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ETHELIND THE FAIR;

OR,

THE EVE OF ALLHALLOWS.

A LEGEND OF BARKING.

CHAPTER I.—ETHELIND THE ORPHAN.

At the time when the people of England, so cruelly oppressed during the reigns of their Norman conqueror, William, and his son, known as Rufus, or the Red King, were rejoicing in the marriage of Henry the First with the pious Princess Molde, the lineal descendant of the English race of kings, there lived some few miles from the celebrated nunnery of Barking, in Essex, a young damsel, who, like the new queen, was of purely Saxon descent, being distantly related to that Edric, surnamed the Forester, who gave Norman William almost as much trouble as the famous patriot Hereward himself.

This young maiden was so eminently endowed with the beauty for which the Saxon race in England were so famous, that she was known by the title of "Ethelind the Fair." The purest pearl that ever lay sleeping in the deep caverns of the British sea was not whiter than her skin; amber was never more lustrous than her yellow hair, which fell almost to her feet, a chaste and glorious veil of nature's own bestowing; the purple light of the morning seemed reflected in her deep blue eyes, and its faint rosy streaks were not softer or purer than the blush upon her maiden cheek.

Ethelind the fair was Ethelind the rich also, for her grandfather was a wealthy Saxon thane, one who was in the company of nobles who first submitted to the Norman Conqueror. In all the convulsions that succeeded, this thane, Osmond, managed to retain the favor of the Norman kings; and his son, the father of Ethelind, was no less "cowardly-wise," as those among the English nobility called this caution, who chose rather to lose land and life than submit to the tyranny of the Conqueror.

Both her father and grandfather died while Ethelind was still a little child; and she was left to the charge of one Edred, a distant kinsman of her father, whose wife was a worthy and pious woman.

But yet a better title than to be called the fair and the rich had Ethelind, though one which her humility would have disclaimed as earnestly as the other two. She was Ethelind the good, as not only the born thralls on her own land, but the poor and the sick, and the suffering for miles around would have witnessed. She excelled in all the accomplishments of a Saxon lady; not only was she a perfect mistress of that delicate art of embroidery for which the Saxon or English were so distinguished; and in those duties of a careful housewife, which in those days were not esteemed below the attention of princesses and queens, but she had been taught by a learned priest to read and write not only her native tongue, Saxon, but Latin also; in both these tongues did she exercise her powers in the art of poetry; she touched the harp, too, with a skill which the court minstrels of Queen Molde might have envied; and whether carolling some quaint ditty which told of human joy or woe, or joining in the solemn strains of matins or evensong, her voice was sweet as the trill of the lark, or the plaintive note of the night-tingle.

We have said that Ethelind was rich; of many a green meadow and fair corn-field was she mistress; the patch of woodland into which her swineherd drove the porkers to feed, was her property; her cows and sheep were the best and most carefully tended in the fertile lowland of Essex.

The gracious and gentle sway of Ethelind comprehended in its careful wisdom the well-being not only of her tenants and her serfs, but of the very brute creation; she held herself responsible to the great Giver of all, for merciful usage even of dumb animals.

So fair, and rich, and good as was this young maiden, it was natural that her hand should be eagerly sought in marriage; and when she had scarce passed the period of childhood, more than one worthy youth, not only of her own countrymen, but even of the proud Normans, indulged the hope of winning Ethelind for his wife.

Gently and kindly, but very firmly, nevertheless, the damsel refused them all, and meekly told her guardian Edred, and his wife Edburga, that it was her one purpose, her only wish, to be found worthy of devoting herself to a heavenly spouse.

Like Agnes, the child-saint of the early Church, this young English maiden, as beautiful, as wealthy, and as good, had no earthly thoughts, and held her riches as a loan from God to administer to the poor.

While her kin-man's good wife Edburga, lived, all went well for the wishes of Ethelind; but only a few weeks after the espousals of the king and the princess Molde, and while Ethelind was arranging the disposition of her property, ere she entered on her novitiate in the nunnery at Barking, the worthy woman died.

Edred was plunged in profound affliction by the loss of his wife, and Ethelind, who had regarded this couple as in the place of the parents whom she had lost, could not endure to abandon him in this affliction. She therefore deferred, for some months, her retreat from the world; and this not only with the approval of her confessor, but of the pious sisterhood, who held that it was a duty to bestow on her guardian such consolation as he might derive from her society, and bade her regard the delay in the accomplishment of her desires as a trial of her constancy and faith.

