touches with a master's hand; and as he plays the maiden with him sings to his harp tales of heroes and brave deeds. Fair is she, and rarely well doth she sing. In sooth, the tricks the gleeman gives are good also."

"Then let them enter," said the king. "Heavy lieth the heart of Guthrum in his breast for darkness hath settled over him, and he feareth evil to come."

"Enter, minstrel. My lord's heart is heavy, ease it with thy art," and the warder conducted them into the hall where Guthrum sat with his jarls.

"Strike thy harp, skald," said Guthrum, "and choose some lay that will lighten the shadow which the death goddess, Hela, hath thrown over my soul. For to-night, Guthrum sitteth in darkness."

Alfred gazed in compassion on the noble countenance and broad forehead of the Dane before him. A wish to ease the burthen which evidently oppressed him by infusing into his soul some of that comfort which never failed, filled him. Striking his harp with a strong twang of the strings after the fashion of harpers, he exclaimed loudly, "Hwaet!" (what). The clamour of the surrounding voices was hushed instantly and he began to sing.

"Tis a Christian hymn, skald. Hast not something gayer? Some song of the deeds of thy heroes or ours? Once were Saxon and Dane brothers from the same Alfadur, but now hath the Saxon forsaken his gods."

"Brothers they be still under the All-father," returned Alfred. "Brothers, Guthrum, in stronger bonds than those of yore. And brother's hand should not be lifted against brother."

"Thy harp," said Guthrum impatiently. "'Tis music I crave, not thy words."

Again did the king sing, and this time accompanied by the maiden. Guthrum raised his hand.

"Wait, skald. Wondrous is thy skill on the harp, and delectably also doth the maiden wield the cymbals. I would that my daughter should hear ye."

He motioned to some of his servitors, who left the hall, and soon returned bearing a chair in which was seated the form of a girl. She was very pale, but her dark eyes were bright, and her countenance, though wan, showed traces of beauty.

"What aileth thy daughter, O king?" came from Alfred pityingly as he looked on the white face of the girl.

"Her knee is swollen, and vain hath been all leech's care," returned Guthrum. "It hath been long since she hath stood. It pricks me to the heart thus for Hilda to be so sore afflicted."

"Her knee?" The Saxon king drew near the maiden. "Wheaten flour boiled in milk and applied while warm hath been known to work wonders for such misease. Knowest thou not that Cuthbert was so cured?"

"Cuthbert? No, I know naught of him. Was he afflicted as I?" spoke the Danish girl eagerly.

"In the very self-same manner, maiden. Listen and, if thou wishest, I will tell thee how the good saint was cured."

"But thy harp," interposed Guthrum. "Work no charm, sir skald, but give us of thy skill."

"Nay, my father," spake the maiden Hilda. "He worketh no charm, and I would hear of this Cuthbert. Speak on, skald."

Alfred looked at Guthrum, and the latter bowed in assent to his daughter's wish.

"Cuthbert," began the minstrel, "was a noble youth destined for a holy man. He had alway been straight and handsome, but all at once—

"The youth now bent beneath a sudden pain[2]
And led his languid footsteps with a pine.
When on a day as in the air he placed
His weary limbs, and meek yet mourning lay,
A horseman clothed in snowy garments came,
And graceful as a courser:—He saluted
The youth reclined, who offered his obeisance.

[2]Bede's Life of St. Cuthbert.

"My prompt attentions should be gladly paid
To you if grievous pains did not withhold me;
See how my knee is swelled—no leech's care
Through a long lapse of time has soothed the evil."
Straight leaped the stranger from his horse and stroked
The part diseased, thus counselling:

"The flour
Of wheat and milk boil quickly on a fire,
And spread the mixture warm upon the tumor."
Remounting then he took the road he came;
And Cuthbert used his medicine, and found
That his physicians from th' exalted throne
Of the Supreme had come, and eased his pain,
As with the fish's gall he once restored
The light to poor Tobias."

"That is like me," said the Danish girl. "Oh, I wonder if that would avail my poor limb?"

"'Twill harm thee not to try it, and may it bring thee cure as it did Cuthbert."

"And ever will I hold thee in grateful memory should it do so," said Hilda. "Take this charm, minstrel, and if it cures as thou dost say, bring that to Hilda, and from this land's demesne shalt thou receive a jarl's share. Ay, with vill upon it, too."

Alfred hesitated.

"From this land's demesne?" he repeated. "Then dost thou own the land?"

"Not yet; but Alfred hath fled from our power, and soon will my father complete that which he hath so well begun. Fear not, minstrel! Thou shalt have thy share."

"But—" began Alfred.

"The king doth wax impatient," spake Egwina, quickly. "Should we not again soothe his brow with melody?"

"Thou speakest well," said Hilda. "I, too, would hear thy harp. Take the charm, minstrel, and bring it me should it fall out as thou hast said."

She extended the charm which Alfred took. Again the king and the maiden sang, and yet again. Guthrum rose from his seat and with his own hands bestowed gifts upon them.

"Wondrous is thy skill, and that of the maiden also," he said to Alfred. "Yet methinks that thou art not as are other skalds."

"Eager and willing am I to accept thy princely favors, O King, even as other

skalds are," returned the minstrel. "Kingly are thy gifts, Guthrum, as doth become thee. Why sayest thou that I am not as the others?"

"Keen doth flash thine eye, and ever and anon thy glance doth penetrate as if to read my soul. An enemy would I say thou wert, but that thou hast looked with compassion upon mine afflicted one. And, minstrel, if thy cure doth work, add to what my child hath granted any boon that thou dost wish, and it shall be thine."

"I will remind thee of thy promise, my lord," and Alfred drew his gonna about him. "Long will the harper remember thy gifts, for generous have they been, and again may he seek thy favor."

He turned to leave, when there came a commotion from the lower end of the hall.

"Gyda, the seid woman hath come," came the cry, and into the room the witch woman ran.

"Guthrum! I would speak with Guthrum, the old," she cried. "This night have I been warned that the enemy is within the camp. The Dragon hath come forth from his lair. He is within thy walls, Guthrum! Seize him, lest he devour thee!"

"My king, we must fly," whispered Egwina, with pale face. "I fear the wicca, for she hath marvelous power."

"Nay," said Alfred. "Tremble not, little one. Be not afraid. There is One higher than wicca, in whose hands we are. Let us meet the danger as Saxons."

He turned and stood as if to hear what the seid woman said, and the trembling maiden drew close to his side.

"What is it that thou sayest, Gyda?" called Guthrum the king. "That an enemy is in our midst? Where is he that we may seize him?"

"Yon skald and the maiden are not what they seem," called the woman loudly.

"The skald! The skald! Where is the skald?" demanded an hundred voices at once. Alfred advanced into the centre of the hall.

"Who calls the skald?" he asked. "Wish ye more of harp and song that ye cannot let a man and his daughter pass?"

"Come hither, minstrel," commanded Guthrum as the tumult ceased suddenly at the sound of the voice of the harper. "And thou, Gyda! Come thou also, and make thine accusal."

Alfred looked fixedly at the woman. She quailed under his glance.

"My lord," he said to the Dane boldly, "if I seem not to be what I am, 'tis not the fault of the minstrel. In token of the truth of my words thou shalt find in the breast of the seid woman a jewel of gold. Look! if it be not there, do to the harper as thou wilt."

With a cry of rage the seid woman clasped her hands to her bosom.

"The runes were wrong," she gasped. "O my lord, take not from me the jewel. Again will I read the rede. Let the skald go, for I have wronged him."

"And thou hast the jewel even as he hath said?" queried Guthrum, looking from one to the other in perplexity.

"Yes, my lord."

"Then," said the Dane, turning to the minstrel who stood so calmly waiting his pleasure, "thou art a galdra smith (a wizard) as well as harper?"

"Nay," returned Alfred. "No charm do I work save that of a good conscience. Some little lore of leech craft have I, but that be all."

"And thou art truly a harper?" Guthrum knew not what to do, yet was loth to let him go.

"Hast thou not heard for thyself? Be thou my judge."

"True," said Guthrum. "What sayest thou, Gyda?"

"My lord, let the incantation be prepared for the seid woman; for this night hath her art misled her," returned Gyda, who sought to divert all minds from the jewel.

"Let the incantation be prepared," commanded the king.

"Go," whispered the Danish woman, and Alfred turned and without undue haste made his way unchidden from the hall.

CHAPTER XVII—THE WINNING OF A BUCKLER

The time at last was ripe to strike the final blow. By his visit into Guthrum's camp, Alfred had learned the numbers, disposition and discipline of the Danes. After satisfying himself as to the chances of a sudden attack, he had returned to Athelney and sent messengers to the thegns and ealdormen of neighboring shires, giving them a tryst for the second week in May.

Egbert's stone, twenty-six miles east of Selwood, was the place of the tryst. The signal for the gathering of the forces was to be a beacon light kindled on the top of Stourton's hill, where Alfred's Tower now stands. The light would be hidden from the Danes by the range of Wiltshire hills, while it would be visible to the

low country towards the Bristol Channel and to the south as far as Dorsetshire.

The time had finally come for the decisive blow to fall, so Ethelfleda and Egwina, whom the former had generously consented should accompany her, set forth, with Edward and Ethelred for protection, to light the beacon.

"Prithee, Ethelfleda, let me carry the coals," said Ethelred. "Thou has carried them a long way already, and I fear that thou wilt be tired."

"Nay; there is naught to tire me," said Ethelfleda. "Besides, I wish to carry the embers, Ethelred. I like not to have other hands than mine touch them."

"How strong thou art in thy purpose, Ethelfleda," said the young man with admiration. "Naught deters thee from thy enterprises after thou hast entered upon them. Art thou never discouraged?"

"Sometimes," confessed the maiden. "Yet, Ethelred, when once a purpose hath formed itself within my mind, I cannot loosen my hold upon it. Discouragements and doubts may crowd thick and fast upon me; but, I know not why, my purpose doth shine bright and clear through them all, and towards it I needs must wend my way."

"I would that it were so with me," retorted the young man. "But ofttimes doth happenings turn me from my purpose. Would that I had thy perseverance."

"'Tis a virtue that can be cultivated," said the girl gayly as she looked at the embers which she carried in an earthen vessel. "Here we are, Ethelred, and for thy pleasant words thou shalt hold the embers until I need them." She gave the vessel into his hands, and sank down before the great heap of brushwood which had been gathered for the beacon.

"Almost," said she solemnly, "do I feel like offering a sacrifice on this fire that all may end as my father doth desire."

"It would not please him, sister, to have aught rendered that savored of heathenism," said Edward. "Here are some fine twigs for the starting."

Ethelfleda took them.

"Now, Ethelred, the coals," she called. They were given her in silence, and the girl carefully fanned the embers until the fine stuff ignited. Then she arose and the four stood and watched the flames as they caught twig after twig creeping up, up, until finally the whole pile became a blazing mass which leaped and crackled, darting tongues of flame higher and higher until the surrounding wood was ruddy in the glare. The figures of the four were silhouetted against the light in bold relief, and so, standing out against the background of those dark ages, have the pictures of those four come down to us.

On the morrow Ethelfleda's own hands buckled the sword round Ethelred's waist, while Edward chafed that he must remain.

"But another year and I too should go," he said, appealing to Egwina for sympathy. "O Egwina, dost thou not think that my father would let me go? A

little year! What is it that it should make a difference?"

But Alfred turned a deaf ear to their pleadings, and Edward was forced to the inactivity of a non-combatant. The forces left with high hopes. Listlessly the lad wandered about, unable to occupy himself. At last he sought Egwina's side.

"I cannot content myself here," he said, "while yonder the battle may rage. 'Tis custom for women and maidens to follow from afar, why not for youths also? Wilt thou go with me, Egwina, to watch the issue of the fray?"

"Gladly, Edward," answered Egwina rising, "if thou wilt promise that thou wilt not rush into it."

"I am not old enough," said the youth scornfully. "O Egwina, it breaketh my heart that I am not yet able to strike for my country, but I will bide my time."

So the two set forth and followed after the army. Alfred had gathered his forces first at Egbert's stone where the whole army had collected. The Saxons received him with acclamations of joy. Moving swiftly, Alfred then fell upon the pagans at Ethandune. They were taken completely by surprise.

The chief fault of the Saxons hitherto had been that they fought in an uncompact manner, and the Danes could overwhelm them by surrounding a part at a time. This Alfred had tried to overcome by direction and drill until now they fell upon the Danes an organized, skilled force. Furiously did the Northmen receive the assault. The discharge of the Saxon arrows was succeeded by the attack of the lances, and soon it became a personal conflict of swords. The Danes resisted with their customary intrepidity, but their efforts though furious were unavailing. Closer and closer to the combatants crept Edward and Egwina. The boy's eyes were dilated with excitement. He trembled but not with fear. Suddenly Alfred's own standard of the golden dragon upon a white ground, which Adiva and Gunnehilde had woven, tottered and fell. The standard-bearer was struck down with his death blow.

"The standard! the king's own standard is down!" screamed Edward, wildly. "It must not be!"

"Edward! Edward!" shrieked Egwina, but the boy heard not, or if he heard, he did not heed. Over the intervening space he flew; snatched a sword from a dead body as he went, and then right to the front he ran, and hoisted the standard on high. The flying figure of the lad as he appeared amongst them thrilled the superstitious Saxons with awe. Alfred saw his son as he dashed into the thick of the fray, and as he noted with what bravery he bore himself, a smile of pride lighted up his face.

"Marry, the boy bears himself as if he were St. Neot come to lead us to victory!"

A Saxon near heard the word St. Neot, and saw the king gazing in the direction of the boy. Instantly he sent up the cry that St. Neot was in the midst

of them. Through the Saxon lines it ran and raised their spirits to fever heat. Mad with enthusiasm, their resolute attack was everywhere irresistible, and the Northmen gave way. Their bodies strewed the plain. Of those that remained living, many fled in different directions, and the rest took refuge with Guthrum in the neighboring fortifications.

Alfred was master of the field. By one decisive blow he had broken the force of the Danish invasion. The fleeing Northmen were pursued and slaughtered. Then the king sat down before the fortress, calmly awaiting the surrender that must follow. After fourteen days, Guthrum, oppressed by want, cold and despair, sent overtures of peace, which the king, being filled with pity, accepted.

The pagans promised to leave the kingdom, after giving hostages to Alfred and receiving none, which thing had never been done before. Guthrum, being moved by the noble conduct of the king, signified his intention of embracing Christianity, much to the good Alfred's delight. Seven weeks afterward, Guthrum, accompanied by thirty of his jarls, were baptized at a place called Aller, near Athelney, and there King Alfred received him as his son by adoption.

After eight days, during which time the Danes wore, in accordance with the custom of the times, the Chrismal—a white linen cloth put on the head when the rite of baptism was performed; the eighth day what was known as the Chrism-loosing, or removal of the cloths, took place at Wedmore, into which royal vill Alfred now repaired with his family and Egwina.

Here, too, did he receive Guthrum, or Athelstan, as we shall now have to call him, for that was the name he received from the king at his baptism.

At Alfred's invitation, Athelstan brought his family and abode with him for twelve days. And behold! the maiden Hilda walked straight and fair. Seeing this, the king approached her.

"Did the wheat flour, boiled in milk, applied hot, work thy cure?" he asked.

"It did, my lord," returned the maiden. "How knowest thou of it? It was told me by a skald who sang for us with his daughter."

From the folds of his gonna Alfred drew the charm which she had given him.

"Behold, maiden, thy charm. Now do I crave the fulfilment of thy promise."

"Was it thou?" cried she, in surprise. "My father said that the skald was not what he seemed, but naught could he learn from the seid women concerning him. But alack! No longer have I power to give vill or jarl's proportion of land."

"None do I crave, Hilda, so that thou art healed," answered Alfred.

"Didst thou not say that thou wert what thou seemest?" queried Athelstan.

"Nay; I but said that if I were not that which I seemed, it was not the fault of the minstrel," answered Alfred. "Dost thou not remember?"

"I remember, Alfred, and nobly has thou borne thyself both as foe and

friend. Easy is it to forgive the deceptions upon me for out of that grew the pity for the misfortune of another. Though she were the daughter of thy foe, thou didst generously give her cure for misease."

"Thou wouldst have done the same, Athelstan," returned the king. "At once did I feel that there was that in thee which spake a kindred to me."

"And this is thy son?" Athelstan turned to Edward who stood near. "To him, King Alfred, as much as to thy prowess I truly believe the victory belongs. What a noble charge he made as unhelmed he rushed into the fray! Young though is he for battle."

Alfred smiled proudly.

"Without permission did he join us," he said. "Young the boy is. 'Twill not be until next year that he will be old enow for buckler. But for his bravery, he shall not need to wait his year. Edward hath taught me that a king's son matureth sooner than others. Which remindeth me, my son, that thou hast not yet received thy guerdon. This night repair thee to the priest and make confession of thy sins, watching the night through with prayer. On the morrow thou shalt then be declared a legitimate miles."

Overcome with joy at this news, Edward hastened to tell it to Ethelfleda and Egwina.

"Never again will I tease thee, Edward, about thy age," said Ethelfleda. "Thou art truly a man in heart if not in years."

Egwina joined in the commendation of his valor.

The night having been passed in accordance with the custom, in prayer and watching, the next morning in the presence of a great concourse of people, Edward heard mass. Then, having put on a purple robe girded by a belt set with gems to which was attached a golden sheath for his sword, the gift of his father, the youth repaired again to the church and offered his sword upon the altar.

The priest read from the Gospel, and, taking the sword, blessed it and placed it on the youth's neck with his benediction. The sacrament was administered to him, and then Edward arose, a full-fledged Saxon warrior.

"To my country do I consecrate this weapon," said he solemnly. "May God judge me if it be lifted other than in her service."

