

BOOK VIII. THE SCOURING OF THE HORSE

In the years of the peace of Wessex, When the good King sat at
home; Years following on that bloody boon When she that
stands above the moon Stood above death at Ethandune And
saw his kingdom come--

When the pagan people of the sea Fled to their palisades,
Nailed there with javelins to cling And wonder smote the pirate king,
And brought him to his christening And the end of all his raids.

(For not till the night's blue slate is wiped Of its last star
utterly, And fierce new signs writ there to read, Shall eyes with
such amazement heed, As when a great man knows indeed A
greater thing than he.)

And there came to his chrim-loosing Lords of all lands afar,
And a line was drawn north-westerly That set King Egbert's empire
free, Giving all lands by the northern sea To the sons of the
northern star.

In the days of the rest of Alfred, When all these things were
done, And Wessex lay in a patch of peace, Like a dog in a patch
of sun--

The King sat in his orchard, Among apples green and red,
With the little book in his bosom And the sunshine on his head.

And he gathered the songs of simple men That swing with helm
and hod, And the alms he gave as a Christian Like a river alive
with fishes ran; And he made gifts to a beggar man As to a
wandering god.

And he gat good laws of the ancient kings, Like treasure out of
the tombs; And many a thief in thorny nook, Or noble in sea-
stained turret shook, For the opening of his iron book, And the
gathering of the dooms.

Then men would come from the ends of the earth, Whom the
King sat welcoming, And men would go to the ends of the earth
Because of the word of the King.

For folk came in to Alfred's face Whose javelins had been
hurled On monsters that make boil the sea, Crakens and coils
of mystery. Or thrust in ancient snows that be The white hair
of the world.

And some had knocked at the northern gates Of the ultimate
icy floor, Where the fish freeze and the foam turns black, And
the wide world narrows to a track, And the other sea at the world's
back Cries through a closed door.

And men went forth from Alfred's face, Even great gift-bearing
lords, Not to Rome only, but more bold, Out to the high hot
courts of old, Of negroes clad in cloth of gold, Silence, and
crooked swords,

Scrawled screens and secret gardens And insect-laden skies--
Where fiery plains stretch on and on To the purple country of Prester
John And the walls of Paradise.

And he knew the might of the Terre Majeure, Where kings
began to reign; Where in a night-rout, without name, Of gloomy
Goths and Gauls there came White, above candles all aflame,
Like a vision, Charlemagne.

And men, seeing such embassies, Spake with the King and
said: "The steel that sang so sweet a tune On Ashdown and on
Ethandune, Why hangs it scabbarded so soon, All heavily like
lead?

"Why dwell the Danes in North England, And up to the river
ride? Three more such marches like thine own Would end
them; and the Pict should own Our sway; and our feet climb the
throne In the mountains of Strathclyde."

And Alfred in the orchard, Among apples green and red,
With the little book in his bosom, Looked at green leaves and said:

"When all philosophies shall fail, This word alone shall fit;
That a sage feels too small for life, And a fool too large for it.

"Asia and all imperial plains Are too little for a fool; But
for one man whose eyes can see The little island of Athelney Is

too large a land to rule.

"Haply it had been better When I built my fortress there,
Out in the reedy waters wide, I had stood on my mud wall and cried:
'Take England all, from tide to tide-- Be Athelney my share.'

"Those madmen of the throne-scramble-- Oppressors and
oppressed-- Had lined the banks by Athelney, And waved and
wailed unceasingly, Where the river turned to the broad sea, By
an island of the blest.

"An island like a little book Full of a hundred tales, Like
the gilt page the good monks pen, That is all smaller than a wren,
Yet hath high towns, meteors, and men, And suns and spouting
whales;

"A land having a light on it In the river dark and fast, An
isle with utter clearness lit, Because a saint had stood in it;
Where flowers are flowers indeed and fit, And trees are trees at last.

"So were the island of a saint; But I am a common king,
And I will make my fences tough From Wantage Town to Plymouth
Bluff, Because I am not wise enough To rule so small a thing."

And it fell in the days of Alfred, In the days of his repose,
That as old customs in his sight Were a straight road and a steady
light, He bade them keep the White Horse white As the first
plume of the snows.

And right to the red torchlight, From the trouble of morning
grey, They stripped the White Horse of the grass As they strip it
to this day.

And under the red torchlight He went dreaming as though dull,
Of his old companions slain like kings, And the rich irrevocable things
Of a heart that hath not openings, But is shut fast, being full.

And the torchlight touched the pale hair Where silver clouded
gold, And the frame of his face was made of cords, And a young
lord turned among the lords And said: "The King is old."

And even as he said it A post ran in amain, Crying:
"Arm, Lord King, the hamlets arm, In the horror and the shade of

harm, They have burnt Brand of Aynger's farm-- The Danes are
come again!

"Danes drive the white East Angles In six fights on the plains,
Danes waste the world about the Thames, Danes to the eastward--
Danes!"

And as he stumbled on one knee, The thanes broke out in ire,
Crying: "Ill the watchmen watch, and ill The sheriffs keep the shire."

But the young earl said: "Ill the saints, The saints of England,
guard The land wherein we pledge them gold; The dykes decay,
the King grows old, And surely this is hard,

"That we be never quit of them; That when his head is hoar
He cannot say to them he smote, And spared with a hand hard at the
throat, 'Go, and return no more.'"

Then Alfred smiled. And the smile of him Was like the sun for
power. But he only pointed: bade them heed Those peasants of
the Berkshire breed, Who plucked the old Horse of the weed As
they pluck it to this hour.

"Will ye part with the weeds for ever? Or show daisies to the
door? Or will you bid the bold grass Go, and return no more?"

