

BOOK II. THE GATHERING OF THE CHIEFS

Up across windy wastes and up Went Alfred over the shaws,
Shaken of the joy of giants, The joy without a cause.

In the slopes away to the western bays, Where blows not ever a
tree, He washed his soul in the west wind And his body in the
sea.

And he set to rhyme his ale-measures, And he sang aloud his
laws, Because of the joy of the giants, The joy without a cause.

The King went gathering Wessex men, As grain out of the chaff
The few that were alive to die, Laughing, as littered skulls that lie
After lost battles turn to the sky An everlasting laugh.

The King went gathering Christian men, As wheat out of the
husk; Eldred, the Franklin by the sea, And Mark, the man from
Italy, And Colan of the Sacred Tree, From the old tribe on Usk.

The rook croaked homeward heavily, The west was clear and
warm, The smoke of evening food and ease Rose like a blue tree
in the trees When he came to Eldred's farm.

But Eldred's farm was fallen awry, Like an old cripple's bones,
And Eldred's tools were red with rust, And on his well was a green
crust, And purple thistles upward thrust, Between the kitchen
stones.

But smoke of some good feasting Went upwards evermore,
And Eldred's doors stood wide apart For loitering foot or labouring
cart, And Eldred's great and foolish heart Stood open like his
door.

A mighty man was Eldred, A bulk for casks to fill, His
face a dreaming furnace, His body a walking hill.

In the old wars of Wessex His sword had sunken deep,
But all his friends, he signed and said, Were broken about Ethelred;
And between the deep drink and the dead He had fallen upon sleep.

"Come not to me, King Alfred, Save always for the ale: Why
should my harmless hinds be slain Because the chiefs cry once again,
As in all fights, that we shall gain, And in all fights we fail?"

"Your scalds still thunder and prophesy That crown that never
comes; Friend, I will watch the certain things, Swine, and slow
moons like silver rings, And the ripening of the plums."

And Alfred answered, drinking, And gravely, without blame,
"Nor bear I boast of scald or king, The thing I bear is a lesser thing,
But comes in a better name.

"Out of the mouth of the Mother of God, More than the doors of
doom, I call the muster of Wessex men From grassy hamlet or
ditch or den, To break and be broken, God knows when, But I
have seen for whom.

"Out of the mouth of the Mother of God Like a little word come
I; For I go gathering Christian men From sunken paving and
ford and fen, To die in a battle, God knows when, By God, but I
know why.

"And this is the word of Mary, The word of the world's desire
'No more of comfort shall ye get, Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.'"

Then silence sank. And slowly Arose the sea-land lord,
Like some vast beast for mystery, He filled the room and porch and
sky, And from a cobwebbed nail on high Unhooked his heavy
sword.

Up on the shrill sea-downs and up Went Alfred all alone,
Turning but once e'er the door was shut, Shouting to Eldred over his
butt, That he bring all spears to the woodman's hut Hewn
under Egbert's Stone.

And he turned his back and broke the fern, And fought the
moths of dusk, And went on his way for other friends Friends
fallen of all the wide world's ends, From Rome that wrath and pardon
sends And the grey tribes on Usk.

He saw gigantic tracks of death And many a shape of doom,
Good steadings to grey ashes gone And a monk's house white like a

skeleton In the green crypt of the combe.

 And in many a Roman villa Earth and her ivies eat, Saw
coloured pavements sink and fade In flowers, and the windy
colonnade Like the spectre of a street.

 But the cold stars clustered Among the cold pines Ere he
was half on his pilgrimage Over the western lines.

 And the white dawn widened Ere he came to the last pine,
Where Mark, the man from Italy, Still made the Christian sign.

 The long farm lay on the large hill-side, Flat like a painted plan,
And by the side the low white house, Where dwelt the southland man.

 A bronzed man, with a bird's bright eye, And a strong bird's
beak and brow, His skin was brown like buried gold, And of
certain of his sires was told That they came in the shining ship of old,
With Caesar in the prow.

 His fruit trees stood like soldiers Drilled in a straight line,
His strange, stiff olives did not fail, And all the kings of the earth
drank ale, But he drank wine.

 Wide over wasted British plains Stood never an arch or dome,
Only the trees to toss and reel, The tribes to bicker, the beasts to
squeal; But the eyes in his head were strong like steel, And his
soul remembered Rome.