"May He help you to keep that vow, my son," said Alfred.

And the years have proven how nobly the boy fulfilled his oath.

CHAPTER XVIII—PEACE

By the treaty of peace between Alfred and Athelstan drawn up by the witanagemot or the Saxon parliament which convened at Wedmore after the baptism of the Danes, the boundaries of the two kingdoms were defined. A line beginning at the mouth of the Thames, and running along the river Lea to its source, and turning at Bedford to the right along the Ouse as far as Watling street was to make the division. The part which was north of the line being the Danish kingdom and called Danelagh, while all south of the line was the kingdom of the Saxons. According to this arrangement a large portion of Mercia fell to Alfred's share.

The treaty comprehended various rules for the conduct of commerce, and courts were instituted for the trial of disputes and crimes; although in their own kingdom the Danes were to be governed by their own laws.

Athelstan was to remain king of the Danes but to Alfred tribute was to be paid as over lord. As soon as peace had been concluded, Alfred turned his attention to the internal affairs of his kingdom. The lessons of the invasion had not been lost, and he proceeded at once to put the country into a complete state of defence. Old fortifications were repaired and new ones raised in suitable localities. Flocks and herds again grazed in the pastures, herds of swine roamed in the woods, fields were cultivated, houses rebuilt, and the country entered upon an era of unprecedented prosperity.

The fleet was brought into a state of great efficiency, and it was Alfred who at this time laid the foundation for England's future supremacy on the seas. The land had been infested by robbers, but the king cleared the land of these by stringent laws which forced them either to leave the country or become peaceful and law-abiding citizens.

The laws were not neglected, and the indefatigable king revised the code, striking out those which availed not for the time, and adding others; the whole approved by his witan. He exerted the utmost care that justice should be administered to all impartially. He encouraged commerce, and took a lively interest in geographical discovery.

The king's heart had been grieved at the depth of the popular ignorance, and to the mitigation of this dark feature of his country did he also direct his attention. It had been his testimony that south of the Thames not even the priests understood the ritual of the church, or the meaning of the prayers which they repeated. It was one of his strongest and most cherished desires that every free-born youth should qualify himself to read English correctly.

In order to accomplish this, he rebuilt the monasteries which had been cast down in the late wars, and which were the great centres of education in those days, and established schools. For the furtherance of the same object, he invited to his court learned men from all quarters, and with their assistance, completed a number of works for the diffusion of knowledge throughout the kingdom.

Among these men from Gaul were Grimbald and John. Grimbald was a venerable man and a good singer; adorned with every kind of ecclesiastical discipline and good morals, and most learned in holy Scriptures. John, priest and monk also, was of most energetic talents, learned in all kinds of literary science, and skilled in many other arts. Asser of Wales also came. From Mercia did he call Werefrith bishop of Worcester, a man well versed in Scripture; and Plegmund, archbishop of the church of Canterbury. Ethelstan and Werewulf, priests and chaplains, Mercians by birth and erudite.

Through these men was the mind of the king enlarged, and great work accomplished among the youth. Elswitha, Ethelgiva, and Ethelwerd, the younger children, were consigned to the schools of learning where with the children of almost all the nobility of the country, and many also who were not noble, they pursued their studies. Books both in Latin and in Saxon were they taught. They learned to write, and became studious and clever in the liberal arts.

Ethelfleda, Edward, and Egwina were not suffered to pass their time in idleness or without gain. Well had Egwina profited by the lessons taught her in the cottage of Denewulf, and her apt and ready mind soon placed her beside Edward and Ethelfleda, who had already received much instruction. When not engaged in study, the maidens spent much time with the needle or distaff; while Edward hunted or trained hawks. Thus did the days pass until two years had gone by.

Fair had Egwina been in her childhood, but the maiden of sixteen was wondrously beautiful. In sweet unconsciousness of her charm she performed her tasks with light heart for pleasant were the days to her. But one shadow darkened the horizon.

Ethelred had conducted himself with so much prowess, and shown himself endowed with so much of executive ability that Alfred had made him ealdorman of Mercia. Also had the king consented to the marriage of Ethelfleda to him, and for this event preparations were now being made.

For this cause was Egwina sad. She rejoiced in the happiness of the two, yet did it grieve her sore to lose the companionship of her friend.

"It shall not be for long, Egwina," comforted Ethelfleda. "When I am Lady of the Mercians thou shalt come, and be my companion as thou hast been."

So, amongst innumerable multitudes of both sexes, the marriage was celebrated with great rejoicing. As was the custom, the feasting continued both by day and by night for many days. Wearied by so much mirth and festivity, and overcome by a feeling of sadness which she could not control, Egwina stole away from the guests, and glided out beneath the trees to a knoll. The moon shone in all her splendor. The long, deep shadows of the breathless forest which lay beyond, checkered the silvery whiteness of open sward and intervening glade. Pensively

the maiden gazed at the moon, and then she sighed involuntarily.

"Why sighest thou, daughter of Wulfhere?" asked a voice near.

Egwina turned with a start. Before her on the knoll stood Gyda, the seid woman.

"Is it thou, Gyda? Long hath it been since last I saw thee. Then the land was torn with tumult and warfare; now doth it prosper, and peace abideth everywhere."

"True, maiden; happy have been the days. Pleasant have been my days. Pleasant, most pleasant, have been thine. Then wherefore dost thou sigh? Is it because thou art alone?"

"Nay, Gyda," said the maiden gently. "'Tis only that I mourn the loss of my friend. Otherwise I would not have it to be, for Ethelfleda is happy. She believes that naught can change us; but thou wottest, Gyda, that now new duties will claim her attention, and it cannot be with us as it hath been. Unworthy is it in me to grieve, but yet, methinks I shall be the better for it."

"Egwina," said Gyda abruptly, "art thou happy here? Dost thou not often grieve for the old life and the free? Think of thy father, and of thy grandfather. Ay! and I have heard his father, and his father's father were gleemen; yet thou stayest here, and there is peace in the land. Much gold and many gifts couldst thou bring to thyself by thy harp and song. Art content to be at the call of one lord even though that lord is the king?"

"I do not grieve for the old life, Gyda," said the maiden, simply. "Pleasant was it with granther. Yet methinks I am happier here than I should be wandering from lord to lord; from mead hall to mead hall. And the king and his family love me."

"And thou wouldst not leave them?" queried the wicca.

"Nay; why should I? Useful am I to Elswitha, and now that she no longer will have Ethelfleda, I shall be more so. No, Gyda; I would not leave them. 'Twould grieve me much."

"Sorry am I to hear it," and Gyda's tone was low. "Child, little didst thou reck that thou didst make me long to have thee with me when last I saw thee. The runes speak not well for Gyda. They grow dim when she would read what Skulda hath in store for her. Calamity overshadows me, and a curious longing hath fallen upon my heart to have thee, who art pure and innocent, with me. Methinks I should be the better for it. Canst thou not, child, give me thyself for a time only? Alfred hath much. Why should he begrudge me thee who have none sibbe to me? Wilt thou come to dwell with me? Much of gold have I, maiden, and many gems of rare value which have been showered upon me. These, all these shall be thine."

"Gyda, I know not," answered Egwina much distressed and full of pity for

the woman's loneliness. "I will talk with the king and the lady Elswitha, and let thee know anon. But if I go with thee, Gyda, 'tis not for gifts or gold, but for thy loneliness. I will see thee again."

"Thinkest thou that Alfred will let thee go from him?" cried Gyda. "I trow not! I trow not! Thou art born for greatness, and it is much to ask of thee."

She drew her mantle over her head, and turned to go.

"Natheless, Gyda, wait for a little and I will speak with him," urged Egwina, laying her hand upon the woman's shoulder.

"Wait I will, maiden. Till the dawn I will wait. Again will I read the runes, and see if thou wilt come. Dark and clouded have they been of late, and seid and galdra have availed me naught; but once more will I try. Fount, and tree and scin-laeca, shall all be consulted."

She glided away, and was lost in the darkness.

"Strange, strange woman," said the girl musingly, with a shudder. "I pity her, and yet my heart revolts from dwelling with her; but still will I ask the king."

"Egwina, art thou here?" Edward came to her side at this moment. "Vainly have I sought thee through hull and bower, and only caught sight of thee but now. Why didst thou leave the mirth?"

"I was awearied, Edward, but now will I return with thee."

"Soon will we re-enter, Egwina. Ethelfleda wishes thee to sing the same song which she heard thee sing when first thou didst sing for her."

"That will I do gladly," and Egwina turned. "'Tis but a short time that Ethelfleda remaineth with us, and gladly will I do aught that she asketh."

"Nay; go not yet, Egwina. How fine the night is! Dost thou remember how chill and drear was the awful night that the Northmen fell upon us at Chippenham? How fair thou didst look that night when, child though thou wert, thou didst stand up in the hall and sing. Fair thou wert, Egwina, but not so fair as now. Thou mindest me of a fawn with thy shyness and grace. Tell me, hast thou kept the charm I gave thee?"

"Yes, Edward." Egwina drew the chain from under the folds of her tunic. "See! The amulet is as thou didst fasten it."

The Saxon clasped the amulet with the hand that held it in his own.

"Egwina, this night wilt thou exchange with me the true-lofa?"

"Edward, what meanest thou?" The maiden looked up at him in startled amazement.

"Thou art duller than thy wont, Egwina, if thou knowest not," smiled Edward. "I mean our betrothal. Always have I intended to wed thee, if thou wert willing, when proper time should come. What then so fitting as that we plight our troth now when all rejoice in the happiness of Ethelred and Ethelfleda?"

"But, Edward," faltered Egwina, "thou art the atheling, and I but a

gleemaiden. Thou wilt be the cyning (king) one day, and then thou wilt know that such as I am not fit to be the Lady of the Saxons."

"No other will I choose, if thou be not my mate," returned Edward.

"But thy father, Edward; and thou art yet too young." Egwina was troubled.

"I will go to my father now, Egwina. If he says that we are too young, then will I wait his pleasure. He will sanction our troth and bless it. And why should he not? He loves thee now as a daughter. Wilt thou not give me thy true-lofa, Egwina?"

"Wait until thou hast seen thy father," whispered the maiden. "I fear his displeasure."

"Thou foolish little one! Hath he not been kind to thee?"

"Always and always," declared she with fervor. "But I am not noble. Naught of gentle blood have I either on the spear side or the spindle side. I fear, Edward, that the king will be displeased with me."

"Marry, I trow not! Stay thou here, and I will seek him, and soon shall thy fears be quieted. Remain here, Egwina, for I will soon return."

He hastened back into the house with eager footsteps, and the agitated girl sank down upon the sward. Soon she heard voices, and wishing not to meet any one for a while, she withdrew into the shadows of the trees. It was Alfred himself and his wife, Elswitha.

"Dear lord," the lady was saying, "hast noted how fair the maiden Egwina groweth?"

"Yea; but not before these last few days. I fear, Elswitha, that soon she, too, will leave us for some other's abode."

"My lord, Edward looks upon the maiden with loving eyes."

"Sayest thou so?" cried Alfred. "Why, the boy is but young! Art thou not mistaken?"

"Nay, a mother's heart doth not deceive her, Alfred. Thou wert but eighteen thyself when we were wed. Thy son is almost the same age now as thou wert then."

"Sayest thou so?" Alfred seemed to be startled. "Why, 'tis but the other day that he received sword and buckler!"

"Swiftly doth the time fly," returned Elswitha. "I know that which I tell thee is true, and it hath grieved me, Alfred, for Egwina is not noble."

"True," assented the king; "she comes not of noble blood."

Egwina covered her face with her hands. Was it not as she had thought it would be? Now these dear people, who had done so much for her, who had been so kind, would be displeased.

Alfred and the lady passed on. Egwina sobbed aloud in her loneliness.

"Maiden," came a low whisper.

Egwina looked up to see the form of Gyda again beside her.

"I have heard all. All that the youth said to thee, and what the king and his wife said also. Seest thou not that they wish thee not? Come! Gyda will cherish thee as her own."

Egwina looked at her hopelessly.

"What shall I do, Gyda?" she cried. "I could not bear that they should be cold to me."

"Thou needst not bear it, child. Come with me. I promise thee that thou shalt not regret it. Come! Edward must not find thee here when he returns. Come!"

She held out her hand. Scarcely knowing what she was doing, Egwina put her own within it, and the two glided noiselessly into the woods.

CHAPTER XIX—DARK DAYS

Away into the forest they went, the seid woman keeping fast hold of Egwina's hand, and speaking not. Once the maiden thought she heard the voice of Edward calling, "Egwina! Egwina!" She half paused but Gyda hurried her on. At last the wicca stopped before a small, low cottage quite outside the demesne of the royal vill. In answer to her knock, the door was thrown open and they entered the hut. The inmates, a wite and his wife, seemed to know the seid woman, and accepted the presence of Egwina without question.

Gyda did not pause to converse with them, but half carried the drooping form of the girl into an adjoining room which was evidently used by her as a bower chamber.

"There, child, lie down," she said, not unkindly. "Spent art thou with thy exertions, and grief maketh heavy thy heart. Rest, while I prepare thee hot drink."

The maiden sank on the bed, and gave way to her woe. Soon the wicca returned with a horn full of steaming liquid.

"Drink!" she commanded, and the maiden drank obediently. "'Tis a potion that will lull thee to dreamless repose, and woe will sit lightly on thy pillow."

The eyes of the maiden waxed heavy as the drug took effect, and soon she sank into a deep sleep. The seid woman bent over her, noting her fairness

exultantly.

"Now shalt thou be to me as mine own child," she murmured. "Happy shalt thou be, for I will love thee. Always shalt thou be by my side, and even though the king himself should claim thee, thou shalt not leave me. Sleep, my pretty one! None shall take thee now from Gyda."

Morning dawned. Egwina awoke from her heavy slumber, and gazed about her.

"How came I here?" she murmured as she arose. "Methinks it be strange to me."

"Art thou up, Egwina?" asked the seid woman, entering the room at this moment. At sight of her the memory of all that had happened came back to Egwina with a shock. "That is well," continued Gyda. "Breakfast we eat, and then wend we on our journey."

"Where go we?" asked the maiden, turning from her that she might not see her emotion.

"To Gunnehilde's in the forest of Selwood," answered Gyda pretending not to notice Egwina's grief. "Afterward to Athelney, where Alfred gathered his forces together. There, mayhap, I will acquire new virtue. The Saxon King is my Flygia. Thou dost not mind returning thither, dost thou?"

"Nay," answered the girl sadly; "it matters not where we wayfare."

"Be not cast down, child," said the woman gently. "Some dark threads are woven into the woof of each life. All cannot be golden. Thou art young and soon will thy trouble fall from thee even as the shadow halting between the light and the darkness passes away into the night. Sorrow sits not long with the young. Come, let us eat."

Egwina partook mechanically of the food set before her, and then prepared to follow Gyda on her journey. They proceeded silently, for the heart of the maiden was heavy, and Gyda, too, seemed weighed down by some care. At last the seid woman aroused herself, and turned to the girl:

"Let us beguile the journey by talk, my child. Wouldst thou that I should read thy rede for thee?"

"Nay, Gyda; I care no more for rede or rune. Dark are the shadows which they cast, and I would fain be free from their witchery."

"Yet, natheless, give me thy palm. Believe as thou wilt. Belief cometh not at the bidding; neither doth it depart. Thou believest not; I believe. Yield, then, thy palm for my pleasure."

Reluctantly the maiden permitted the woman to scan the lines of her hand. Gyda's troubled look returned as she examined them.

"Dark, dark spreads the near future," she cried. "Bright is the ending, but, oh, child! thy trouble hath but begun. Would I had left thee with Alfred. It is

not yet too late. Come, let us retrace our steps. Thus only canst thou avoid the danger."

Egwina shook her head. "No, Gyda; I wish not to return. If danger or trouble come, I will ask for strength to meet it. Let us on." She withdrew her palm from Gyda's and started onward.

"But thy life endeth in glory," said Gyda, comfortingly more to herself than to Egwina. "It endeth in great glory. What doth it matter after all if we go not back? What hath been woven, hath been woven!" She lapsed into silence which was broken by her presently: "Child, wouldst thou not do something for me?"

"Willingly, Gyda, if I can."

"Thou canst if thou wilt." The woman's tone was low, and her manner almost supplicating.

"What is it, Gyda?"

"Call me no longer Gyda, but mother. Once I had a child, and she would have been like unto thee had she lived, but Hela took her from me. Wilt thou, Egwina?"

"I will try," and the girl turned to her in sudden pity, moved by the yearning in the woman's voice, and laid her hand gently upon her arm.

"Thou wilt?" exclaimed Gyda, joyously. "I will be so good to thee, child. Thou shalt not regret it. Now sing to me, my daughter! Sing for thy mother. Often had Gyda heard the echo of thy sweet voice in her heart. Sing, my pretty one; 'twill cheer both thee and me."

Bravely subduing her own feelings, Egwina sang the songs the woman asked for, and thus alternately singing and talking, the journey to the hut of Gunnehilde was at last accomplished. Gyda bade the maiden remain without the hut, for she feared that the vala would recognize her.

"Stay thou here until my return, my child. Move not from the log where thou sittest, for thou mightest stray too far into the forest. I go to consult the vala."

Egwina sat down as the woman bade her. It was some little time ere Gyda returned. When she did so she seemed deeply stirred and somewhat upset.

"Move quickly," she cried. "Let us to Athelney. It may be that there Gyda will regain that power which now comes not at her bidding."

Egwina followed after her. A brisk walk soon brought them to the island, but lo! a great change had taken place. Instead of the fortifications and rude huts which Alfred had erected during his time of need, there rose the stately walls of a monastery. With a cry of despair, the wicca dropped upon the ground.

"What is it?" cried Egwina, coming to her.

