

BOOK VI. ETHANDUNE: THE SLAYING OF THE CHIEFS

As the sea flooding the flat sands Flew on the sea-born horde,
The two hosts shocked with dust and din, Left of the Latian paladin,
Clanged all Prince Harold's howling kin On Colan and the sword.

Crashed in the midst on Marcus, Ogier with Guthrum by,
And eastward of such central stir, Far to the right and faintlier,
The house of Elf the harp-player, Struck Eldred's with a cry.

The centre swat for weariness, Stemming the screaming horde,
And wearily went Colan's hands That swung King Alfred's sword.

But like a cloud of morning To eastward easily, Tall
Eldred broke the sea of spears As a tall ship breaks the sea.

His face like a sanguine sunset, His shoulder a Wessex down,
His hand like a windy hammer-stroke; Men could not count the crests
he broke, So fast the crests went down.

As the tall white devil of the Plague Moves out of Asian skies,
With his foot on a waste of cities And his head in a cloud of flies;

Or purple and peacock skies grow dark With a moving locust-
tower; Or tawny sand-winds tall and dry, Like hell's red
banners beat and fly, When death comes out of Araby, Was
Eldred in his hour.

But while he moved like a massacre He murmured as in sleep,
And his words were all of low hedges And little fields and sheep.

Even as he strode like a pestilence, That strides from Rhine to
Rome, He thought how tall his beans might be If ever he went
home.

Spoke some stiff piece of childish prayer, Dull as the distant
chimes, That thanked our God for good eating And corn and
quiet times--

Till on the helm of a high chief Fell shatteringly his brand,
And the helm broke and the bone broke And the sword broke in his

hand.

Then from the yelling Northmen Driven splintering on him ran
Full seven spears, and the seventh Was never made by man.

Seven spears, and the seventh Was wrought as the faerie
blades, And given to Elf the minstrel By the monstrous water-
maids;

By them that dwell where luridly Lost waters of the Rhine
Move among roots of nations, Being sunken for a sign.

Under all graves they murmur, They murmur and rebel,
Down to the buried kingdoms creep, And like a lost rain roar and
weep O'er the red heavens of hell.

Thrice drowned was Elf the minstrel, And washed as dead on
sand; And the third time men found him The spear was in his
hand.

Seven spears went about Eldred, Like stays about a mast;
But there was sorrow by the sea For the driving of the last.

Six spears thrust upon Eldred Were splintered while he
laughed; One spear thrust into Eldred, Three feet of blade and
shaft.

And from the great heart grievously Came forth the shaft and
blade, And he stood with the face of a dead man, Stood a little,
and swayed--

Then fell, as falls a battle-tower, On smashed and struggling
spears. Cast down from some unconquered town That, rushing
earthward, carries down Loads of live men of all renown--
Archers and engineers.

And a great clamour of Christian men Went up in agony,
Crying, "Fallen is the tower of Wessex That stood beside the sea."

Centre and right the Wessex guard Grew pale for doubt and
fear, And the flank failed at the advance, For the death-light on
the wizard lance-- The star of the evil spear.

"Stand like an oak," cried Marcus, "Stand like a Roman wall!
Eldred the Good is fallen-- Are you too good to fall?

"When we were wan and bloodless He gave you ale enow;
The pirates deal with him as dung, God! are you bloodless now?"

"Grip, Wulf and Gorlias, grip the ash! Slaves, and I make you
free! Stamp, Hildred hard in English land, Stand Gurth, stand
Gorlias, Gawen stand! Hold, Halfgar, with the other hand,
Halmer, hold up on knee!

"The lamps are dying in your homes, The fruits upon your
bough; Even now your old thatch smoulders, Gurth, Now is the
judgment of the earth, Now is the death-grip, now!"

For thunder of the captain, Not less the Wessex line,
Leaned back and reeled a space to rear As Elf charged with the Rhine
maids' spear, And roaring like the Rhine.

For the men were borne by the waving walls Of woods and
clouds that pass, By dizzy plains and drifting sea, And they
mixed God with glamoury, God with the gods of the burning tree
And the wizard's tower and glass.

But Mark was come of the glittering towns Where hot white
details show, Where men can number and expound, And his
faith grew in a hard ground Of doubt and reason and falsehood
found, Where no faith else could grow.

Belief that grew of all beliefs One moment back was blown
And belief that stood on unbelief Stood up iron and alone.

The Wessex crescent backwards Crushed, as with bloody spear
Went Elf roaring and routing, And Mark against Elf yet shouting,
Shocked, in his mid-career.

Right on the Roman shield and sword Did spear of the Rhine
maids run; But the shield shifted never, The sword rang down
to sever, The great Rhine sang for ever, And the songs of Elf
were done.

