

The Martyr's Victory

Chapter I

The Ark of Refuge

THE first bright beams of the morning sun rising above the eastern horizon, gilded the thatched roofs of a group of buildings which, partly of stone, partly of wood, but all strongly and securely built, were clustered round a central and more imposing structure, evidently a church.

And now the strong oaken door of the church was suddenly opened, and a group of serge-clad monks came out into the morning sunshine; not to loiter in its bright beams, however, for each hurried to an outbuilding, and shouldering a mattock or spade, hastened to the fields that lay behind the buildings.

These were no lazy drones, as the fruitful fields testified; and many a poor family in the neighbouring town could do the same; for what they would do if the winter was unusually severe or the

SERGE-CLAD: *wearing garments made of a durable fabric*

MATTOCK: *a tool similar to a pickax, but with a flat blade*

DRONES: *those who do mindless, menial work*

Danes came and drove away their cattle and destroyed their crops, they hardly dared to think, if they could not be succoured by the brethren of the monastery.

These incursions of their neighbours of East Anglia were a never-ceasing trouble and embarrassment to the brethren, and at the present time were the subject of a grave consultation, whether or not their house should be abandoned, and the whole brotherhood removed further south, where King Alfred might afford them some protection.

One of the brethren, now carrying his mattock across his shoulder, and ever and anon casting anxious glances across the barren waste that marked the confines of the East Anglian kingdom, seemed to be musing over this question still, although he did not join in the animated discourse of his companions.

At length he was joined by a young monk who had lately come among them. "Dost thou not think it is labour in vain to till the fields of this monastery?" he said, in something of a discontented tone.

"And wherefore?" asked the elder monk sharply.

"Nay, brother Osric, I meant not to provoke thine anger, but thou knowest that for all our digging and hoeing and seed-sowing, it is mighty little reaping we can get, except a few handfuls be snatched in haste, when the alarm is given that the Danes are upon us."

"That is true, my brother; it is now many years

SUCCOURED: *assisted in time of need*

INCURSIONS: *hostile invasions*

CROZIER: *a staff with a crook or cross on the top*

since the brethren gathered in the rye and wheat and barley, and to feed ourselves and our starving townsfolk last winter our Lord Abbot's silver crozier had to be sold," said the monk quietly.

The young monk looked horrified. "I thought the monastery was very rich," he said. "The Danes say ye can grow gold."

His companion smiled. "Yes, we grow gold for them, golden grain which they tear from the fields ere it be fully ripe. What wouldst thou counsel, my brother?" he asked.

"That we should go southward to King Alfred. He is a great and mighty king now, and he will give us a monastery where we can abide in peace, without damage from the filthy pagans."

"And so thou dost counsel our forsaking this goodly house, where we can protect the weak and tend the sick and feed the hungry? But let me ask thee this, What will the poor folk do next winter? What wouldst thou have done if there had been no refuge here?" asked Osric.

The hot blood came into the young man's face for a moment, but he said, rather haughtily, "I am of thane folk; I am not poor."

"True, thy father is a thane," said Osric quietly, "but thou wouldst have been called nidling before many years were over thine head, for they would never have made a man of thee." There was a touch of contempt in the tone in which this was said, and the young monk's face grew crimson.

THANE: *a free man who owes service to an Anglo-Saxon lord, especially military service*

NIDLING: *a coward; a term of extreme disgrace*

The elder saw that he had pained his young companion, and a feeling of compunction stole over him. "Nay, nay, heed not my words, Egbert; we have need of such as thee, I trow, to copy our books, and learn all clerkly arts. For myself, I could never learn to read," and he stretched out his stalwart arms, drew himself up to his full height, and stopping for a moment to look at his gigantic stature reflected in a pool of water, he said, "I may be wrong, Egbert, but it seemeth to me that God must have other work than reading and writing for such as I."

How the lad envied him his splendid strength and gigantic stature! He, weak, pale and delicate, was only allowed to work an hour or two in the fields for his health's sake. What his companion had said was quite true. In his father's great hall, among the roistering house-carles, there was no place for him, for he could not join in their rough sports, and the sight of a battle-axe or two-handed sword always made him shudder.