"Child, child, I am undone! Seest thou not yon walls? They have taken the charm from the place. Curses be upon them! No galdra or seid can flourish in

the shadows of such walls."

She moaned in her despair; then from her bosom drew the jewel of Alfred.

"Evil hast thou brought to me instead of good," she exclaimed. "Yet did not the volva tell me by the fount when the scin-laeca rose from the grave that jewel of Saxon I must have to complete my knowledge? One of the line of Cerdic, and from Cerdic came Alfred. Why, then, do I falter? Why grow the runes dark before me? Gunnehilde hath said that a loss was coming, and death. Death? No, I defy it! Hela shall not yet have her prey; I will try the charm despite mone (monk) and priest."

She arose and started across the bridge from the mainland.

"Come," she called to the maiden, who lingered, half terrified by her manner. Then she turned, and almost ran on the bridge. She had but reached the middle of it, when her foot slipped and she fell. As she did so, the jewel dropped from her hand into the water below. With a moan of anguish the woman lay prone upon the bridge. Egwina hurried to her.

"Art ill?" she asked. "Let me help thee up."

Gyda rose hopelessly. "Fate must be met," she said, with despairing calmness. "I have had my moan; now will Gyda accept that which Skulda hath spun for her." She turned to go back to the mainland.

"But wilt thou not go to the island?" asked the girl.

"Nay; 'tis useless. Home now do we wend our way. If Gunnehilde readeth the runes aright it will not be for long."

In melancholy silence, with no beguiling of the journey by song or talk, the two wended their way to the woman's home which was in Berkshire. The life of Egwina now became very different from what it had been. Life at Alfred's vill had been full of duties and pleasures. Here the seid woman's time was filled by consultations of bark and fountain, and by exercises of her art into which she tried to get the girl to join. Egwina's soul sickened with loathing at sight or sound of magic, and she resisted all efforts to get her assistance in the rites.

Vainly she strove to lead the woman from the subject, and, remembering what the abbot had told of the good priest Aldhelm and his singing, tried by singing Christian hymns to inculcate a longing to hear of the Christian's God. But Gyda would have none of them.

"Sing them not," she said. "Much doth thy voice please me, but sing not if they be all that thou canst sing. Galdra doth not flourish where such songs are sung."

And Egwina ceased singing entirely. As the woman grew more feeble, she practiced her rites more and more until the house seemed peopled by demons who waited only a summons to step forth. Her temper, too, became very uncertain. She loaded Egwina with caresses, and railed at her alternately. Although

she grew thin and pale under this treatment, Egwina bore patiently with her, for she knew that death was fast approaching.

"Give me thine arm," said Gyda one day to Egwina. "Hela will sit with me soon, and I would fain prepare for her coming."

Leaning heavily upon Egwina's shoulder, she went into her room.

"Leave me," she commanded. "I will call thee when I need thee."

Thus adjured, the maiden left her with some uneasiness, for Gyda seemed much weaker. Long she remained waiting, and hearing no sound became uneasy, and softly entered the room. Gyda sat before a large box on the floor fingering lovingly the coins and gems which it contained. So intent was she that she did not hear the girl enter. Egwina started to leave the room as quietly as she had entered it, but in so doing she made a noise which caused the woman to look up. With an exclamation of rage she sprang to her feet with unwonted vigor, her eyes flaming with anger.

"How durst thou spy upon me?" she cried in fury. "How durst thou, girl? Thinkest thou to get the gold now? But thou shalt not."

"Nay, nay, Gyda," began Egwina, soothingly, advancing toward her. "I did but come to see why thou wert so still."

"Tell me not that thou didst not spy upon me. Thou didst!" and the enraged woman struck her violently with her staff.

The blow was so sudden and severe that Egwina fell heavily to the floor. Instantly the woman's anger fled when she saw what she had done, and she tottered to the girl, her strength leaving her.

"Forgive me, my pretty one! I meant it not. Gyda meant not to harm thee." But the maiden had fainted.

As soon as she saw this the woman dragged herself back to her treasure, and restored it to its hiding place. Then again she approached the girl and hung over her prostrate form, moaning, and strove feebly to revive her. Presently Egwina recovered consciousness. Gyda caressed her tenderly.

"My child! My child! I have been cruel to thee. Canst forgive me? Not much longer shalt thou need to bear with Gyda, for Hela even now breatheth cold upon my brow."

"I forgive thee, Gyda," said Egwina weakly. "Thou didst not mean to hurt me. Thou wotted not what thou wert doing."

"No, no; I wotted not. Say, I forgive thee, mother. Give me thy hand and say it."

Egwina stretched forth her hand and took the woman's gently.

"I forgive thee, mother," she said softly.

With an effort the maiden raised herself, bent over the woman and kissed her.

"Now lie beside me. Art weak, Egwina?"

"Yes, mother."

"Mayhap Hela will bear thee to Niflheim also," and a triumphant expression flitted across Gyda's face. "It would glad my heart to have thee with me there. Shouldst like to die, Egwina?"

"I mind it not, Gyda. Heaven is bright and beautiful, and granther would be there. Dear granther! We were so happy together! Would I were with him!"

"Wouldst rather be with him in thy heaven than with me in Niflheim?" asked the woman, jealously.

"Mind it not, Gyda. He is mine own granther, and he loves me."

"So do I love thee. It groweth dark, Egwina. Lie closer."

Egwina crept close to Gyda, and the woman drew her within her arms.

"Shall I not help thee to thy couch, Gyda?"

"Thou canst not, child. What doth it matter where we meet Hela?"

Then there fell a silence. Weakened by the trying days that had preceded, the blow seemed to have robbed the girl of all energy, and soon she fell into a deep sleep.

Suddenly she awakened. The light streamed faintly into the room. Stiff from long lying, she tried to move, but only did so with much difficulty. Raising herself on one arm, she turned toward the figure at her side. Noting how perfectly still Gyda lay, she bent over her and looked into her face. She was dead.

With a scream of horror, Egwina sprang up. At this instant a man and woman, attracted by her cry, entered the room. Egwina took a step toward the woman, then clasping her hands to her head, she reeled and fell an unconscious heap on the floor.

"'Tis a pity that the jade waxeth sick at this time," a voice broke rudely upon Egwina's ear one morning as she awoke with the clear light of reason in her eyes. "Here we but get done wailing for the mother, when the daughter must be sick also."

"Was she her daughter?" came a man's voice. "I knew not that Gyda had a daughter, sibbe though we be."

"Do not the neighbors say so?" asked the first voice. "How should she be here if not her daughter? But now 'tis burthensome for the minx to be sick."

"Well, see how she doeth. We cannot treat her ill, though but for her, all of Gyda's treasure would befortune us. Much hath she hidden somewhere, and when the girl becometh better, mayhap she will tell us where it be."

"Not she," grumbled the other. Still grumbling the woman approached the bed where Egwina lay.

"How art thou this morning?" she asked.

"Have I been ill?" The clear eyes of Egwina looked at the woman in amaze-

ment. "Who art thou and why am I here?"

"Who am I? Why Githa, the wife of Sweyn, own cousin to thy mother. Who else should I be?" asked the woman, who was of surly countenance.

"But I wot not thy meaning. I have no mother; nor have I had sith a child. Nor have I ever heard of any of that name sibbe to us."

"Odin hear her!" ejaculated the woman. "Dost thou hear that, Sweyn?"

"What?" asked the man.

"The girl doth deny her kith and kin."

"Well, sith she doth, let her deny," returned the man lazily.

"But seest thou not, blockhead, that 'tis to keep us from the money," cried the woman angrily.

The man sprang to his feet and entered the room where they were. Egwina regarded the pair with wonder.

"Art thou not Gyda's daughter?" demanded the man of her.

"Gyda's? No. Why should ye think me the seid woman's daughter?" asked Egwina in amazement.

"Hast thou not lived here with her always, and then sayest thou that thou art not her daughter?" the woman exclaimed fiercely. "How now, maiden?"

"Nay; but I am not her daughter," reiterated Egwina.

"Then how camest thou here? The neighbors say that thou wert here for weeks, and that Gyda called thee daughter. Thou didst call her mother!"

"True; but it was to please her that I called her thus. Her own child died, and she yearned for love as age crept upon her. Hence she took me to dwell with her."

"And so thou art not Gyda's daughter?" cried the woman.

Egwina shook her head.

"Then thou hast no claim to gold or gem that may be found?" said the woman quickly.

"None," said Egwina briefly.

"Tell us where she kept them hidden," cried the man.

"I know not," replied the maiden. "I only know that the day she died," and a strong shudder shook her frame at the remembrance, "I came upon her as she did count some gold from a box. Did ye not see it when ye came into the room?"

"Was it the room where we found ye together?" asked the man.

"Yes."

"And thou has not seen aught but that?" queried he.

"Naught but that," replied the girl, wearily.

"Then what doest thou here?" The woman looked so fierce that the maiden trembled.

"Wife, she cannot go now. If she be not Gyda's child, we care not if she

stay until she be well. We will have it all," spoke the man.

"Yea; I will go as soon as I am able," cried Egwina. "Prithee let me stay until then. 'Twill be but a little longer!"

Reluctantly the woman consented.

CHAPTER XX—ÆLFRIC'S REVENGE

Egwina's recovery was rapid. She saw that as she grew stronger, the impatience of Sweyn and Githa to have her gone increased. With her by, they feared to hunt for the treasure which Gyda had left. So one day Egwina thanked them for their kindness in caring for her, and again set forth to wend her way from mead hall to mead hall to gain good will by her singing. No longer had she harp with which to accompany herself, and sadly did the girl miss the loved instrument. Her voice had lost none of its sweetness and power, and her exceeding fairness procured for her a ready hearing; and so, in safety and peace, for the stringent laws of Alfred were such that gold bracelets might hang on the high road unmolested, she wandered from burgh to burgh.

One day she found herself on the road to Winchester. Memories of when last she had seen the place crowded thick upon her. Here upon this very log had she tarried to rest with her grandfather. Here was where she first met Ethelfleda and Edward. A sob of loneliness broke from her lips as she thought of them. How long ago it all seemed! Had she ever been a member of the king's family? What would they say if they should know that again she wandered homeless over the land? Bright and happy had been the days when with her grandfather they had sauntered leisurely from place to place. Now she was alone. A throb of self-pity filled her heart.

She paused before entering the town. The king might be here even now, and Edward! Should she go on? Then an overwhelming desire to look once more upon their faces, herself unseen, possessed her. For this once she would see them if the king were at his royal vill. With this determination the maiden entered the city. But the king had not yet come to Winchester, so somewhat disappointed, Egwina turned her steps toward the manor of a thegn, and, as was her wont,

joined in the glee of the feast.

Bed and entertainment for a day and a night could be had by the meanest wayfarer, so without comment, the maiden took her place among the singers and harpers. Her beauty and the sweetness of her voice soon attracted the attention of Oswald the thegn, and brought from him a request for more.

"Brother," said the maiden addressing a harper, "lend me thy harp. Once did I have one of mine own, but 'tis gone. The song is the better for the accompaniment."

"I need the harp for song of mine own," answered the harper churlishly. "Sith thou hast the ear of Oswald, why needst thou the harp?"

Fearing a refusal from the other gleemen, Egwina asked not another, but sang without the instrument, and great was the approval of Oswald.

"Thou shall remain as gleemaiden under my mund (protection)," he said, "and bounteous shall be thy gifts."

"Prithee, sir," said Egwina for she wished not to remain where Alfred and Edward might come at any time, "ask me not to abide with thee; for I wish not to stay in Winchester. This night will I make glee for thee as much as thou wishest, but to-morrow must I wend my way hence."

"Have it thine own way, girl," said the thegn good naturedly, "though I wish thou wouldst stay. Playest thou the harp?"

"Yes, good thegn."

"Thou hast none of thy own, I see. Edwy, lend thy harp to the maiden. I would hear if she hath skill."

With a sulky look on his face the harper whom Egwina had asked for his harp handed it to her. Thanking him, the maiden swept the strings of the instrument and played with such rare skill that even the gleemen were forced to acknowledge her power. The thegn at last declared himself satisfied, and, after making her promise that she would abide in the manor till after the next night, Egwina retired to the chamber assigned her.

The great mead hall was deserted the next morning when the maiden, hardly knowing how to occupy herself until the evening, strayed into it. On one of the benches where sat the gleemen and harpers there lay the harp of Edwy. The maiden took it up with delight. Not since she had left the palace of Alfred had she touched a harp until the night before.

The instrument seemed like a friend to her. Tenderly she touched it; then, carried away by fond memories, let her fingers stray idly over the strings, musing on the time when she had taught the king to play.

"Thou hast improved, maiden, since last I heard thee," said a voice in her ear.

Egwina turned with a start. Ælfric the juggler stood beside her. At first

the maiden could not recall his name or who he was, when Ælfric, seeing her bewilderment, said:

"Thou canst not gainsay thy knowledge of me, girl. Wot ye not that thou and thy father didst make me into a theow?"

"Art thou truly the juggler?" asked Egwina, shrinking back from the fierce look of the man's face.

"I am in truth he. Where is thy father!"

"Dead," came from the maiden, faintly.

"Art thou alone?" a malignant look came into the man's eyes.

Egwina nodded. "And thou?" she asked. "Art thou still a wite? I hope not. I would have tried to get granther to return and pay the were for thee, but that the Danes oppressed so that there was no thought save for safety from them."

"I needed not your aid," came from Ælfric. "A freed-man do I stand before thee with help of none save Ælfric. But what dost thou with Edwy's harp?"

"I did but try it;" and Egwina laid it down.

"Hast thou none of thine own that thou must try those of others?"

"No; I have none;" and Egwina sighed. "Truly, Ælfric, thou hast had thy desire, and ill hath been our fortune. Dead lieth granther, and alone do I wander without kith or kin. Soon I hope to find some lord to take me for his gleemaiden."

"Why stayest thou not here?" questioned Ælfric.

"I wish not to be in Winchester," returned Egwina. "Tell me, Ælfric, thou dost not regard me now with hatred, dost thou?"

A cruel light shone in the man's eyes; but he answered:

"No; if ye have both suffered, it is sufficient."

Without saying more he left the hall, and Egwina saw him not while she was at the hall.

The next morning, laden with many gifts bestowed by the bounty of Oswald the thegn, the maiden started forth, resolved to speedily seek the protection of some lord.

She had gone but a little way from the manor, when she heard her name called, and looking back she beheld a bond-woman running toward her. In her hand was Edwy's harp.

"This also hath my lord sent thee," she cried, her breath coming quickly from the exertion of running.

"But the instrument belongeth to the harper!" cried Egwina in amazement.

"He hath another for Edwy. Take and question not the bounty of the thegn." The woman thrust the instrument into the girl's hands before she could prevent her, and was gone.

Egwina stood for a little while regarding the harp with surprise and some disquietude.

"I would that the thegn had not done this," she mused. "I like not to take the harp of a gleeman. I wot not what manner of lord he may be who takes from one to bestow on another. I know not what to do."

She pondered the matter for a time, then throwing the ribbon of the harp over her shoulder went on her way. It was evening when she entered the courtyard of a manor, and proceeded to the mead hall. Waiting until all had sung or contributed their portion to the glee, the maiden began a song. In the midst of it there came the noise of horses' hoofs from without, and a voice vociferously demanded admission. The wassail and glee were suspended while every one looked curiously at the men who entered.

The group consisted of several Saxons; among them, Oswald the thegn, Ælfric the juggler, Edwy the gleeman, and others.

"Now what seek ye, friend Oswald, that so unmannerly ye do enter our castle?" cried the thegn of the manor.

"Yon maiden," said Oswald pointing at Egwina. "Last night, and the night before, she sang in my hall at the glee. Laden with gifts did I send her forth, but that did not suffice. With covetous eyes she looked upon the harp of Edwy the gleeman, and that hath she taken with her. We come that we may take her to the reeve that the doom may be pronounced upon her."

"That girl?" The thegn and the retainers looked at the maiden in surprise. "She looks not as if she would do so base a thing."

"And neither would I!" spake Egwina, recovering from the consternation into which Oswald's speech had thrown her. "Good Oswald, didst thou not send thine bond-woman to me with this harp as additional gift after I had left thine abode?"

"Marry, no! Why should Oswald take that which belongeth to another to give thee? Hath he not wealth enow of his own?"

"But didst thou not send the woman to me?" faltered the maiden.

"A likely story," cried Ælfric the juggler. "Is it the custom for a lord to run after a gleemaiden with his gifts? I trow not!"

A loud guffaw from the Saxons in the hall greeted this remark. Poor Egwina was covered with confusion.

"But truly my lord," said she, addressing Oswald, "a woman did bring it and give it me."

"Maiden," said Oswald sorrowfully, "add not to theft the vice of lying. Of both sins the Scripture doth warn us."

"But I speak the truth," cried Egwina, clasping her hands. "I speak the truth, my lord, as I live by bread."

A look of compassion overspread over the thegn's face.

"Fair art thou, maiden! Too fair to utter such words. Evil hath been thy

surroundings if so innocent looking a maiden shouldst so perjure herself."

"To think that the jade would say that my lord would give away the harp of his gleeman," spoke Edwy. "Saw ye not, Ælfric, with what longing eyes she gazed upon it?"

"I saw," answered Ælfric. "Nought remaineth but to take her to the gerefa. Let him pronounce doom upon her."

There was so much of malignity in his tone that Egwina looked at him, and seeing with what cruel triumph he gazed upon her, knew in her inmost soul that it was Ælfric who had caused this thing.

In silence, she suffered herself to be carried back to the manor of Oswald to await the morning when she would be taken to the gerefa for trial.