And a great thunder of Christian men Went up against the sky,
Saying, "God hath broken the evil spear Ere the good man's blood was

dry."

"Spears at the charge!" yelled Mark amain. "Death on the gods
of death! Over the thrones of doom and blood Goeth God that is
a craftsman good, And gold and iron, earth and wood, Loveth
and laboureth.

"The fruits leap up in all your farms, The lamps in each abode;
God of all good things done on earth, All wheels or webs of any worth,
The God that makes the roof, Gurth, The God that makes the road.

"The God that heweth kings in oak Writeth songs on vellum,
God of gold and flaming glass, Confregit potentias Arcuum,
scutum, Gorlias, Gladium et bellum."

Steel and lightning broke about him, Battle-bays and palm,
All the sea-kings swayed among Woods of the Wessex arms upflung,
The trumpet of the Roman tongue, The thunder of the psalm.

And midmost of that rolling field Ran Ogier ragingly,
Lashing at Mark, who turned his blow, And brake the helm about his
brow, And broke him to his knee.

Then Ogier heaved over his head His huge round shield of
proof; But Mark set one foot on the shield, One on some
sundered rock upheeled, And towered above the tossing field, A
statue on a roof.

Dealing far blows about the fight, Like thunder-bolts a-roam,
Like birds about the battle-field, While Ogier writhed under his shield
Like a tortoise in his dome.

But hate in the buried Ogier Was strong as pain in hell,
With bare brute hand from the inside He burst the shield of brass and
hide, And a death-stroke to the Roman's side Sent suddenly
and well.

Then the great statue on the shield Looked his last look around
With level and imperial eye; And Mark, the man from Italy, Fell
in the sea of agony, And died without a sound.

And Ogier, leaping up alive, Hurl'd his huge shield away
Flying, as when a juggler flings A whizzing plate in play.

And held two arms up rigidly, And roared to all the Danes:
"Fallen is Rome, yea, fallen The city of the plains!

"Shall no man born remember, That breaketh wood or weald,
How long she stood on the roof of the world As he stood on my shield.

"The new wild world forgetteth her As foam fades on the sea,
How long she stood with her foot on Man As he with his foot on me.

"No more shall the brown men of the south Move like the ants
in lines, To quiet men with olives Or madden men with vines.

"No more shall the white towns of the south, Where Tiber and
Nilus run, Sitting around a secret sea Worship a secret sun.

"The blind gods roar for Rome fallen, And forum and garland
gone, For the ice of the north is broken, And the sea of the
north comes on.

"The blind gods roar and rave and dream Of all cities under the
sea, For the heart of the north is broken, And the blood of the
north is free.

"Down from the dome of the world we come, Rivers on rivers
down, Under us swirl the sects and hordes And the high dooms
we drown.

"Down from the dome of the world and down, Struck flying as a
skiff On a river in spate is spun and swirled Until we come to
the end of the world That breaks short, like a cliff.

"And when we come to the end of the world For me, I count it
fit To take the leap like a good river, Shot shrieking over it.

"But whatso hap at the end of the world, Where Nothing is
struck and sounds, It is not, by Thor, these monkish men
These humbled Wessex hounds--

"Not this pale line of Christian hinds, This one white string of
men, Shall keep us back from the end of the world, And the
things that happen then.

"It is not Alfred's dwarfish sword, Nor Egbert's pigmy crown,
Shall stay us now that descend in thunder, Rending the realms and
the realms thereunder, Down through the world and down."

There was that in the wild men back of him, There was that in
his own wild song, A dizzy throbbing, a drunkard smoke, That
dazed to death all Wessex folk, And swept their spears along.

Vainly the sword of Colan And the axe of Alfred plied--
The Danes poured in like a brainless plague, And knew not when they
died.

Prince Colan slew a score of them, And was stricken to his
knee; King Alfred slew a score and seven And was borne back
on a tree.

Back to the black gate of the woods, Back up the single way,
Back by the place of the parting ways Christ's knights were whirled
away.

And when they came to the parting ways Doom's heaviest
hammer fell, For the King was beaten, blind, at bay, Down the
right lane with his array, But Colan swept the other way,
Where he smote great strokes and fell.

The thorn-woods over Ethandune Stand sharp and thick as
spears, By night and furze and forest-harms Far sundered were
the friends in arms; The loud lost blows, the last alarms, Came
not to Alfred's ears.

The thorn-woods over Ethandune Stand stiff as spikes in mail;
As to the Haut King came at morn Dead Roland on a doubtful horn,
Seemed unto Alfred lightly borne The last cry of the Gael.