

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS – VOLUME 10**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

**Harold : the Last of the
Saxon Kings — Volume 10**

«Public Domain»

Бульвер-Литтон Э. Д.

Harold : the Last of the Saxon Kings — Volume 10 / Э. Д. Бульвер-Литтон — «Public Domain»,

© Бульвер-Литтон Э. Д.
© Public Domain

Содержание

BOOK X.	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	7
CHAPTER III	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Harold : the Last of the Saxon Kings — Volume 10

BOOK X. THE SACRIFICE ON THE ALTAR

CHAPTER I

The good Bishop Alred, now raised to the See of York, had been summoned from his cathedral seat by Edward, who had indeed undergone a severe illness, during the absence of Harold; and that illness had been both preceded and followed by mystical presentiments of the evil days that were to fall on England after his death. He had therefore sent for the best and the holiest prelate in his realm, to advise and counsel with.

The bishop had returned to his lodging in London (which was in a Benedictine Abbey, not far from the Aldgate) late one evening, from visiting the King at his rural palace of Havering; and he was seated alone in his cell, musing over an interview with Edward, which had evidently much disturbed him, when the door was abruptly thrown open, and pushing aside in haste the monk, who was about formally to announce him, a man so travel-stained in garb, and of a mien so disordered, rushed in, that Alred gazed at first as on a stranger, and not till the intruder spoke did he recognise Harold the Earl. Even then, so wild was the Earl's eye, so dark his brow, and so livid his cheek, that it rather seemed the ghost of the man than the man himself. Closing the door on the monk, the Earl stood a moment on the threshold, with a breast heaving with emotions which he sought in vain to master; and, as if resigning the effort, he sprang forward, clasped the prelate's knees, bowed his head on his lap, and sobbed aloud. The good bishop, who had known all the sons of Godwin from their infancy, and to whom Harold was as dear as his own child, folding his hands over the Earl's head, soothingly murmured a benediction.

"No, no," cried the Earl, starting to his feet, and tossing the dishevelled hair from his eyes, "bless me not yet! Hear my tale first, and then say what comfort, what refuge, thy Church can bestow!"

Hurriedly then the Earl poured forth the dark story, already known to the reader,—the prison at Belrem, the detention at William's court, the fears, the snares, the discourse by the riverside, the oath over the relics. This told, he continued, "I found myself in the open air, and knew not, till the light of the sun smote me, what might have passed into my soul. I was, before, as a corpse which a witch raises from the dead, endows with a spirit not its own—passive to her hand—life-like, not living. Then, then it was as if a demon had passed from my body, laughing scorn at the foul things it had made the clay do. O, father, father! is there not absolution from this oath,—an oath I dare not keep? rather perjure myself than betray my land!"

The prelate's face was as pale as Harold's, and it was some moments before he could reply.

"The Church can loose and unloose—such is its delegated authority.

But speak on; what saidst thou at the last to William?"

"I know not, remember not—ought save these words. 'Now, then, give me those for whom I placed myself in thy power; let me restore Haco to his fatherland, and Wolnoth to his mother's kiss, and wend home my way.' And, saints in heaven! what was the answer of this caitiff Norman, with his glittering eye and venomed smile? 'Haco thou shalt have, for he is an orphan and an uncle's love is

not so hot as to burn from a distance; but Wolnoth, thy mother's son, must stay with me as a hostage for thine own faith. Godwin's hostages are released; Harold's hostage I retain: it is but a form, yet these forms are the bonds of princes.'