Beechdale Grange, as the dwelling of Ethelind was called, was distant, as we have said, some miles from the famous convent; and no other buildings were near, save the huts and farm-houses of her serfs and tenants. The places of public entertainment in those days were few and far between, and it was only in the great towns that these afforded tolerable accommodation. Thus it was the custom of travelers, more especially if they were people of consideration, when overtaken on a journey by night or stormy weather, to appeal for shelter at any substantial dwelling on their road, and seldom was the claim of hospitality refused.

Thus, unfortunately for Ethelind, it happened that one stormy night in July, when the blue lightning flashed through the deep woods and glared athwart the open country, and the rain beat against the casements, the blast of a horn was heard faintly at the gate, mingled with the booming thunder.

Though termed a grange, and originally nothing more than the name signified—a large farm-house, Ethelind's progenitors had so enlarged and improved upon the original structure, that when she became the heiress, Beechdale Grange was a spacious and noble mansion, well becoming the abode of a wealthy Saxon landholder. The building took its name from the growth of magnificent beeches that overspread the hollow vale in which it stood.

Covering a considerable space of ground, for there was but one story of upper apartments, its walls of rough gray stone were in many parts overgrown with ivy, which clustered about the round-headed casements and intercepted the scanty light that was admitted through the panes of thick green glass, which, indifferent as was its quality, was still a luxury reserved for the wealthy of those days.

The principal apartment was a spacious low-roofed hall, with a fireplace in the centre, the smoke passing through a hole in the roof—a barbarous substitute for a chimney. Little apertures were therefore left just below the ceiling, and covered with wooden shutters, which were opened according to the direction of the wind, to carry off the smoke.

In this hall, where the whole household were accustomed to assemble at their meals, the luxury of tapestry was not allowed; and bitterly did the winter winds whistle through the nooks and crannies in the walls, whether they were of stone or timber.

At the upper end of this hall was a platform, raised a foot above the flooring, and called the dais. This was the place of honor, and at the table spread there sat the heads of the household and their guests. Other tables,

consisting often of smooth planks laid upon tressels, extended down the hall; and at these tables sat the retainers and domestics of the family.

At each extremity of the dais was a door communicating with it, that led to the upper apartments, where, though mixed with some discomfort, considerable magnificence was displayed; for, in addition to warm and abundant bedding, the walls were hung with tapestry, the chairs cushioned with stuffs delicately embroidered, and cups, candlesticks, and other articles, consisting not unfrequently of the precious metals, beautifully wrought, the English artists of those days being so skilled that "English work" was renowned throughout Europe.

On that stormy night, the fair Ethelind was waiting in her chamber the summons to the evening meal. She had drawn the curtain from the glazed casements, and was gazing, with mingled awe and admiration, upon the sylvan landscape that stretched beyond the low stone wall that surrounded the grange, with its court and outbuildings.

The vivid blaze of the lightning darting among the bolls of the trees gave brief glimpses of the whole valley, and in one of these gleams Ethelind caught sight of a party of travelers galloping along the margin of a stream that bordered the verge of the landscape.

"Santa Maria!" ejaculated Ethelind, involuntarily clasping her hands before her dazzled eyes, "Pray for the wayfarers, and guide them to safe shelter!"

When, shortly afterwards, the summons for admittance was heard at the gate, little did the charitable maiden foresee that the arrival of these travelers was the prelude to persecutions and trouble to herself.

CHAPTER II.—THE NORMAN GUESTS. The travelers, who were most hospitably entertained by Ethelind, consisted of a Norman knight, one Sir Alberic Maltravers, his only daughter, and their attendants.

These persons were on their way to take shipping at Harwich, for the knight had large possessions in the neighborhood of Rouen.

The wife of this Sir Alberic was dead, and the demeanor of the knight towards his daughter was so harsh and stern, that Ethelind conceived an unutterable repugnance to him, despite the exceeding courtesy of his manners towards herself.

In truth, Sir Alberic Maltravers had been a tyrannical husband, and was an unfeeling father. There were none of the amenities of chivalry in his character; he was a fierce and rapacious soldier, and hated both his wife and her daughter, because that daughter was not a son.

Corisande Maltravers was a beautiful girl, whose beauty was of an order distinctly different from that of the fair English heiress; and the expression of melancholy that pervaded her countenance was not the natural one of her black eyes and piquante features.

Corisande had been accustomed only to see her father take his place at the board at which her mother presided, with a scowling brow and rude speech, was amazed at the smiles and courteous attentions he lavished on the fair hostess.

Rude and unmannered marauder as he was, this knight partook largely in the insolent contempt of his countrymen for the simple customs and domestic life of the Saxons. "Gluttons and swine," he was wont to term them, sneering at the profusion of a Saxon table, the huge joints, and birds roasted whole, instead of the dainty dishes of the Normans.

