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Edmund Dale

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

THE purpose of this study is to examine and set forth the ever-developing character of the Englishman in the successive ages of his early career, until modern life begins, together with the corresponding development of political and social life which determines and, at the same time, is determined by it; "to hold, as 't were, the mirror up to nature," as the centuries pass by; "to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

The method employed will be, as far as it is possible, to permit the Englishman to speak for himself, while we use his words as self-revelations of his life and thought and character. Thus one may hope to minimise the errors which arise from fallacious reasonings and biassed judgments, and to attain more closely to scientific accuracy and truthfulness.

So for the material for our work we turn to the literature in which each age has left us a reflection of itself, remembering that no literature is merely fortuitous or accidental, but springs from the very heart of the nation in which it lives; that a true poet is never independent and self-contained in his art, but derives his inspiration from the great movements of his time, paints his pictures from the men and the life he sees about him, and is encouraged and uplifted by the sympathies of those whose hearts leap at his words because he has sounded the depths of their humanity. A literature is but the means by which the aspirations and ideals of a nation find expression in an abiding form.

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CHAPTER I.

[To about 650 A.D.]

THE ENGLISHMAN OF THE CONQUEST.

WHEN our forefathers were passing from the Continent to the invasion and settlement of Britain they were making neither the first nor the last of their many migrations. Already many marks of past experience had been impressed upon the race; already the mighty and mysterious forces of nature had left their influence upon both life and character. For the inner man grows, changes and develops as does the outward man; and in the inner life, as in the outer, there are always the first faint cries of new births to blend with the voices of the living and the last sighs of the dying. There is always a continual development of character and social life from age to age, as we all come from the past with its lesson towards the future with its hope. Each successive age in the history of the development of man incorporates into itself the substance of the ages past, shapes that substance as the pressure of circumstance or environment demands, and at its close leaves its own composite deposit of experience for the making of the ages yet to be. In one long unbroken chain of many links the development of mankind goes on throughout all time, its end Eternity. No race, no age, depends upon itself alone. Born of the past, yet plastic to the present, ever changing towards the future, the Englishman first stepped out upon these shores from the bosom of his keel.

In the ranks of the invading hosts were many who could touch the harp with skilful fingers while they chanted the rude melodies which the warrior loved, blending recitals of the stirring deeds of the past with softer and more mournful memories of the old homeland beyond the sea. There was

Beowulf, 2106.

CH. I

Old English Song

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always some sympathetic chord in the Englishman's rugged nature to vibrate in unison with either strain. Chiefs and warriors, heroes and commoners alike, could weave their spells upon the strings, hoarding up in their breasts the treasures of song and story which, in the days of their youth, they had heard the gleeman sing. Many there were who could themselves frame new songs and shape the story of the present into verse for the gleeman of the future to recall in after days; and it seems that thus the story of their invasion was first handed down. While the long, black ships passed across the lonely seas, or lay hidden in some quiet creek, the plaintive notes would often while away the period of inactivity. As the host advanced into battle, the wild notes of the war-song rose high above the din; and, when the victory was won and the excited warriors sat down to feast and to play, the harp was brought forth to exult in impassioned strains over the ancestral honours of the race.

Beowulf,
Widsith, 1.
Bede, *H. E.*
IV. 24.

Rhyme Song
14.
Gnomic V.
(*Ex.*) 170.
Beowulf, 496.
868, 1063.

One of the earliest of these old songs is the *Lay of Beowulf* which seems to have had a long and regular growth, out of the myths and legends of remote antiquity, among the Continental tribes. This poem, whatever its date may be, affords a typical example of Old English song in the heathen days, and reflects, with accuracy and completeness, the life and thought, the manners, customs and character of our early ancestors. Their aspirations and beliefs, their passions and affections, their feuds and warfaring expeditions, their battles and conquests, their songs and banquets after victory, are here clearly reflected, to stand out as self-revelations of a primitive and warlike people. Another poem, of like or even greater antiquity, is the *Song of Widsith*, the wandering gleeman; and there are many echoes of such old songs scattered throughout Old English poetry. From this material, which the English tribes brought with them from the Continent, we best learn to know their past history and character.

We see that the invaders are just emerging from a state of chaos, already grouping themselves into warrior tribes, and acknowledging the tribal ties for their own preservation. The family is no longer the unit in the social organism; life is no longer distinctly nomadic. That they have but recently left such a state may be seen in the strong claims which the ties

of blood relationship still impose, and in their restless, roving habits. But they have not yet grouped themselves into settled states or nations with distinguishing characteristics or clearly defined territories. Their character is, correspondingly, in an almost chaotic condition; elements of good intermingle inextricably with elements of evil. In the same type, even in the same being, all the traits of utter barbarism, all the selfish instincts and mad impulses of the savage, blend with the higher qualities of a nobler humanity. Passionate cravings, insatiate lust, brutal ferocity, treachery, revengefulness, unreliability, improvidence, childishness, everywhere lie side by side with staunchest devotion, loyalty, self-sacrifice, heroism, wisdom, caution; and often the accidents of circumstance, or the wayward fancies of the moment, decide which rises uppermost. Such is the deposit of the past, such the material from which the future Englishman is to be evolved.