He had always retreated to his mother's bower when the weather prevented him from rambling in the woods, until at last the bower-maidens laughed, and whispered among themselves, as they glanced at him in the corner poring over his strip of beech board, on which was roughly cut two or three sentences of the Lord's Prayer in the Saxon tongue, or sorting out the herbs and roots he had gathered in the woods.

COMPUNCTION: *remorse*

TROW: *believe or think*

CLERKLY ARTS: *reading and writing*

These were the only occupations possible for one like him, in those times; and instead of looking forward to the future with hope and anticipation, each year as it came filled poor Egbert's heart with a greater dread and fear; for what room was there for him in the world? His father grumbled, groaned, and blustered by turns, which only made the delicate sensitive lad more nervous than ever, and cost his mother many bitter tears.

To see his mother in trouble was a grief to Egbert almost unbearable, and so, to save her the sight of her useless son, and to escape the scornful looks and whispers of the bower-maidens and house-carles, as well as his father's reproachful anger, the lad took to hiding himself in out-houses and dark closets when he could not go to the woods.

The all-perplexing subject of his thoughts was this: How it was God could let him live, when it was clear there was no room for such as he in the world. The world needed fighting-men, the weak ones only robbed these of the bread that was already too scarce. He had been told this again and again, with many oaths to enforce it, when his father was unusually angry; and one day Egbert went forth to the woods, resolving that he would no longer rob those who had a right to all the world could give them. He would live as long as he could on the roots and acorns that he might find, and when these failed he would lie down and die.

ROISTERING: *noisy and unruly*

HOUSE-CARLES: *household men-servants*

BOWER: *a lady's private apartment in a medieval hall*

But before he had walked far, the thought of his mother quite overcame him, and he threw himself upon the ground, while an irrepressible wail of anguish burst from his lips.

The next minute someone touched him on the shoulder, and starting to his feet he saw a monk before him; a stately commanding man he looked, in spite of his dirty ragged serge frock and cowl. Egbert could only stare in blank surprise for a minute or two, for a monk was rarely seen in that neighbourhood.

"Holy father," stammered Egbert, and then he stopped, for the monk had raised his hand, as if in warning.

"Nay, nay, call me not holy father," said the monk quietly, "I am but a sinful man; call me brother Osric, an thou wilt, and tell me thy trouble; it may be I can help thee," he added, in a winning tone.

But the lad shook his head. "There is no help, for there is no room in the world for such as I;" and he lifted his pale face and looked in wonder at the tall stately monk.

Brother Osric looked down upon him pityingly. "The world is a rough, storm-tossed sea," he said; "but hast thou never heard of the Ark that ever rides securely on its rough billows—the refuge God hath provided for the weak—His holy Church?"

Egbert's pale face grew crimson. "My father drove my mother's confessor from the door seven years ago," he said, "just as I began to read. It was

because he found me with this," and he drew from his sleeve his treasured beech board. "Since then, I have heard little but what my mother could teach me," he added.

"So thou didst never hear there was a refuge for the weak—a shelter where such as thee may hide from the world's rough storms, and read books, and gather knowledge, and learn wisdom?"

Egbert shook his head. "I have seen the great monastery west of the Watling Street," he said.

"Would'st thou like to come and dwell there?" asked the monk.

Egbert opened his eyes wide at the question. "Who would have me?" he said.

"The Church will have thee, and help and shelter thee," said the monk.

"But—but I am of no use," said Egbert.

"That is nought to the Church; thou art needy, and she offers thee a shelter—a shelter from the scorn of men. Wilt thou accept it, or wilt thou stay in thy father's house, to be called a nidling?"

How the lad's face flushed at that word! It was the embodiment of all that was mean, cowardly and contemptible; and in that age, when brute force was the only recognized pledge of honour and bravery, a gentle timid lad like Egbert lived in continual dread of it. He shivered now as he heard it, and the monk saw the shudder.

"Nay, nay, my son, think not that I call thee nidling, or that our holy Mother Church doth call

the weakest of her servants this name of reproach. Thou art no niding, I trow, but thou art no warrior either, and thou dost know that the world will call thee the one if thou art not the other."

"I—I would come to thy monastery, and gladly be a monk, an the Church could make use of me," said Egbert; "but wherefore should I eat the bread of a better man, as I am of no use in the world?"

"Nay," said Osric, "but the Church can make use of thee, an thou dost love such things as that," and he nodded rather contemptuously at the slips of beech wood in Egbert's hand.