Now, however, he partook not only of the chine of beef, but of roasted pork, that favorite food of the Saxon, and abhorrence of the Norman; he lavished praises on the delicate cakes and confections which Ethelind, after the fashion of the ladies of her country, had prepared with her own hands. He quaffed ale instead of Bordeaux wine, and drank to the Saxon maiden in a beaker of the luscious morat, a drink compounded of honey and mulberries.

Whatever was the cause of the extraordinary good humor of her father, Corisande was content with the effect; and as in the overflowing of this good humor he even had a smile and a kind word to spare for her, the poor maiden for the first time in her life ventured to indulge the innocent gaiety of her heart in her father's presence.

Ethelind was always cheerful, with the serene cheerfulness of a pious mind and benevolent heart, and the sadness of her guardian, Edred, on this evening yielded to the sallies of their Norman guests.

The Norman maiden shared on that night the chamber of Ethelind, and in innocent confidence they revealed to each other the hopes and projects of their young lives; Ethelind relating how the recent decease of her beloved friend and foster-mother Edburga had delayed the happy time when she should join the pious sisterhood at Barking; and Corisande, with a

blush and a sigh, saying that she was unequal to so exalted a vocation, and then tearfully beseeching Ethelind's sympathy with her sorrow for the hard usage her father had dealt to a valiant and pious young knight, who had sought her hand, and been by Sir Alberic most unpitiously rejected because he was poor; an irreparable offence in the eyes of Sir Alberic, but none in those of his daughter.

"By the Mass!" cried Sir Alberic irreverently, and adding mockery to insult, in his refusal of the young knight, "thou art a fool, Sir Roland Courtenaye; thou art a comely youth enough, and that beardless face of thine, mayhap, shall win thee favor with some buxom widow of these English dames, who shall endow thee with her land and beesves. Castles and lands, silver and gold, are of more worth than all the cherry lips and bright eyes in Britain. As for Corisande, not as much land as her foot would cover will fall to her portion; it was ill-hap enough she was born a puny maid instead of a brave boy, but the fault of her birth must be mended by her wedding, and those bright eyes which have bewitched thee must cast their glamour on some gray old warrior who is lord of a broad barony."

With this unceremonious sally had Sir Alberic dismissed his daughter's suitor; and it was with the double purpose of avoiding the poor lover, and of securing a rich one, that Sir Alberic had resolved to quit England.

It was with much confusion and many tears that Corisande told the tale of her troubles to her dear friend. It might be, indeed, she said in conclusion, that Ethelind, who hoped to be a holy nun, would deem it ill that she should so grieve over the lot that separated her from this valiant knight, but he was so good, so pious, and so true; and Sir Alberic would take her back to Normandy. Ah! in sooth it was no shame to pious Ethelind to pity her.

And pious Ethelind did pity her, for her pity was gentle and humane; and though God had given her grace to choose the better part, and devote all her life and love to Him, yet she remembered how sacred was the bond of marriage, how pure and true may be the love that it consecrates.

So she gave the Norman maid much good and comforting counsel, and bade her hope that some chance might occur to favor Sir Roland, and even to prevent Sir Alberic's proposed journey to Rouen.

This chance did indeed occur, but in a fashion that in no way amended the prospects of Corisande, and involved Ethelind in misfortunes equally severe.

CHAPTER III.—SIR ALBERIC'S PLOT.

There is a numerous class of people in this world who under ordinary circumstances will pass through life, not only without giving any gross offence to the laws of religion or morality, but even with an outward show of piety and principle which secures for them the repute of being more than commonly excellent persons. In this outward show they are not altogether, perhaps not at all, hypocrites, not even when, as is often the case, they condemn with great severity in others the very vices into which they themselves ultimately fall. The secret of these people's seeming virtue is in the Divine mercy which has shielded them from any great temptation. Generally they are persons of a dull and sluggish temperament; but let strong passion, whether of revenge, ambition, love or hatred, once be awakened in their bosoms, they will pursue its gratification with pertinacity, and hardly hesitate at any crime which shall ensure success.

A man of this class was Ethelind's guardian, Edred; he was not ordinarily ambitious, perhaps he was not brave, or perhaps he was exceedingly wise in carefully avoiding the rough encounters which so often took place between the Normans and Saxons, and sometimes among the Saxons themselves.

Edred was really attached to his good wife Edburga, and she repaid his attachment with the most devoted affection. Edburga was a sensible as well as good woman; indeed virtue and good sense are very rarely separated.