When we turn to examine the antecedents of these men we begin to understand how their condition may be accounted for. The Continental life depicted in the poems is essentially migratory and chaotic, the strenuous life of the warrior in a state of continual unrest. Many tribes, accustomed to the freedom and license of a roving life, are seen packed together in North-West Europe, always increasing in numbers, and ever assailed by a steady pressure upon all sides. Behind them, from the east, press the Huns; in front, to the west and south, even as far as the Saxon Shore of Britain, the Latin race attempts to bar their progress. Frequently we hear of the exceeding fecundity of the race, and how, in consequence, it is the custom for chosen bands to emigrate in order to relieve the pressure. Against the ever-increasing restraint the tribes struggle violently, each seeking to preserve its own liberty. They passionately refuse to surrender the old life to the new circumstances. A movement in one quarter transmits itself, with increasing turmoil, through every tribe, and agitates in turn each particle of the seething mass of humanity.

In the *Widsith* some of the tribes are seen slowly moving westwards, pressed from the east by the Hunnish hordes of Attila, and fighting for their lives. "Full often there war ceased not, when the army of the Hræds with sharp swords

Alfred's
Metra, 1. 1.

*Will. of
Malmes.* 1. 1.
Layamon's
Brut 13854.
Wace's *Brut*,
etc.

Widsith, 119.

about the woods of Vistula was forced to defend their old ancestral seat against Attila's hordes." In another quarter, 127.
 "full often from the troop flew the whistling shaft and the yelling spear against the grim folk, where Wudga and Hama, chieftains adorned with gold, sought to avenge their warriors and their wives." For generation after generation in their migration to the west they must have fought so often with all the fierceness which despair alone could give that the lust of strife had entered into their blood, and the excitement of the fray had become almost a necessity. They had so often encouraged each other with loud cries to harden their hearts and to sell their lives dearly in defence of all they loved that now they begin to enter into battle with the wildest songs upon their lips and the intensity of ferocious delight in their eyes. They struggle continuously for the supremacy among themselves; and in this connection is to be found the first mention in our literature of the Angles and their land, a continental England not yet deserted for the fields and woods of Britain. Offa, the first great king and national hero, a half historic, half mythic personage, stands out as the conquering warrior; and his people are already winning the mastery over their neighbours: "Offa ruled the Angles, Alewih the Danes. Of all those men Alewih was the 35.
 proudest, yet over Offa he never proved his valour; but Offa, first of men, while yet a youth, won the greatest of the kingdoms. None, at his age, won greater renown than he. With his single sword at Fifel-Dor he extended his borders against the Myrgings; Angles and Swæfs thenceforth held sway as Offa won it."

Great chiefs, like Scyld, rise upon the earth and grow in power; they deprive many tribes of their mead-seats, and force their neighbours to obey them and to pay tribute. Like Hygelac, who "for pride endured woe, feud with the Frisians," *Beowulf*, 4.
 they make raids and carry off much booty, protecting under the banner the spoil they have taken, and in its defence falling in the war-rush beneath the shield, dead through "the drinking of the swords." And when a famous chief 2355.
 lies dead the attacks of old-time enemies upon his unprotected country are but to be expected. In the might of 2913.
 spears and swords lies the sole protection against the horrors 2923.
 of war; and often does the warrior experience "the iron- 3000.
 1770.
 3117.

1205
 [c. 512 A.D.]

shower" when the storm of arrows driven by the bowstrings smites upon the shield-wall.

Often was the warrior, by the fierce onrush of his foes under cover of night, roused from sleep to cry aloud to his men to arm quickly to fight for their lives. So, in the hall, a good war-troop would always retire to rest with their shields by their heads, and with their helmets, corslets and spears on a bench above them. "Such was their custom that they should always be prepared for war, both at home and on foray, as their lord had need." Then would the hall ring again with the din of battle and the challenges of attackers and defenders. Thus it happened at Finnsburg where Finn the Frisian treacherously surprised Hnæf the Dane, his guest and the brother of his wife.

*The Fight at
Finnsburg*
[folg. Grein
and Bugge].

