

BOOK V. ETHANDUNE: THE FIRST STROKE

King Guthrum was a dread king, Like death out of the north;
Shrines without name or number He rent and rolled as lumber,
From Chester to the Humber He drove his foemen forth.

The Roman villas heard him In the valley of the Thames,
Come over the hills roaring Above their roofs, and pouring On
spire and stair and flooring Brimstone and pitch and flames.

Sheer o'er the great chalk uplands And the hill of the Horse
went he, Till high on Hampshire beacons He saw the southern
sea.

High on the heights of Wessex He saw the southern brine,
And turned him to a conquered land, And where the northern
thornwoods stand, And the road parts on either hand, There
came to him a sign.

King Guthrum was a war-chief, A wise man in the field,
And though he prospered well, and knew How Alfred's folk were sad
and few, Not less with weighty care he drew Long lines for pike
and shield.

King Guthrum lay on the upper land, On a single road at gaze,
And his foe must come with lean array, Up the left arm of the cloven
way, To the meeting of the ways.

And long ere the noise of armour, An hour ere the break of
light, The woods awoke with crash and cry, And the birds
sprang clamouring harsh and high, And the rabbits ran like an elves'
army Ere Alfred came in sight.

The live wood came at Guthrum, On foot and claw and wing,
The nests were noisy overhead, For Alfred and the star of red,
All life went forth, and the forest fled Before the face of the King.

But halted in the woodways Christ's few were grim and grey,
And each with a small, far, bird-like sight Saw the high folly of the
fight; And though strange joys had grown in the night, Despair
grew with the day.

And when white dawn crawled through the wood, Like cold
foam of a flood, Then weakened every warrior's mood, In hope,
though not in hardihood; And each man sorrowed as he stood
In the fashion of his blood.

For the Saxon Franklin sorrowed For the things that had been
fair; For the dear dead woman, crimson-clad, And the great
feasts and the friends he had; But the Celtic prince's soul was sad
For the things that never were.

In the eyes Italian all things But a black laughter died;
And Alfred flung his shield to earth And smote his breast and cried--

"I wronged a man to his slaying, And a woman to her shame,
And once I looked on a sworn maid That was wed to the Holy Name.

"And once I took my neighbour's wife, That was bound to an
eastland man, In the starkness of my evil youth, Before my
griefs began.

"People, if you have any prayers, Say prayers for me: And
lay me under a Christian stone In that lost land I thought my own,
To wait till the holy horn is blown, And all poor men are free."

Then Eldred of the idle farm Leaned on his ancient sword,
As fell his heavy words and few; And his eyes were of such alien blue
As gleams where the Northman saileth new Into an unknown fiord.

"I was a fool and wasted ale-- My slaves found it sweet; I
was a fool and wasted bread, And the birds had bread to eat.

"The kings go up and the kings go down, And who knows who
shall rule; Next night a king may starve or sleep, But men and
birds and beasts shall weep At the burial of a fool.

"O, drunkards in my cellar, Boys in my apple tree, The
world grows stern and strange and new, And wise men shall govern
you, And you shall weep for me.

"But yoke me my own oxen, Down to my own farm; My
own dog will whine for me, My own friends will bend the knee,
And the foes I slew openly Have never wished me harm."

And all were moved a little, But Colan stood apart,
Having first pity, and after Hearing, like rat in rafter, That little
worm of laughter That eats the Irish heart.

And his grey-green eyes were cruel, And the smile of his mouth
waxed hard, And he said, "And when did Britain Become your
burying-yard?"

"Before the Romans lit the land, When schools and monks were
none, We reared such stones to the sun-god As might put out
the sun.

"The tall trees of Britain We worshipped and were wise,
But you shall raid the whole land through And never a tree shall talk
to you, Though every leaf is a tongue taught true And the forest
is full of eyes.

"On one round hill to the seaward The trees grow tall and grey
And the trees talk together When all men are away.

"O'er a few round hills forgotten The trees grow tall in rings,
And the trees talk together Of many pagan things.

"Yet I could lie and listen With a cross upon my clay,
And hear unhurt for ever What the trees of Britain say."

A proud man was the Roman, His speech a single one,
But his eyes were like an eagle's eyes That is staring at the sun.

"Dig for me where I die," he said, "If first or last I fall--
Dead on the fell at the first charge, Or dead by Wantage wall;

"Lift not my head from bloody ground, Bear not my body home,
For all the earth is Roman earth And I shall die in Rome."

Then Alfred, King of England, Bade blow the horns of war,
And fling the Golden Dragon out, With crackle and acclaim and
shout, Scrolled and aflame and far.

