

BOOK III. THE HARP OF ALFRED

In a tree that yawned and twisted The King's few goods were
flung, A mass-book mildewed, line by line, And weapons and a
skin of wine, And an old harp unstrung.

By the yawning tree in the twilight The King unbound his
sword, Severed the harp of all his goods, And there in the cool
and soundless woods Sounded a single chord.

Then laughed; and watched the finches flash, The sullen flies
in swarm, And went unarmed over the hills, With the harp
upon his arm,

Until he came to the White Horse Vale And saw across the
plains, In the twilight high and far and fell, Like the fiery
terraces of hell, The camp fires of the Danes--

The fires of the Great Army That was made of iron men,
Whose lights of sacrilege and scorn Ran around England red as morn,
Fires over Glastonbury Thorn-- Fires out on Ely Fen.

And as he went by White Horse Vale He saw lie wan and wide
The old horse graven, God knows when, By gods or beasts or what
things then Walked a new world instead of men And scrawled
on the hill-side.

And when he came to White Horse Down The great White Horse
was grey, For it was ill scoured of the weed, And lichen and
thorn could crawl and feed, Since the foes of settled house and creed
Had swept old works away.

King Alfred gazed all sorrowful At thistle and mosses grey,
Then laughed; and watched the finches flash, Till a rally of Danes
with shield and bill Rolled drunk over the dome of the hill, And,
hearing of his harp and skill, They dragged him to their play.

And as they went through the high green grass They roared like
the great green sea; But when they came to the red camp fire
They were silent suddenly.

And as they went up the wastes away They went reeling to and
fro; But when they came to the red camp fire They stood all in
a row.

For golden in the firelight, With a smile carved on his lips,
And a beard curled right cunningly, Was Guthrum of the Northern
Sea, The emperor of the ships--

With three great earls King Guthrum Went the rounds from fire
to fire, With Harold, nephew of the King, And Ogier of the Stone
and Sling, And Elf, whose gold lute had a string That sighed
like all desire.

The Earls of the Great Army That no men born could tire,
Whose flames anear him or aloof Took hold of towers or walls of proof,
Fire over Glastonbury roof And out on Ely, fire.

And Guthrum heard the soldiers' tale And bade the stranger
play; Not harshly, but as one on high, On a marble pillar in the
sky, Who sees all folk that live and die-- Pigmy and far away.

And Alfred, King of Wessex, Looked on his conqueror--
And his hands hardened; but he played, And leaving all later hates
unsaid, He sang of some old British raid On the wild west
march of yore.

He sang of war in the warm wet shires, Where rain nor fruitage
fails, Where England of the motley states Deepens like a garden
to the gates In the purple walls of Wales.

He sang of the seas of savage heads And the seas and seas of
spears, Boiling all over Offa's Dyke, What time a Wessex club
could strike The kings of the mountaineers.

Till Harold laughed and snatched the harp, The kinsman of the
King, A big youth, beardless like a child, Whom the new wine of
war sent wild, Smote, and began to sing--

And he cried of the ships as eagles That circle fiercely and fly,
And sweep the seas and strike the towns From Cyprus round to Skye.

How swiftly and with peril They gather all good things,
The high horns of the forest beasts, Or the secret stones of kings.

"For Rome was given to rule the world, And gat of it little joy--
But we, but we shall enjoy the world, The whole huge world a toy.

"Great wine like blood from Burgundy, Cloaks like the clouds
from Tyre, And marble like solid moonlight, And gold like
frozen fire.

"Smells that a man might swill in a cup, Stones that a man
might eat, And the great smooth women like ivory That the
Turks sell in the street."

He sang the song of the thief of the world, And the gods that
love the thief; And he yelled aloud at the cloister-yards, Where
men go gathering grief.

"Well have you sung, O stranger, Of death on the dyke in
Wales, Your chief was a bracelet-giver; But the red unbroken
river Of a race runs not for ever, But suddenly it fails.

"Doubtless your sires were sword-swingers When they waded
fresh from foam, Before they were turned to women By the god
of the nails from Rome;

"But since you bent to the shaven men, Who neither lust nor
smite, Thunder of Thor, we hunt you A hare on the mountain
height."

King Guthrum smiled a little, And said, "It is enough,
Nephew, let Elf retune the string; A boy must needs like bellowing,
But the old ears of a careful king Are glad of songs less rough."

Blue-eyed was Elf the minstrel, With womanish hair and ring,
Yet heavy was his hand on sword, Though light upon the string.

And as he stirred the strings of the harp To notes but four or
five, The heart of each man moved in him Like a babe buried
alive.

And they felt the land of the folk-songs Spread southward of
the Dane, And they heard the good Rhine flowing In the heart
of all Allemagne.

They felt the land of the folk-songs, Where the gifts hang on the
tree, Where the girls give ale at morning And the tears come
easily.

The mighty people, womanlike, That have pleasure in their pain
As he sang of Balder beautiful, Whom the heavens loved in vain.

As he sang of Balder beautiful, Whom the heavens could not
save, Till the world was like a sea of tears And every soul a
wave.

"There is always a thing forgotten When all the world goes well;
A thing forgotten, as long ago, When the gods forgot the mistletoe,
And soundless as an arrow of snow The arrow of anguish fell.

"The thing on the blind side of the heart, On the wrong side of
the door, The green plant groweth, menacing Almighty lovers in
the spring; There is always a forgotten thing, And love is not
secure."

And all that sat by the fire were sad, Save Ogier, who was
stern, And his eyes hardened, even to stones, As he took the
harp in turn;

Earl Ogier of the Stone and Sling Was odd to ear and sight,
Old he was, but his locks were red, And jests were all the words he
said Yet he was sad at board and bed And savage in the fight.