Despite the decorum, however, with which the youth and early maturity of Edred had passed, his breast was the very abyss of evil passions, which were blown into a blaze by the fierce Norman knight, Sir Alberic Maltravers. This barbarous soldier was smitten with the charms of the fair and chaste Ethelind, as the pagan prince was enamored of the holy Winifred, and the youth of heathen Rome with the virgin martyr Agnes. This Norman knight, who lived in a Christian era, and called himself a Christian, was very much more wicked than the ignorant British chieftain who slew Winifred, or the luxurious and misguided Roman who persecuted the innocent Agnes.

This recreant son of the Church, fearing neither God nor man, proposed himself to Edred as the husband of Ethelind; whose grandsire he might have been.

Edred at first would not listen to the proposal, alleging the holy vocation of Ethelind,

and that but for the death of his wife, she would already have assumed the garb of a novice at Barking.

Maltravers laughed at these objections, and forthwith attacked the Saxon with Satan's own favorite weapons, alternate jibes and flattery.

"By mine honor as a Norman," cried he, "it moveth me to surprise, yea, even to laughter, to look at thee, Sir Saxon, a free man, a man, if I mistake not, with a brain to contrive, and a hand to execute, and yet for twelve long years thou has been content to live as the hand and foot vassal of a fair foolish maiden, as guardian, forsooth, of her and of her lands, which, seeing thou art the sole remaining male of her father's race, should of a surety have been thine. Go to; had I my will, that whoseome law of France, which forbids a woman to wear in her own right the queenly crown, should prevent her girding her brow with the coronet of a countess, yea, even the holding of a rood of land! And for the maid herself, seeest thou not how thy half-sainted Princess Molde hath overcome the fancy for a cloister? Marry! I doubt me if she would now be willing to change her royal court at Westminster for the Priory at Wilton. And let thy fair Ethelind once ride forth at Rouen with hound, and horse, and hawk, and gay pages, the delf bower-maidens, the lady of Sir Alberic Maltravers, I'll warrant she will overcome her fancy for the cold choir of the pious Sisters at Barking. It shall rest with thee, man, to instruct this young maiden in the way of a better fortune; and as I look for no man to be as witless as to serve me save for his own advantage, I will show thee how to compass my ends with infinite advantage to thine own."

The end proposed by this false and cunning knight was to persuade Edred that he had been, during the whole period of his guardianship of Ethelind, a most ill-used person; that her kindness and generosity in allowing him so large an income from her lands was an insult, as by right of male heirship the whole estate ought to have been his; that the deceased Edburga might doubtless have been a worthy dame, but that so comely a person as Edred might well look for alliance with a Norman lady with a dowry that should enable her spouse to ruffle it at King Henry's court; and finally, Sir Alberic concluded the bargain, with the promise of his daughter Corisande's hand to the Saxon gentleman, and Ethelind's whole estate for her dowry, if Edred, on his part would give his ward to the Norman.

Neither man nor woman who has preserved even the outward semblance of virtue for a long period, becomes avowedly wicked all at once.

A kind of terror at the internal promptings of sin, a sense of shame at stripping off the long-worn mask and laying aside with it the world's respect, the very habit even of appearing virtuous, startled and confounded the miserable Edred when Sir Alberic suggested the scheme of iniquity which finally snared the Saxon, body and soul.

The Norman knight was as crafty as he was treacherous and cruel. He was not discouraged by the horror and even anger with which Edred at first repulsed his offers; but he forthwith laid aside his scheme of journeying to Rouen, and remained with his daughter for some weeks a guest at the Beechdale Grange.

It was during the long converse into which he beguiled Edred on the night of his arrival that he hinted his abominable scheme; he laughed at the Saxon's first expressions of dismay, and left the spell to work.

On that first evening that they met, the sagacity of Sir Alberic sounded the vicious and feeble character of the Saxon.

From the time that he assumed the guardianship of Ethelind, Edred had been lord of the household, and without consulting the young maiden he offered, the Norman knight and his daughter a prolonged hospitality, an offer which in the morning was warmly seconded by Ethelind.

Little to the taste of the English maiden, indeed, in the days and weeks that succeeded were the worldly pastimes and pomps introduced by Sir Alberic; the hunting and hawking, the engagement of mummings and minstrels, the chase in the morning, and the feast and the dance at night.

But gentle, kind-hearted Ethelind would not, for Corisande's sake, express the weariness she felt, for the cunning Sir Alberic still held over his daughter's head the threat of proceeding to Rouen; and while the visit at Beechdale was prolonged, the poor damsel flattered herself that her father might relent, and that there was hope for her and the worthy Sir Roland Courtenaye.

This hope she imparted to Ethelind, and though the pious maiden would fain have seen her visitors depart, so that she could have returned to that quiet round of duties in which she so much delighted, yet out of consideration for her friend, she forebore to express the weariness she felt.