"I looked at him, and his eye quailed. And I said, 'That is not in the compact.' And William answered, 'No, but it is the seal to it.' Then I turned from the Duke and I called my brother to my side, and I said, 'Over the seas have I come for thee. Mount thy steed and ride by my side, for I will not leave the land without thee.' And Wolnoth answered, 'Nay, Duke William tells me that he hath made treaties with thee, for which I am still to be the hostage; and Normandy has grown my home, and I love William as my lord.' Hot words followed, and Wolnoth, chafed, refused entreaty and command, and suffered me to see that his heart was not with England! O, mother, mother, how shall I meet thine eye! So I returned with Haco. The moment I set foot on my native England, that moment her form seemed to rise from the tall cliffs, her voice to speak in the winds! All the glamour by which I had been bound, forsook me; and I sprang forward in scorn, above the fear of the dead men's bones. Miserable overcraft of the snarer! Had my simple word alone bound me, or that word been ratified after slow and deliberate thought, by the ordinary oaths that appeal to God, far stronger the bond upon my soul than the mean surprise, the covert tricks, the insult and the mocking fraud. But as I rode on, the oath pursued me—pale spectres mounted behind me on my steed, ghastly fingers pointed from the welkin; and then suddenly, O my father—I who, sincere in my simple faith, had, as thou knowest too well, never bowed submissive conscience to priest and Church—then suddenly I felt the might of some power, surer guide than that haughty conscience which had so in the hour of need betrayed me! Then I recognised that supreme tribunal, that mediator between Heaven and man, to which I might come with the dire secret of my soul, and say, as I say now, on my bended knee, O father—father—bid me die, or absolve me from my oath!"

Then Alred rose erect, and replied, "Did I need subterfuge, O son, I would say, that William himself hath released thy bond, in detaining the hostage against the spirit of the guilty compact; that in the very words themselves of the oath, lies the release—'if God aid thee.' God aids no child to parricide—and thou art England's child! But all school casuistry is here a meanness. Plain is the law, that oaths extorted by compulsion, through fraud and in fear, the Church hath the right to loose: plainer still the law of God and of man, that an oath to commit crime it is a deadlier sin to keep than to forfeit. Wherefore, not absolving thee from the misdeed of a vow that, if trusting more to God's providence and less to man's vain strength and dim wit, thou wouldst never have uttered even for England's sake—leaving her to the angels;—not, I say, absolving thee from that sin, but pausing yet to decide what penance and atonement to fix to its committal, I do in the name of the Power whose priest I am, forbid thee to fulfil the oath; I do release and absolve thee from all obligation thereto. And if in this I exceed my authority as Romish priest, I do but accomplish my duties as living man. To these grey hairs I take the sponsorship. Before this holy cross, kneel, O my son, with me, and pray that a life of truth and virtue may atone the madness of an hour."

So by the crucifix knelt the warrior and the priest.

CHAPTER II

All other thought had given way to Harold's impetuous yearning to throw himself upon the Church, to hear his doom from the purest and wisest of its Saxon preachers. Had the prelate deemed his vow irrefragable, he would have died the Roman's death, rather than live the traitor's life; and strange indeed was the revolution created in this man's character, that he, "so self-dependent," he who had hitherto deemed himself his sole judge below of cause and action, now felt the whole life of his life committed to the word of a cloistered shaveling. All other thought had given way to that fiery impulse— home, mother, Edith, king, power, policy, ambition! Till the weight was from his soul, he was as an outlaw in his native land. But when the next sun rose, and that awful burthen was lifted from his heart and his being—when his own calm sense, returning, sanctioned the fiat of the priest,—when, though with deep shame and rankling remorse at the memory of the vow, he yet felt exonerated, not from the guilt of having made, but the deadlier guilt of fulfilling it—all the objects of existence resumed their natural interest, softened and chastened, but still vivid in the heart restored to humanity. But from that time, Harold's stern philosophy and stoic ethics were shaken to the dust; re-created, as it were, by the breath of religion, he adopted its tenets even after the fashion of his age. The secret of his shame, the error of his conscience, humbled him. Those unlettered monks whom he had so despised, how had he lost the right to stand aloof from their control! how had his wisdom, and his strength, and his courage, met unguarded the hour of temptation!

Yes, might the time come, when England could spare him from her side! when he, like Sweyn the outlaw, could pass a pilgrim to the Holy Sepulchre, and there, as the creed of the age taught, win full pardon for the single lie of his truthful life, and regain the old peace of his stainless conscience!