And under the Golden Dragon Went Wessex all along,
Past the sharp point of the cloven ways, Out from the black wood into
the blaze Of sun and steel and song.

And when they came to the open land They wheeled, deployed
and stood; Midmost were Marcus and the King, And Eldred on
the right-hand wing, And leftwards Colan darkling, In the last
shade of the wood.

But the Earls of the Great Army Lay like a long half moon,
Ten poles before their palisades, With wide-winged helms and runic
blades Red giants of an age of raids, In the thornland of
Ethandune.

Midmost the saddles rose and swayed, And a stir of horses'
manes, Where Guthrum and a few rode high On horses seized
in victory; But Ogier went on foot to die, In the old way of the
Danes.

Far to the King's left Elf the bard Led on the eastern wing
With songs and spells that change the blood; And on the King's right
Harold stood, The kinsman of the King.

Young Harold, coarse, with colours gay, Smoking with oil and
musk, And the pleasant violence of the young, Pushed through
his people, giving tongue Foewards, where, grey as cobwebs hung,
The banners of the Usk.

But as he came before his line A little space along, His
beardless face broke into mirth, And he cried: "What broken bits of
earth Are here? For what their clothes are worth I would sell
them for a song."

For Colan was hung with raiment Tattered like autumn leaves,
And his men were all as thin as saints, And all as poor as thieves.

No bows nor slings nor bolts they bore, But bills and pikes ill-
made; And none but Colan bore a sword, And rusty was its
blade.

And Colan's eyes with mystery And iron laughter stirred,
And he spoke aloud, but lightly Not labouring to be heard.

"Oh, truly we be broken hearts, For that cause, it is said,
We light our candles to that Lord That broke Himself for bread.

"But though we hold but bitterly What land the Saxon leaves,
Though Ireland be but a land of saints, And Wales a land of thieves,

"I say you yet shall weary Of the working of your word,
That stricken spirits never strike Nor lean hands hold a sword.

"And if ever ye ride in Ireland, The jest may yet be said,
There is the land of broken hearts, And the land of broken heads."

Not less barbarian laughter Choked Harold like a flood,
"And shall I fight with scarecrows That am of Guthrum's blood?"

"Meeting may be of war-men, Where the best war-man wins;
But all this carrion a man shoots Before the fight begins."

And stopping in his onward strides, He snatched a bow in
scorn From some mean slave, and bent it on Colan, whose
doom grew dark; and shone Stars evil over Caerleon, In the
place where he was born.

For Colan had not bow nor sling, On a lonely sword leaned he,
Like Arthur on Excalibur In the battle by the sea.

To his great gold ear-ring Harold Tugged back the feathered
tail, And swift had sprung the arrow, But swifter sprang the
Gael.

Whirling the one sword round his head, A great wheel in the
sun, He sent it splendid through the sky, Flying before the
shaft could fly-- It smote Earl Harold over the eye, And blood
began to run.

Colan stood bare and weaponless, Earl Harold, as in pain,
Strove for a smile, put hand to head, Stumbled and suddenly fell
dead; And the small white daisies all waxed red With blood out
of his brain.

And all at that marvel of the sword, Cast like a stone to slay,
Cried out. Said Alfred: "Who would see Signs, must give all things.
Verily Man shall not taste of victory Till he throws his sword
away."

Then Alfred, prince of England, And all the Christian earls,

Unhooked their swords and held them up, Each offered to Colan, like
a cup Of chrysolite and pearls.

And the King said, "Do thou take my sword Who have done this
deed of fire, For this is the manner of Christian men, Whether
of steel or priestly pen, That they cast their hearts out of their ken
To get their heart's desire.

"And whether ye swear a hive of monks, Or one fair wife to
friend, This is the manner of Christian men, That their oath
endures the end.

"For love, our Lord, at the end of the world, Sits a red horse like
a throne, With a brazen helm and an iron bow, But one arrow
alone.

"Love with the shield of the Broken Heart Ever his bow doth
bend, With a single shaft for a single prize, And the ultimate
bolt that parts and flies Comes with a thunder of split skies,
And a sound of souls that rend.

"So shall you earn a king's sword, Who cast your sword away."
And the King took, with a random eye, A rude axe from a hind hard
by And turned him to the fray.

For the swords of the Earls of Daneland Flamed round the
fallen lord. The first blood woke the trumpet-tune, As in monk's
rhyme or wizard's rune, Beginneth the battle of Ethandune
With the throwing of the sword.