

CHAPTER II

THE ANGLO-SAXON OR OLD-ENGLISH PERIOD

I. OUR FIRST POETRY

Beowulf. Here is the story of Beowulf, the earliest and the greatest epic, or heroic poem, in our literature. It begins with a prologue, which is not an essential part of the story, but which we review gladly for the sake of the splendid poetical conception that produced Scyld, king of the Spear Danes.¹

At a time when the Spear Danes were without a king, a ship came sailing into their harbor. It was filled with treasures and weapons of war; and in the midst of these warlike things was a baby sleeping. No man sailed the ship; it came of itself, bringing the child, whose name was Scyld.

Now Scyld grew and became a mighty warrior, and led the Spear Danes for many years, and was their king. When his son Beowulf² had become strong and wise enough to rule, then Wyrð (Fate), who speaks but once to any man, came and stood at hand; and it was time for Scyld to go. This is how they buried him:

Then Scyld departed, at word of Wyrð spoken,
The hero to go to the home of the gods.
Sadly they bore him to brink of the ocean,
Comrades, still heeding his word of command.

There rode in the harbor the prince's ship, ready,
With prow curving proudly and shining sails set.
Shipward they bore him, their hero beloved;
The mighty they laid at the foot of the mast.

Treasures were there from far and near gathered,
Byrnies of battle, armor and swords;
Never a keel sailed out of a harbor
So splendidly tricked with the trappings of war.

¹ There is a mystery about this old hero which stirs our imagination, but which is never explained. It refers, probably, to some legend of the Anglo-Saxons which we have supplied from other sources, aided by some vague suggestions and glimpses of the past in the poem itself.

² This is not the Beowulf who is hero of the poem.

They heaped on his bosom a hoard of bright jewels
To fare with him forth on the flood's great breast.
No less gift they gave than the Unknown provided,
When alone, as a child, he came in from the mere.

High o'er his head waved a bright golden standard —
Now let the waves bear their wealth to the holm.
Sad-souled they gave back its gift to the ocean,
Mournful their mood as he sailed out to sea.¹

"And no man," says the poet, "neither counselor nor hero, can tell who received that lading."

One of Scyld's descendants was Hrothgar, king of the Danes; and with him the story of our Beowulf begins. Hrothgar in his old age had built near the sea a mead hall called Heorot, the most splendid hall in the whole world, where the king and his thanes gathered nightly to feast and to listen to the songs of his gleemen. One night, as they were all sleeping, a frightful monster, Grendel, broke into the hall, killed thirty of the sleeping warriors, and carried off their bodies to devour them in his lair under the sea. The appalling visit was speedily repeated, and fear and death reigned in the great hall. The warriors fought at first; but fled when they discovered that no weapon could harm the monster. Heorot was left deserted and silent. For twelve winters Grendel's horrible raids continued, and joy was changed to mourning among the Spear Danes.

At last the rumor of Grendel crossed over the sea to the land of the Geats, where a young hero dwelt in the house of his uncle, King Hygelac. Beowulf was his name, a man of immense strength and courage, and a mighty swimmer who had developed his powers fighting the "nickers," whales, walruses and seals, in the icebound northern ocean. When he heard the story, Beowulf was stirred to go and fight the monster and free the Danes, who were his father's friends.

With fourteen companions he crosses the sea. There is an excellent bit of ocean poetry here (ll. 210-224), and we get a vivid idea of the hospitality of a brave people by following the poet's description of Beowulf's meeting with King Hrothgar and Queen Wealhtheow, and of the joy and feasting and story-telling in Heorot. The picture of Wealhtheow passing the mead cup to the warriors with her own hand is a noble one, and plainly indicates the reverence paid by these strong men to their wives and mothers. Night comes on; the fear of Grendel is again upon the Danes, and all withdraw after the king has warned Beowulf of the frightful danger of sleeping in the hall. But Beowulf lies down with his warriors, saying proudly that, since weapons will

¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 26-50, a free rendering to suggest the alliteration of the original.

not avail against the monster, he will grapple with him bare handed and trust to a warrior's strength.

Forth from the fens, from the misty moorlands,
Grendel came gliding — God's wrath¹ he bore —
Came under clouds, until he saw clearly,
Glittering with gold plates, the mead hall of men.
Down fell the door, though fastened with fire bands;
Open it sprang at the stroke of his paw.
Swollen with rage burst in the bale-bringer;
Flamed in his eyes a fierce light, likest fire.²

At the sight of men again sleeping in the hall, Grendel laughs in his heart, thinking of his feast. He seizes the nearest sleeper, crushes his "bone case" with a bite, tears him limb from limb, and swallows him. Then he creeps to the couch of Beowulf and stretches out a claw, only to find it clutched in a grip of steel. A sudden terror strikes the monster's heart. He roars, struggles, tries to jerk his arm free; but Beowulf leaps to his feet and grapples his enemy bare handed. To and fro they surge. Tables are overturned; golden benches ripped from their fastenings; the whole building quakes, and only its iron bands keep it from falling to pieces. Beowulf's companions are on their feet now, hacking vainly at the monster with swords and battle-axes, adding their shouts to the crashing of furniture and the howling "war song" of Grendel. Outside in the town the Danes stand shivering at the uproar. Slowly the monster struggles to the door, dragging Beowulf, whose fingers crack with the strain, but who never relaxes his first grip. Suddenly a wide wound opens in the monster's side; the sinews snap; the whole arm is wrenched off at the shoulder; and Grendel escapes shrieking across the moor, and plunges into the sea to die.

