

BOOK IV. THE WOMAN IN THE FOREST

Thick thunder of the snorting swine, Enormous in the gloam,
Rending among all roots that cling, And the wild horses whinnying,
Were the night's noises when the King Shouldering his harp, went
home.

With eyes of owl and feet of fox, Full of all thoughts he went;
He marked the tilt of the pagan camp, The paling of pine, the sentries'
tramp, And the one great stolen altar-lamp Over Guthrum in
his tent.

By scrub and thorn in Ethandune That night the foe had lain;
Whence ran across the heather grey The old stones of a Roman way;
And in a wood not far away The pale road split in twain.

He marked the wood and the cloven ways With an old captain's
eyes, And he thought how many a time had he Sought to see
Doom he could not see; How ruin had come and victory, And
both were a surprise.

Even so he had watched and wondered Under Ashdown from
the plains; With Ethelred praying in his tent, Till the white
hawthorn swung and bent, As Alfred rushed his spears and rent
The shield-wall of the Danes.

Even so he had watched and wondered, Knowing neither less
nor more, Till all his lords lay dying, And axes on axes plying,
Flung him, and drove him flying Like a pirate to the shore.

Wise he had been before defeat, And wise before success;
Wise in both hours and ignorant, Knowing neither more nor less.

As he went down to the river-hut He knew a night-shade scent,
Owls did as evil cherubs rise, With little wings and lantern eyes,
As though he sank through the under-skies; But down and down he
went.

As he went down to the river-hut He went as one that fell;
Seeing the high forest domes and spars. Dim green or torn with
golden scars, As the proud look up at the evil stars, In the red

heavens of hell.

For he must meet by the river-hut Them he had bidden to arm,
Mark from the towers of Italy, And Colan of the Sacred Tree,
And Eldred who beside the sea Held heavily his farm.

The roof leaned gaping to the grass, As a monstrous mushroom
lies; Echoing and empty seemed the place; But opened in a
little space A great grey woman with scarred face And strong
and humbled eyes.

King Alfred was but a meagre man, Bright eyed, but lean and
pale: And swordless, with his harp and rags, He seemed a
beggar, such as lags Looking for crusts and ale.

And the woman, with a woman's eyes Of pity at once and ire,
Said, when that she had glared a span, "There is a cake for any man
If he will watch the fire."

And Alfred, bowing heavily, Sat down the fire to stir, And
even as the woman pitied him So did he pity her.

Saying, "O great heart in the night, O best cast forth for worst,
Twilight shall melt and morning stir, And no kind thing shall come to
her, Till God shall turn the world over And all the last are first.

"And well may God with the serving-folk Cast in His dreadful
lot; Is not He too a servant, And is not He forgot?

"For was not God my gardener And silent like a slave;
That opened oaks on the uplands Or thicket in graveyard gave?

"And was not God my armourer, All patient and unpaid,
That sealed my skull as a helmet, And ribs for hauberk made?

"Did not a great grey servant Of all my sires and me,
Build this pavilion of the pines, And herd the fowls and fill the vines,
And labour and pass and leave no signs Save mercy and mystery?

"For God is a great servant, And rose before the day,
From some primordial slumber torn; But all we living later born
Sleep on, and rise after the morn, And the Lord has gone away.

"On things half sprung from sleeping, All sleepy suns have
shone, They stretch stiff arms, the yawning trees, The beasts
blink upon hands and knees, Man is awake and does and sees--
But Heaven has done and gone.

"For who shall guess the good riddle Or speak of the Holiest,
Save in faint figures and failing words, Who loves, yet laughs among
the swords, Labours, and is at rest?

"But some see God like Guthrum, Crowned, with a great beard
curled, But I see God like a good giant, That, labouring, lifts
the world.

"Wherefore was God in Golgotha, Slain as a serf is slain;
And hate He had of prince and peer, And love He had and made good
cheer, Of them that, like this woman here, Go powerfully in
pain.

"But in this grey morn of man's life, Cometh sometime to the
mind A little light that leaps and flies, Like a star blown on the
wind.

"A star of nowhere, a nameless star, A light that spins and
swirls, And cries that even in hedge and hill, Even on earth, it
may go ill At last with the evil earls.

"A dancing sparkle, a doubtful star, On the waste wind whirled
and driven; But it seems to sing of a wilder worth, A time
discrowned of doom and birth, And the kingdom of the poor on earth
Come, as it is in heaven.

"But even though such days endure, How shall it profit her?
Who shall go groaning to the grave, With many a meek and mighty
slave, Field-breaker and fisher on the wave, And woodman and
waggoner.

"Bake ye the big world all again A cake with kinder leaven;
Yet these are sorry evermore-- Unless there be a little door, A
little door in heaven."