 Then Alfred of the lonely spear Lifted his lion head; And
fronted with the Italian's eye, Asking him of his whence and why,
King Alfred stood and said:

 "I am that oft-defeated King Whose failure fills the land,
Who fled before the Danes of old, Who chattered with the Danes with
gold, Who now upon the Wessex wold Hardly has feet to stand.

 "But out of the mouth of the Mother of God I have seen the
truth like fire, This--that the sky grows darker yet And the sea
rises higher."

 Long looked the Roman on the land; The trees as golden
crowns Blazed, drenched with dawn and dew-empearled While

faintlier coloured, freshlier curled, The clouds from underneath the
world Stood up over the downs.

"These vines be ropes that drag me hard," He said. "I go not far;
Where would you meet? For you must hold Half Wiltshire and the
White Horse wold, And the Thames bank to Owsenfold, If
Wessex goes to war.

"Guthrum sits strong on either bank And you must press his
lines Inwards, and eastward drive him down; I doubt if you
shall take the crown Till you have taken London town. For me,
I have the vines."

"If each man on the Judgment Day Meet God on a plain alone,"
Said Alfred, "I will speak for you As for myself, and call it true
That you brought all fighting folk you knew Lined under Egbert's
Stone.

"Though I be in the dust ere then, I know where you will be."
And shouldering suddenly his spear He faded like some elfin fear,
Where the tall pines ran up, tier on tier Tree overtoppling tree.

He shouldered his spear at morning And laughed to lay it on,
But he leaned on his spear as on a staff, With might and little mood
to laugh, Or ever he sighted chick or calf Of Colan of Caerleon.

For the man dwelt in a lost land Of boulders and broken men,
In a great grey cave far off to the south Where a thick green forest
stopped the mouth, Giving darkness in his den.

And the man was come like a shadow, From the shadow of
Druid trees, Where Usk, with mighty murmurings, Past
Caerleon of the fallen kings, Goes out to ghostly seas.

Last of a race in ruin-- He spoke the speech of the Gaels;
His kin were in holy Ireland, Or up in the crags of Wales.

But his soul stood with his mother's folk, That were of the rain-
wrapped isle, Where Patrick and Brandan westerly Looked out
at last on a landless sea And the sun's last smile.

His harp was carved and cunning, As the Celtic craftsman
makes, Graven all over with twisting shapes Like many

headless snakes.

His harp was carved and cunning, His sword prompt and
sharp, And he was gay when he held the sword, Sad when he
held the harp.

For the great Gaels of Ireland Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry, And all their songs are sad.

He kept the Roman order, He made the Christian sign;
But his eyes grew often blind and bright, And the sea that rose in the
rocks at night Rose to his head like wine.

He made the sign of the cross of God, He knew the Roman
prayer, But he had unreason in his heart Because of the gods
that were.

Even they that walked on the high cliffs, High as the clouds
were then, Gods of unbearable beauty, That broke the hearts of
men.

And whether in seat or saddle, Whether with frown or smile,
Whether at feast or fight was he, He heard the noise of a nameless sea
On an undiscovered isle.

Lifting the great green ivy And the great spear lowering,
One said, "I am Alfred of Wessex, And I am a conquered king."

And the man of the cave made answer, And his eyes were stars
of scorn, "And better kings were conquered Or ever your sires
were born.

"What goddess was your mother, What fay your breed begot,
That you should not die with Uther And Arthur and Lancelot?

"But when you win you brag and blow, And when you lose you
rail, Army of eastland yokels Not strong enough to fail."

"I bring not boast or railing," Spake Alfred not in ire, "I
bring of Our Lady a lesson set, This--that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher."

Then Colan of the Sacred Tree Tossed his black mane on high,

And cried, as rigidly he rose, "And if the sea and sky be foes,
We will tame the sea and sky."

 Smiled Alfred, "Seek ye a fable More dizzy and more dread
Than all your mad barbarian tales Where the sky stands on its head?"

 "A tale where a man looks down on the sky That has long
looked down on him; A tale where a man can swallow a sea
That might swallow the seraphim.

 "Bring to the hut by Egbert's Stone All bills and bows ye have."
And Alfred strode off rapidly, And Colan of the Sacred Tree
Went slowly to his cave.