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ETHELIND THE FAIR; OR, THE EVE OF ALLHALLOWS. A LEGEND OF BARKING.

CHAPTER IV.—THE WANDERING MINSTREL.

The poor damsel Corisande had been cruelly duped by the apparently genial change in the manner of her father, who, having determined to bestow her hand on his Saxon ally in villainy, had vindictively encouraged the renewal of the hopes of Sir Roland Courtenaye.

The pernicious old knight bore a rancorous hatred to the gallant young one, and chuckled and laughed in secret over the disappointment and defeat he was preparing for him.

The delusions of Corisande were at an end on the day on which her father's suit was rejected by the English lady.

Sir Alberic, foaming with mortification, demanded or rather insisted on Edred immediately making a like proposal to Corisande, a task the Saxon would have fain declined, but which, being perhaps ever more cowardly than avaricious, he did not dare refuse.

It may be well imagined that the solemn, middle-aged, and not very comely Edred, had but little chance with Corisande against the young and graceful knight Sir Roland Courtenaye.

Poor Corisande's high spirit had, however, long been broken by her father's harshness; perhaps the hopes she had lately indulged made her disappointment more bitter, for her refusal of Edred was accompanied with a gush of tears, and a pitiful entreaty that he would not press his suit, that she was ready to die sooner than be his wife, and her father, she feared, would kill her.

The two coadjutors laughed grimly over this declaration of Corisande; it was not very complimentary to Edred, and when Sir Alberic exclaimed: "Good! she can die if it so pleases her; but I mistake me, once she is thy wife, her mind will change, Sir Edred. Maids talk glibly of dying, but wives find they can better plague their lords by living!" Edred assented, for he was somewhat wroth with the damsel who held him in such despite, that she said sooner than wed with him she would die.

On that very day did Sir Alberic remove his daughter from Beechdale Grange, and shut her up in a lone, dismal house, which he had purchased at Stratford.

Willingly would the confederates have treated Ethelind with a like severity, but their plans were not yet sufficiently matured, and they feared to alarm the maiden, lest she should at once adopt the expedient of throwing herself on the protection of the Church.

Thus, after the departure of the Norman and his daughter, with whom Ethelind was allowed no private interview, subsequent to that which she had had with Sir Alberic, things fell into their accustomed course at Beechdale Grange.

The cunning Edred even affected to ridicule the absurd suit of Alberic, for he speedily found that by fair and avowed means he would never prevail on Ethelind to relinquish her intention of taking the veil, which would deprive him of all chance of seizing her land, upon which he had now set his avaricious heart.

So he pretended, after the departure of Sir Alberic and Corisande, again to fall into me-

lancholy, and besought his ward not yet to leave him; and the tender Ethelind, moved by his entreaties, again deferred her retirement to the nunnery till after the Feast of all Saints.

The false guardian chuckled over this advantage, which he the same night communicated to Sir Alberic, with whom he held continual meetings, unknown to Ethelind.

Meanwhile the great festival of the Saints drew near; Ethelind had nearly completed her preparations for abandoning the world, and Edred and the Norman knight had nearly completed their preparations for detaining her within the unhallowed circle of its follies and its crimes.

"Those whom God hath determined to confound He makes foolish," is a precept of which Edred and companion villain were destined to prove the truth.

Now Edred had heard from his colleague that Corisande, whom her father had imprisoned because she was aware of their intrigues, did not submit to that imprisonment very quietly, had been detected in communication with Sir Roland Courtenaye, and had on one occasion nearly effected her escape.

Now the conspirators were well aware that all their fine schemes would be scattered to the winds if this contumacious maiden found any means of revealing her position to Ethelind, whom it was necessary to deceive until the final moment.

Edred therefore had been very cautious of admitting strangers, who might be envoys of Corisande, to the presence of Ethelind, and still wearing as a mask that appearance of piety which formerly had not been all deceit, he accompanied his ward to her devotions at the church, on her visits to the sick and poor, and took care to intercept every mendicant and stranger who appeared at the gates of the grange.

The treacherous guardian found this a very dull and tedious task; since he had given the rein to his avarice and envy, the presence of Ethelind was irksome to him; he longed to be at liberty to throw off the pretence of virtue, and was never at his ease, save in the company of his vile tempter and confederate.

Like many such villains, before and since, Edred spoiled his own game of iniquity, because he had not patience to watch until the final move.

Two days—only two days to wait; all must be secure now, the autumn night promised to be dark and tempestuous; he had not seen Alberic for a week; messages had been brought to him, though, by a man-at-arms, a retainer of the Norman, the cunning and ruffianly tool of many of his master's villainies.