There are sometimes event and season in the life of man the hardest and most rational, when he is driven perforce to faith the most implicit and submissive; as the storm drives the wings of the petrel over a measureless sea, till it falls tame, and rejoicing at refuge, on the sails of some lonely ship. Seasons when difficulties, against which reason seems stricken into palsy, leave him bewildered in dismay —when darkness, which experience cannot pierce, wraps the conscience, as sudden night wraps the traveller in the desert—when error entangles his feet in its inextricable web—when, still desirous of the right, he sees before him but a choice of evil; and the Angel of the Past, with a flaming sword, closes on him the gates of the Future. Then, Faith flashes on him, with a light from the cloud. Then, he clings to Prayer as a drowning wretch to the plank. Then, that solemn authority which clothes the Priest, as the interpreter between the soul and the Divinity, seizes on the heart that trembles with terror and joy; then, that mysterious recognition of Atonement, of sacrifice, of purifying lustration (mystery which lies hid in the core of all religions), smoothes the frown on the Past, removes the flaming sword from the future. The Orestes escapes from the hounding Furies, and follows the oracle to the spot where the cleansing dews shall descend on the expiated guilt.

He who hath never known in himself, nor marked in another, such strange crisis in human fate, cannot judge of the strength and the weakness it bestows. But till he can so judge, the spiritual part of all history is to him a blank scroll, a sealed volume. He cannot comprehend what drove the fierce Heathen, cowering and humbled, into the fold of the Church; what peopled Egypt with eremites; what lined the roads of Europe and Asia with pilgrim homicides; what, in the elder world, while Jove yet reigned on Olympus, is couched in the dim traditions of the expiation of Apollo, the joy-god, descending into Hades; or why the sinner went blithe and light-hearted from the healing lustrations of Eleusis. In all these solemn riddles of the Jove world and the Christ's is involved the imperious necessity that man hath of repentance and atonement: through their clouds, as a rainbow, shines the covenant that reconciles the God and the man.

Now Life with strong arms plucked the reviving Harold to itself. Already the news of his return had spread through the city, and his chamber soon swarmed with joyous welcomes and anxious

friends. But the first congratulations over, each had tidings that claimed his instant attention, to relate. His absence had sufficed to loosen half the links of that ill-woven empire.

All the North was in arms. Northumbria had revolted as one man, from the tyrannous cruelty of Tostig; the insurgents had marched upon York; Tostig had fled in dismay, none as yet knew whither. The sons of Algar had sallied forth from their Mercian fortresses, and were now in the ranks of the Northumbrians, who it was rumoured had selected Morcar (the elder) in the place of Tostig.

Amidst these disasters, the King's health was fast decaying; his mind seemed bewildered and distraught; dark ravings of evil portent that had escaped from his lip in his mystic reveries and visions, had spread abroad, banded with all natural exaggerations, from lip to lip. The country was in one state of gloomy and vague apprehension.

But all would go well, now Harold the great Earl—Harold the stout, and the wise, and the loved—had come back to his native land!

In feeling himself thus necessary to England,—all eyes, all hopes, all hearts turned to him, and to him alone,—Harold shook the evil memories from his soul, as a lion shakes the dew from his mane. His intellect, that seemed to have burned dim and through smoke in scenes unfamiliar to its exercise, rose at once equal to the occasion. His words reassured the most despondent. His orders were prompt and decisive. While, to and fro, went forth his bodes and his riders, he himself leaped on his horse, and rode fast to Havering.

At length that sweet and lovely retreat broke on his sight, as a bower through the bloom of a garden. This was Edward's favourite abode: he had built it himself for his private devotions, allured by its woody solitudes and gloom of its copious verdure. Here it was said, that once that night, wandering through the silent glades, and musing on heaven, the loud song of the nightingales had disturbed his devotions; with vexed and impatient soul, he had prayed that the music might be stilled: and since then, never more the nightingale was heard in the shades of Havering! Threading the woodland, melancholy yet glorious with the hues of autumn, Harold reached the low and humble gate of the timber edifice, all covered with creepers and young ivy; and in a few moments more he stood in the presence of the King.

Edward raised himself with pain from the couch on which he was reclined¹, beneath a canopy supported by columns and surmounted by carved symbols of the bell towers of Jerusalem: and his languid face brightened at the sight of Harold. Behind the King stood a man with a Danish battle-axe in his hand, the captain of the royal house-carles, who, on a sign from the King, withdrew.