"So ceaseless and so secret Thrive terror and theft set free;
Treason and shame shall come to pass While one weed flowers in a
morass; And like the stillness of stiff grass The stillness of
tyranny.

"Over our white souls also Wild heresies and high Wave
prouder than the plumes of grass, And sadder than their sigh.

"And I go riding against the raid, And ye know not where I am;
But ye shall know in a day or year, When one green star of grass
grows here; Chaos has charged you, charger and spear, Battle-
axe and battering-ram.

"And though skies alter and empires melt, This word shall still
be true: If we would have the horse of old, Scour ye the horse
anew.

"One time I followed a dancing star That seemed to sing and
nod, And ring upon earth all evil's knell; But now I wot if ye
scour not well Red rust shall grow on God's great bell And
grass in the streets of God."

 Ceased Alfred; and above his head The grand green domes, the
Downs, Showed the first legions of the press, Marching in haste
and bitterness For Christ's sake and the crown's.

 Beyond the cavern of Colan, Past Eldred's by the sea,
Rose men that owned King Alfred's rod, From the windy wastes of Exe
untrod, Or where the thorn of the grave of God Burns over
Glastonbury.

 Far northward and far westward The distant tribes drew nigh,
Plains beyond plains, fell beyond fell, That a man at sunset sees so
well, And the tiny coloured towns that dwell In the corners of
the sky.

 But dark and thick as thronged the host, With drum and torch
and blade, The still-eyed King sat pondering, As one that
watches a live thing, The scoured chalk; and he said,

 "Though I give this land to Our Lady, That helped me in
Athelney, Though lordlier trees and lustier sod And happier
hills hath no flesh trod Than the garden of the Mother of God
Between Thames side and the sea,

 "I know that weeds shall grow in it Faster than men can burn;
And though they scatter now and go, In some far century, sad and
slow, I have a vision, and I know The heathen shall return.

 "They shall not come with warships, They shall not waste with
brands, But books be all their eating, And ink be on their
hands.

 "Not with the humour of hunters Or savage skill in war,
But ordering all things with dead words, Strings shall they make of
beasts and birds, And wheels of wind and star.

 "They shall come mild as monkish clerks, With many a scroll
and pen; And backward shall ye turn and gaze, Desiring one of
Alfred's days, When pagans still were men.

"The dear sun dwarfed of dreadful suns, Like fiercer flowers on
stalk, Earth lost and little like a pea In high heaven's towering
forestry, --These be the small weeds ye shall see Crawl,
covering the chalk.

"But though they bridge St. Mary's sea, Or steal St. Michael's
wing-- Though they rear marvels over us, Greater than great
Vergilius Wrought for the Roman king;

"By this sign you shall know them, The breaking of the sword,
And man no more a free knight, That loves or hates his lord.

"Yea, this shall be the sign of them, The sign of the dying fire;
And Man made like a half-wit, That knows not of his sire.

"What though they come with scroll and pen, And grave as a
shaven clerk, By this sign you shall know them, That they ruin
and make dark;

"By all men bond to Nothing, Being slaves without a lord,
By one blind idiot world obeyed, Too blind to be abhorred;

"By terror and the cruel tales Of curse in bone and kin,
By weird and weakness winning, Accursed from the beginning,
By detail of the sinning, And denial of the sin;

"By thought a crawling ruin, By life a leaping mire, By a
broken heart in the breast of the world, And the end of the world's
desire;

"By God and man dishonoured, By death and life made vain,
Know ye the old barbarian, The barbarian come again--

"When is great talk of trend and tide, And wisdom and destiny,
Hail that undying heathen That is sadder than the sea.

"In what wise men shall smite him, Or the Cross stand up
again, Or charity or chivalry, My vision saith not; and I see
No more; but now ride doubtfully To the battle of the plain."

And the grass-edge of the great down Was cut clean as a lawn,
While the levies thronged from near and far, From the warm woods of

the western star, And the King went out to his last war On a
tall grey horse at dawn.

 And news of his far-off fighting Came slowly and brokenly
From the land of the East Saxons, From the sunrise and the sea.

 From the plains of the white sunrise, And sad St. Edmund's
crown, Where the pools of Essex pale and gleam Out beyond
London Town--

 In mighty and doubtful fragments, Like faint or fabled wars,
Climbed the old hills of his renown, Where the bald brow of White
Horse Down Is close to the cold stars.

 But away in the eastern places The wind of death walked high,
And a raid was driven athwart the raid, The sky reddened and the
smoke swayed, And the tall grey horse went by.

 The gates of the great river Were breached as with a barge,
The walls sank crowded, say the scribes, And high towers populous
with tribes Seemed leaning from the charge.

 Smoke like rebellious heavens rolled Curled over coloured
flames, Mirrored in monstrous purple dreams In the mighty
pools of Thames.

 Loud was the war on London wall, And loud in London gates,
And loud the sea-kings in the cloud Broke through their dreaming
gods, and loud Cried on their dreadful Fates.

 And all the while on White Horse Hill The horse lay long and
wan, The turf crawled and the fungus crept, And the little
sorrel, while all men slept, Unwrought the work of man.

 With velvet finger, velvet foot, The fierce soft mosses then
Crept on the large white commonweal All folk had striven to strip and
peel, And the grass, like a great green witch's wheel, Unwound
the toils of men.

 And clover and silent thistle throve, And buds burst silently,
With little care for the Thames Valley Or what things there might be--

 That away on the widening river, In the eastern plains for

crown Stood up in the pale purple sky One turret of smoke like
ivory; And the smoke changed and the wind went by, And the
King took London Town.