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THE CONSECRATION OF WESTMINSTER ABBEY.

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The evening of a gloomy autumn day was closing in amid the mists of a northern climate, and the feeble rays of a setting sun, which made their way through the masses of dark and heavy clouds that were piled on the western horizon, shone over a scene as wild and desolate as any which the imagination could depict. A broad river rolled through the low flat land that lay on either side, and which as far as the eye could reach presented nothing but the dreary aspect of an uncultivated waste. Towards the east, however, the long lines of marsh were broken by a considerable number of houses clustered together on the river-bank. The misty atmosphere hung over this spot in a heavier cloud; whilst some dark objects on the water, which seemed to be vessels of a larger kind than those used in the inland navigation of the stream, indicated the neighborhood of a town of some importance. Even further to the west there might be noticed some rude huts scattered about on the water's edge; but their presence scarcely had the power to dissipate the dreariness of the landscape, which impressed the beholder with feelings of no ordinary kind; the wide stream in many places overflowed its marshy boundaries, and breaking into other channels, formed islands in its course; and on one of these, of larger dimensions than the others, appeared several buildings, some newly erected, and others of a heavy and antique character, which were falling into ruins, and overgrown by the thorny thickets that covered the ground and gave the spot its popular name of Thorney Island. For, indeed, it is no new settlement of the far-west which we are here describing; the wide sluggish river, tangled with weeds and rolling on through that bleak and desolate waste, is neither the Mississippi nor the Missouri—it is our own busy Thames; and those clustered houses to the east are all that the seventh century can show us of the boundaries of London.

Into one of the miserable huts already mentioned as scattered about beyond the limits of the town, we must now invite our readers to enter. It is the dwelling of Seward the fisherman, and he is even now in the act of preparing to set out on an expedition up the stream; though the hour is late, and the grey and lowering sky gives promise of a stormy night. He is standing on the clay-floor of his rude kitchen, gathering some large nets over his shoulders, and, as it seems, deaf to the remonstrances, urged, however, in no gentle tone, of a woman, whom, by the freedom of her tongue, we may take to be his wife.

"Heard you ever such folly?" she exclaimed, as though appealing for support in a defeated argument to some third party; though in truth her husband was the only other occupant of the apartment—"to go up stream at such an hour as this, with the wind-clouds heaping up like feathers, and not a fish moving in the channel, as he knows, or might know; for he has been after them the live-long day, with nothing to show for his labor but two starveling eels. And then to talk of a woman's stubbornness; I trow, if they be stubborn, they learnt it from their lords;" and the good dame threw her hands into the air as though she had finished with the subject.

If she counted, however, on gaining any thing by her apparent abandonment of the offensive, and trusted that the self-love inherent in human nature would move Seward to have a last word in the debate, she was mistaken; for the fisherman was an East Saxon, and had the proverbial plegm of his race. He went on at his work with the nets without suffering himself to be disturbed by the tempting opportunity of a retort; and shouldering his burden, at length moved towards the door.

"A wild evening truly," he said as he opened it, and looked out on the fast-gathering darkness; "three hours hence, good dame, you may bid Eadbald show a light on the shore below, for I fancy the moon will do little to-night to help us homeward; and if by that time the fish will not rise in the Thorney Creek, I shall not try the higher stream."

"The Thorney Creek!" almost screamed his wife, while something of terror mingled with the shrewish sharpness of her tone. "Now, is it not enough that thou shouldst set wind and darkness at defiance, without tempting the fiends and goblins of yonder haunted spot? The Thorney Creek! where none but fools would fish by day; and thou speakest of a three-hours' fishing in it at such a time as this, when thou knowest well Mellitus himself were a bold man if he dared put his foot there after sunset!"