"Thou art come back, Harold," said Edward then, in a feeble voice; and the Earl drawing near, was grieved and shocked at the alteration of his face. "Thou art come back, to aid this benumbed hand, from which the earthly sceptre is about to fall. Hush! for it is so, and I rejoice." Then examining Harold's features, yet pale with recent emotions, and now saddened by sympathy with the King, he resumed: "Well, man of this world, that went forth confiding in thine own strength, and in the faith of men of the world like thee,—well, were my warnings prophetic, or art thou contented with thy mission?"

"Alas!" said Harold, mournfully. "Thy wisdom was greater than mine, O King; and dread the snares laid for me and our native land, under pretext of a promise made by thee to Count William, that he should reign in England, should he be your survivor."

Edward's face grew troubled and embarrassed. "Such promise," he said, falteringly, "when I knew not the laws of England, nor that a realm could not pass like house and hyde by a man's single testament, might well escape from my thoughts, never too bent upon earthly affairs. But I marvel not that my cousin's mind is more tenacious and mundane. And verily, in those vague words, and from thy visit, I see the Future dark with fate and crimson with blood."

¹ Bayeux tapestry.

Then Edward's eyes grew locked and set, staring into space; and even that reverie, though it awed him, relieved Harold of much disquietude, for he rightly conjectured, that on waking from it Edward would press him no more as to those details, and dilemmas of conscience, of which he felt that the arch-worshipper of relics was no fitting judge.

When the King, with a heavy sigh, evinced return from the world of vision, he stretched forth to Harold his wan, transparent hand, and said:

"Thou seest the ring on this finger; it comes to me from above, a merciful token to prepare my soul for death. Perchance thou mayest have heard that once an aged pilgrim stopped me on my way from God's House, and asked for alms—and I, having nought else on my person to bestow, drew from my finger a ring, and gave it to him, and the old man went his way, blessing me."

"I mind me well of thy gentle charity," said the Earl; "for the pilgrim bruited it abroad as he passed, and much talk was there of it."

The King smiled faintly. "Now this was years ago. It so chanced this year, that certain Englishers, on their way from the Holy Land, fell in with two pilgrims—and these last questioned them much of me. And one, with face venerable and benign, drew forth a ring and said, 'When thou reachest England, give thou this to the King's own hand, and say, by this token, that on Twelfth-Day Eve he shall be with me. For what he gave to me, will I prepare recompense without bound; and already the saints deck for the new comer the halls where the worm never gnaws and the moth never frets.' 'And who,' asked my subjects amazed, 'who shall we say, speaketh thus to us?' And the pilgrim answered, 'He on whose breast leaned the Son of God, and my name is John!'² Wherewith the apparition vanished. This is the ring I gave to the pilgrim; on the fourteenth night from thy parting, miraculously returned to me. Wherefore, Harold, my time here is brief, and I rejoice that thy coming delivers me up from the cares of state to the preparation of my soul for the joyous day."

Harold, suspecting under this incredible mission some wily device of the Norman, who, by thus warning Edward (of whose precarious health he was well aware), might induce his timorous conscience to take steps for the completion of the old promise,—Harold, we say, thus suspecting, in vain endeavoured to combat the King's presentiments, but Edward interrupted him, with displeased firmness of look and tone:

"Come not thou, with thy human reasonings, between my soul and the messenger divine; but rather nerve and prepare thyself for the dire calamities that lie greeding in the days to come! Be thine, things temporal. All the land is in rebellion. Anlaf, whom thy coming dismissed, hath just wearied me with sad tales of bloodshed and ravage. Go and hear him;—go hear the bodes of thy brother Tostig, who wait without in our hall;—go, take axe, and take shield, and the men of earth's war, and do justice and right; and on thy return thou shalt see with what rapture sublime a Christian King can soar aloft from his throne! Go!"

More moved, and more softened, than in the former day he had been with Edward's sincere, if fanatical piety, Harold, turning aside to conceal his face, said:

"Would, O royal Edward, that my heart, amidst worldly cares, were as pure and serene as thine! But, at least, what erring mortal may do to guard this realm, and face the evils thou foreseest in the Far—that will I do; and perchance, then, in my dying hour, God's pardon and peace may descend on me!" He spoke, and went.