Edred on that night felt the stillness of the grange insupportable, and pretending to Ethelind that he had business with one of the king's Reeves at Barking, which could not be delayed, he had a horse saddled and rode off to confer with Sir Alberic, and rejoiced beforehand in the success of their schemes, which were ultimately foiled by this very imprudence.

It is true he left Bertrand, Sir Alberic's man, at the grange, with strict orders that no stranger should be admitted; but Bertrand was a jolly companion, and Gotfrid, Ethelind's farm-reeve, another, and the two sat down, immediately on Edred's departure, to solace themselves with a mighty stoup of spiced ale, and a game at tables, as backgammon was then called, and when they had waxed merry over their cups, there was a knocking at the gate, and a wandering minstrel prayed for refreshment and an hour's rest, as he had traveled on foot all day, and must reach London before the dawn.

Against the express orders left by Edred, this stranger was admitted by Bertrand, who gave him beef and ale, in return for a merry song and a deft twangling of his harp-strings.

An aged man, with long white hair and beard, was this minstrel; and the gentle Ethelind having news from her bower-maid of what a venerable and skilled harper was in the hall, the lady went down to hear the strains herself; and so greatly was she moved by his aged aspect, that she gave him a liberal gratuity, and bade him rest at Beechdale for the night.

The harper, being refreshed, humbly declined that gracious proffer, urging still that he must be in London by the dawn.

When the minstrel approached the lady to receive her alms, however, he glanced significantly at her with a pair of eyes that were marvellously bright and full for such a white-haired old man; and in return for the gold piece she bestowed, he furtively slipped into her hand a ring which she had given to Corisande, and a tightly-rolled strip of parchment.

CHAPTER V.—THE EVE OF ALLHALLOWS.

The Eve of All-Hallows! That mystic vigil, when arts forbidden of the Church are practised, and the veil of the future is rashly raised; when spirits are said to walk the earth; when under the church porch glides the sheeted phantoms of all who are to be summoned in the coming year, and the

maiden, aghast at her own temerity, scatters hemp-seed along the churchyard path, and calls the spectre of her future husband to follow her.

These unholy arts and dismal superstitions were alike shunned by the good sense and good piety of Ethelind; yet she spent not this Eve of All-Hallows in her oratory, absorbed in prayer, as was her wont.

It is long past her usual hour for retiring, her attendant maiden sleeps soundly in the little ante-chamber, and Ethelind, garbed as for a journey in hood and mantle, stands anxiously gazing from the casement of her own apartment.

It is a dark night, the November fogs are rising ere October is fully spent; the haze as yet is thin and white, and the moon shows dusky through the vapor, gleaming lurid red, like a ball of copper.

More heavily still the mists thicken as they roll upwards. The silence is oppressive; the thick, clammy atmosphere seems to deaden every sound. Ethelind listens anxiously, but she hears nothing save the throbbing of her own heart.

Yes, now—her strained eyes ache—but now surely she beholds some object darker than the mists that hover round it; and there is a muffled sound of footsteps on the already frozen ground.

A sharper sound was presently heard—the ring of a pebble against the casement. Then Ethelind cautiously unfastened the casement, and lo, beneath stood a man—young and of noble deportment, as far as could be judged in the obscurity of the night.

"Oh! Blessed Virgin, sweet lady, queen of all the saints—oh! saints and holy angels, pray for me this night!" ejaculated Ethelind. Then she drew back from the casement, and the person below flung up a rope ladder, to which was attached a small grappling iron, which secured it to the window-sill; and as Ethelind again approached the window, he ventured to exclaim:

"Haste, sweet lady, haste. Corisande awaits us, and we have not a moment to lose."

One more earnest prayer—thought rather than uttered—and Ethelind, cautiously climbing through the casement, descended from it by the frail support of the rope ladder.

On reaching the ground she was received by the person who was in waiting, and who was, indeed, no other than Corisande's betrothed, the young knight Sir Roland Courtenaye.

"Have you horses?" whispered Ethelind, as Sir Roland hurried across the court towards a kind of postern-gate, the bolts of which he had withdrawn after having made his way over the wall by the help of the rope ladder.

"Alas! no, lady," answered the knight. "Grace of our Holy Mother! it was well I found means to acquaint you with the plot of your guardian and Sir Alberic last night, for the two catiffs changed their plans this morning. The villainous Bertrand has drugged the possets of your servants, and by midnight Sir Alberic and Edred will be here with a score of the knight's followers to rouse you from your sleep, and have you on board a ship that lies at Harwich before the dawn."

Ethelind shuddered. "Ah, me!" she exclaimed; "what harm have I, a helpless maiden, done this knight, that he should seek to work me so much wrong? Surely there are fair dames enow of his own country, and degree, and age, that he might choose other than to constrain one whose sole wish is to serve God in the sacred cloister."