"Wife," said Seward, who evidently winced a little at the mention of the goblins, "thou speakest without thought, as is the manner of thy sex. The fiends had Thorney Island for their own a while since, and well they might, so long as the accursed temples of the heathens were

the only buildings on its soil; but thou knowest very well that the holy Mellitus hath redeemed it from the enemy, and that even to-morrow the goodly minster he hath raised will be hallowed to the blessed Peter, under whose favor," and he crossed himself devoutly, "I shall fear neither fiend nor wizard; the rather that this night's fishing is for the table of his own guests; for King Sebert is to dine with all his train within the abbey, and the two starveling eels thou speakest of are all the fish as yet provided for the banquet."

"Well, go thy way, and see what comes of it," replied his wife; "and if thou gettest not something more than eels for thy labor, my name is not Ebba. Eadbald shall show the light; and I trow thou wilt be over-glad to see it, if the fiends have not carried thee to Friesland first, as they did to Swegn the fowler and a score of others."

"Swegn was a heathen, and it were no great wonder that the fiends had power over their worshipper," returned Seward; "but thou and I, good Ebba, have received the baptism of faith, and to such the spirits are subject, as Mellitus hath often taught; and their wiles can injure none who defend themselves with the cross of Christ. Therefore lay aside thy fears, and remember that Eadbald brings the light, as I have bid thee;" and so saying, the fisherman left the hut and closed the door behind him.

Notwithstanding the boldness of his speech, it must be owned that Ebba's words had not been without their effect; for Thorney Island had indeed a bad reputation to those days, and Seward, however prepared to do battle with the fiends, was certainly not one to deny their existence. The night, too, did not promise to be such as would dispel any supernatural fears which had been excited; the river mist wrapt every thing in a gloomy haze; and the wind, as it came sweeping over the dreary and desolate marsh, sighed among the reeds that grew by the water's edge with the sound of a spirit in pain. Seward unfastened his little boat from the shore, and pushed into the channel; but his heart failed him when he was about to turn its head towards the Thorney Creek.

"I will try the southern bank first," he muttered; "it will be time enough to give a last cast in the creek if the fish will not rise yonder;" and so saying, he pulled over to the further bank of the river, and commenced his work.

But the fish did not rise; the hours went by slowly and heavily, and still each cast of his net gave the same discouraging result, and Seward began to doubt whether it had not been wiser for once to have stayed at home by his blazing fire than to have wasted his time to so little purpose. He felt ashamed at the thought of returning home and acknowledging to Ebba that after all he had never gone near the Thorney Island; and so, gathering up his resolution, he prepared to get in his nets, and try his luck at the dreaded spot before making his way back for the night. Even where he then was, he could see through the murky folds of mist the dark masses of the old ruins, and the outline of the newer buildings, which rose exactly opposite to the place where his little boat was moored.

Those ruins, the object of so much fear to the Saxon Christians, were all that remained of the great temple of Apollo, which formerly occupied the site. Long since abandoned and falling into decay, as they were, the terrible rumors that were associated with the place, and the tales of spectres and fiends that were said to haunt the scenes of the old pagan worship, were so numerous and so generally believed, that the island had been given up by common consent to the possession of its demon-masters. And the thorns that overgrew it with such luxuriance had given it the popular name which describes something of its savage desolation; for it was, in the language of the monkish historian, "a terrible and awful place." King Sebert, however, who conjointly with Mellitus, the companion of St. Augustine, and the first Bishop of London, had introduced the Christian faith among the East Saxons, and who had already raised a church in honor of St. Paul on the site of the temple of Diana, had resolved in like manner to beat the enemy of paganism on his own ground, by the consecration of a Christian altar in the "terrible place;" and the minster and the monastery of St. Peter's abbey were already completed, and awaited their solemn dedication on the very day following that on which our story opens. But the hallowing had not yet taken place; and the Christian associations were yet too fresh to chase away the superstitious dread which the place inspired among all the fishermen of the Thames.

Nevertheless Seward, as we have said, was preparing manfully to encounter all the terrors of the haunted spot, rather than go home empty-handed and own himself in the wrong; when, as he was in the act of unmooring his boat, that he might cross to the northern shore, a sound came from the bank near which he had been lying, as

of a voice calling his name. He listened, and it came again, "Seward! Seward!" There was no mistake. Instead, therefore, of leaving this side of the river, he pulled closer in, endeavoring to make out whence the voice could have proceeded. Nor was his eye long before it discovered something like a human form standing on the bank, beckoning to him with its hands, as though bidding him approach.