"You sing of the young gods easily In the days when you are
young; But I go smelling yew and sods, And I know there are
gods behind the gods, Gods that are best unsung.

"And a man grows ugly for women, And a man grows dull with
ale, Well if he find in his soul at last Fury, that does not fail.

"The wrath of the gods behind the gods Who would rend all
gods and men, Well if the old man's heart hath still Wheels
sped of rage and roaring will, Like cataracts to break down and kill,
Well for the old man then--

"While there is one tall shrine to shake, Or one live man to
rend; For the wrath of the gods behind the gods Who are weary
to make an end.

"There lives one moment for a man When the door at his
shoulder shakes, When the taut rope parts under the pull, And
the barest branch is beautiful One moment, while it breaks.

"So rides my soul upon the sea That drinks the howling ships,
Though in black jest it bows and nods Under the moons with silver
rods, I know it is roaring at the gods, Waiting the last eclipse.

"And in the last eclipse the sea Shall stand up like a tower,
Above all moons made dark and riven, Hold up its foaming head in
heaven, And laugh, knowing its hour.

"And the high ones in the happy town Propped of the planets
seven, Shall know a new light in the mind, A noise about them
and behind, Shall hear an awful voice, and find Foam in the
courts of heaven.

"And you that sit by the fire are young, And true love waits for
you; But the king and I grow old, grow old, And hate alone is
true."

And Guthrum shook his head but smiled, For he was a mighty
clerk, And had read lines in the Latin books When all the north
was dark.

He said, "I am older than you, Ogier; Not all things would I
rend, For whether life be bad or good It is best to abide the
end."

He took the great harp wearily, Even Guthrum of the Danes,
With wide eyes bright as the one long day On the long polar plains.

For he sang of a wheel returning, And the mire trod back to
mire, And how red hells and golden heavens Are castles in the
fire.

"It is good to sit where the good tales go, To sit as our fathers
sat; But the hour shall come after his youth, When a man shall
know not tales but truth, And his heart fail thereat.

"When he shall read what is written So plain in clouds and
clods, When he shall hunger without hope Even for evil gods.

"For this is a heavy matter, And the truth is cold to tell;
Do we not know, have we not heard, The soul is like a lost bird,
The body a broken shell.

"And a man hopes, being ignorant, Till in white woods apart
He finds at last the lost bird dead: And a man may still lift up his
head But never more his heart.

"There comes no noise but weeping Out of the ancient sky,
And a tear is in the tiniest flower Because the gods must die.

"The little brooks are very sweet, Like a girl's ribbons curled,
But the great sea is bitter That washes all the world.

"Strong are the Roman roses, Or the free flowers of the heath,
But every flower, like a flower of the sea, Smelleth with the salt of
death.

"And the heart of the locked battle Is the happiest place for
men; When shrieking souls as shafts go by And many have
died and all may die; Though this word be a mystery, Death is
most distant then.

"Death blazes bright above the cup, And clear above the crown;
But in that dream of battle We seem to tread it down.

"Wherefore I am a great king, And waste the world in vain,
Because man hath not other power, Save that in dealing death for
dower, He may forget it for an hour To remember it again."

And slowly his hands and thoughtfully Fell from the lifted lyre,
And the owls moaned from the mighty trees Till Alfred caught it to his
knees And smote it as in ire.

He heaved the head of the harp on high And swept the
framework barred, And his stroke had all the rattle and spark
Of horses flying hard.

"When God put man in a garden He girt him with a sword,
And sent him forth a free knight That might betray his lord;

"He brake Him and betrayed Him, And fast and far he fell,

Till you and I may stretch our necks And burn our beards in hell.

"But though I lie on the floor of the world, With the seven sins
for rods, I would rather fall with Adam Than rise with all your
gods.

"What have the strong gods given? Where have the glad gods
led? When Guthrum sits on a hero's throne And asks if he is
dead?

"Sirs, I am but a nameless man, A rhymester without home,
Yet since I come of the Wessex clay And carry the cross of Rome,

"I will even answer the mighty earl That asked of Wessex men
Why they be meek and monkish folk, And bow to the White Lord's
broken yoke; What sign have we save blood and smoke? Here is
my answer then.

"That on you is fallen the shadow, And not upon the Name;
That though we scatter and though we fly, And you hang over us like
the sky, You are more tired of victory, Than we are tired of
shame.

"That though you hunt the Christian man Like a hare on the
hill-side, The hare has still more heart to run Than you have
heart to ride.

"That though all lances split on you, All swords be heaved in
vain, We have more lust again to lose Than you to win again.

"Your lord sits high in the saddle, A broken-hearted king,
But our king Alfred, lost from fame, Fallen among foes or bonds of
shame, In I know not what mean trade or name, Has still some
song to sing;

"Our monks go robed in rain and snow, But the heart of flame
therein, But you go clothed in feasts and flames, When all is ice
within;

"Nor shall all iron dooms make dumb Men wondering
ceaselessly, If it be not better to fast for joy Than feast for
misery.

"Nor monkish order only Slides down, as field to fen, All
things achieved and chosen pass, As the White Horse fades in the
grass, No work of Christian men.

"Ere the sad gods that made your gods Saw their sad sunrise
pass, The White Horse of the White Horse Vale, That you have
left to darken and fail, Was cut out of the grass.

"Therefore your end is on you, Is on you and your kings,
Not for a fire in Ely fen, Not that your gods are nine or ten, But
because it is only Christian men Guard even heathen things.

"For our God hath blessed creation, Calling it good. I know
What spirit with whom you blindly band Hath blessed destruction
with his hand; Yet by God's death the stars shall stand And the
small apples grow."

And the King, with harp on shoulder, Stood up and ceased his
song; And the owls moaned from the mighty trees, And the
Danes laughed loud and long.