The accounts he received from Anlaf (a veteran Anglo-Dane), were indeed more alarming than he had yet heard. Morcar, the bold son of Algar, was already proclaimed, by the rebels, Earl of Northumbria; the shires of Nottingham, Derby, and Lincoln, had poured forth their hardy Dane populations on his behalf. All Mercia was in arms under his brother Edwin; and many of the Cymrian chiefs had already joined the ally of the butchered Gryffyth.

² AIL. de Vit. Edw.—Many other chroniclers mention this legend, of which the stones of Westminster Abbey itself prated, in the statues of Edward and the Pilgrim, placed over the arch in Dean's Yard.

Not a moment did the Earl lose in proclaiming the Herr-bann; sheaves of arrows were splintered, and the fragments, as announcing the War- Fyrd, were sent from thegn to thegn, and town to town. Fresh messengers were despatched to Gurth to collect the whole force of his own earldom, and haste by quick marches to London; and, these preparations made, Harold returned to the metropolis, and with a heavy heart sought his mother, as his next care.

Githa was already prepared for his news; for Haco had of his own accord gone to break the first shock of disappointment. There was in this youth a noiseless sagacity that seemed ever provident for Harold. With his sombre, smileless cheek, and gloom of beauty, bowed as if beneath the weight of some invisible doom, he had already become linked indissolubly with the Earl's fate, as its angel,—but as its angel of darkness!

To Harold's intense relief, Githa stretched forth her hands as he entered, and said, "Thou hast failed me, but against thy will! grieve not; I am content!"

"Now our Lady be blessed, mother—"

"I have told her," said Haco, who was standing, with arms folded, by the fire, the blaze of which reddened fitfully his hueless countenance with its raven hair; "I have told thy mother that Wolnoth loves his captivity, and enjoys the cage. And the lady hath had comfort in my words."

"Not in thine only, son of Sweyn, but in those of fate; for before thy coming I prayed against the long blind yearning of my heart, prayed that Wolnoth might not cross the sea with his kinsmen."

"How!" exclaimed the Earl, astonished.

Githa took his arm, and led him to the farther end of the ample chamber, as if out of the hearing of Haco, who turned his face towards the fire, and gazed into the fierce blaze with musing, unwinking eyes.

"Couldst thou think, Harold, that in thy journey, that on the errand of so great fear and hope, I could sit brooding in my chair, and count the stitches on the tremulous hangings? No; day by day have I sought the lore of Hilda, and at night I have watched with her by the fount, and the elm, and the tomb; and I know that thou hast gone through dire peril; the prison, the war, and the snare; and I know also, that his Fylgia hath saved the life of my Wolnoth; for had he returned to his native land, he had returned but to a bloody grave!"

"Says Hilda this?" said the Earl, thoughtfully.

"So say the Vala, the rune, and the Scin-laeca! and such is the doom that now darkens the brow of Haco! Seest thou not that the hand of death is in the hush of the smileless lip, and the glance of the unjoyous eye?"

"Nay, it is but the thought born to captive youth, and nurtured in solitary dreams. Thou hast seen Hilda?—and Edith, my mother? Edith is—"

"Well," said Githa, kindly, for she sympathised with that love which Godwin would have condemned, "though she grieved deeply after thy departure, and would sit for hours gazing into space, and moaning. But even ere Hilda divined thy safe return, Edith knew it; I was beside her at the time; she started up, and cried, 'Harold is in England!'—'How?—Why thinkest thou so?' said I. And Edith answered, 'I feel it by the touch of the earth, by the breath of the air.' This is more than love, Harold. I knew two twins who had the same instinct of each other's comings and goings, and were present each to each even when absent: Edith is twin to my soul. Thou goest to her now, Harold: thou wilt find there thy sister Thyra. The child hath drooped of late, and I besought Hilda to revive her, with herb and charm. Thou wilt come back, ere thou departest to aid Tostig, thy brother, and tell me how Hilda hath prospered with my ailing child?"