"Of a truth, lady," answered Sir Roland, "such wooing of a maid against her will better befits some uncouth churl than a knight of fame and lineage; but Sir Alberic covets your beauty, and your false guardian your lands; but by grace of our Blessed Lady, and the prayers of all the saints, on this, the eve of their great festival, both you and my dear Corisande shall be in safe sanctuary ere the morn!"

The famous nunnery was distant some seven miles from the abode of Ethelind.

In the missive, which, in his disguise as a minstrel, Sir Roland had managed to convey to the English maiden, the gentle Corisande had made known to her friend the dire plots which were hatching between her father and the recreant Edred; and as she expected to effect her own escape on the Eve of All-Hallows, she had prayed Ethelind to be ready to proceed to the nunnery, which would afford them both a safe and sure shelter.

The original design of Corisande was to have taken horses with Sir Roland, and herself waited with them in the beech-wood that gave its name to Ethelind's demesne, while he proceeded to liberate her friend. The change which she had discovered in the plans of her father and Edred, however, necessitated a change in hers, and she thought it would be safer to adventure on foot the journey between Beechdale and the nunnery.

With hasty and timid steps, Ethelind, under

the escort of Sir Roland, traversed the glade to the spot where her friend awaited her.

Familiar with the locality from her childhood, Ethelind could have pursued her way blindfold over her own demesne and the party had no difficulty till after Sir Roland and Ethelind having rejoined Corisande, who was waiting on the boundary of the glade, they sallied out into the open country, then the heavy fog which had arisen caused them considerable embarrassment.

Strips of forest land, where the night reigned with dense blackness, were alternated with yet more dangerous morasses and they hesitated to kindle torches lest, should Sir Alberic and Edred already be on the road, the blaze should prove a beacon for their enemies instead of a safeguard for themselves. Thus they had groped their way for perhaps a third of their journey when the sound of horses' hoofs was heard, the white vapors were scattered in the lurid gleam of torches, and a party of horsemen galloping down the firm road which they had traversed so cautiously in the darkness, surrounded them on the brink of what Ethelind knew to be a broad and dangerous morass.

The very caution of the poor fugitives in not venturing to kindle a torch had destroyed them, for in the darkness they had strayed out of the by-path, among the woods that bordered the main road, into the road itself, and Sir Alberic, Edred, and their men, who had discovered Ethelind's flight, being well mounted and with torchlight to guide them, had easily overtaken the party, when they missed the by-path.

Sir Alberic, spurring his horse in advance, was the first to discover the poor maidens and their solitary protector. With a yell of rage he sprung from his saddle, and beating down the guard of Sir Roland, who had drawn his sword to defend his betrothed and Ethelind, the savage Maltravers stretched the poor youth dead at his feet with a blow from his battle-axe. Unheeding that first victim, he shouted to Edred to look to Corisande, who, with a lamentable shriek had thrown herself on the body of the slain knight. Then Sir Alberic snatched a torch from one of his men, and plunged headlong in pursuit of Ethelind, who, frantic with terror, had fled, heedless of all danger, directly across the morass, and had already disappeared in the masses of vapor that overhung it.

CHAPTER VI.—THE GUIDING STARS!

In the fear and horror which fastened on the heart of Ethelind when she recognized the voice of her persecutor, she had plunged into the mist and darkness without thought of any danger save of falling into the hands of her treacherous guardian and his ally.

In the bright beams of a summer moon she could have trodden the morass in safety, for there were here and there patches of firm ground, and stepping-stones in the brook, for else, covered with rushes, crept slyly through the moss and slimy mud. But in the dark and cold vapors that overhung the dismal swamp like a pall, shutting out the feeble light of the moon, which still loomed red and angry in the sky, the attempt to traverse the morass was fraught with the danger of a horrible death.

To be drowned in the sluggish stream or some dull silent pool; to be sucked down through treacherous moss, and be suffocated in the black bog, swarming with the efts and toads, and other hideous crawling things; to lie rotting in such unhallowed ground, unshriven and unannealed, her dirge the wind that piped among the bulrushes, and the hoarse cry of the bitter for her passing knell!

The courage of the poor maiden failed as she felt the damp earth yielding beneath her feet, and the impenetrable fogs folding her as in a mantle of darkness and of ice.

She burst into tears, and clasping her half-frozen, trembling hands, she breathed a fervent prayer.

"Miserere mei, Domine!" she exclaimed. "Oh, sweet lady, mother of mercy, queen of virgins; oh, all ye blessed saints, pray for me, a forlorn and wretched maiden! Out of this darkness deliver me, O Lord! Let me not perish like the heathen of old, uncomfited by the rites of thy Church, on the last dark journey!"