"Who calls there?" said Seward; "and what do you seek at this hour of night?"

"Fear nothing," answered the voice; "and it was one of wonderful power, for it came over the water as clearly as though the speaker were by his side; "I do but seek a passage to the further shore; and if you are ready to give it, your trouble shall be well rewarded."

"That will I," answered Seward without hesitation; saying to himself, as he endeavored to get within reach of the stranger, "it will be no ill luck to pass the Thorney Creek in company; and if he pays well, the silver will silence my good Ebba's tongue as well as though I brought her river-salmon;" and with these words he pulled his boat beneath the bank where his intended passenger was standing. "Have a care of the weeds, good friend," he cried; "they are over-slippy, and thou mightest well miss thy footing;" but before the words had left his lips, the stranger was in the boat, and seated on one of its benches, passing over the obstacles that lay in his way with a marvellous lightness and firmness of step.

"He is used to the river, that is certain," said Seward to himself, whose admiration of his guest's agility had set him quite at ease. "Where will your nobleness land?" he asked; "doubtless you have missed the ferry and will be for the path to the city, which is lower down the stream."

"I have not missed the ferry," answered the stranger; "and you will land me in Thorney Island, where you will wait awhile for my return; it will repay your trouble, though the hour is a little late."

"It is one of the king's followers, I make no doubt," muttered Seward. "He is preparing for to-morrow's ceremony; though it is strange he came from the southern bank;" and he began to scan his passenger with a curious eye.

The faint light from a clouded moon enabled him discern no more than that he was of a noble and majestic bearing; that his venerable beard floated far upon his breast, and that his person was wrapped in a thick mantle, which prevented any part of his dress from being seen. Seward would gladly have questioned him, and engaged him in conversation; but an involuntary feeling of respect held him in silence, and a few strokes of the oar brought him within a boat's length of the shores of Thorney Island.

"The tide must have changed within the hour," he said, as he ran the skiff along the bank; "for we have come over faster than the water-fowl. Is your nobleness bent on landing?" he added, perceiving the stranger rising from his seat. "Thorney Island is but a weird place after nightfall."

"I have business here," replied the stranger. "Thou, good Seward, wilt await me on this spot; and fear nothing, for the spirit of darkness have had their day, and there are better times in store for Thorney Island;" and so, with the same firm and rapid step, he passed over the benches, and was standing on the shore before Seward could raise a hand to help him.

He watched his figure till it was lost among the thickets; and then, pushing out from the shore, he endeavored to wile away the time and keep off unpleasant thoughts by fresh casts of his nets—all as fruitless, however, as those he had made before. He looked round him, and strained his eye, if happily he could catch sight of his late companion; but no one was to be seen. The moon, as it broke with fitful gleams from behind the thick masses of drifting clouds, fell on the pillars of the ruined temple, which rose close by the water's edge. Within them the darkness seemed blacker than elsewhere, and the very shadow cast upon the river had a gloom and mystery of its own.

"Now, by Woden!" growled Seward between terror and impatience, "I will give him but five minutes more for his business, and will find my way back without him; the fish are sleeping or bewitched, so in with the nets!" Thus saying, he stooped over the edge to commence the work of hauling them in.

As he did so, the reflection of a brilliant light struck his eye; it must be Eadbald's signal; no, that could hardly be, unless he were strangely out in his reckoning. The light came from the island, and from the minster window—he could discern the very outline of the heavy mullions, and the great round arch above them; what could it mean? But his speculations on the matter were soon lost in a wonder which swallowed up even the emotion of supernatural fear which mingled with his surprise. Even as he gazed in the direction of the minster, the small ray of light he had at first perceived burst into a vast

and sudden illumination of the entire building; from every window and opening there streamed forth a light more brilliant far than day; and yet with a yellow golden hue, as though cast from a multitude of torches. The very mist which hung about the marshy ground caught the reflection of that wonderful light, and was transformed by it into a cloudy glory that floated about the walls, so that they scarcely seemed to touch or to belong to the earth, and gave the whole scene the effect of some enchanted or celestial vision.

