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Ethelred & Lidania; OR, The Sacrifice to Woden [Transcript]

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ETHELRED & LIDANIA;
OR,
The Sacrifice to Woden.
BY SARAH WILKINSON.

“GRACIOUS Heaven! (exclaimed Sir Ethelred,) “into what a dilemma has my imprudence brought me! Would to the divine gods I had never left the stately palace of my father, whose majestic grandeur inspires the beholder with awe. All-powerful Woden, unto thee I have offered incense, and adorned thy altars from my earliest days. Here, by thy magic rites, I swear, if thou wilt deliver me from this peril, and restore me to my home, to offer to thy holy shrine, the first human being that presents itself at my gates to welcome my approach.” Woden appeared to the deluded, superstitious Knight, to smile on his request. The storm abated; the fury of the winds was hushed asleep; the hapless wreck was no longer to be perceived, it was buried in the relentless deep; but the raft on which Ethelred had placed himself with the aged Aribert, safely landed on the Mercian shores. Ethelred left the old man to the care of some priests at the first temple he came to, that he might refresh his weary limbs, while he hastened to the Vale of Lowin, anxious to behold his long-lost home. Lightsome of heart, and joyous at his escape, he thought not of his rash vow. Woden was forgot; and his thoughts expanded with the domestic bliss that awaited him. Already he clasped his fair Lidania in his arms, and their lovely pledge, which had blessed their nuptials, the infant Edgar.

It was the middle of the night when Sir Ethelred gained this peaceful retirement, where all he held dear on earth was placed, to secure them from the tyranny of his father, from whom his nuptials were a secret; for the haughty and wealthy Lord Edwy wished his son to espouse Avisia, the heiress of the Count of Guienne. The chance of war flung the brave Lucius, an officer of the Britons, with his fair sister Lidania, into the power of Ethelred, who became enamoured of his captive. He espoused her; and restored her brother, without ransom, to the British camp.

Lidania, whose fears had been excited in the most excruciating manner by the storm of the preceding night, as she had for some days past, expected the return of Sir Ethelred, who, awed by the threats of his father, had imprudently consented to visit the Count and his daughter at Guienne. He consented the more readily, as he hoped the coldness he should shew, and some hints of a prior engagement, would inspire Avisia with a dislike to him; but, unhappily, she beheld him with the most pure affection; and Ethelred found great difficulty to depart, without coming to an explanation, which was earnestly expected both by father and daughter. As he returned, they were overtaken by a dreadful storm, which wrecked their vessel, and swallowed all the crew into the deep and unrelenting ocean. Aribert and Ethelred were all that escaped by means of a small raft, which the youth contrived. This aged man was the tutor of his infant years, and now the friend of the Knight. He of late had fallen under the displeasure of Lord Edwy, as he was supposed to favour the tenets of Christianity, and impart them to Ethelred. This charge was not entirely without foundation: and since the youth had espoused Lidania, his sentiments had been greatly altered. The pure piety which filled her bosom, her love, her charity, and modesty, shook the principles of his Pagan faith; and he no longer persecuted Christians with that cruel zeal that once marked his character: but still he was a Pagan: the prejudices he had imbibed from his cradle, were too strong to be removed as yet; and the artful priests, by the denunciations they threatened to apostates, and the grandeur of their sacrifices and worship, did not a little deter him

from searching into the truth of their mysterious assertions. Added to this, his escape, which he attributed to the vow he had made to Woden, eradicated the good opinion he had received of the true Gospel; and he resolved to listen no further to the lectures of Aribert. But to return to Lidania: She saw another day pass without the return of her Ethelred. Fears for his safety distracted her. Sometimes she fancied the charms of Avisa kept him at Guienne; but this was presently effaced by the remembrance of his vows at parting, and the honour that attended all his actions. The night was remarkably fine, and the trees were fanned by gentle breezes from the sea shore. Lidania, to divert her thoughts, went, attended by her maidens, to walk in the spacious grove that surrounded her habitation; while her little page played harmonious tunes on a soft instrument that was used in those days.