The warriors are sleeping in the hall; outside, the full moon is shining; it is near the dawn when men sleep most heavily. From without comes the sound of a stealthy rush,

5. and there is a flicker of flame. The chief, stirred by foreboding fears, awakes and listens. Is it the dawn that so lights up the hall? He hears the ring of mail corslets, the rattle of spears, the clatter of shaft on shield, the arrows singing about the doors. It is no dawn; the roof is ablaze;
10. and he is up on his feet with a loud cry: "Awake now, warriors mine! Meet the rush of the foe! Be ready to strike! Forget not your fame! Be brave in heart!" The warriors leap up at his call, seize their swords, and hasten to defend the doors. Sigferth and Eaha are first to the one; Ordlâf, Gûthlâf and Hengest first to the other. All is tumult and confusion beneath the reek of the smoke and the crackling flame; hard it is to discern friend from foe. Above the uproar a fierce voice is heard without, crying aloud to know who holds the door; and a challenge rings out boldly:
24. "Sigferth is my name. I am chief of the Secga, a rover widely known. Many woes, many hard battles, have I borne. Here is appointed thee whatsoever thou wilt to seek of me." So a fight to the death begins within the walls; the hall-floor rings again with the din; the swords flash in the light of the flames as though all Finnsburg were full of fire.

For five days the fight continues, and then Hnæf's corslet is broken, his helmet cloven, and he receives a mortal wound.

But his followers under Hengest hold their own, and slay *Beowulf*, 1070. many of their assailants, including Finn's son. Finn himself is forced to come to terms, and to make rich gifts as the price of peace. Yet, when the winter has passed, Hengest again renews the strife, and is himself slain, leaving the feud for Gúthláf and Ósláf to carry through. Finally Finn's hall is taken and he and his followers slain. Then the avengers depart, leading with them Hildeburh, Finn's wife, and a great booty.

There is a somewhat similar story of feud and surprise attack in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which shows that the character of the English was not transformed in this respect by the migration across the sea. Sigeberht, an under king of Wessex, for wrong-doing, was deprived of his kingdom, with the exception of Hampshire, by Cynewulf and the West Saxon Witan. Soon afterwards he slew Cumbra, his oldest "ealdorman," and for that deed was banished into the Forest of Andred. There a herdsman stabbed him to death, and so avenged Cumbra. But Sigeberht had a brother, Cyneheard, who took up the feud with Cynewulf. Hearing that the king was in the company of a woman at Merton with but a little troop to protect him, Cyneheard came upon him there and surrounded the bower before the king's followers found him. When the king perceived this he posted himself at the door and nobly defended himself until he caught sight of the atheling, when he rushed out and severely wounded him; and they were all fighting against the king until they had slain him. By this time, hearing the cries of the woman, the king's thegns became aware of the tumult, and ran thither, each as he was ready. And the atheling offered them money and life, and none of them would take it, but they went on fighting until they all fell, except one British hostage, and he was sorely wounded. In the morning the king's thegns who were left behind heard what had happened and rode to the town to avenge their lord. Bribes they indignantly refused: they would never follow the murderer of their king. So they kept on fighting about the gates until they got within and slew the atheling and the men who were with him, all save one, and he was often wounded.

A.-S. Chron.
755 A.D.

So largely are such attacks a feature of the life of the Teutonic peoples that, in Alfred's days, the laws take

Laws of
Alfred, No. 42.
"Of Feuds,"
A.-S. Laws,
Thorpe, p. 40.

cognisance of them, but can only prescribe regulations to check the wanton shedding of blood. If a man know his foe to be home-staying he is not to fight before he has demanded justice of him. If he is strong enough to besiege him he must not attack him for seven days, if his foe remain within. If after seven days his foe will surrender and deliver up his weapons he is to be kept safe for thirty days, and notice must be given to his kinsmen and friends. If he flee to a church for sanctuary the sanctity of the church is to be observed. If the man is not strong enough to besiege his foe, he must ride to the "ealdorman" and beg aid of him, and if the "ealdorman" will not aid him he must ride to the king before he fights. If the foe will not surrender then he may be attacked; but if he be willing to surrender, and any one after that attack him, the assailant must pay "wer" (blood-money) and "wite" (fine), and forfeit his family rights. But a man may fight in his lord's defence without penalty, and so may the lord fight for his man. In the same manner a man may fight for his born kinsman if he be attacked wrongfully, except against his lord, which is not allowed.

Beowulf, 2025.

To settle a feud was always an exceedingly difficult matter, as we learn from the lips of Beowulf. He tells of a feud between Hrothgar the Dane and Froda the Heathobard, in which the latter had been slain. To settle it, Hrothgar had given his daughter in marriage to Ingeld, the dead man's son, and Beowulf prophesies what the end will be. A Danish thegn will come with the bride among the Heathobards wearing a well-known sword, a spoil of battle, and some fierce old warrior, who remembers the strife, will see it. He will say to the young chief: "Canst thou not, my friend, recognise the sword, the dear iron, which thy father bore to battle on his last foray, when the Danes slew him? Now, here, a son of I know not who of those slayers, exulting in his trappings, walks the floor, boasts of the slaying, and bears the treasure which by right thou should'st possess." So he will remind him constantly with bitter words until occasion offers, and then the Dane will sleep, bloodstained and lifeless. Then oaths will be broken, and murderous hates again well up. And it came to pass even as Beowulf had said, for in the *Widsith* we read that Ingeld afterwards led his Heathobards in battle array to Heorot, but his host was

Widsith, 45.