"I will, my mother. Be cheered!—Hilda is a skilful nurse. And now bless thee, that thou hast not reproached me that my mission failed to fulfil my promise. Welcome even our kinswoman's sayings, sith they comfort thee for the loss of thy darling!"

Then Harold left the room, mounted his steed, and rode through the town towards the bridge. He was compelled to ride slowly through the streets, for he was recognised; and cheapman and mechanic rushed from house and from stall to hail the Man of the Land and the Time.

"All is safe now in England, for Harold is come back!" They seemed joyous as the children of the mariner, when, with wet garments, he struggles to shore through the storm. And kind and loving were Harold's looks and brief words, as he rode with veiled bonnet through the swarming streets.

At length he cleared the town and the bridge; and the yellowing boughs of the orchards drooped over the road towards the Roman home, when, as he spurred his steed, he heard behind him hoofs as in pursuit, looked back, and beheld Haco. He drew rein,— "What wantest thou, my nephew?"

"Thee!" answered Haco, briefly, as he gained his side. "Thy companionship."

"Thanks, Haco; but I pray thee to stay in my mother's house, for I would fain ride alone."

"Spurn me not from thee, Harold! This England is to me the land of the stranger; in thy mother's house I feel but the more the orphan. Henceforth I have devoted to thee my life! And my life my dead and dread father hath left to thee, as a doom or a blessing; wherefore cleave I to thy side;— cleave we in life and in death to each other!"

An undefined and cheerless thrill shot through the Earl's heart as the youth spoke thus; and the remembrance that Haco's counsel had first induced him to abandon his natural hardy and gallant manhood, meet wile by wile, and thus suddenly entangle him in his own meshes, had already mingled an inexpressible bitterness with his pity and affection for his brother's son. But, struggling against that uneasy sentiment, as unjust towards one to whose counsel—however sinister, and now repented—he probably owed, at least, his safety and deliverance, he replied gently:

"I accept thy trust and thy love, Haco! Ride with me, then; but pardon a dull comrade, for when the soul communes with itself the lip is silent."

"True," said Haco, "and I am no babbler. Three things are ever silent: Thought, Destiny, and the Grave."

Each then, pursuing his own fancies, rode on fast, and side by side; the long shadows of declining day struggling with a sky of unusual brightness, and thrown from the dim forest trees and the distant hillocks. Alternately through shade and through light rode they on; the bulls gazing on them from holt and glade, and the boom of the bittern sounding in its peculiar mournfulness of toile as it rose from the dank pools that glistened in the western sun.

It was always by the rear of the house, where stood the ruined temple, so associated with the romance of his life, that Harold approached the home of the Vala; and as now the hillock, with its melancholy diadem of stones, came in view, Haco for the first time broke the silence.

"Again—as in a dream!" he said, abruptly. "Hill, ruin, grave-mound— but where the tall image of the mighty one?"

"Hast thou then seen this spot before?" asked the Earl.

"Yea, as an infant here was I led by my father Sweyn; here too, from thy house yonder, dim seen through the fading leaves, on the eve before I left this land for the Norman, here did I wander alone; and there, by that altar, did the great Vala of the North chaunt her runes for my future."

"Alas! thou too!" murmured Harold; and then he asked aloud, "What said she?"

"That thy life and mine crossed each other in the skein; that I should save thee from a great peril, and share with thee a greater."

"Ah, youth," answered Harold, bitterly, "these vain prophecies of human wit guard the soul from no anger. They mislead us by riddles which our hot hearts interpret according to their own desires. Keep thou fast to youth's simple wisdom, and trust only to the pure spirit and the watchful God."

He suppressed a groan as he spoke, and springing from his steed, which he left loose, advanced up the hill. When he had gained the height, he halted, and made sign to Haco, who had also dismounted, to do the same. Half way down the side of the slope which faced the ruined peristyle,

Haco beheld a maiden, still young, and of beauty surpassing all that the court of Normandy boasted of female loveliness. She was seated on the sward;—while a girl younger, and scarcely indeed grown into womanhood, reclined at her feet, and leaning her cheek upon her hand, seemed hushed in listening attention. In the face of the younger girl Haco recognised Thyra, the last-born of Githa, though he had but once seen her before—the day ere he left England for the Norman court—for the face of the girl was but little changed, save that the eye was more mournful, and the cheek was paler.