On a sudden, the barking of the great dog aroused their attention, and they were fearful of being surprised by a stranger; but great was the joy of Lidania, when, by a bright gleam of the moon, she perceived her much-loved Ethelred advancing towards the house. Alone, and unattended, she could scarce credit her sight, and thought it was some dear illusion; but a second ray convinced her. She flew towards him, and was presently clasped in his arms. They were mutually delighted; and she had led him into their small but neat saloon, before he recollected Woden or his vow. He started from her embrace, and rushed out of the house with the frenzy of a lunatic; while the terrified Lidania fainted, and fell on the ground. Her forehead encountered the foot of a marble table, and she received a violent contusion, which covered her with blood. Ethelred, in the midst of his horror, recollected that the next day of sacrifice to Woden would not take place for six weeks. He resolved to stifle his emotions, and return to Lidania, and to conceal from her, if possible, the cause of his anguish. But, O, what a scene presented itself to his view! Lidania, bathed in purple gore, and himself the occasion of it! He raised her from the ground, and in the most gentle manner tried to bring her to life. At length, with the assistance of her attendants, she recovered, and Ethelred commanded the domestics to withdraw. Lidania earnestly besought him to relate the cause of the violent emotions that marked his behaviour, and so much alarmed her. He endeavoured to attribute it to the ill success of his journey; but in vain; his countenance, always the index of his mind, betrayed the anguish that dwelt in his breast, and at length he was obliged, however unwilling, to confess the truth.

Lidania fell at his feet, and bathed them with her tears. At length she broke silence, and, in the most pathetic manner, asked him if he could have the heart to sacrifice the mother of his child to his Idol. "Talk not with such irreverence, my dear Lidania, (said the Knight;) for to the all-powerful Woden I owe my life." "Then I die cheerfully, (said his affectionate wife.) But, my son, my Edgar, must I leave thee here?" She relapsed into her fainting. Ethelred knew not what course to take: a thousand times he repented his rash vow. "Would to Heaven, (he exclaimed,) I had perished in the deep, before I had invoked the mighty deity." Here a dire thought rushed on his imagination. "Have not I offended the gods of my forefathers by my espousing a Christian, one who abhors the mystic rites of our worship?" He paused. "By Ther and Woden, it must be the cause; and she must fall a sacrifice to their vengeance. But then my Lidania, my faithful spouse, did she not refuse the proffered hand of nobles, to dwell in retirement with me? renounced the gaities of a court, the lustre of dress, and all that can delight or please the eye, the splendid tournament, the pompous shew, and gave herself to one who dared not own the jewel he possessed?"

The attendants interrupted his soliloquy by the account of Lidania's recovery. He hastened to her chamber, where the gentle fair one tried every means to calm the mind of her bosom's Lord. At length it was agreed that Ethelred should refer the matter to the priests of Woden, and be directed by their better judgment.

The next morning Ethelred was obliged to depart, in order to return to Lord Edwy's palace, which was some leagues distant from Lidania's retreat. They had never known a parting so replete with sorrow. Her sighs, her tears, her chaste embraces, made all his tenderness return; and he resolved, if Lidania must be the sacrifice to his vows, never to survive her. He imparted to her his thoughts. The fair one gazed at him with unutterable anguish, and then snatching the young Edgar from the floor, (where he was playing with a tame kid, unconscious of the agonies of his unfortunate parents,) tenderly embraced him; and bid Ethelred recollect his child, and conjured him to live, and protect him. The countenance of the unhappy father expressed his miserable sensations. He folded his Edgar in his arms, imprinted on his lips a fervent kiss, and then placing him on his mother's lap, hastened to mount his fleet courser. He could not say adieu, but waved his handkerchief as far as that parting signal could be perceived from the house.

By the setting of the sun he arrived at Lord Edwy's palace. The sullen silence that reigned around astonished the youthful Knight, and he passed through the court-yards without being perceived. When he gained the ante-chamber that led to the painted room where his father usually sat, he stopt some moments to consider what account he should give him about his courtship to the Heiress of Guienne. When he had settled his plan, he opened the folding doors, and discovered Lord Edwy a corpse adorned for the funeral. The chamber was hung with black velvet, adorned with banners and family escutcheons. The body was dressed in white robes, and the head crowned with wreaths of flowers, interspersed with cypress. By his side lay the torch that was to light the funeral pile. For it was the custom of the ancient Saxons to burn the dead bodies of their chiefs and nobles.