CHAPTER XXI—THE TRIAL OF EGWINA

Before the ealdorman of the shire, and the gerefa or reeve, was Egwina taken. It was the folk moot of the shire. The bishop should have been present, but he was attending the king at Windshore. Many were in attendance, and the maiden shrank from the curious eyes fixed upon her.

"In the Lord," said Edwy the gleeman, as he took the oath, "I accuse not the maiden neither for hate, nor art, nor unjust avarice, nor do I know anything more true, but so my mind said to me, and I myself tell for truth, that this maiden, called Egwina the Fair, is the thief of my harp."

"Thou art sure of this, Edwy?" asked the gerefa, Beornwulf, won by the sweet face of the maiden.

"Marry, am I not on my oath?" blustered the man. "Not only do I ween that the maiden took the harp, but I wot it."

"Declare then thy charge," said Beornwulf.

"The maiden did enter the hall but three days since at sunset," deposed Edwy. "She sang and well did she please my Lord Oswald. That ye may know that naught but love of justice, and the restoration of mine own property doth animate me, I will say that she sang well. Then did my lord call for more, and the maiden asked for my harp, but, being unwilling that the sunbeam of the gleeman

should go from my hands, I loaned it not. My Lord Oswald then commanded that the maiden have the harp, and it was given her. She gave it me again. The next night she sang again at the glee. In the morning she went her way. Lo! when I would have accompanied my song with the instrument it was gone. We followed after the maiden, and found it with her. I have said."

He sat down. The statement was clear and direct. Egwina looked at the gerefa, and saw that he was impressed by the recital. Friendless and alone in the crowd she sat with none to believe in her innocence.

Ælfric next took the oath, and deposed that the morning thereafter, the first night of which the harper spake, he had entered the hall. There sat the maiden, and in her hands was the harp of Edwy which she did finger with lingering touch. He had joined in the pursuit of the girl, and when they found her, behold the harp was in her hands. When he had made an end of speaking, he raised his right hand solemnly and said: "In the name of the almighty God! As I here stand in true witness, unbidden and unbought; so oversaw I it with mine eyes, and overheard it with mine ears what I have said."

The maiden raised her head and looked the fellow straight in the eye. Ælfric quailed at that clear gaze, and in some confusion took his seat. Oswald the thegn then took the oath, and swore to the truth of what the other two had said, adding, that though he compassionated the maiden, he felt that he must deliver her to the doom of the land.

"Maiden," the gerefa turned to Egwina and his face was full of honest sorrow, "it mislikes me to believe that this is as these have sworn. Take now thine oath, and if thou canst say aught in rebuttal of what these have said, speak."

The maiden stood up, and proud was her port as she took the oath, and cried earnestly: "In the name of the Lord! I am innocent both in word and deed of this thing of which the gleeman accuses me."

"Child," said the gerefa, "perjure not thy soul. Thou art on oath."

"I know that I am on oath," said the maiden in a clear, steady voice. "I say again, my lord gerefa, I am innocent of this charge. 'Tis true, as Edwy hath said, that I did ask him for the harp. Sweeter is the voice of the singer with its music. It is the wish of all our craft to please, thus would I have enhanced my chance to delight others. True is it also, that Ælfric found me alone in the hall trying the instrument. It lay on the seat of the gleeman, and it harmed none that I did try it. Then, my lord, and the truth do I speak as I tell thee, when I left the thegn's manor laden with generous gifts, there came one running after me, a bond-woman carrying the harp. 'This also hath my lord sent thee,' she cried. Wondering much that a lord should send as gift the property of another, I took it not, but spake of the matter. 'Question not the gifts of my lord but take them,' she said, thrusting it upon me. Before I could say aught else, she ran from me,

and I was forced to proceed with the harp, wondering."

"Strange is thy tale, maiden." The gerefa spoke doubtingly. "Never, I ween, hath a lord been known to take from one to bestow on another. Strange, strange thy tale!"

"Yet methinks that there is the sound of truth in the maiden's words," spoke the ealdorman. "Prithee, my Lord Oswald, have thy bond-women brought that they may be spoken with, and we shall see how truly the maid doth speak."

Egwina looked at him gratefully. It was the first word that she had heard that evinced anything like faith in her innocence. A silence fell upon the people as the thegn sent for his bond-women, and as they waited their appearance some were there who, won by the beauty of the maiden, openly expressed a belief in her innocence. At last the gesiths of Oswald returned, and with them came the bond-women. Motioning them forward, the gerefa said to Egwina, "Maiden, as these pass before thee, say which was the one who gave thee the harp."

Egwina looked at the women as they passed. Finally, at the end of the line, there came one whom she regarded attentively.

"This, my lord gerefa," spake she, "is the one who gave it me."

The reeve called the woman to him and administered the oath.

"State, woman," said he, "when and where thou didst give the harp to the maiden."

The woman looked at him in surprise.

"Dread lord, I wot not thy meaning."

"Didst thou not follow after the maiden, and give her a harp?"

"Nay; I know not what thou meanest," declared the woman.

"Knowest thou not the maiden? Tell if thou hast even spoken with her."

"I saw the maiden in the hall of Oswald the thegn," deposed she. "For two nights and a day did she abide therein, and when there was wassail she sang for the glee. On the morning of the third day did she bid us good-by and wended her way hence; whither, my lord, I wot not. Neither wot I more of her."

"Dost thou know aught of the harp, and how the maid came by it?" demanded the ealdorman, moved by the look of despair on the maiden's face. "Take the instrument, and look at it. Declarest thou, woman, that thou hast never beheld it before?"

The woman took up the harp and looked at it closely.

"Many and oft are the times that I have seen it," she said, with an appearance of candor. "It is that of Edwy the gleeman."

"How knowest thou?"

"Once he did ask that I clean it for him. Here, my lord, is where by accident I scratched the wood when I had holpen him."

"And thou gavest it not to the maid?" The ealdorman was plainly disap-

pointed.

"No, my lord," declared the woman positively. "Why should I give to the girl Edwy's harp?"

The gerefa turned to Egwina who, with pale face, listened to the woman's denial.

"Thou hearest what the woman hath deposed. Is there aught else that thou hast to say before thy doom be pronounced upon thee?"

Egwina was troubled. "I know not what to say," she said, despairingly. "The truth have I declared to thee, my lord—the truth, and naught but the truth. This is she who gave me the harp. Why she should gainsay the fact, I know not. But as my soul liveth, I declare to thee that I am innocent of this charge which hath been brought against me. It hath been borne in upon my mind that malice hath been at work, and that Ælfric hath arranged the matter; that for vengeance sake he hath testified falsely, and wrought this evil."

"Maiden, no longer can we listen to thee. Receive the doom as thou knowest it to be," commanded the gerefa.

But the ealdorman cried, "Brother, are we not to administer justice? While still there is a doubt, suffer the girl to benefit by it. Let her declare cause why Ælfric should wish to wreak vengeance upon her."

"Why should we listen?" returned the reeve, impatiently. "Hath she not been given a fair trial? One artifice—that of the woman—hath failed. Shall we try another? Marry, no!"

"Yet, still let us listen," requested the ealdorman. "Maiden," without waiting for the assent of the reeve he turned to Egwina, "thou hast not before seen Ælfric the freed-man. Why, then, should this be his vengeance upon thee?"

"Oh, my lord, but I have seen him before!" cried Egwina, hope springing once more in her breast. Rapidly she recounted the circumstances.

"It may be as thou sayest," mused the ealdorman. "Brother, let us search into the matter as the maiden hath told."

"No;" the gerefa was full of impatience. "'Tis but a wile of the jade. Besides, hath it not been clearly shown that she hath stolen the harp? Arise, maiden, and hear thy doom. Too long now hast thou detained us. It hath been proved by witnesses, both unbought and unlying, that thou didst take from the manor of Oswald the thegn the harp of Edwy the gleeman. More hath also been shown. Not only didst thou steal the harp, but thou wert found with it in thy possession. Hear, then, the doom."

"But, my lord, I am innocent—innocent," interrupted Egwina, wildly. "By the Powers of Heaven, I swear to thee that I am innocent."

"Girl, darest thou to blaspheme?" cried the gerefa, recoiling from her. "Darest thou to call upon the Powers of Heaven?"

"Aye!" cried Egwina, springing to her feet. "And not only upon the Powers alone, but upon Him who ruleth over all as well. Sir Gerefa, a greater than thou shall be my judge. I commit my soul to God to attest its innocence. Sir, I demand the ordeal."

CHAPTER XXII—THE ORDEAL

The effect on the people was electrical. A murmur went up that the maiden was innocent else she durst not appeal to the Supreme Judge. Ælfric the juggler turned pale. The tendency toward belief in the girl's innocence grew into a certainty in the heart of the ealdorman, and even the gerefa seemed somewhat softened.

"Child, child," he said, compassionately, "wottest thou what thou askest?"

"Yea, I know," answered Egwina, firmly. "By fire or by water as ye may choose, my lord gerefa and my lord ealdorman, and with God be the judgment."

"With God be the judgment," repeated the gerefa solemnly. "But with thee lieth the choice."

"Do ye two choose," said the maiden, "that ye may be satisfied with the trial. It will please me the better to have it so decided."

"Then, brother," said the gerefa, addressing the ealdorman, "what sayest thou to the ordeal by water?"

"If it suit the maiden, I will not gainsay the choice," returned the ealdorman.

"Then, maiden, thou shalt to the bishop, who will return to Winchester this day. There wilt thou purify thyself by just preparation for the rite. Let bread and salt, water and herbs only be thy portion. Three days shalt thou tarry at the abode of the bishop; then, purified and absolved, the ordeal will be given thee. In the presence of witnesses, twelve for thee, and twelve against thee, shalt thou enter the church with the priest. Into boiling water shalt thou plunge thine arm to the elbow, and from the water shalt thou take a stone heated hot. And may God, the Supreme Ruler, who on the last great day shall judge the quick and the dead, be thy judge. May He, in His infinite mercy, prove thee innocent as thou sayest, for dire and dread is the punishment that will o'erwhelm thee shouldst thou be guilty."

The assembly dispersed. With erect bearing, as of one conscious of rec-

titude, the maiden walked with the ealdorman and the gerefa. With pale face, Ælfric would have hurried away with Edwy but that Beornwulf interposed.

"My Lord Oswald," he said, addressing the thegn, "see that these men are present during the ordeal. Be thou there also and thy bond-woman who hath testified."

"Aye; I will be there," answered the thegn. "If it shall be proven that I have wronged the maiden, twice will I pay the were."

"Await the result, and then shape thy action," said Beornwulf, shortly, and continued on his way with the maiden and the ealdorman.

In answer to the knock at the portals of the bishop's house, the warder declared that the bishop had returned but was at mass.

"Then leave we the maiden here," said the ealdorman, "and seek him at the minster."

"Not yet hath the maiden been proven innocent of the charge," said the gerefa cautiously. "I would afford no opportunity for escape lest justice be defeated. Should she flee from us, thou and I, brother, must pay the were."

"Are there not bolts and bars?" queried the other. "Let us leave the girl here, and seek the bishop."

It was so decided, and Egwina found herself alone in a room with the door barred awaiting the return of the bishop. Overwrought by the events which had transpired so rapidly, and the excitement thereof, the wearied girl sank down upon one of the carved settles and gave way to tears. Violently at first she wept, but gradually the sobs grew quieter and less frequent until at last they ceased entirely, and, worn out by fatigue, the maiden slept.

"She sleeps not as the guilty sleeps," said the voice of the ealdorman, as Egwina awoke. "It speaks in the maiden's favor that she hath sought the aid of the church. Mickle do I mislike to see so fair a hand scarred and seamed by the ordeal."

"True," answered a voice, which sounded sweeter than the softest music in Egwina's ear, for well did she know it. "True; but better for the hand to be scarred than that the soul be seared with the blackness of falsehood and theft. Time may bring obliteration to the scars of the skin; to the soul never, save through the blood of Him who alone can purify."

Egwina turned and looked the speaker full in the face.

"Well hast thou spoken, Denewulf," she said.

"Egwina! is it truly thou?" and the bishop, for he was none other than Denewulf, the swineherd, whom the king had appointed to this position, seized the maiden's hands. "Dear child, is it thus that I see thee at last?"

"It is thus, Denewulf," answered Egwina, sadly. "Where is Adiva? I knew not that thou wert the bishop."

"Unworthy am I of so great an estate," said Denewulf, humbly, "but the king hath thought otherwise. Adiva is well and with me. Much will she rejoice to see thee, my child, for little have we known of thee for some time. How comes it that thou art not with the king, but lie in my hands, accused of theft and subjected to the ordeal?"

"'Tis a long story," said Egwina. "Take me to Adiva, dear Denewulf, and then will I tell thee of all that hath befallen me, and why I am with thee to be shriven for the ordeal."

"My lord bishop, is the maiden known to thee?" exclaimed the ealdorman, in surprise. "Belongeth she to the king?"

"She doth," answered Denewulf, sternly. "If harm doth come to her, greatly will ye have to answer to the king."

"Truly, my lord, we knew not that the girl was of the king's household," cried the ealdorman, with humility. "Yet, unknowing the fact, have I believed her guiltless of the theft."

"True," said Egwina, smiling at him, gratefully. "He alone hath shown even a faint belief in mine innocence."

"Now we will go to Adiva," said Denewulf, "and then, child, thou must begin to prepare for the ordeal. Since thou hast demanded it, God alone can judge thee."

"To His hands gladly do I commend the matter," answered Egwina. "Man's judgment is fallible, God's infallible."

"Then in thy hands do I leave the maiden," said the ealdorman, withdrawing.

Adiva greeted her with joy, but became saddened as she told her story.

"Must thy pretty arm be plunged into the water?" she cried, indignantly. "Denewulf, be thou bishop and permit it?"

"She hath appealed to God," answered Denewulf. "Not even the king could prevent the ordeal from taking place now, though I will lay the matter before him if Egwina so wills."

"Nay, do not so," cried Egwina. "Do ye not see, good friends, I wish not Edward to know where I am. The king would be displeased with me for calling upon him. He likes not that Edward looks on me with—" She faltered, blushing.

"With favor," supplemented Adiva. "Dear heart, little one, how could he help it? I knew not that the king would turn from thee because thou wert not gentle. I own that somewhat hath he grieved me in this, but alack! even Alfred, wise and good as he is, hath, mayhap, too much pride."

"Nay, nay, Adiva," chid Egwina. "Say naught against the king. Kind and tender to me always hath he been. Seest thou not that Edward may be chosen of the witan to be cyning some day?—and great will he be, too great for the husband of a simple girl such as I."

Adiva shook her head, and began caressing her, when Denewulf interrupted.

"Not longer must we talk, Adiva. The maiden must begin to prepare for the ordeal. Let her come triumphant from that, and thou wilt have time to talk enow."

"Must she?" Adiva began to weep.

"Grieve not, dear Adiva," comforted Egwina. "I fear naught. Why should I? Am I not innocent? I am ready, Denewulf."

Thus did she enter upon her preparation for the trial. Three days were consumed in making ready. She ate only bread and salt and herbs, and drank but water; spending much time in prayer.

It was the night before the ordeal was to take place that Egwina was awakened by a dim light in the little room which was kept for such as demanded the trial by fire or water. A touch fell softly on her arm, and some one began rubbing it from the elbow down. Wondering much, the maiden sat up on her couch and, behold! Adiva was gently stroking her right arm.

"Adiva, what doest thou to my arm?" questioned the girl.

"Nay, my pretty one, ask me not. No harm, I'll warrant thee."

"What is that with which thou anointest it?" demanded the girl.

"Why shouldst thou wish to know?" cried the good dame. "'Tis but a salve that I had made for thee."

"But why dost thou use it on my arm?"

"Child, 'tis to save thy arm. See, it hardens the skin, and thus it feels not the boiling water, and thou mayest take up the heated stone with impunity."

Egwina snatched her arm from the dame in horror.

"Interferest thou with the judgment of God?" she cried. "How can I prove that I took not the harp if I hardened the hand and the arm to the water? Away, Adiva! Else I shall believe thee in league with the evil one to perjure my soul."

Abashed by the girl's vehemence, the dame left the room, and the maiden carefully removed every vestige of the unguent from her arm. Little did she reck that thus Adiva had anointed the member each night.

The next morning, the day of the ordeal, Egwina laid upon the altar her offering, and received the holy sacrament. Then before the gerefa, Beornwulf, and the ealdorman she again took the oath of innocence. From the accusers, Oswald the thegn, Ælfric, Edwy, and others to the number of twelve were chosen for those against her. The ealdorman and eleven others stood for her.

These had fasted for twenty-four hours. On either side of the church they stood, and Denewulf sprinkled them with the holy water, of which they also drank. Presenting the Scriptures to each to kiss, the bishop signed every one with the sign of the cross. The fire which was built directly under the altar sparkled

and burned brightly. The huge kettle swinging over it was full of water which bubbled and boiled briskly. In the embers of the fire lay the stone which, heated hot, was to be dropped into the water from which the maiden was to snatch it.

From either side advanced a man: Oswald the thegn and the ealdorman. They went to the kettle, and, agreeing that the water boiled furiously, with measured steps returned to their places at the sides of the church.

All bowed their heads in prayer. As the last collect was said, Egwina entered with the bishop. She was very pale, but she walked firmly, and her eyes shone with a rapt, intent gaze as if communing with invisible beings In her hand she carried a small cross which she kissed ever and anon, and alway did her lips move in prayer.

[image]

SHE WITHDREW THE STONE FROM THE BOILING WATER.

Slowly the bishop and the accused approached the altar. They paused as they reached the iron kettle. All heads were bowed, and each continued to pray a prayer that the truth might be known, as the bishop with tongs lifted the stone and dropped it into the water.

There was a hissing, seething sound. The water bubbled and moved tumultuously as it received the stone. At a sign from the bishop, with an inaudible prayer, Egwina plunged her bared arm into the water and lifted therefrom the stone.

