

BOOK VII. ETHANDUNE: THE LAST CHARGE

Away in the waste of White Horse Down An idle child alone
Played some small game through hours that pass, And patiently
would pluck the grass, Patiently push the stone.

On the lean, green edge for ever, Where the blank chalk
touched the turf, The child played on, alone, divine, As a child
plays on the last line That sunders sand and surf.

For he dwelleth in high divisions Too simple to understand,
Seeing on what morn of mystery The Uncreated rent the sea
With roarings, from the land.

Through the long infant hours like days He built one tower in
vain-- Piled up small stones to make a town, And evermore the
stones fell down, And he piled them up again.

And crimson kings on battle-towers, And saints on Gothic
spires, And hermits on their peaks of snow, And heroes on
their pyres,

And patriots riding royally, That rush the rocking town,
Stretch hands, and hunger and aspire, Seeking to mount where high
and higher, The child whom Time can never tire, Sings over
White Horse Down.

And this was the might of Alfred, At the ending of the way;
That of such smiters, wise or wild, He was least distant from the
child, Piling the stones all day.

For Eldred fought like a frank hunter That killeth and goeth
home; And Mark had fought because all arms Rang like the
name of Rome.

And Colan fought with a double mind, Moody and madly gay;
But Alfred fought as gravely As a good child at play.

He saw wheels break and work run back And all things as they
were; And his heart was orb'd like victory And simple like
despair.

Therefore is Mark forgotten, That was wise with his tongue and
brave; And the cairn over Colan crumbled, And the cross on
Eldred's grave.

Their great souls went on a wind away, And they have not tale
or tomb; And Alfred born in Wantage Rules England till the
doom.

Because in the forest of all fears Like a strange fresh gust from
sea, Struck him that ancient innocence That is more than
mastery.

And as a child whose bricks fall down Re-piles them o'er and
o'er, Came ruin and the rain that burns, Returning as a wheel
returns, And crouching in the furze and ferns He began his life
once more.

He took his ivory horn unslung And smiled, but not in scorn:
"Endeth the Battle of Ethandune With the blowing of a horn."

On a dark horse at the double way He saw great Guthrum ride,
Heard roar of brass and ring of steel, The laughter and the trumpet
peal, The pagan in his pride.

And Ogier's red and hated head Moved in some talk or task;
But the men seemed scattered in the brier, And some of them had lit
a fire, And one had broached a cask.

And waggons one or two stood up, Like tall ships in sight,
As if an outpost were encamped At the cloven ways for night.

And joyous of the sudden stay Of Alfred's routed few, Sat
one upon a stone to sigh, And some slipped up the road to fly,
Till Alfred in the fern hard by Set horn to mouth and blew.

And they all abode like statues-- One sitting on the stone,
One half-way through the thorn hedge tall, One with a leg across a
wall, And one looked backwards, very small, Far up the road,
alone.

Grey twilight and a yellow star Hung over thorn and hill;
Two spears and a cloven war-shield lay Loose on the road as cast

away, The horn died faint in the forest grey, And the fleeing
men stood still.

"Brothers at arms," said Alfred, "On this side lies the foe;
Are slavery and starvation flowers, That you should pluck them so?

"For whether is it better To be prodded with Danish poles,
Having hewn a chamber in a ditch, And hounded like a howling
witch, Or smoked to death in holes?

"Or that before the red cock crow All we, a thousand strong,
Go down the dark road to God's house, Singing a Wessex song?

"To sweat a slave to a race of slaves, To drink up infamy?
No, brothers, by your leave, I think Death is a better ale to drink,
And by all the stars of Christ that sink, The Danes shall drink with
me.

"To grow old cowed in a conquered land, With the sun itself
discrowned, To see trees crouch and cattle slink-- Death is a
better ale to drink, And by high Death on the fell brink That
flagon shall go round.

"Though dead are all the paladins Whom glory had in ken,
Though all your thunder-sworded thanes With proud hearts died
among the Danes, While a man remains, great war remains:
Now is a war of men.

"The men that tear the furrows, The men that fell the trees,
When all their lords be lost and dead The bondsmen of the earth shall
tread The tyrants of the seas.

"The wheel of the roaring stillness Of all labours under the sun,
Speed the wild work as well at least As the whole world's work is
done.

"Let Hildred hack the shield-wall Clean as he hacks the hedge;
Let Gurth the fowler stand as cool As he stands on the chasm's edge;

"Let Gorlias ride the sea-kings As Gorlias rides the sea,
Then let all hell and Denmark drive, Yelling to all its fiends alive,
And not a rag care we."

When Alfred's word was ended Stood firm that feeble line,
Each in his place with club or spear, And fury deeper than deep fear,
And smiles as sour as brine.

And the King held up the horn and said, "See ye my father's
horn, That Egbert blew in his empery, Once, when he rode out
commonly, Twice when he rode for venery, And thrice on the
battle-morn.

"But heavier fates have fallen The horn of the Wessex kings,
And I blew once, the riding sign, To call you to the fighting line
And glory and all good things.

"And now two blasts, the hunting sign, Because we turn to bay;
But I will not blow the three blasts, Till we be lost or they.

"And now I blow the hunting sign, Charge some by rule and
rod; But when I blow the battle sign, Charge all and go to God."

Wild stared the Danes at the double ways Where they loitered,
all at large, As that dark line for the last time Doubled the knee
to charge--

And caught their weapons clumsily, And marvelled how and
why-- In such degree, by rule and rod, The people of the peace
of God Went roaring down to die.