Ethelred's faculties were for a time suspended with amazement and horror. He rang a bell that was near the spot, and the chamberlain appeared. Ethelred, after rebuking him for the careless manner in which the palace was guarded, asked the particulars of his father's decease. Redwick informed him, that four days since Lord Edwy was seized with an apoplectic fit, which he only survived twenty-four hours; that he had just began making a will, in which he disinherited him, in case he refused to espouse Avisia, heiress of Guienne, when the news arrived of the wreck of the vessel in which Ethelred and his attendants were, and an account that all the crew had perished; when Lord Edwy flung the will into the fire, and soon after expired.

Sir Ethelred, amidst the concern he felt for his father's death, could not avoid blessing the Providence that saved him from destruction, by the frustration of a will of so dreadful an import to his peace. The funeral of Lord Edwy was performed with great solemnity the next day, and Ethelred was acknowledged as Baron by his faithful vassals, who adored him. He now declared his marriage with Lidania, for whom, and his little son, he sent a splendid equipage. When Lidania saw the messengers arrive, she did not doubt but that her fate was sealed; but, anxious to absolve her Ethelred from his vow, and to give him peace even at the expence of her own existence, she stepped into the vehicle with her Edgar, without asking any questions of the attendants. On her arrival at the palace of Lord Ethelred, he went to meet her with a mournful

aspect, and slow step; a behaviour that much surprised his domestics, when they beheld so beautiful a woman. He approached, and took her hand. "Would I could give thee that welcome I would wish: but the cruel fates, who beheld our happiness with malignity, forbids me. He then led her into a spacious saloon. The infant Edgar, unused to such splendor, expressed his admiration in terms which suited his childish ideas; declaring he would never go back from such a fine place; and even chided his mother for her tears, while he hung on her neck, and besought her to look at the pretty things. At this moment the good Aribert entered, and congratulated Ethelred on his new dignity. The young nobleman presented to his friend his wife and child, whom the old man embraced with the warm transports of affection, and wished them a happy succession of years; that they might see their children's children climb their knees, and grace their plenteous board. Ethelred and Lidania burst into tears, and unfolded their griefs to his sympathising bosom. When they had ended their sorrowful relation, he thus addressed his pupil. "Can my Lord still entertain such weak prejudices in favour of Paganism, in spite of all the convictions he has had to the contrary? (Ethelred frowned.) Nay, my Lord, be not angry with thy servant; I submit, and can only grieve that you are so deluded."

Ethelred now repaired to the temple of Woden, and submitted his case to the priests with a magnificent present. They, ever ready to oblige the powerful, and at the same time make the most of their votaries, declared that they would solemnly invoke Woden to answer them by his Oracle; and Ethelred shut himself up in the temple till their determination should be known. In the mean time, Aribert and Lidania gave themselves up to the most fervent devotions, and waited the return of the Baron with some impatience.

At the end of the third day he returned, and declared the High Priest had dispensed with the performance of his vow, in case Lidania embraced their worship, and renounced her faith. The amiable lady presently declared her resolution to die sooner than turn apostate. Ethelred embraced her, and lamented his inability to save her in the most pathetic terms that language could invent, which was still heightened when Lidania declared herself pregnant. Ethelred imparted this circumstance to the cruel priests, but could obtain no mercy. They came in procession, on the appointed day of sacrifice, for their beautiful victim, who was led forth in a white robe, and crowned with flowers by her weeping maidens. When they arrived at the fatal place, life was again offered her on the terms before mentioned, and again refused. The steady resolution of Lidania touched Ethelred to the soul; conviction rushed upon his mind, and he repented that he had ever revealed his rash vow to the priests; but it was too late. He declared aloud that he had embraced Christianity, and his determination to die with Lidania.

The enraged priests of Woden bound their victims, and led them, in the midst of solemn music, to the altar. Already were the dreadful knives lifted to the breasts of the unhappy couple, when the door of the temple was forced open by a party of soldiers, headed by the gallant Lucius, who shewed a mandate from his sovereign, who was a reformed Pagan, never to dare to sacrifice another human victim, to offer upon the altar of Woden. The pious Lidania, and her repenting husband, were led back to the palace amidst the acclamations of all ranks of persons, who execrated the cruel sentence of the priests. Ethelred became a sincere Christian, as soon after did most of the Saxons resident in Britain. He lived with his amiable spouse to see the pious wish of Aribert fulfilled, and to behold the daughter of Edgar espoused to the king of England.

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