A look of intense amazement flitted across her face as she did so. Her lips parted as if about to speak, but the bishop made the sign of the cross and she remained silent. Still in dead silence, Denewulf, his own hands covered by a cloth removed from her hand the stone which he threw again into the embers. Solemnly he bandaged the arm and sealed it.

"To God belongeth the judgment," he said in grave tones, and withdrew from the church with the maiden. The people filed out after them.

For three days was the arm to remain bound up, and if it showed foul on the third day guilt was assumed; if clear, without suppuration, then would she be innocent.

"It pains me not, Adiva," said the maiden doubtfully in answer to the solicitous inquiries of the dame. "I know not why but no smart of burn have I felt at all."

"Why shouldst thou?" demanded the dame. "Art thou not one of God's own lambs? Rest thee contented, dear heart, that He meant thee not to suffer."

In the presence of the ealdorman, the gerefa Beornwulf, Oswald the thegn, Edwy, Ælfric, and all others present at the ordeal, the bandage was removed from the girl's arm. Clear and white as alabaster, with no mark of scald or burn upon it, shone the beautiful member.

A cry went up from those who saw it.

"A miracle! A miracle!" they shouted. "One of God's own virgins is the maiden!"

CHAPTER XXIII—THE DREAD DECREE

"The maid is innocent," cried Denewulf the bishop. "By God's own judgment is she so pronounced. What then of her accusers? Those who have perjured themselves, and by testifying falsely risked their soul's salvation in so doing? Step forth, ye that have so spoken, and give cause why ye have done this thing!"

Then did Oswald the thegn step forth.

"I sware to thee, my lord bishop, that unwitting did I wrong the maiden. I spake only that which I knew when I deposed. The harp was gone. It was found with the maid. Marry, as I judged so would ye have judged likewise. Name the were, and it shall be paid! I have said."

"And well, Oswald, unwitting and unknowing didst thou wrong the maiden. As thou wilt willingly make amends thou hast atoned thy fault. More thou canst not do. But the others."

His brow darkened ominously as Edwy the gleeman came forward. The ealdorman and gerefa looked hard on the man; now, since Heaven itself had shown the innocence of Egwina, they were convinced that guile had been employed.

"My lords," cried the gleeman who was plainly agitated, "I take oath by all the saints that I did depose only that which I knew. The harp was mine. 'Twas gone. We found the same with the maid. How else could I depose?"

"How camest thou to think the maiden had taken it?" demanded the ealdorman, sharply.

"'Twas Ælfric who spake to me of the maiden's toying with it in the hall. But the night before she did ask me for it. My lords, it looked ill for the girl, ye

must allow."

"Speaks he the truth, think ye?" inquired the ealdorman of the bishop and the gerefa.

"Leave him to me," said the bishop. "He shall not be shriven until he declareth the truth. The other two, methinks, are the real culprits."

A hue and cry was now raised that Ælfric was escaping, and many left the assembly to go in pursuit. The juggler was soon overtaken and borne again to the bishop. Oswald had brought the bond-woman forward.

The two stood defiantly before the tribunal. Ælfric had given the woman a quick, warning glance under which she quailed.

"What sayest thou?" asked Denewulf of the woman. "Why didst thou deny giving the harp to the maiden?"

"I gave it not," answered she sullenly.

"Woman, God hath judged the maiden innocent. Then thou and this man are guilty. It must be so. Tell, then, why thou didst the thing."

No answer came from the woman's lips. The bishop turned to the gerefa and ealdorman. "Brothers, do ye question her. Stubborn and hard of heart hath she proven herself. Seek ye to soften her."

No amount of questions, threats or persuasion would induce the woman to answer further than that she gave not the harp to the maiden. Presently, hoping to gain more by it, they turned to Ælfric. The man's eyes were shining with a triumphant light as he saw that the woman was obdurate.

To all questions he answered nothing. In an insolent attitude he listened, but replied not. At last the bishop said, with some impatience: "Fully am I convinced of the guilt of these two. By his attempt at flight hath Ælfric shown his crime. Brothers, in this matter the man and the woman have sinned against heaven. Let, then, the church give the punishment. To the ordeal shall both be condemned. The woman to trial by water and stone even as the maiden; the man, the ordeal by fire."

The gerefa and ealdorman willingly gave consent, as they were convinced that Ælfric and the woman were truly the offenders.

To the bishop's house were they taken, there to make the needful preparation. The allotted number of days passed. Solitary and alone as the woman had been kept during this period, she had had time for reflection. Traces of a mental struggle between obduracy and despair showed in her countenance as she was brought forth to make her offering, and to receive the sacrament before taking the ordeal.

"Of Christ's body spiritually dost thou eat," said the bishop as he administered the bread. "Pure and sinless was He. If thou art innocent, eat with impunity of the holy loaf, and drink of the wine which by His blessing is His blood spiri-

tually. Eat and drink, woman! If innocent, fear naught; if guilty, woe, woe to thy soul."

The woman trembled, and her face, already pale, grew ghastly white. She stretched forth her hand for the holy morsel, and then with a great cry fell at the bishop's feet.

"I dare not," she cried, "for my soul's sake, I dare not partake of it."

"Then, daughter, assoil thy soul of its taint by full confession."

"I will, I will," sobbed the woman, breaking down completely. "I did give the harp to the maiden even as she hath declared. All was as she hath already told. I ran after her and gave it into her hands, stating that my Lord Oswald had sent it as gift."

"But why, daughter, shouldst thou so perjure thy soul?" asked the bishop.

"Oh, my lord, judge me not too hardly. I have a child, and mickle doth it grieve me that she should be a slave. Ælfric would give me the money to buy my child and then she would be free—free, my lord bishop! Little dost thou reck of a mother's heart if thou wottest not the temptation such offer would be to me. What knew I of the maiden? She was naught to me, and my child is my life."

"Grievous hath been thy sin, woman, but great also thy temptation," said Denewulf, with compassion. "Hardened thou art not, or the holy supper would not have so affected thee. Out of her sorrow at thy lot feel, daughter, the full blessings of the Church. Thy child, and thou also, shall be freed from her bounty. Not because of thy sin, but because the Church hath compassion on thine affliction doth she redeem thee. Arise, daughter, and go in peace. Even as the Holy One, whose priest I am, spake to the erring woman, so say I to thee: 'Go, and sin no more!'"

With prayers and tears and ejaculations of gratitude, the woman arose, and left the minster. The bishop approached Ælfric.

"Wilt thou partake of the holy bread and wine, or wilt thou, as the woman hath done, assoil thy soul's guilt by confession?"

Ælfric's lip curled.

"Naught fear I, sir priest. On with thy ordeal! What have I to confess?"

"Heardst thou not what the woman confessed?" asked the bishop. "That thou hadst enticed her into this deed by the offer of money to buy the freedom of her child. Man, man! Partakest thou of the Eucharist and purgest not thy soul by confession?"

"Naught have I to confess," reiterated the man, doggedly. "Falsely hath the woman sworn to thee, as thou wilt see."

With horror in his face at the temerity of the juggler, Denewulf administered the sacrament. Ælfric partook of it, and then, as before, twelve men were chosen from each side of those for and against him. Nine feet of the length of

the foot of the accused were measured from the fire where the iron lay heating. For this distance was the iron to be carried. Just before the last collect the bishop lifted the iron to the staples, and then after the prayer he led in the accused.

With firm step the man advanced, and grasped the iron steadfastly with both hands. He walked the required distance, carrying the iron steadily, then flung it on the floor with an oath.

The bishop and the honest Saxons ranged on either side of the church started back in horror. Tremblingly, fearful of seeing the man struck down for his impiety, the bishop approached the wretch and bound up his hands, putting the seal of the church upon them. After the required three days the bandages were removed, and foully mattered were the burns.

"Guilty art thou," said the bishop with sorrow to the juggler. "Evil wouldst thou have wrought upon another, and evil hast thou brought upon thyself. Son, didst thou not remember that the Lord hath said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay'? Then wherefore shouldst thou try to wreak upon the maiden that for which only thine own actions were responsible? See, the judgment of God hath fallen upon thee! Guilty art thou shown to be. Purged must thy soul be of its dire sin. Go forth from this day without thy weapons; and travel barefoot to the graves of the four saints: St. Edwin, St. Guthlac, St. Oswald, and St. Neot. No shelter must thou have at night. Thou must fast, and watch, and pray both day and night, and willingly weary thyself. Iron shall not come to thy hair nor to thy nails. No warm bath shalt thou affect, nor soft bed; flesh shalt thou not eat nor shalt thou partake of drink which can intoxicate. Inside of a church thou shalt not go, because of the oath which thou didst utter at the trial of God's holy ordeal, but thou shalt seek the tombs of these saints and there confess thy sins and pray for intercession. When thou hast finished thy penance, and severe it is, son, for greatly hast thou sinned, shriven and absolved from guilt, thou canst return and again mingle amongst thy fellows. Arise and go, and may God in His infinite mercy be with thee in thy wanderings."

With heads bowed the assembly listened to the dire punishment meted out to the wretch. Such was the power of the Church over the people that not once did it enter the head of Ælfric to disobey her command.

With dark looks and unrepentant mien he sat down in the midst of them and removed his shoes and leather hose. Then forth from the church did he wend his way to begin his pilgrimage.

And never again did Egwina behold him.

CHAPTER XXIV—ADIVA TAKES MATTERS INTO HER HANDS

For a short time after this the days of Egwina were peaceful. Adiva petted and coddled her as only good motherly women can do, and the maiden felt that at last she had found a haven of rest, for weary was she of wandering.

"Never again shalt thou leave us, little one," declared Adiva, one day, as she and the maiden employed themselves as in the olden days with shuttle and distaff. "Never again! Thou shouldst not have left us at all, for thou didst first belong to us. Did not Denewulf find thee in the forest? Now thou shalt remain always."

"But the king?" said Egwina, bending low over her work. "Doth he not visit thee, Adiva—he or some of his family?"

"Well-a-day, yes," answered Adiva. "What of it, child? Couldst thou not stay out of the way until they had departed? 'Tis not as in the forest. Then there was but the two rooms. Wottest thou not that the manor of the bishop hath more?"

Egwina laughed with something of her old brightness.

"There!" cried the good woman, delightedly, "gladness doth it bring to my heart to hear thee laugh like that! Laugh an' thou wilt, even though it be at my foolish pride. 'Tis something better to be the wife of a bishop than of a swineherd, is it not?"

"But still he is the same, Adiva, swineherd or bishop," said the maiden. "What doth it matter what he doeth? 'Tis the man whom thou hast wed."

"Thou art young," remarked Adiva, with an upward lift of the head. "Wisdom thou wilt acquire as thou growest older. Denewulf was good enow as a husband when a swineherd, but few were the mancuses and pence that came our way. Now doth he wear the bishop's stole and all bow down to him. Well-a-day, child! It doth make a difference. But thou hast not yet said that them wouldst stay with me. To tell the truth," she lowered her voice, "there are times when lonely I be in spite of greatness."

"If it will please thee, then will it please me," answered the maiden. "Weary am I of wandering, and fain would I dwell where friends abide, if it so be that I may not see the king nor Edward. It hath seemed to me of late, Adiva, that in some way I should show my gratitude to God for His mercy to me. Some service would I render Him for His judgment. Why, Adiva, when I think that there was not even a scar, I wonder what I have done that so great a favor should be shown me."

"Trouble not thy head about it," said the dame, hastily. "Oft have I heard that such things were past finding out. Why, Denewulf, bishop though he be, wottest not the why of many things!"

"The maiden is right," said Denewulf, entering at this moment. "I, too, Egwina, have thought of the miracle, for such it was, and it hath seemed to me that thou wert spared that thou mightest give Him thy service. To chaste and holy Mary thy life should belong. Thou seekest repose, my child; find it in the cloister."

"The cloister!" Adiva threw up her arms in dismay. "Yon pretty child? Denewulf, what aileth thee?"

"Naught," answered the bishop, promptly. "Naught but desire for the best for Egwina. Wonderfully hath she been favored. It can be for naught else than that she should devote her life to the service of Heaven."

"Denewulf, hast thou gone daft?" demanded Adiva, with some asperity. "Egwina a nun? I trow not!"

"But, Adiva," said the gentle voice of Egwina, "why have I been so favored? Not even a scar, as thou knowest, nor mark of any kind. I felt that God would show mine innocence, but so marked was His favor that it hath troubled me to know the cause. It may be that for this service was I thus favored."

"And dost thou think of becoming a nun?" cried the dame, in consternation.

"If Denewulf thinketh best, and that for this cause was the miracle performed, I will so do," answered the maiden.

"It hath weighed upon my mind," said the bishop, "and it doth seem to me, Egwina, that it hath been intended by that sign that thou shouldst become the bride of the church."

"Out upon such nonsense!" exclaimed the dame, with energy. "No miracle was there save only what I, with the help of thy foster-mother, Gunnehilde, worked."

"Adiva!" exclaimed both Egwina and the bishop in a breath. "What meanest thou?"

"I mean," said the dame, "that I was not willing to have thy pretty arm seared, so I sent to Gunnehilde, and she concocted me a lotion. Every night did I bathe hand and arm. The last night, child, the salve which thou didst find me

using was but the final touch. Already the lotion had done its work, and thou mightest have carried red-hot iron thy nine feet and back, and no scar would there have been. Out upon it for a miracle!"

"Woman! thou hast profaned the judgment of the Supreme One," said her husband, sternly, while Egwina sank back overcome.

"Profaned? Not at all," answered the dame, defiantly. "Did it not bring the guilty to punishment? The woman confessed, and the juggler is even now upon his pilgrimage. Egwina was shown innocent—as she was. How, then, have I profaned the judgment?"

"Thou must do penance," said Denewulf.

"Penance?" retorted Adiva. "Not I. What good doth it do me to be a bishop's wife if I am to do penance as an ordinary body? Keep thy penance for such as need them, Denewulf."

"But mine innocence?" cried poor Egwina. "Happy have I been to think that God did stoop to so favor me."

"Now, more than ever, do I think that thou shouldst enter the cloister," said the bishop. "'Tis true that the guilty were brought to punishment and thy innocence proven; but what if the ealdorman, the gerefa, and the people knew of this. Thinkest thou that they would think it just? Either, my child, thou must again take the ordeal or thou must retire to the cloister. I see naught else to be done," and he left the room.

"Thou to the nunnery?" cried the dame, indignantly. "Well-a-day! We shall see, my lord bishop. Neither ordeal nor cloister shall there be for my pretty one!"

"But, Adiva, I see that it must be as he saith," said Egwina. "Naught is left for me."

"Is there not, child? Again did I ask Gunnehilde of thy dream. Greatness is to be thy portion, and thou shalt not spoil the web woven for thee by this thing. A nunnery for thee, who art destined for the bride of Edward? I trow not! Before that shall happen, Edward himself shall be sent for, and then we shall see."

"Oh, dear Adiva, thou must not do that," cried Egwina, distressed.

"If thou dost not as I tell thee," said Adiva, with determination written on her brow, "both the king and Edward will I send for."

"I will! I will!" cried Egwina, hastily. "Whatever thou dost say that will I do, if only, dear friend, thou wilt not send for them. Gladly would I look upon their faces unknown of them, but I durst not speak with the king. I could not bear for him to look on me with coldness."

"We will wait for a few days," said Adiva, "and see whether Denewulf still thinketh the same. If he doth, then will I tell thee what to do. If I can o'ersuade him from such thing, then thou shalt remain with me, and naught will there be to do."

But Denewulf could not be persuaded from his idea. The honest Saxon desired only to do justice, and to his upright sense of honor this ordeal had been a failure. Only could his conscience be satisfied by a repetition of the ordeal or a retirement to the cloister.

On the other hand, Egwina, actuated by the same delicate sense of honor, was overwhelmed with fear lest Adiva should send for Alfred and Edward as she had threatened. Finding that Egwina inclined more and more to Denewulf's way of thinking, and that Denewulf was obdurate, the good dame took matters into her own hands.

"Come!" said she to Egwina one day. "Thou shalt go with me this morning to see Gunnehilde. Rememberest thou that time we went through the forest to have her read thy rede for thee? Again will we go."

"But not for reading of rune or rede," pleaded the maiden. "Sick at heart doth it make me, for it bringeth Gyda to my mind."

"No rune shall she read thee, child, though I would that thou wouldst let her. Then would she show thee that thou art destined to sit beside Edward."

"Speak not so, Adiva," said the maiden. "Henceforth I renounce all faith in seid and galdra. Of peril they do not warn; neither keep they from sin. I will seek no more to pierce that veil by which an all-wise Father hides the future from our gaze. It bringeth naught but evil."

"Well, well, do as thou wishest," grumbled the dame. "For my part, I find that it harms me not to be guided by Gunnehilde, and rare is she as a compounder of herbs. Here we are, child. Thou seest that we have brought the vala with us, for Denewulf, though he believeth not in her craft, wisheth her near him."

Gunnehilde greeted them with warmth. To Egwina she accorded a respect and deference that confused the maiden, who could not but see what thoughts were in her mind.

"Come ye to consult the runes?" she asked, "or upon the matter of which thou spakest, Adiva?"

"Upon the matter," returned Adiva. "Egwina will have naught more to do with runes or rede. Therefore haste we to the other affair."

"She hath no need," replied the vala. "Skulda hath woven the web and golden is its woof. Fear not, maiden, Verdandi striveth to weave dark threads among the gold, but already do they begin to brighten. Speed thou on thy way. Skulda holdeth the shuttle."

Egwina answered not. The remembrance of Gyda was still too strong upon her for her to listen without a shudder to the woman's prophecies. Gunnehilde saw the repugnance in her face, and turned to the bishop's wife.