"I cannot read much," said Egbert sadly.

"But thou canst learn to read, and write too, I trow, and that is more than I can do, and when thou hast learned those, canst copy the books in the monastery scriptorium, and illuminate them too. Who knoweth but thou mayest do one worthy of our Alfred himself to receive?" he added encouragingly.

Egbert forgot his trouble for a moment in the joyful anticipation of seeing and being able to read more wonderful books than his own, and he looked so elated that the monk thought it needful to put in a word of caution. "I tell thee this that thou mayest know the gentle goodness of God in providing something for weak hands to do. I say not that such things as reading and writing are quite useless, since our gracious lord Alfred hath recommended all judges and bishops to learn

SCRIPTORIUM: *a room set apart for scribes*

ILLUMINATE: *to decorate with gold, silver or brilliant colors*

these clerkly arts; but I see that the world will never think aught of these. 'Tis spear and battle-axe for the world, but book and pen for the Church."

"Do ye monks do nought but read and write?" asked Egbert timidly.

A look of contemptuous scorn for a moment crossed the face of Osric. "Book and pen for such as me? Nay, nay, my son, a monastery were no place for me; my penance would be harder than I could bear, an it were so. Nay, nay, our God when He gave the Church to be an ark of refuge, knew that men of might and stature might need to seek its shelter, as well as the weak and helpless, and so there is work for all, the strong as well as the weak. Didst thou ever see our fields, my son?" he asked.

"I have heard that they are ever fruitful, and thy crops always plenteous."

"And wherefore dost thou think this is so?" asked Osric. "Who hath made them fertile? It is well-known that nought would grow in these lands until the monks came, and digged, and watered, and drained, working like giants, with spade and mattock, instead of battle-axe and spear, until corn waved where the bittern boomed, and there were goodly barns built of the forest trees, storehouses filled with food, that God's poor might be fed."

"Then thou dost work in the fields?" Egbert ventured to say, at the same time thinking how contemptuously his father's house-carles regarded

PENANCE: *voluntary punishment for sins committed*

BITTERN: *a large bird that lives in marshes*

BOOMED: *the male bittern's call has a loud booming sound*

this employment. *Their* fields were scratched over rather than dug, and their crops were always poor and thin.

“Yes; the brethren work in the fields,” said Osric, after a pause, during which he had been looking at the lad attentively, almost reading his thoughts. He sighed as he did so, and yet, after all, was he not, in spite of his boasting tone, half-ashamed of being a farmer monk, instead of a blustering, roistering warrior, always on the lookout for picking a quarrel with either friend or foe, so that it gave opportunity for a sword to be drawn? Both remained silent for a few minutes, until the monk said, “Well, my son, what dost thou think? thou must choose between the world and the Church.”

“The world hath nought that I can do, and so I will come with thee, an thou wilt wait until I have bidden my mother and sister farewell.”

“That is well-spoken, my son; there is no room in the world for such as thee: I will wait an hour for thee by the old oak yonder, an thou dost not come back I shall know thou art in thy mother’s bower, crying with the maidens, and wilt leave thee for a nidling unworthy of our shelter.”

“I will meet thee,” said Egbert shortly; and he turned homeward at once to tell his mother. But it was not so easy to leave home as he had imagined. There was his favourite dog and other dumb pets, to say nothing of one or two of the house-carles who had been kind to him, and these had to be

passed in the great hall, and cost his heart a pang as he thought of leaving them forever.

But this was as nothing to what he felt when, throwing himself at his mother's feet, he sobbed forth, "My mother, I have come to bid thee farewell."

"To bid me farewell!" said the lady, in a little alarm, as she laid her hand on his fair silky hair.

Then he told her of his meeting with the monk, and the proffered protection of the Church, and whispered of his father's anger on account of his weakness, and finally begged that she would let him go. What could the lady say? She loved her son, dearer than life itself, and knew that she should daily and hourly miss the meek gentle lad who was of no use in the world, and yet she could not bid him stay: nay, she felt thankful that a shelter had been offered him from the world's scorn.

So Osric and Egbert went back together to the monastery, and a friendship was formed between them that day that gradually increased as time went on; and it became the rule, that when Egbert went for the morning walk it should always be to the fields, or wherever Osric's work lay.