I *The Fight in Ravens' Wood* 9

overthrown and cut to pieces by Hrothgar and his nephew Hrothulf.

We hear of many such long-protracted feuds in the story of Beowulf, the most noteworthy being that which is connected with the hero's line. Ohthere and Onela, sons of *Beowulf, 2923.* Ongentheow, king of the Swedes, raid the lands of Hæthcyn, king of the Geats, Beowulf's uncle. Hæthcyn revenges himself by a raid against Ongentheow, whose wife, the mother of Ohthere and Onela, he bears away with him. But Ongentheow, old and terrible, pursues and slays the seaking, and rescues his wife. He follows up the remnant of the leaderless Geats, his mortal enemies; and they escape with difficulty into Ravens' Wood. Here he surrounds with his host those spared by the sword, now in a pitiable condition, weary with wounds. "Woe oft he promised the *2938.* wretched band, the whole night long; he said that on the morrow he would slay them with the edge of the sword; some should hang on the gallows-tree for sport to the birds." But at dawn horns and trumpets are heard; and the sore-hearted ones have hope of rescue. Hygelac, Hæthcyn's brother, with his army, is near at hand, and is following up the blood-stained track to the assistance of his distressed comrades. "The blood-trace of Swedes and Geats, *2947.* the deadly onslaught of warriors, was widely visible, how the folk with each other carried on the feud." Ongentheow fears to meet him; "he trusted not in resistance, that he could withstand the sea-men, from the sea-farers protect his treasure, his children and bride." He flees with his followers to a fastness in the heights, and takes refuge in an earthen fort. Hygelac follows close behind. Ongentheow's banner is captured; the Geats storm the ramparts, and pour into the enclosure. The old warrior stands grimly at bay; the swords of the Geats on every side bar the way of escape. Eofor and Wulf, two young warriors, brothers, single him out. Wulf, son of Wonred, strikes fiercely at him, and from the stroke the blood spurts in streams from beneath his grizzled hair. Yet all undaunted, though his wound is mortal, the stout old king returns the blow with interest. He cleaves Wulf's helmet, and fells him to the ground, all bloody, unable to strike another blow, though he struggles to rise in spite of the pain of his wound. But Eofor breaks

through Ongentheow's guard, smiting over the rim of his shield with his broad sword; and the king, the shepherd of his people, falls. Even his foes admire him, and speak well of him, because he is brave. The fort is won; Wulf's companions bind up his wound, and raise him to his feet; while Eofor strips the body of Ongentheow of its trappings, the iron corslet, the hard hilted sword, and the helmet, and bears them in triumph to Hygelac, who, before all the host, promises him a magnificent reward for his valour.

- So ends the fight in Ravens' Wood, but not the feud.
2382. When Hygelac is dead Eanmund and Eadgils, Ongentheow's grandsons, having rebelled against Ohthere their father, come into the land of the Geats, and Heardred, Hygelac's son, is slain by Eanmund. Weohstan in turn takes up the feud against them, and slays Eanmund; and Eadgils returns home.
2397. Long afterwards he again raids the Geats, and is slain by Beowulf. Thenceforth, while Beowulf lives, the feud is quiescent, for his prowess is well-known; but when he is dead all expect the feud to break out afresh. "That is the feud and the enmity, the deadly hostility of men, because of which I expect that the Swedes will attack us when they hear that our lord is dead," says he who tells the tale: "I expect not at all from the Swedes either peace or good faith."
- 2923.

- The passion for revenge was one of the most prominent characteristics of the Teuton, and almost partook of the nature of a religious duty. When Beowulf attempts to assuage the grief of Hrothgar for the loss of his friend and follower Æschere, and gives him the best consolation that he knows,
1385. "Sorrow not, wise one," he says; "better it is for every one to avenge his friend than to mourn much. All of us must come to the end of this life; let him who is able gain glory before his death; that is best in the end for the warrior dead. Arise, warden of the kingdom, let us hasten on the track of the slayer; I promise thee she shall not escape, go where she will. This day do thou bear patiently all thy woes, as I expect of thee." The old man leapt up at once, comforted by his words, and we hear no more of passionate grief for Æschere. Vengeance was then the best antidote for sorrow; for was it not the delight of the gods themselves?

Practically, the principle of revenge lay at the root of the social life of the Teutons, affording as it did the only check