"The cart is ready at thy bidding, Adiva. Whenever thou shalt say, then shall Beorn take the maiden to my brother's, Anlaf the black."

"What dost thou mean?" cried Egwina. "Where do I go? Adiva, what is it?"

"My child, thou didst promise thou wouldst do as I bade thee should Denewulf remain obdurate in his purpose to have thee enter a convent. Thou wottest how set he is in his design. Without thy consent thou canst not, of course, be made to enter one, but I fear that he will o'ersuade thee. Therefore I deem it best that thou shouldst retire for a little while into East Anglia where Anlaf the black, brother to Gunnehilde, abides. There shalt thou stay until such time as Denewulf will have given over his design. Then thou canst return to me, and never shalt thou leave me until Edward takes thee."

"Adiva," said the maiden, distressed, "it cannot be. It will never be as thou seemeth to think. Dwell not on such hopes for they are vain. I feel with Denewulf that it is meet and fitting that I should retire into a nunnery. Oppose me no longer, Adiva. It is best."

"It is not best," cried the dame. "If it so be that Edward doth not wed with thee, yet still thou shalt not be hidden in the cloister. Thou wilt go with the man to Anlaf's, wilt thou not? Thou must, Egwina, else I will send for the king and lay the whole matter before him."

"Thou wottest that I will do as thou sayest, Adiva, when thou dost make such threat. To please thee, then, and to keep thee from sending for the king, I will go into East Anglia and for a time give up the thought of the cloister. Anon I will take it up."

So Egwina found herself bundled into a cart and on the way to East Anglia to the house of Anlaf the black.

CHAPTER XXV—HILDA AGAIN

The brother of Gunnehilde, Anlaf the black, had been one of the servitors of Guthrum. The king had parceled out among those of his retainers who had chosen to remain with him the lands and manors of East Anglia. Many of the wild and courageous spirits, rebelling at the restraints of a peaceful life, had retired from the coasts of Britain, seeking other fields of adventure and prowess. To these also the fact that Guthrum and many of his jarls had embraced Christianity proved galling, and so many were the manors and broad the fields assigned

to those who remained. The Saxon inhabitants either submitted to their rule, and became subjects of the Danish king, or else retired into Wessex or southern Mercia.

To Thetford, the capital and largest city of East Anglia, was Egwina taken. Large and extensive forests surrounded the town. Just in the edge of the woods was an open glade in which was the house where dwelt Anlaf the black. In the near distance could be seen the royal vill of Guthrum or Athelstan.

The family consisted of but two members. Anlaf himself and his wife. They received the maiden with hospitality and reverence, for Egwina found that even here the greatness predicted for her by Gunnehilde had its effect. The wife of Anlaf would not permit her to assist her in her household duties, and the maiden soon found that, deprived of all employment, time began to hang heavily upon her hands.

Chafing at her idleness, she began to wander in the woodland near the house, observing the caution that had been given her of not straying too far away for fear of the wolves or bears with which the forest was filled. One afternoon, she had walked somewhat farther than usual, and, feeling the need of rest, flung herself down upon the sward under the spreading branches of an oak tree. She had lain so but a short while when she heard voices.

Out from among the trees there came the figures of two persons: a young man, very fair, and to all appearances a Saxon, and a girl, a Dane. Egwina sat up and surveyed the two with some curiosity which was reciprocated by the man and the girl, for they stopped and looked at her with surprise.

"Come, Siegbert," said the Danish girl, "let us advance and see who the maiden is." She started forward as she spoke, and the young man, called Siegbert, supported her form carefully.

Egwina rose, and awaited their coming, rejoicing in the fact that she was at last going to meet with some young folk near her own age.

"Why, it is the skald maiden!" exclaimed the Danish girl, as she drew near to the Saxon maiden.

"Hilda, daughter of Guthrum!" exclaimed Egwina in turn.

"Yes; it is Hilda. What dost thou here?" cried the king's daughter. "I thought that thou wert skald maiden to King Alfred? Thou wert with him when he entered the camp at Westbury."

"True," answered Egwina, briefly. "Gleemaidens as well as gleemen are in many places. To-day they serve one lord; to-morrow they chant the praises of another."

"Sit we down," commanded the Danish girl imperiously. "Much doth it tire me to stand, and I would talk with thee."

The young man spread a mantle upon the sward, and Hilda sank down

upon it. Egwina resumed her seat, looking at the Saxon attendant as she did so. Well worthy of attention was he.

He carried himself nobly; his form was strong, muscular, and symmetrically developed. His face was marvelously beautiful, but the eyes caught and held the gaze. Deep blue were they, and full of unfathomable sorrow, yet full also of that strength which is self-conscious of power. His bearing toward the Danish maiden was tender in the extreme.

He bore her pettishness and imperiousness not as a slave, but indulgently as one bears the caprices of a loved child. Again and again Egwina found her glance wandering to his face, and she caught herself listening to his voice as he spoke to Hilda, with a strange throb of the heart.

"Lean against me, Hilda," he was saying. "Then thou wilt not be so tired."

"It is better," admitted Hilda, leaning contentedly against his broad chest. "Now tell me, maiden. Art thou wandering through Danelagh, or what dost thou here?"

"Nay; I wander no more," answered Egwina. "Here in East Anglia do I abide for a time only. I wot not when I shall go hence, but methinks it will not be long. Hast thou trouble again with thy knee?"

"No; didst thou not know that thy King Alfred did cure me? No longer do I suffer from my knee, but hot and sharp is the pain here," and she laid her hand on her breast. "I would that I knew more of that Cuthbert of whom the king told me. And he was afflicted even as I with the lameness of the knee. Prithee, maiden, dost thou know aught of him?"

"Only that he was an holy and an austere man; the bishop of Lindisfarne," replied Egwina. "Many miracles have been wrought by his tomb, and many did he perform himself."

"Oh, that I might visit his tomb!" exclaimed the Danish girl, fervently. "I wish not to die yet. I am so young, so young!" She burst into a passion of weeping.

Siegbert drew her to him, and gently stroked her hair.

"But are there no leeches, no remedies?" cried Egwina, her heart full of sympathy for the girl.

"Everything hath been tried," said Siegbert, and again Egwina felt that strange throbbing of the heart as he spake. "Everything; but Hilda thinketh that nothing will cure her save a visit to the tomb of Cuthbert."

"Then why doth she not go?" asked Egwina. "Could she not be taken there?"

"No, maiden." The Saxon's voice was grave. "When the Danes spread over the country, destroying the monasteries, Cuthbert's remains were taken up and carried away by the monks when they fled. Now, none know where they be."

"I feel sure that King Alfred will know," cried Egwina. "He hath rebuilt the

monasteries, and oh! I know that he will know."

"Thinkest thou so?" cried Hilda with eagerness. "I will tell my father and he will send to the king."

She sat up, and seemed much better and stronger for the hope that was infused into her.

"Hadst thou not better return now, Hilda?" asked Siegbert. "Thou hast stayed out long enow for one day."

"Nay, I would talk more with the maiden," returned Hilda. "So soon as I return will I get my father to send bode to King Alfred to ask of him where lie the bones of Cuthbert. Maiden, believest thou in runes of the volva?"

Egwina shook her head.

"The runes tell me of speedy death," said Hilda.

"But, Hilda, thou wert baptized with thy father," chid Egwina. "Thou canst not now believe in runes, or any of the seid of the volva."

"Do not the Saxons?" inquired Hilda. "I have heard that even they who hold belief in Christianity consult the Morthwyrtha by fount and elm and scin-laeca."

Egwina winced, but answered bravely: "Too true, Hilda. Many of our people do so deal with such pagan ideas, but it is forbidden by priest and our most holy religion. I have heard it said that some worship still the old gods, despite word of king or monk."

"But why forsook they the olden gods?" cried the Danish girl. "I like not the Saxon God. In what is He better than Odin? Whom can ye give us in place of our beautiful Baldur the glorious? 'Worship the Saxon God,' is the command that hath gone forth from my father, and the people obey because he hath said; but still do they cling to Odin, and Thor, and Baldur. Once as we worship, so did ye. Why did ye change?"

"Hast thou not heard how the good Pope Gregory sent the priests to Britain?" asked Egwina.

"No; tell me," and Hilda, leaned back comfortably against Siegbert. "If I am to worship in this new religion I wish to know of it; but little do I care for aught of it save Cuthbert."

"Wottest thou not that often men of our island have been sold as serfs into other countries?" asked Egwina.

"Yes; as it hath been with ye in that respect, so hath it been with us."

"Well, at one time in the city of Rome there were some men from our island to be sold as serfs. While they stood in the market place, Pope Gregory of blessed memory was passing by. He was a simple priest then, but afterward became pope. Being attracted by the exceeding fairness of the men, he stopped.

"'From what country come ye?' he asked. They replied that they were 'Angles.' 'Angles! Ye should be angels! Are ye Christians,' said the holy man,

'or heathens?' 'Certainly not Christians,' said they, 'for no one hath opened our ears.' Then the holy man, lifting up his eyes, replied, 'What man, when there are stones at hand, layeth a foundation with reeds?' They answered, 'No man of prudence.' 'Ye have well said,' said he, and straightway did he take them to his own house and instruct them in the divine oracles, and arrange with them that he should go into their country to carry the holy religion.

"When the people heard of it they made a great outcry, for he was a holy man, much noted for good works and well-beloved. So the pope would not let him go, and it became his hope that some day the gospel should be taken into our land. When he became pope, he at once sent St. Augustine, a holy man, with a multitude of priests, and thus did they change our forefathers into Christians."

"What said they?" inquired the Danish girl. "How could they turn them from the old gods? Methinks that I should like to know what was said."

"Dear Hilda," and Egwina looked distressed, "I would that there was some one that thou couldst question aside from me. I know so little; I only know that I believe. I would that King Alfred were here! He could tell thee all that thou askest."

"But dost thou not know somewhat of what passed between them?" asked the girl impatiently. "Methinks that were my people to change so, I would know wherefore it was done. Bethink thee! Dost thou not remember something of it?"

"Methinks," said the Saxon maid, musingly, "that I have heard that which passed between them, but, Hilda, I cannot tell thee what it was. It hath been custom so long for our people to be Christian that they no longer question the whyfore."

"I can tell thee, Hilda," spake Siegbert, in his deep musical voice. "The king and his thegns were debating the old and the new religions in the witan, when a thegn arose and said: 'Thou dost remember, it may be, O king, that which sometimes happens in winter, when thou art seated at table with gesiths and thegns. Thy fire is lighted and thy hall warmed, and without is rain and snow and storm. Then comes a swallow flying across the hall. He enters by one door and leaves by another. The brief moment while he is within is pleasant to him; he feels not rain nor cheerless winter weather; but the moment is brief—the bird flies away in the twinkling of an eye, and he passes from winter to winter. Such, methinks, is the life of man on earth, compared with the uncertain time beyond. It appears for a while, but what is the time which comes after—the time which was before? We know not. If, then, this new doctrine may teach us somewhat of greater certainty, it were well that we should regard it.'"

"Why, Siegbert," exclaimed Hilda, "I knew not that thou didst know aught of it."

"Dost thou forget that once I was in a monastery?" asked Siegbert.

"True, I did forget. How comes it that thou hast not told me before?" questioned Hilda.

"Never have I heard thee speak as thou hast spoken to-day," answered the young man. "Willingly would I have told thee of it."

"'Tis true," declared the Danish girl, after a short interval of silence, during which time she seemed to be thinking. "We are like the swallow. Here for such a brief time and then out into the shadow of death. Whither? We know not; unless, indeed, it be true that Hela, the death goddess, awaits us in Niflheim. Oh, would that I were not woman! Would that I were warrior; that Odin, Alfadur, might send the Valkyrie to wing me to Valhalla, where all is bright and beautiful. I wish not to go to Hela!"

"Thou shalt not." Siegbert spoke soothingly and with so much of positiveness that Hilda forgot her tears and raised her head inquiringly.

"What meanest thou, Siegbert?"

"Thou shalt not go to that dread abode, for none such exists," said the young man. "Let me tell thee, Hilda, of the beautiful heaven of the Christian faith."

With solemn sweetness he told of the heavenly city, where there is no night, where pain nor death enters not, and of the gentle Christ so pitiful of weakness and suffering. Egwina listened entranced. The young man's earnestness impressed her, and she felt her own imperfections as she had never done before.

"I am tired," said Hilda, at length. "Take me home, Siegbert, and there thou shalt tell me more of this Christ of thine. He is like Baldur in his beauty and goodness. If thy heaven is as thou sayest, then methinks I wish it, for one need not be warrior to enter it."

Lifting her up carefully in his arms, Siegbert turned to go, but Hilda stopped him.

"Come to me to-morrow, maiden," said she to Egwina. "Wilt thou not? Siegbert shall come to fetch thee if thou wilt. I would hear thee sing again. Wondrous skill hadst thou with the harp."

"I have none now," responded Egwina, slowly, "but I will come an' thou wishest it."

"I do wish it. I have harp of mine own which thou canst use. Then I will send Siegbert for thee."

She sank back in the strong arms of the Saxon, who strode off as if the burden he bore were naught for his strength. Egwina stood for a long time on the knoll where they had left her.

"Why doth my heart beat at sound of his voice or look of his eye?" she mused. "Something doth draw me to him. I would, oh, I would that he were sibbe to me. Never before have I so longed for one to be near to me as I do him. Oh, would that he were of my kith! But God doeth all things well, and it may be

that I am bereft of kin that I may the more readily give myself to the service of Heaven."

With an involuntary sigh, she turned her steps in the direction of the abode of Anlaf.

CHAPTER XXVI—THE ECLIPSE

Egwina awaited the coming of the next day with impatience. She could not define the feeling that possessed her. She would not go to the forest lest Siegbert might come, and she sought to pass the time until his arrival as best she might. It was not until the sun had risen high in the heavens that the young man came.

"Fair day to thee, maiden," he said in his grave voice. "Wilt thou come now to Hilda, daughter of Guthrum?"

"Gladly, Siegbert," and Egwina hastily donned coverchief and neckcloth. "How seemeth she to-day?"

"Brighter; but it is the brightness that precedes dissolution," answered Siegbert, seriously.

"Then dost thou think that she will not get well?"

"She will not. She can not," returned the Saxon. "Misease hath entered upon her vitals so thoroughly that naught can cure her."

"Hath her father sent to Alfred to know where Cuthbert lies?" asked Egwina, anxiously. "Mickle have been the miracles that have been wrought at his tomb, and could she but reach the place it might be that she, too, would be favored."

"Nay; Hilda could not reach it unless it were very near. I think the end not far off."

In silence did they proceed to the vill of Guthrum. It had been the property of the kings of the royal family of Anglia, and was a low, rambling structure built in the usual style of the Saxons. As they entered its portals, Egwina could not but notice the difference between the court of the Danish king and that of King Alfred.

At Alfred's court there was an air of quietness, of moderation, and of learning. Under the trees, in the rooms, and everywhere about the palace might be seen men of erudition, with book or tablet in hand, engaged either in absorbing

the wisdom of the ancients or imparting it to others. Smiths and artisans were occupied in work of their various crafts, while the army, one-half of which the king kept ever by him, could be seen as they were being drilled in the tactics of war. Everything betokened an alert monarch trying to educate his people in all that goes to make civilization and refinement.

Here Danes lolled listlessly about—some under the trees playing quoits, or clustered together about some skalds listening eagerly to recitals of heroes or battles, or to the harp and song, things of which they never seemed to weary; others still were throwing spears or shooting arrows at a mark, while many feasted and drank in the great mead hall. If the Saxons were hearty eaters and drinkers and believers in good cheer, insisting upon their four meals a day from ealdorman to ceorl, the Danes surpassed them. Nothing here evidenced that superior intelligence which was the animus and life of the Saxon king.

Egwina, without being able to define it, felt the difference. Siegbert hurried her through the courtyard and the mead hall, where Guthrum sat with his jarls, and into the bower chamber of Hilda. The Danish maiden reclined languidly on a couch. Her face was paler than it had been the day before, and dark rings encircled her eyes.

"I am glad that ye have come," she cried. "I feared that ye had stopped by the way to talk. I wot that, being Saxons, ye would have much to say, but I hoped that ye would not."

"Nor did we," soothed Egwina, gently. "Tell me, Hilda, how fares it with thee to-day?"

"I am better," answered the girl, brightly. "Much better! My father hath sent a bode to the Saxon king to learn of St. Cuthbert's tomb, and as soon as he returns I shall be taken there. Then shall I be well again. How good it would seem never to have pain here again!"

She laid her hand on her breast and the muscles of her face twitched.

"Here is my harp," she continued, after a moment, handing the instrument to Egwina. "Sing me one of thy songs. Dost remember what thou and the king did sing when ye came to the camp?"

"Yea," answered Egwina, briefly.

"Then sing the same songs as ye did then. I like the Saxon king and fain would I be reminded of him. Gentle was he to me, though I were the daughter of his foe who had driven him from his throne. In his palace nobly did he demean himself towards my father, and bestowed upon him twelve manors and many presents. Stay," as Egwina swept the strings of the harp, "knowest thou the king's favorite songs?"

"Yea, they are the Christian hymns," replied Egwina, promptly.

"Then sing those, and afterward shalt thou sing the others."

Again the maiden swept the strings, saying as she did so: "Methinks the king liketh this hymn the best of any. 'Tis a hymn of thanksgiving on the creation.

"Befits it well that man should raise
To Heaven the song of thanks and praise,
For all the gifts a bounteous God
From age to age hath still bestowed.
The kindly seasons' tempered reign,
The plenteous store, the rich domain
Of this mid earth's extended plain,
All that His creatures' wants could crave,
His boundless pow'r and mercy gave.
Noblest of yon bright train that sparkles high,
Beneath the vaulted sky,
The sun by day, the silver'd moon by night,
Twin fires of Heav'n, dispense for man their useful light.
Where'er on earth his lot be sped,
For man the clouds their richness shed,
In gentle dews descend, or op'ning pour
Wide o'er the land their fertilizing shower.