And Harold's betrothed was singing, in the still autumn air, to Harold's sister. The song chosen was on that subject the most popular with the Saxon poets, the mystic life, death, and resurrection of the fabled Phoenix, and this rhymeless song, in its old native flow, may yet find some grace in the modern ear.

THE LAY OF THE PHOENIX.³

"Shineth far hence—so
Sing the wise elders
Far to the fire-east
The fairest of lands.

Daintily dight is that
Dearest of joy fields;
Breezes all balmy-filled
Glide through its groves.

There to the blest, ope
The high doors of heaven,
Sweetly sweep earthward
Their wavelets of song.

Frost robes the sward not,
Rusheth no hail-steel;
Wind-cloud ne'er wanders,
Ne'er falleth the rain.

Warding the woodholt,
Girt with gay wonder,
Sheen with the plummy shine,
Phoenix abides.

³ This ancient Saxon lay, apparently of the date of the tenth or eleventh century, may be found, admirably translated by Mr. George Stephens, in the *Archaeologia*, vol. xxx. p. 259. In the text the poem is much abridged, reduced into rhythm, and in some stanzas wholly altered from the original. But it is, nevertheless, greatly indebted to Mr. Stephens's translation, from which several lines are borrowed verbatim. The more careful reader will note the great aid given to a rhymeless metre by alliteration. I am not sure that this old Saxon mode of verse might not be profitably restored to our national muse.

Lord of the Lleod,⁴
Whose home is the air,
Winters a thousand
Abideth the bird.

Hapless and heavy then
Waxeth the hazy wing;
Year-worn and old in the
Whirl of the earth.

Then the high holt-top,
Mounting, the bird soars;
There, where the winds sleep,
He buildeth a nest;—

Gums the most precious, and
Balms of the sweetest,
Spices and odours, he
Weaves in the nest.

There, in that sun-ark, lo,
Waiteth he wistful;
Summer comes smiling, lo,
Rays smite the pile!

Burden'd with eld-years, and
Weary with slow time,
Slow in his odour-nest
Burneth the bird.

Up from those ashes, then,
Springeth a rare fruit;
Deep in the rare fruit
There coileth a worm.

Weaving bliss-meshes
Around and around it,
Silent and blissful, the
Worm worketh on.

⁴ People.

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.'

High flies the phoenix,
Escaped from the worm-web
He soars in the sunlight,
He bathes in the dew.

He visits his old haunts,
The holt and the sun-hill;
The founts of his youth, and
The fields of his love.

The stars in the welkin,
The blooms on the earth,
Are glad in his gladness,
Are young in his youth.

While round him the birds troop,
the Hosts of the Himmel,⁵
Blisses of music, and
Glories of wings;

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

⁵ Heaven.

As the lay ceased, Thyra said:

"Ah, Edith, who would not brave the funeral pyre to live again like the phoenix!"

"Sweet sister mine," answered Edith, "the singer doth mean to image out in the phoenix the rising of our Lord, in whom we all live again."

And Thyra said, mournfully:

"But the phoenix sees once more the haunts of his youth—the things and places dear to him in his life before. Shall we do the same, O Edith?"

"It is the persons we love that make beautiful the haunts we have known," answered the betrothed. "Those persons at least we shall behold again, and whenever they are—there is heaven."

Harold could restrain himself no longer. With one bound he was at Edith's side, and with one wild cry of joy he clasped her to his heart.

"I knew that thou wouldst come to-night—I knew it, Harold," murmured the betrothed.