Nor was it long before another of the astonished fisherman's senses was equally engaged with that of sight; for as he sat gazing in mute bewilderment on the incomprehensible scene, the sound of distant singing broke upon his ear, at first faint and indistinct, but swelling into louder harmony, and that of so exquisite and extraordinary a character that he scarce knew what to think.

"Holy Peter!" he exclaimed, "what if my wife's words be true, and the fiends have carried me to Friesland? for well I wot this is little like Thorney Island, which was ever a dark and dreary place, and where one heard no sound but that of the screech-owl. But then," he added, "neither would the goblins of the accursed pagans sing like that; for it is the self-same measure wherewith the Roman monks so wonderfully wrought on the ears of Ethelbert; I have heard it from Mellitus' own lips."

He listened again, and it even seemed as though he could catch the very words they sang; there was a pause and break in the melody, and the sound as of a single voice, loud, clear, and sonorous, like that of his passenger from the opposite shore, as it intoned the words, "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sanctus."—"Amen," added Seward; "those were Christian words; and as I am a Christian man, I will see what this singing and torch-bearing may mean. The boat will stay where she is, safe enough; and my strange passenger is doubtless busy with the rest of them, and will not be back before me;" and with these words he jumped ashore, and making his way through the thicket to the walls of the brightly-illuminated minster, contrived to climb to one of the windows, from whence he could look down on the whole scene within.

A great ecclesiastical ceremony is doubtless a splendid spectacle; and when it is performed by night, and the golden vestments and jewelled mitres flash in the brightness of a thousand tapers, and the clouds of incense float away into the dim heights of the darkened roof, and all the light is centred about the altar, there is something yet grander and more mystic in its beauty. And yet all this was little to the magnificence that fell on the eye of the astonished Seward. Were they indeed priests, those venerable figures, whose heads were encircled with aureoles of glory, that dazzled him as he gazed? And the choir—robed indeed, yet not with linen garments, like the singing-boys of Sebert's church, but, as it seemed, in ethereal vestments made and fashioned out of light—it was as if airy wings moved about their shoulders; and the music, which poured from their lips in such full rich tones, told him that he listened to no earthly strain; heaven seemed moving below him, and its harmonies were floating in the air; and Seward felt that the wonderful choristers could be none other than a company of angels. They were winding in procession round the church, the censers casting forth their sweet and balmy clouds of perfume, and the lights they carried gleaming through the vast nave like stars. He watched them as they came, and the line of vested priests that followed, each with the glory round his brow, and last of all, a figure more venerable and majestic than them all, clothed in the pontifical robes, with a mitre of light upon his head, who seemed performing the solemn ceremony of the Hallowing or Consecration; and Seward's heart stood still, as he recognised in those majestic features, and in the long beard that rested on his breast, the stranger he had ferried over the river but a short half-hour before. They paused before the door, and at different stations, whilst making the circuit of the church, and each time the walls were signed with the sign of the Cross, affixed there in blazing characters of light; and still the wonderful chant rose and fell at intervals, with words which, whilst he knew nothing of their meaning, clave to the memory of the listener with extraordinary distinctness. How long he gazed and listened he never knew; the ceremony was long, and had many changes; but his eye never felt tired of watching those figures, as they went to and fro with such a sweet order in all their movements; there was such a joy and grace in the bowings of their heads, and the very foldings of their hands; they did not look weary or unwilling; as Seward felt he often was when he had been long standing at a church function; but their service seemed all of love, and their singing was so full of gladness, that he thought they could have sung for ever; nay, what is more, if they had, he would have been well content to listen.