And as he wept for the woman He let her business be,
And like his royal oath and rash The good food fell upon the ash
And blackened instantly.

Screaming, the woman caught a cake Yet burning from the bar,
And struck him suddenly on the face, Leaving a scarlet scar.

King Alfred stood up wordless, A man dead with surprise,
And torture stood and the evil things That are in the childish hearts
of kings An instant in his eyes.

And even as he stood and stared Drew round him in the dusk
Those friends creeping from far-off farms, Marcus with all his slaves
in arms, And the strange spears hung with ancient charms Of
Colan of the Usk.

With one whole farm marching afoot The trampled road
resounds, Farm-hands and farm-beasts blundering by And jars
of mead and stores of rye, Where Eldred strode above his high
And thunder-throated hounds.

And grey cattle and silver lowed Against the unlifted morn,
And straw clung to the spear-shafts tall. And a boy went before them
all Blowing a ram's horn.

As mocking such rude revelry, The dim clan of the Gael
Came like a bad king's burial-end, With dismal robes that drop and
rend And demon pipes that wail--

In long, outlandish garments, Torn, though of antique worth,
With Druid beards and Druid spears, As a resurrected race appears
Out of an elder earth.

And though the King had called them forth And knew them for
his own, So still each eye stood like a gem, So spectral hung
each broidered hem, Grey carven men he fancied them, Hewn
in an age of stone.

And the two wild peoples of the north Stood fronting in the
gloom, And heard and knew each in its mind The third great
thunder on the wind, The living walls that hedge mankind, The
walking walls of Rome.

Mark's were the mixed tribes of the west, Of many a hue and
strain, Gurth, with rank hair like yellow grass, And the Cornish
fisher, Gorlias, And Halmer, come from his first mass, Lately

baptized, a Dane.

But like one man in armour Those hundreds trod the field,
From red Arabia to the Tyne The earth had heard that marching-line,
Since the cry on the hill Capitoline, And the fall of the golden shield.

And the earth shook and the King stood still Under the
greenwood bough, And the smoking cake lay at his feet And the
blow was on his brow.

Then Alfred laughed out suddenly, Like thunder in the spring,
Till shook aloud the lintel-beams, And the squirrels stirred in dusty
dreams, And the startled birds went up in streams, For the
laughter of the King.

And the beasts of the earth and the birds looked down, In a
wild solemnity, On a stranger sight than a sylph or elf, On one
man laughing at himself Under the greenwood tree--

The giant laughter of Christian men That roars through a
thousand tales, Where greed is an ape and pride is an ass, And
Jack's away with his master's lass, And the miser is banged with all
his brass, The farmer with all his flails;

Tales that tumble and tales that trick, Yet end not all in
scorning-- Of kings and clowns in a merry plight, And the clock
gone wrong and the world gone right, That the mummers sing upon
Christmas night And Christmas Day in the morning.

"Now here is a good warrant," Cried Alfred, "by my sword;
For he that is struck for an ill servant Should be a kind lord.

"He that has been a servant Knows more than priests and
kings, But he that has been an ill servant, He knows all earthly
things.

"Pride flings frail palaces at the sky, As a man flings up sand,
But the firm feet of humility Take hold of heavy land.

"Pride juggles with her toppling towers, They strike the sun and
cease, But the firm feet of humility They grip the ground like
trees.

"He that hath failed in a little thing Hath a sign upon the brow;
And the Earls of the Great Army Have no such seal to show.

"The red print on my forehead, Small flame for a red star,
In the van of the violent marching, then When the sky is torn of the
trumpets ten, And the hands of the happy howling men Fling
wide the gates of war.

"This blow that I return not Ten times will I return On
kings and earls of all degree, And armies wide as empires be
Shall slide like landslips to the sea If the red star burn.

"One man shall drive a hundred, As the dead kings drave;
Before me rocking hosts be riven, And battering cohorts backwards
driven, For I am the first king known of Heaven That has been
struck like a slave.

"Up on the old white road, brothers, Up on the Roman walls!
For this is the night of the drawing of swords, And the tainted tower
of the heathen hordes Leans to our hammers, fires and cords,
Leans a little and falls.

"Follow the star that lives and leaps, Follow the sword that
sings, For we go gathering heathen men, A terrible harvest, ten
by ten, As the wrath of the last red autumn--then When Christ
reaps down the kings.

"Follow a light that leaps and spins, Follow the fire unfurled!
For riseth up against realm and rod, A thing forgotten, a thing
downtrod, The last lost giant, even God, Is risen against the
world."

Roaring they went o'er the Roman wall, And roaring up the
lane, Their torches tossed a ladder of fire, Higher their hymn
was heard and higher, More sweet for hate and for heart's desire,
And up in the northern scrub and brier, They fell upon the Dane.