And when the last arrow Was fitted and was flown, When
the broken shield hung on the breast, And the hopeless lance was
laid in rest, And the hopeless horn blown,

The King looked up, and what he saw Was a great light like
death, For Our Lady stood on the standards rent, As lonely and
as innocent As when between white walls she went And the
lilies of Nazareth.

One instant in a still light He saw Our Lady then, Her
dress was soft as western sky, And she was a queen most womanly--
But she was a queen of men.

Over the iron forest He saw Our Lady stand, Her eyes
were sad withouten art, And seven swords were in her heart--
But one was in her hand.

Then the last charge went blindly, And all too lost for fear:
The Danes closed round, a roaring ring, And twenty clubs rose o'er
the King, Four Danes hewed at him, halloing, And Ogier of the
Stone and Sling Drove at him with a spear.

But the Danes were wild with laughter, And the great spear
swung wide, The point stuck to a straggling tree, And either
host cried suddenly, As Alfred leapt aside.

Short time had shaggy Ogier To pull his lance in line--
He knew King Alfred's axe on high, He heard it rushing through the
sky,

He covered beneath it with a cry-- It split him to the spine:
And Alfred sprang over him dead, And blew the battle sign.

Then bursting all and blasting Came Christendom like death,
Kicked of such catapults of will, The staves shiver, the barrels spill,
The waggons waver and crash and kill The waggoners beneath.

Barriers go backwards, banners rend, Great shields groan like
a gong-- Horses like horns of nightmare Neigh horribly and
long.

Horses ramp high and rock and boil And break their golden
reins, And slide on carnage clamorously, Down where the bitter
blood doth lie, Where Ogier went on foot to die, In the old way
of the Danes.

"The high tide!" King Alfred cried. "The high tide and the turn!
As a tide turns on the tall grey seas, See how they waver in the trees,
How stray their spears, how knock their knees, How wild their
watchfires burn!

"The Mother of God goes over them, Walking on wind and
flame, And the storm-cloud drifts from city and dale, And the
White Horse stamps in the White Horse Vale, And we all shall yet
drink Christian ale In the village of our name.

"The Mother of God goes over them, On dreadful cherubs
borne; And the psalm is roaring above the rune, And the Cross
goes over the sun and moon, Endeth the battle of Ethandune

With the blowing of a horn."

For back indeed disorderly The Danes went clamouring,
Too worn to take anew the tale, Or dazed with insolence and ale,
Or stunned of heaven, or stricken pale Before the face of the King.

For dire was Alfred in his hour The pale scribe witnesseth,
More mighty in defeat was he Than all men else in victory, And
behind, his men came murderously, Dry-throated, drinking death.

And Edgar of the Golden Ship He slew with his own hand,
Took Ludwig from his lady's bower, And smote down Harmar in his
hour, And vain and lonely stood the tower-- The tower in
Guelderland.

And Torr out of his tiny boat, Whose eyes beheld the Nile,
Wulf with his war-cry on his lips, And Harco born in the eclipse,
Who blocked the Seine with battleships Round Paris on the Isle.

And Hacon of the Harvest-Song, And Dirck from the Elbe he
slew, And Cnut that melted Durham bell And Fulk and fiery
Oscar fell, And Goderic and Sigael, And Uriel of the Yew.

And highest sang the slaughter, And fastest fell the slain,
When from the wood-road's blackening throat A crowning and
crashing wonder smote The rear-guard of the Dane.

For the dregs of Colan's company-- Lost down the other road--
Had gathered and grown and heard the din, And with wild yells came
pouring in, Naked as their old British kin, And bright with
blood for woad.

And bare and bloody and aloft They bore before their band
The body of the mighty lord, Colan of Caerleon and its horde,
That bore King Alfred's battle-sword Broken in his left hand.

And a strange music went with him, Loud and yet strangely
far; The wild pipes of the western land, Too keen for the ear to
understand, Sang high and deathly on each hand When the
dead man went to war.

Blocked between ghost and buccaneer, Brave men have
dropped and died; And the wild sea-lords well might quail As

the ghastly war-pipes of the Gael Called to the horns of White Horse
Vale, And all the horns replied.

And Hildred the poor hedger Cut down four captains dead,
And Halmar laid three others low, And the great earls wavered to and
fro For the living and the dead.

And Gorlias grasped the great flag, The Raven of Odin, torn;
And the eyes of Guthrum altered, For the first time since morn.

As a turn of the wheel of tempest Tilts up the whole sky tall,
And cliffs of wan cloud luminous Lean out like great walls over us,
As if the heavens might fall.

As such a tall and tilted sky Sends certain snow or light,
So did the eyes of Guthrum change, And the turn was more certain
and more strange Than a thousand men in flight.

For not till the floor of the skies is split, And hell-fire shines
through the sea, Or the stars look up through the rent earth's knees,
Cometh such rending of certainties, As when one wise man truly sees
What is more wise than he.

He set his horse in the battle-breech Even Guthrum of the
Dane, And as ever had fallen fell his brand, A falling tower o'er
many a land, But Gurth the fowler laid one hand Upon this
bridle rein.

King Guthrum was a great lord, And higher than his gods--
He put the popes to laughter, He chid the saints with rods,

He took this hollow world of ours For a cup to hold his wine;
In the parting of the woodways There came to him a sign.

In Wessex in the forest, In the breaking of the spears, We
set a sign on Guthrum To blaze a thousand years.

Where the high saddles jostle And the horse-tails toss,
There rose to the birds flying A roar of dead and dying; In
deafness and strong crying We signed him with the cross.

Far out to the winding river The blood ran down for days,
When we put the cross on Guthrum In the parting of the ways.