But an untoward accident put a sudden end to his enjoyment of the wonderful spectacle; for wholly wrapt in its entrancing beauty, he ceased to look to his footing, and one of the stones on which he was resting, insecurely enough, giving way, he fell with a heavy crash to the ground; and looking about him, half stunned and wholly bewildered, he perceived that the lights in the minster were extinguished, and the music silenced. The ceremony seemed to be at an end; and now the only thing was to make the best of his way back to the boat, if, indeed, it were still there, and he were not, as he half doubted, bewitched, or spell-bound, or spirited away to some distant sphere. No; it was Thorney Island sure enough; there was the river gleaming in the light, now full and clear, of the September moon; and there were the dark heathen ruins black and drear as ever, and there, safe among the sedges on the shore, was his own flat-bottomed and clumsy boat; and Seward, as he looked about him on one familiar object after another, thought that, dull and sad as Thorney Isle had ever seemed, it had never looked so sad as now, when his eyes were still full of pictures of the heavenly worshipping. It was as though he had fallen down from the very courts of the Seraphim into a world of "beggarly elements;" and though he would have been puzzled to express it, he felt like Endymion, after his midnight soaring on the eagle's pinions:—"the first touch of the earth went nigh to kill."

"It was surely a goodly vision," he thought; "but the bishop—he would give the best fish in the river to know his name; and if it were not he I ferried over this very night, may I never trust eyesight again, nor use it either. There was the very same ring in his voice too, as when he called my name, 'Seward! Seward!'—and how should he have known it, were he not something more than a common man, or even a king's noble, as I guessed in my dulness?"

"Seward! Seward!" sounded the same voice at that moment; and the startled fisherman hastily turned, and fell on his knees as he beheld the subject of his meditation standing on the shore before him. It seemed to him that he was not alone; a golden cloud floated about his feet; and, in the midst of its curling folds, he thought he could discern the beautiful faces, and the wings and aerial robes, of the angel choir; but all was misty and indistinct. "Holy Peter!" he exclaimed, and at the words the saintly visitant seemed to smile.

"Even so, good Seward!" he replied; "thou hast named me right. Even now hath it been given to thine eyes, and thine alone, to see the hallowing of the first temple that shall bear that name in England; Heaven itself hath come down within its walls this night, and other hallowing must it never have from mortal hands. Wherefore do thou go to Mellitus, and tell him all things that thou hast seen, bidding him forbear to bring the words and rites of Holy Church where now they are not needed; and for thyself, fear not henceforth, either thou or thy comrades, to approach this spot; for the power of the Evil One is gone for ever; and Thorney Island from this hour is become the patrimony of Peter."

"Alas!" exclaimed the bewildered fisherman, "I am surely dreaming; or if I be in truth awake, and carry such a tale to Mellitus and the king, they will treat it as an ill-timed jest, and it may be my ears will pay the forfeit. What token shall I give them that should have power to stay them in their doings, or make them credit the word of a wretched fisherman when he tells them he is the messenger of an apostle?"

"O man of little faith!" was the reply; "still, as in old time, is the cry for signs and tokens.—Bid Mellitus look upon the minster walls, and he will see the evidence of thy words; and if thou needest proof thyself that these things are real, and no sleeping phantasy, cast thy net on the right side of thy boat, and it shall be given thee; and know that neither thou nor thy posterity shall ever want for such so long as you fish not on the Lord's Day, and offer the tenth of all your gains to the church thou hast this night seen hallowing by the ministry of angels."

Then as Seward still gazed upon the vision, he saw how it was lifted from the earth. The light golden cloud still encircled it, and bore it gently towards the heavens. The bright faces of the angels gleamed like stars about the figure of the apostle, and once more the harmonies burst forth from their lips, and filled the island with echoes of the same glorious music which had rung through the vaulted minster; "Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Him flee before Him. Glorious things are spoken of thee, thou city of God.—Alleluia! Alleluia! There shall be sung in three songs of joy. Alleluia!" And as the vision floated higher and higher above his head, the Alleluia sounded fainter, and the golden cloud grew dim before his eyes. He passed his hand over them, as though to test his senses; and when he looked again, the dark island and broad