"Not such the doom
Our sorrowing fathers heard of old,
The doom that in dread accents told
Of Heaven's avenging might, and woe, and wrath to come.
'Lo! I have set thee on earth's stubborn soil
With grief and stern necessity to strive;
To wear thy days in unavailing toil,
The ceaseless sport of tort'ring friends to live.
Thence to thy dust to turn, the worm's repast,
And dwell where penal flames thro' endless ages last.

"'Thrice holy He,
The Spirit Son of Deity!
He called from nothing into birth
Each fair production of the teeming earth;
He bids the faithful and the just aspire
To join in endless bliss Heaven's angel choir.
His love bestows on human kind
Each varied excellence of mind.

To some His Spirit-gift affords
The power and mastery of words.
So may the wiser sons of earth proclaim,
In speech and measured song, the glories of His name.'"

"Doth the king like that?" asked the girl, wistfully.

"Yes, Hilda. Doth it not please thee?"

"It is like the king," said Hilda. "Lofty and grand! Far beyond the simple ken of a maiden's knowledge, even as the king is beyond a maiden's understanding. Siegbert, what is the little song that thou dost sing?"

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost," chanted Siegbert. "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. Amen."

Egwina joined in, and Hilda looked at them wonderingly.

"Do ye know that as ye were singing, methought that ye looked alike," said she. "Hast thou a brother, maiden?"

"No," answered Egwina, sadly. "None of kith and kin have I. Oft hath it saddened my heart, and it hath brought mickle grief to me that I had none."

"Hadst thou never one?" began Siegbert, when Hilda interrupted him.

"I weary of the harp and even of song, Siegbert. Prithee carry me into the courtyard, and let me be in the sunshine."

Siegbert lifted her up. Egwina stood, not knowing what to do.

"Come thou also," said Hilda. "I weary not of thy presence. The music doth tire me, but thy talk doth not."

Out under the trees they went, Siegbert bolstering up Hilda with pillows.

"How bright is the sun!" said she. "How good its warmth feels!" She lay for a few moments basking in its rays. Then throwing out her hands, exclaimed with sudden energy: "O sun! Thou bright star of day! If the Saxon God be the Supreme One and Odin not the All-Powerful, darken thy rays I entreat. Turn day into night, that I may know truth, truth. It shall be a sign, and my life shall be the offering."

A silence fell upon Egwina and Siegbert and those of the jarls who were near enough to hear the words. Involuntarily all glanced at the sun. Brightly it shone as ever. A scornful laugh broke from Hilda's lips.

"What is your Saxon God?" she cried. "Powerless is He, or the sun would darken. What! hath He not so much power as that? Out upon Him!"

"Behold!" exclaimed Siegbert, abruptly.

All eyes were turned toward the sky. An undeniable shadow was stealing over the sun. A hush fell upon them. Almost breathless, Hilda watched the bright orb. The breeze rustled the leaves in the tree-tops with a soft, murmuring sound,

as if uneasy at the phenomenon. Deeper grew the shadow, for over the sun's bright disc spread a darkening cloud.

The loud laughter of Dane and the song of skald were hushed. Knowing naught of the cause, the jarls rushed forth from the mead hall with Guthrum at their head. Awed and panic-stricken, many threw themselves on the ground in paroxysms of terror.

"'Tis Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods!" cried Guthrum in fear. "Dim groweth the sun! Soon will the stars fall, and time shall be no more!"

With hoarse cries the Danes repeated, "Ragnarok! Ragnarok!"

In the distance the cocks crew, and the birds chirped in the tree-branches as they nested to rest. Egwina and Siegbert drew close to Hilda. She had sprung to her feet and, tense and rigid, stood regarding the sun with awe. Darker grew the sky, until an intense darkness, black as starless night, spread over the earth. Only for a few moments did the phenomenon last, and then the shadow began to lighten. The cloud passed, and again the sun shone forth bright and beautiful.

Then only did the rigidity of the form of the maiden relax.

"I am answered!" she cried, with a dazzling smile as she turned to them. "Gloriously hath the Supreme One honored me! Heed well, ye jarls, what Hilda saith: The Saxon God is Supreme. I know it."

She half turned to her father, who sprang forward. Before he could reach her, with an upflinging of her arms toward that orb which had so wondrously answered her, Hilda fell prone upon the sward.

When they reached her she was dead.

CHAPTER XXVII—SIEGBERT'S STORY

It was seven days since the death chant had arisen in the house of Guthrum for Hilda.

A melancholy had settled upon the spirits of Egwina. Unable to content herself, she wandered from wood to house and back again to wood. Usually bright and cheerful, the girl felt herself weighed down by a heavy depression born of loneliness, and she dwelt morbidly upon the happy days in the king's

household. A conviction that this was the manner in which she was to be convinced that she was set apart for the cloister was fast stealing over her.

One morning, after a sleepless night, she arose from her couch with the determination to return to Denewulf, and tell him that she was ready to devote herself to the life of a nun. After all, it was not so dreadful a thing. Alfred's second daughter, Ethelgiva, was so set apart, and if she could give up the pomp and majesty of a king's court for such a holy life, why should she rebel, who was only a simple gleemaiden?

Should Adiva send for the king, she would tell him that it was her wish and he would respect it. Thus reasoned Egwina. Having reached this determination, the maiden sought Anlaf to ask him to take her into Berkshire that day, but the Dane responded that it could not be done until the morrow. So Egwina started off for her accustomed retreat on the knoll.

To her surprise, she found Siegbert there. She had not seen him since the day of Hilda's death, and now hastened to greet him, feeling again that strange pleasure in being near him.

"Siegbert, glad am I to behold thee once more, for to-morrow I go to Berkshire, and I feared that I should see thee not again."

"I wished to see thee also," replied the young man, "because I, too, go away."

"Thou goest? Whither?" cried Egwina in surprise.

"Thou wottest, maiden, dost thou not, that I am or have been a serf in the house of Guthrum?"

"Yes, I know," answered she.

"Since I was but ten years old," continued the Saxon, "have I been serf to Guthrum. Twelve long years in bondage to the Dane! Now I have my freedom at last."

"But how cometh it that now thou hast it after all these years?"

"I will tell thee, maiden. When I was but a lad of ten, and Guthrum brought me to his house as bondsman, Hilda was but five years old. I had had a little sister in mine own home, younger still than Hilda. The baby girl eased the pain and homesickness in my bereaved heart, and Hilda would have none but me attend her. So as she grew, grew also the bond between us, until it was not as bondsman, but as brother, that I ministered to her. Long ago could I have had my freedom, for I saved the money until there was enow, but Hilda clung to me, and for her sake, because none cared for her as I did, I stayed. Guthrum knew of it—knew that I forebore to take my freedom when I could because of Hilda. He loved her, and that I was gentle with her did gladden his heart. Yesterday in the presence of witnesses he called me and made me free!"

"And now, Siegbert, what doest thou?" asked Egwina.

"No man will I own as lord save the Saxon king," answered Siegbert. "Gladly

would I live where I could partake of his wisdom and learning. Oh!" he cried with more passion than Egwina had as yet seen him exhibit, "Oh, that I could be learned!—learned as those men with whom I have heard that he surrounds himself! But what could I give in return? He has no daughter requiring my care, and there is naught else that I can do!"

"Why not go to Alfred, and tell him of thy desire?" said Egwina simply. "He is wise and good, Siegbert. Thou wottest not how good unless thou hast partaken of his bounty. It grieveth his heart that learning is not more sought after by the youth. Many are there who care for naught but the chase and hunt. Canst thou hunt, Siegbert?"

"None better," answered the young man, briefly. "Expert are the Danes with bow and arrow. They teach the youths to excel in such weapons; leaping, running, wrestling, even as with the Saxons, are sports in which they delight, but naught of wisdom's lore teach they. For one short year only was the cup of knowledge presented to my lips. Fain would I have partaken longer of the draught, but that it was rudely dashed from my lips, and now, ere I again partake of it, do I set forth to find if any there be who know aught of my grandfather or sister. I wot not if they be dead or living. I was taken from them so long ago."

"Tell me of it, Siegbert," urged Egwina, seating herself near him. "From what place wert thou taken?"

"It was from a monastery," said Siegbert, "where I was placed, because the abbot had taken a fancy to my voice and face. 'He shall be another Cynewulf,' he said, and so 'suaded my grandfather to give me to them. I, too, maiden, was the son of a gleeman who was the son of a gleeman, and song was my heritage even as it is thine. The good abbot taught me to read and to know of other things, that I might not be like the animal, who wots of naught but grass and drink. One morning—well do I remember the day—a bode ran breathlessly to the monastery to tell us that the Northmen were advancing upon us. The battle of Kesteven had been fought, and victory sat upon the helmet of the Dane. Terror and consternation reigned in the monastery, for as the destroyer had done to other convents, so would he do to ours. No mercy would be shown to priest or monk. The abbot alone was calm. Calling all together, he sent into the fens the younger brothers, who could support life, together with the sacred relics of the monastery—the most holy body of St. Guthlac, the jewels, documents, and precious gifts presented to the abbey. The aged and infirm monks with the young children, in fact all those whom he considered unable to endure the hardships of the fens, did he retain with him, hoping that the savage breasts of the Danes might be filled with pity for so much helplessness. But alack! even as, robed in the vestments, we stood at mass, the Danes burst in upon us. Never, maiden, shall I forget that sight! Often now, in the dark watches of the night, doth it come

before my vision—the good abbot, stricken down at the very altar; the priests and monks, with their heads cloven into by the terrible battle-ax of the Danes. By the sub-prior did I stand. The pagans swept to us, and one, with a swift blow of his ax, laid the holy father dead at my feet. Wotting not what I did, I taunted him scornfully because he slew me not, but stood regarding me with weapon uplifted. I bade him put me to death by the side of the holy father, for I loved him; but the Dane seized me, stripped me of my robe, and then threw upon me a Danish tunic. Then bearing me with him, he strode from the edifice, crying that I was too fair to be slain. So," and Siegbert's lip curled in scorn, "where holiness and goodness availed not, mere beauty of feature saved my life. The others who were not slain outright were seized and tortured to tell where the treasures of the monastery were held. Incensed at being thwarted of their gains, the Danes slew all the remainder save only myself. I, too, would have been slain but that Sidroc the younger, who had saved me, bade me keep from the way of Hubba and the other jarls, and keep only with his own retainers. Then they passed on to Medeshamstede, to continue the work of destruction. The army then moved toward Huntingdon.

"The two jarls Sidroc were appointed to guard the rear and the baggage over the rivers. As they were passing the Neu, after the rest of the army, two cars laden with wealth and property, with all the cattle drawing them, were overturned at the left of a bridge into a whirlpool. While all the attendants of the younger Sidroc were employed in recovering what was possible of the loss, I stole away unperceived and ran into the nearest wood. All night I walked. I was footsore and weary, but I was upheld by the hope of seeing again the monastery and getting away from the Dane. The wolves molested me not. They, too, seemed filled with fear of the dread pagan, and remained hidden in their lairs. At dawn I reached the monastery. It was still burning. The younger brothers who had fled to the fens had returned and were fighting the flames. They took me and did comfort me. But woe and well-a-day! we were again compelled to fly by news of the approach of the Northmen. I wot not how it happened, but I strayed from or was left behind the rest in the fens. For two days I wandered in the marshes, unwitting where to go. Then did a Dane find me and bring me to Guthrum, who, won by my fair looks, took me into his household. So that again did comeliness bring me succor."

Egwina had drawn closer and closer to the young man during the recital. Her eyes were shining, her lips parted, and she hung upon his words with an intentness almost painful. As Siegbert paused, she laid her hand upon his and asked: "Siegbert, was that monastery of which thou speakest Croyland?"

"Yes," he answered.

"What was the name of thy father?"

"Athelwulf, the son of Wulfhere."

"And thou didst speak of a little sister! Wittest thou her name?" Egwina was greatly agitated. Siegbert, too, was regarding her with intense eagerness.

"My little sister's name was Egwina," cried he, full of suppressed excitement. "Look, maiden!" He tore from his chest his tunic, and pointed to his breast, where in old Saxon letters was punctured the name "Egwina." "My grandfather did that just before I went to the convent. As he did so he said: 'Boy, thy father and mother both are dead. Save thee and me, no kith hath the little one. Keep that name in thy heart, and live for none other until mayhap thou dost resign her into another's keeping.' And I sware to him an oath that it should be as he said."

"Brother!" cried Egwina, half beside herself with joy. "I am that Egwina! I am thy sister."

"My sister?" The young man stared at her for a moment, and then exclaimed: "I feel it! I know it!" and he embraced her rapturously.

"We thought thee dead!" cried Egwina, through her tears. "We knew not that thou wert spared by the Danes. Granther grieved for thee always. My brother! my brother!"

"And thou art Egwina, my own little sister!" Siegbert touched her gently, a glad light shining in his grave, beautiful eyes. "Said not Hilda that we looked alike! I thought that thou and our grandsire likewise were slain, because I knew the Northmen had overrun the country. I thought never to see thee again, sister." He lingered lovingly over the last word, as though it were sweet to him. "Now is my search ended before it hath begun. But tell me of my grandfather and of thyself. How it hath fared with thee these many years."

Egwina told him of their wanderings, and of Wulfhere's death. Siegbert's eyes flashed proudly at the manner of it.

"I grieve not for him," he said. "Glorious was his end! So may I die—with front to foe in defense of my country! Say on, sister."

Egwina told all. The life in the forest at the cottage of Denewulf; Athelney, the palace and Edward's love; of Gyda and the ordeal, and finally how she came to be there at Anlaf's.

Siegbert turned to her, an anxious expression on his face.

"Not now, Egwina, wilt thou seek the cloister, wilt thou? Thy brother cannot give thee up, now that he hath found thee."

"Dear brother, never will I leave thee unless thou sendest me from thee," said Egwina, kissing him. "We will go to the king, and thou shalt enter his service, and learn of his wisdom. I have eaten of the king's bread, and for my sake, will he aid thee. And not only for my sake, but because thou art a Saxon."

"Nay, my sister. We will go not to the king. Sometime in the future mayhap, when Edward hath taken another to himself, but not now. We will go to London,

an' it please thee, sister. There thou and I shall dwell together, and hard will it go with us, if thy brother doth not gain thegn's rank for thy sweet sake."

"If it pleaseth thee, then doth it please me," answered Egwina. "So that we be near each other."

CHAPTER XXVIII—AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

To London, or, as it was then known, Lundenbrige, the old British name, the brother and sister went. London, with its narrow, winding streets and low dwellings. London, which has grown from the rudiments of a municipal constitution which Alfred planted to the metropolis of to-day. London, which owes to the same king not only its municipality, but also the defenses which rendered it impregnable to the later attacks of the Danes.

Close by the bridge which had spanned the Thames from Roman times immemorial, at the meeting-places of the roads in that district known as East Cheap, the two found a cottage and there did they dwell. Already possessed of some knowledge of the craft of goldsmith, Siegbert allied himself with foreign workmen and cultivated the craft assiduously, soon becoming an expert. Egwina attended to the duties of the little household and happily the time glided by. All that she had learned of books at the court of the king did she impart to Siegbert, so that in giving to him of her learning she but impressed it the more firmly upon her own mind.

Two years passed thus, and if Egwina's heart ever turned with longing toward that far-off time when, beloved and honored, she dwelt an inmate of the king's household, or if the image of Edward rose before her, none knew of it save herself.

It was spring. Egwina drew back the linen blind that did duty in place of glass, which was in use only by the nobles or churches, and leaned out. The air came soft and fresh against her face. A song thrush on a budding tree near the window trilled forth his merry lay, and the maiden listened with light heart.

"Hail to thee, maiden," said a townsman who was passing, saluting her. "Heardest thou the news?"

"Nay, I have heard naught," answered the maiden, returning the salutation. "What hath happened?"

"King Alfred and Edward the atheling have come against the city, and Dane and Saxon alike have acknowledged him as overlord. Now hath he brought a great army of workmen and prepareth to rebuild the wall with which the Roman once encompassed the city. Fortifications and manors also doth he purpose erecting."

"Is the king himself in the burgh?" questioned the maiden, faint with joy.

"He himself is here," replied the citizen. "Royal doings shall we have amongst us, for the king's son-in-law, Ethelred, the ealdorman of Mercia, and the lady Ethelfleda, his wife, are with him. A goodly company, I trow! I'll warrant that there will be rare doings amongst us," and he passed on.

Here! In the same place! Egwina sank back on a seat almost overcome. Those dear people whom she had not seen for so long! Unknown to them she would gaze upon their faces again. And Siegbert! He, too, should see them. Together would they watch for them, and he should know them at least by sight. Full of excitement, she awaited the return of Siegbert with impatience.

"Thou shalt see them if thou wilt, my sister," said Siegbert, kissing her. "I, too, would see the king, and what manner of man the atheling be. Of excellent taste since he hath fancied thee, Egwina. 'Tis pity 'twere displeasing to the king. Thou art fit mate for any, be he atheling or what not."

"At least my life hath not been preserved twice on account of beauty," retorted the girl, saucily, flushing rosy red at his praise.

Siegbert smiled at her.

"Wottest thou not that Hilda said that we looked alike?" he asked. "Stoodst thou in my place before Dane, I trow that there could be found no Norseman, howe'er fierce, that could find it in his heart to slay thee. List! What was that? Methought that I heard a groan."

Both listened, and plainly there came to their ears the sound of some one moaning as if in pain.