The night was intensely cold as well as foggy, and the unhappy damsel sank shivering down as she uttered these aspirations.

From the stupor which was stealing over her, and which probably would have ended in death, she was aroused by a loud halloo in the distance, in which she recognized again the voice of Sir Alberic. She started to her feet, and in the direction of the cry she perceived the fog brightened by a saffron tinge, the reflection doubtless of the torch which the Norman carried.

The poor maiden wrung her hands, despairingly; all the horrible images of death in the morass which presented themselves to her fancy were less horrible than to fall into the power of

that man; so, heedless of the danger, she plunged again into the sea of black vapor that rolled its cold, clammy waves over the waste.

Onward, onward fled the poor damsel, now sinking ankle-deep in the slough, now wounding her tender feet with the rough stones that were scattered over the patches of firm ground. Still the voice of her fierce pursuer grated hoarsely in her ears, and her breath came in quick uncertain gasps, and her trembling limbs seemed to refuse her support, when lo, as she instinctively drew back her foot as it was again sinking in the wet, cold moss, a radiance as of a fair star glimmered through the thick black darkness. Now, when first that bright and beautiful star glimmered out from the dense, dank vapors, Ethelind shrank in yet a greater dread, for she feared it was the Will-o'-the-Wisp, the demon of the morass, swinging his fatal lantern to lure her to her death.

And while the poor maiden stood thus trembling, and with her eyes fixed on the pure light, which did not dance and waver as is the wont of the meteors of the marshes, but burned with a clear and steady radiance, there shone out from the mists another and another, till the sombre mists grew bright and luminous, and a whole galaxy of glorious stars, floating amid clouds of fleecy whiteness, hovered about the pious maiden, and showed the winding path of firm ground that lay before her, and the wild waste of the black, dangerous morass, stretching away on all sides.

Then did hope revive in the bosom of the faithful maiden, and she pursued her way, praising God, yea, in the words of the glorious Canticle, invoking the light and darkness, the snow and frosts, to praise the Lord.

And once again did she hear the voice of her enemy, but that last cry was not of rage and defeated malice, but of fierce anguish and despair, and looking back that luminous atmosphere divided, and she beheld a lurid light, the baleful radiance of the harsh meteor, gleam on the struggling form and harsh features of her foe, as he sank deep down in the dreadful swamp.

Onward, onward journeyed the maiden, still guided by the hovering radiance of those blessed stars, and with her own song of thanksgiving mingled a choir of strange sweet voices, and the refrain of their song was, "Hosannah in Excelsis! GLORY BE TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND ON EARTH PEACE TO MEN OF GOOD WILL."

And with this wondrous music in her ears, those wondrous stars scintillating around her, the maiden reached the holy convent gate in safety; but even as she withdrew her hand, after ringing the portal bell, an overpowering faintness subdued her frame, she sank down in a trance, while the deep tone of the bell still echoed through the court of the convent. And lo, in that trance, a glorious vision was vouchsafed to the pious maid; for those hovering stars, the brightness of which had saved her from death, and worse than death that night, melted and spread in their soft lustre, and seemed to develop into human forms of surpassing grace and beauty.

And foremost of that glorious company was one sweeter and lovelier than all the rest, crowned like a queen, but with a diadem of stars, stars sparkling on her azure mantle, and a white radiance, as of the May moonbeams, beneath her feet. And beside this queenly lady, who seemed as though she smiled graciously on the pious maiden, stood a damsel more youthful than Ethelind herself, clad in dazzling white garments, cherishing a tender white lamb on her left arm, just against her heart, and in her right hand holding a green palm branch, while round her delicate throat was drawn a crimson circlet, seeming like the mark of the headsman's cruel axe.

The good nuns at Barking were appalled when the portress, Sister Ursula, found their expected postulante Ethelind lying senseless at the gate on the Eve of All Hallows.

With the tenderest care did the nuns watch her recovery from her apparent swoon. Sore, wearied and appalled, she was with the terrible adventures of the night, but she was able to relate to them, and to join in thanksgiving for her marvellous escape in the convent chapel at the first Mass on the great festival of All Hallows.

The ministers of human justice, the Reeve of Barking and his officers, apprised by a message from the convent of the iniquity of Sir Alberic and Edred, proceeded at dawn of day to Beechdale. The hand of God had already meted out his earthly punishment to the wicked Norman knight. In his pursuit of Ethelind he was engulfed in the morass; his body was discovered by his right hand protruding, a grisly witness of his fate, from the surface of the quagmire into which he had sunk.

The miserable Edred, who was as weak as he was wicked, and whose crimes had been suggested by Maltravers, was appalled by the slaughter of the knight, Sir Roland, and the despair of Corisande. He had commanded the