CHAPTER III

While, full of themselves, Harold and Edith wandered, hand in hand, through the neighbouring glades—while into that breast which had forestalled, at least, in this pure and sublime union, the wife's privilege to soothe and console, the troubled man poured out the tale of the sole trial from which he had passed with defeat and shame,— Haco drew near to Thyra, and sate down by her side. Each was strangely attracted towards the other; there was something congenial in the gloom which they shared in common; though in the girl the sadness was soft and resigned, in the youth it was stern and solemn. They conversed in whispers, and their talk was strange for companions so young; for, whether suggested by Edith's song, or the neighbourhood of the Saxon grave-stone, which gleamed on their eyes, grey and wan through the crommell, the theme they selected was of death. As if fascinated, as children often are, by the terrors of the Dark King, they dwelt on those images with which the northern fancy has associated the eternal rest, on—the shroud and the worm, and the mouldering bones—on the gibbering ghost, and the sorcerer's spell that could call the spectre from the grave. They talked of the pain of the parting soul, parting while earth was yet fair, youth fresh, and joy not yet ripened from the blossom—of the wistful lingering look which glazing eyes would give to the latest sunlight it should behold on earth; and then he pictured the shivering and naked soul, forced from the reluctant clay, wandering through cheerless space to the intermediate tortures, which the Church taught that none were so pure as not for a whole to undergo; and hearing, as it wandered, the knell of the muffled bells and the burst of unavailing prayer. At length Haco paused abruptly and said:

"But thou, cousin, hast before thee love and sweet life, and these discourses are not for thee."

Thyra shook her head mournfully:

"Not so, Haco; for when Hilda consulted the runes, while, last night, she mingled the herbs for my pain, which rests ever hot and sharp here," and the girl laid her hand on her breast, "I saw that her face grew dark and overcast; and I felt, as I looked, that my doom was set. And when thou didst come so noiselessly to my side, with thy sad, cold eyes, O Haco, methought I saw the Messenger of Death. But thou art strong, Haco, and life will be long for thee; let us talk of life."

Haco stooped down and pressed his lips upon the girl's pale forehead.

"Kiss me too, Thyra."

The child kissed him, and they sate silent and close by each other, while the sun set.

And as the stars rose, Harold and Edith joined them. Harold's face was serene in the starlight, for the pure soul of his betrothed had breathed peace into his own; and, in his willing superstition, he felt as if, now restored to his guardian angel, the dead men's bones had released their unhallowed hold.

But suddenly Edith's hand trembled in his, and her form shuddered.—

Her eyes were fixed upon those of Haco.

"Forgive me, young kinsman, that I forget thee so long," said the Earl. "This is my brother's son, Edith; thou hast not, that I remember, seen him before?"

"Yes, yes;" said Edith, falteringly.

"When, and where?"

Edith's soul answered the question, "In a dream;" but her lips were silent.

And Haco, rising, took her by the hand, while the Earl turned to his sister—that sister whom he was pledged to send to the Norman court; and Thyra said, plaintively:

"Take me in thine arms, Harold, and wrap thy mantle round me, for the air is cold."

The Earl lifted the child to his breast, and gazed on her cheek long and wistfully; then questioning her tenderly, he took her within the house; and Edith followed with Haco.

"Is Hilda within?" asked the son of Sweyn.

"Nay, she hath been in the forest since noon," answered Edith with an effort, for she could not recover her awe of his presence.

"Then," said Haco, halting at the threshold, "I will go across the woodland to your house, Harold, and prepare your ceorls for your coming."

"I shall tarry here till Hilda returns," answered Harold, and it may be late in the night ere I reach home; but Sexwolf already hath my orders. At sunrise we return to London, and thence we march on the insurgents."

"All shall be ready. Farewell, noble Edith; and thou, Thyra my cousin, one kiss more to our meeting again." The child fondly held out her arms to him, and as she kissed his cheek whispered:

"In the grave, Haco!"

The young man drew his mantle around him, and moved away. But he did not mount his steed, which still grazed by the road; while Harold's, more familiar with the place, had found its way to the stall; nor did he take his path through the glades to the house of his kinsman. Entering the Druid temple, he stood musing by the Teuton tomb. The night grew deeper and deeper, the stars more luminous and the air more hushed, when a voice close at his side, said, clear and abrupt:

"What does Youth the restless, by Death the still?"

It was the peculiarity of Haco, that nothing ever seemed to startle or surprise him. In that brooding boyhood, the solemn, quiet, and sad experience all fore-armed, of age, had something in it terrible and preternatural; so without lifting his eyes from the stone, he answered:

"How sayest thou, O Hilda, that the dead are still?" Hilda placed her hand on his shoulder, and stooped to look into his face.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.