"Some one hath been hurt, or o'ertaken by misease," exclaimed Siegbert, rising. "I will see if it be near. It so sounded." He opened the door. Prone upon the entrance lay the figure of a man.

"Now, who art thou, and what aileth thee, that thou dost utter moan?" asked Siegbert as he bent over the prostrate form.

"Let me enter in pity's name," spoke the man, feebly.

Without more ado the Saxon lifted him in his arms and bore him into the cottage. Egwina hastened forward.

"Bear him to thy bed, Siegbert," she said. "The poor man is ill."

The man whose form Siegbert was supporting turned his head and looked

at her.

"Little one, is it thou?" he said.

With a cry, Egwina sprang toward him, and fell upon her knees before him.

"My king! my king!" she cried, covering his hands with kisses.

Alfred tried to raise her, but the effort was too much for him, and he became unconscious.

"Oh, Siegbert, 'tis the king, the king!" cried Egwina as Siegbert laid him on a couch.

"Yes, my sister; but now aid me to bring him from his swound, and then will I go for a leech."

In response to their restoratives the king soon showed signs of returning consciousness. Egwina explained rapidly to Siegbert as they ministered to him. "'Tis the same misease which hath afflicted the king since he was a young man. 'Twas at his wedding feast, I have heard them say, when first it seized upon him. The merriment was at its height when he was taken with it. Some there were, and are yet, who thought that wicca craft had been wrought upon him; but go, my brother, for the leech. See! he openeth his eyes."

Siegbert left hastily, and soon returned with the physician, who examined the king carefully.

"It needeth blood-letting," said he, sagely, "but unlucky is the day, and mickle would be the result should I use the vein knife."

The king smiled faintly.

"No blood dost thou need to let, good leech," he said. "The affliction is one to which time hath accustomed me, and naught do I need now but repose, since the sharpness of the attack hath passed."

"Then," said the leech, unwilling to let slip an opportunity to press his service upon the king, "I will leave thee this decoction, and to-morrow will we see about the blood-letting. Then, too, shalt thou be removed to abode more befitting thee."

To all of his entreaties the next day to allow him to remove him to his own dwelling, Alfred turned a deaf ear; nor would he permit Siegbert to inform his own family of his whereabouts.

"'Twill be but a few days until the misease will have left me," he said. "Until then I will stay with thee, little one, if thou wilt let me."

"Gladly, my king," returned the maiden, with shining eyes. "If thou canst abide in our poor dwelling, thou art as welcome as the sunbeam."

Tenderly did Alfred smile at her.

"Egwina," said he gently, when the leech had gone, "tell me of this young man. Art thou wed to him, and is that why thou wouldst not exchange the true-lofa with Edward?"

"No, no," answered Egwina. "This is my brother, my king."

"Thy brother?" and Alfred looked his surprise. "I knew not that thou hadst a brother, little one."

"Nor did I know until but a short time since," returned Egwina. Briefly she recounted the incidents which led to their finding each other.

"It was the providence of God that brought ye to each other," said the king, piously. "Grievously have we mourned for thee, little one. We knew not why thou shouldst have left us. Now that I have found thee, thou shalt not leave us again. Thy brother shall be of us also. Tell me of thyself," and he turned abruptly to Siegbert.

Siegbert told his story, with which we are already familiar.

"Thoughtful is thy brow, and thine eye glows with the light of a scholar," declared the king, regarding the young man with interest. "Thou dost please me well, Siegbert, and agreeable to me will be the task of training thy mind. In a few days we will go together to the palace."

Egwina looked at Siegbert with a distressed face. Siegbert spoke boldly, resigning without a pang the enticing prospect opened up before him, for the sake of that dear sister: "My lord king, prithee do not press us. Thy graciousness warmeth the heart, but we are not of gentle blood, and unbecoming to us would be the ways of the court."

"And thou carest naught for wisdom and learning?" cried Alfred, regarding him with surprise. "Hath my ken of men failed me now?"

A light flashed into Siegbert's eyes, but, loyal to his sister, he opened his lips to deny the desire that possessed him when the king said, smilingly: "There seemeth a paradox. Thy words belie thy looks, friend Siegbert. Gainsay it not that thou dost long for learning."

"I do not gainsay it, my lord," answered the young man in a low voice.

"Then why dost thou not wish to come to the palace? Ah!" catching sight of the downcast face of Egwina. "Come, little one, thou shalt answer. Is it Edward?"

Egwina bowed in silent assent.

"Egwina, tell me truly," and Alfred's voice was grave. "Lovest thou not my son? He told me that thou didst, and that thou didst withhold from him thy true-lofa because thou didst fear that I would be displeased with thee. Gladly did I approve thee, for thou wert near and dear to me already as mine own child. When he sought thee, lo! thou couldst not be found. Vainly have we searched for traces of thee, but none could be found. Edward hath grieved without ceasing over thy loss. Tell me why thou didst leave, for in that doth lie the reason of thy wish not to return. Hath Edward been mistaken? Dost thou not love him?"

Egwina looked at him with troubled eyes. Siegbert would have spoken, but she stopped him.

"My brother, I will tell him all," she said in earnest tones. "I do love Edward, my king. I knew not that he did love me until the night I left him. I stood awaiting his coming after he would have seen thee, when I heard footsteps approaching. Wishing not to meet other than Edward at the moment, I retired into the shadow of the trees. It was thou, my king, and the lady Elswitha. She was telling thee that she feared that Edward did look upon me with loving eye. Thou wert surprised, and when the lady said that it had grieved her that I was not gentle, thou didst say, 'True, she comes not of noble blood.' I could bear no more, my king. I feared thy displeasure, and so, as Gyda the seid woman was there and wished me to go with her, I left all and followed after her."

"Thou foolish little one!" The king's voice was very tender. "And thou didst not hear the rest of our talk? I said, 'True, she is not of noble blood, but what do we reck of the blood when the mind is noble? Glad am I that our son hath chosen so wisely.'"

"My king!" gasped the girl. "Saidst thou that?"

"The very same. Now will ye go with me, my children?" Alfred had risen. He held out his hands to them with his most winning smile. With an inarticulate cry Egwina sprang to him, and Siegbert's eyes were wet as he kissed the hand of Britain's gentle king.

CHAPTER XXIX—BRINGING THE SUMMER HOME

Never to be forgotten was the day on which Alfred brought Egwina and Siegbert to his palace. Not a cloud marred the blue of the sky or dimmed the brightness of the sun. All nature seemed to have donned her fairest garb. Cowslips dotted every mead. Birds trilled joyously from every bush. The patient oxen, each with a nosegay betwixt his horns, bore to every village and town tall birch trees, around which the swains and maidens frolicked; for it was the first of May, and ealdorman and thegn and ceorl joined together in the glad bringing home of the Summer.

In the morning from every village went two troops of horse. Tall youths and men assembled as though they would go forth to a mighty battle. One troop

was under a captain named "Winter," arrayed in fur and wadded garments, and armed with a winter spear, who arrogantly rode to and fro, showering made snow-balls as if he would fain prolong the cold. The other troop was commanded by a captain clad in green boughs, leaves, flowers, and other summer raiment. Then the two factions engaged in a tilt, typical of the struggle between life and death, wherein Summer hath the mastery. Winter and his companions scatter ashes and sparks about them. The other company defend themselves with birchen boughs and young lime twigs; finally the multitude award the victory to Summer, and he is crowned with flowers.

All the lads and lassies had set out soon after midnight, with horns and other music, to neighboring woods, breaking boughs off the trees and decking themselves with wreaths and posies. Homeward then they turned, and at sunrise set these bushes in the doors and windows of their houses. Feasting and games followed, and joyous was the day.

Bright the mead and green the woodland that stretched from the palace, and merrily resounded horns and song upon the air. As they neared the manor, Egwina's step grew slower, and she trembled. Alfred drew her close to his side, and bade her lean upon him for support. From one of a group of merry-makers a young man detached himself, and came toward them with light, quick steps. It was Edward.

"My father," he cried, "glad am I that thou hast returned. Somewhat of uneasiness did we feel that thou didst not come sooner, but now—"

He stopped short, catching sight of Egwina for the first time. Over his face flashed immediately incredulity, surprise, and delight in quick succession. So great was his amazement that he spoke not, but looked at the maiden as though he were afraid a word would dissolve the vision.

"Son, hast thou no word of welcome for thy bride?" Alfred spoke cheerily. "A laggard will she think thee if thou dost not greet her. Thy father hath brought thee thy bride. Shall he woo her for thee also?"

He stooped and kissed the maiden's brow, and then, leading her to Edward, joined their hands together, saying:

"I have brought thee home thy summer, Edward. Take her, and forever keep that summer in thy heart. I cannot express all her merit. Prudent and modest is she, and none excelleth her in purity. She lives now for thee—thee alone. Hence she loves naught else but thee. Let her waste not for thy love, and suffer naught to come between thee. As thou dealest with her, so may God deal with thee."

"So may God deal with me," repeated Edward, solemnly. "Welcome, my bride, and thrice welcome! Never more shall we be parted. We two will live with but one heart and one purpose."

"Welcome also thy bride's brother," and the king brought Siegbert forward.

"Hast thou room in thy heart for another brother? Marry! once I thought him loth to let thee have Egwina, and hard did I plead for thee."

"But now?" and Edward greeted Siegbert in his frank, winning way.

"Now that I have seen thee, I am content," answered Siegbert.

"It doth surprise me to behold in thee a brother to Egwina," said Edward, his hand still clasping that of Siegbert. "I wotted not that she possessed any that were sibbe to her."

"'Tis a long story," and Alfred drew Siegbert away with him and turned toward the palace. "While we greet the Lady Elswitha, do thou tell him it, Egwina. Join us anon in the hall, Edward."

Edward held out his hands to the maiden.

"Let us wander under the trees," he said. "Henceforth and forever hand-in-hand."

So under the trees they sauntered, pouring forth their joy at again being with each other. When the first rapture was over, Edward said: "Tell me, Egwina, why thou didst leave me that night, and how thou didst find thy brother? Vainly did I seek for thee; vainly sought in hillock and dale for trace of thee, but naught was there to be found anywhere."

Egwina began where he left her, and told him all her story. When she reached the ordeal, he seized her hand and tore her sleeve and bracelet from her arm.

"No scar or burn in truth is there!" he cried. "Oh, blessings on the vala who mixed for Adiva the potion! Blessings also upon Adiva! As for Denewulf—how dared he let thee suffer such a trial?"

Egwina laid her hand gently upon his.

"It was not Denewulf, Edward. I demanded it, for none were there who believed in my innocence. God alone could show it, for man had forsaken me. Grieve not over it, because of it was I led to Anlaf's, where I found Siegbert, my brother. Through him was it that thy father did enter our dwelling, and thus, at last, was I brought to thee."

"Truly, it was God's providence," answered Edward. "Yet doth my heart beat, and a mist comes before mine eyes at thy hardships. Tell on, brave heart; I will be calm."

"There is but little else to tell," answered she, and continued her narrative.

"Edward, Edward," called some merry voices as a group of youths and maidens came trooping toward them, "come and join us."

Catching sight of Egwina, they stopped in surprise, and then called joyously: "'Tis Egwina! Egwina hath come to us again!" They gathered round her, welcoming her warmly. Edward took from a maiden near him a garland of cowslips, daisies, and primroses, and kneeling before Egwina said: "Thus do I

crown thee my Summer and queen of my heart."

"They have exchanged the true-lofa!" went up the merry shout. "Edward hath chosen his mate! Lord and lady of the Summer are they!"

Bursting into a gay song, they joined hands and circled joyously round the loving pair.

"Merry is the throstle's song
And blithe the mead doth bloom;
For we have brought the Summer home
From Winter's dreary tomb.

"Merry is the song of youth
And blithely do we sing;
For each hath brought his Summer fair
To join our mystic ring."

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STORIES FOR GIRLS

The Ferry Maid of the Chattahoochee

By Annie M. Barnes. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

An heroic little Georgia girl, in her father's extremity, takes charge of his ferry, and through many vicissitudes and several impending calamities, succeeds in carrying out her purpose of supporting her invalid parent and his family. The heroine's cheerfulness and hearty good humor, combined with an unflinching zeal in her determination to accomplish her work, make a character which cannot fail to appeal to young people.

A Maid of the First Century

By Lucy Foster Madison. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

A little maid of Palestine goes in search of her father, who for political reasons, has been taken as a slave to Rome. She is shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, but is rescued by a passing vessel bound for Britain. Eventually an opportunity is afforded her for going to Rome, where, after many trying and exciting experiences, she and her father are united and his liberty is restored to him.

My Lady Barefoot

By Mrs. Evelyn Raymond. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

A beautifully told story of the trials of a little backwoods girl who lives in a secluded place with an eccentric uncle, until his death. The privations she undergoes during his life-time, her search for other relatives, her rather uncongenial abode with them, her return to her early home to acquire her uncle's estate, and thus to enjoy a useful and happy life, form a most interesting narrative of a girl whose ruggedness and simplicity of character must appeal to the admiration of all readers.

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This is a most interesting story of a bright and spirited young girl whose widowed mother re-marries. The impulsive girl chafes under the new relationship, being unwilling to share with another the bounteous love of her mother which she had learned to claim wholly for her own. By the exercise of great tact and kindness, the obdurate Dorothy is at last won over, and becomes a most estimable girl.

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The story of a governess' attempt to win the love and confidence of her ward, who, owing to a lack of early restraint, is inclined to be somewhat of a hoyden. The development of the girl's character and her eventual victory over her turbulent disposition combine to form a story of unusual merit and one which will hold its reader's eager attention throughout.

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This is a story of the regeneration of a little street waif. She begins life in a lowly court of a large city. Her adventures are numerous, and often quite exciting. After a time she is transplanted to the country, where after many thrilling experiences she eventually grows into a useful and lovable young woman. The story is pleasantly told, and abounds in interesting incident.

"The story is an intensely interesting one, and abounds in pleasing and unique situations."—*Religious Telescope*, Dayton, Ohio.

Two Wyoming Girls

By Mrs. Carrie L. Marshall. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

Two girls, thrown upon their own resources, are obliged to "prove up" their homestead claim. This would be no very serious matter were it not for the persecution of an unscrupulous neighbor, who wishes to appropriate the property to his own use. The girls endure many privations, have a number of thrilling adventures, but finally secure their claim and are generally well rewarded for their

courage and perseverance.

The Girl Ranchers

By Mrs. Carrie L. Marshall. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

A story of life on a sheep ranch in Montana. The dangers and difficulties incident to such a life are vividly pictured, and the interest in the story is enhanced by the fact that the ranch is managed almost entirely by two young girls. By their energy and pluck, coupled with courage, kindness, and unselfishness they succeed in disarming the animosity of the neighboring cattle ranchers, and their enterprise eventually results successfully.

An Every-Day Heroine

By Mary A. Denison. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

The heroine is not an impossible character but only a pure, winsome, earnest girl, who at fourteen years of age is suddenly bereft of fortune and father and becomes the chief support of a semi-invalid mother. While there are many touching scenes, the story as a whole is bright and cheerful and moves forward with a naturalness and ease that carries its readers along and makes them reluctant to put down the book until the end is reached.

Her College Days

By Mrs. Clarke Johnson. Illustrated by Ida Waugh.

This is a most interesting and healthful tale of a girl's life in a New England college. The trustful and unbounded love of the heroine for her mother and the mutual and self-sacrificing devotion of the mother to the daughter are so beautifully interwoven with the varied occurrences and exciting incidents of college life as to leave a most wholesome impression upon the mind and heart of the reader.

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STORIES FOR BOYS

Uncrowning a King

By Edward S. Ellis, A. M. Illustrated by J. Steeple Davis.

A tale of the Indian war waged by King Philip in 1675. The adventures of the young hero during that eventful period, his efforts in behalf of the attacked towns, his capture by the Indians, and his subsequent release through the efforts of King Philip himself, with a vivid account of the tragic death of that renowned Indian chieftain, form a most interesting and instructive story of the early days of the colonies.

The Young Gold Seekers

By Edward S. Ellis, A. M. Illustrated by F. A. Carter.

A thrilling account of the experiences of two boys during a trip to the gold fields of Alaska. The hardships that they endure, the disappointments they suffer, the courage and perseverance that they manifest in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and their eventual success in their undertaking, are all most graphically portrayed.

True to His Trust

By Edward S. Ellis, A. M. Illustrated by J. Steeple Davis.

The hero of this story will win his way at once into the heart of every one, and his pluck and perseverance will carry the sympathy of every reader through his many adventures, struggles, and singular experiences. Like all of the author's works, the incidents teach in the most convincing manner that true manliness and sturdy integrity are the only principles through which happiness and success in life are possible.

Comrades True

By Edward S. Ellis, A. M. Illustrated.

In following the career of two friends from youth to manhood, the author weaves a narrative of intense interest. This story is more realistic than is usual, as the two heroes pass through the calamitous forest fires in Northern Minnesota and barely escape with their lives. They have other thrilling adventures and experiences in which the characteristics of each are finely portrayed.

"Among juveniles there is not one of greater interest, or more wholesome influence than 'Comrades True.'"—*Sentinel*, Milwaukee, Wis.

Among the Esquimaux

By Edward S. Ellis, A. M. Illustrated.

The scenes of this story are laid in the Arctic region, the central characters being two sturdy boys whose adventurous spirit often leads them into dangerous positions. They visit Greenland; go on a hunting expedition, have a number of stirring adventures, but ultimately reach home safe and sound.

"A capital and instructive book for boys."—*Post*, Boston, Mass.

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Transcriber's Note

Spelling and punctuation inaccuracies were silently corrected.
Archaic and variable spelling is preserved.
The author's punctuation style is preserved.
Hyphenation has been made consistent.

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