Beowulf first exults in his night's work; then he hangs the huge arm with its terrible claws from a cross-beam over the king's seat, as one would hang up a bear's skin after a hunt. At daylight came the Danes; and all day long, in the intervals of singing, story-telling, speech making, and gift giving, they return to wonder at the mighty "grip of Grendel" and to rejoice in Beowulf's victory.

When night falls a great feast is spread in Heorot, and the Danes sleep once more in the great hall. At midnight comes another monster,

¹ Grendel, of the Eoten (giant) race, the death shadow, the mark stalker, the shadow ganger, is also variously called god's foe, fiend of hell, Cain's brood, etc. It need hardly be explained that the latter terms are additions to the original poem, made, probably, by monks who copied the manuscript. A belief in Wyrð, the mighty power controlling the destinies of men, is the chief religious motive of the epic. In line 1056 we find a curious blending of pagan and Christian belief, where Wyrð is withstood by the "wise God."

² Summary of ll. 710-727. We have not indicated in our translation (or in quotations from Garnett, Morley, Brooke, etc.) where parts of the text are omitted.

a horrible, half-human creature,¹ mother of Grendel, raging to avenge her offspring. She thunders at the door; the Danes leap up and grasp their weapons; but the monster enters, seizes Aeschere, who is friend and adviser of the king, and rushes away with him over the fens.

The old scenes of sorrow are reviewed in the morning; but Beowulf says simply:

Sorrow not, wise man. It is better for each
That his friend he avenge than that he mourn much.
Each of us shall the end await
Of worldly life: let him who may gain
Honor ere death. That is for a warrior,
When he is dead, afterwards best.
Arise, kingdom's guardian! Let us quickly go
To view the track of Grendel's kinsman.
I promise it thee: he will not escape,
Nor in earth's bosom, nor in mountain-wood,
Nor in ocean's depths, go where he will.²

Then he girds himself for the new fight and follows the track of the second enemy across the fens. Here is Hrothgar's description of the place where live the monsters, "spirits of elsewhere," as he calls them:

They inhabit
The dim land that gives shelter to the wolf,
The windy headlands, perilous fen paths,
Where, under mountain mist, the stream flows down
And floods the ground. Not far hence, but a mile,
The mere stands, over which hang death-chill groves,
A wood fast-rooted overshades the flood;
There every night a ghastly miracle
Is seen, fire in the water. No man knows,
Not the most wise, the bottom of that mere.
The firm-horned heath-stalker, the hart, when pressed,
Wearied by hounds, and hunted from afar,
Will rather die of thirst upon its bank
Than bend his head to it. It is unholy.
Dark to the clouds its yeasty waves mount up
When wind stirs hateful tempest, till the air
Grows dreary, and the heavens pour down tears.³

Beowulf plunges into the horrible place, while his companions wait for him on the shore. For a long time he sinks through the flood; then,

¹ Grendel's mother belongs also to the Eoten (giant) race. She is called *brimwylf* (sea wolf), *merewif* (sea woman), *grundwyrgen* (bottom monster), etc.

² From Garnett's *Beowulf*, ll. 1384-1394. ³ From Morley's version, ll. 1357-1376.

as he reaches bottom, Grendel's mother rushes out upon him and drags him into a cave, where sea monsters swarm at him from behind and gnash his armor with their tusks. The edge of his sword is turned with the mighty blow he deals the *merewif*; but it harms not the monster. Casting the weapon aside, he grips her and tries to hurl her down, while her claws and teeth clash upon his corslet but cannot penetrate the steel rings. She throws her bulk upon him, crushes him down, draws a short sword and plunges it at him; but again his splendid byrnie saves him. He is wearied now, and oppressed. Suddenly, as his eye sweeps the cave, he catches sight of a magic sword, made by the giants long ago, too heavy for warriors to wield. Struggling up he seizes the weapon, whirls it and brings down a crashing blow upon the monster's neck. It smashes through the ring bones; the *merewif* falls, and the fight is won.

The cave is full of treasures; but Beowulf heeds them not, for near him lies Grendel, dead from the wound received the previous night. Again Beowulf swings the great sword and strikes off his enemy's head; and lo, as the venomous blood touches the sword blade, the steel melts like ice before the fire, and only the hilt is left in Beowulf's hand. Taking the hilt and the head, the hero enters the ocean and mounts up to the shore.

Only his own faithful band were waiting there; for the Danes, seeing the ocean bubble with fresh blood, thought it was all over with the hero and had gone home. And there they were, mourning in Heorot, when Beowulf returned with the monstrous head of Grendel carried on a spear shaft by four of his stoutest followers.

In the last part of the poem there is another great fight. Beowulf is now an old man; he has reigned for fifty years, beloved by all his people. He has overcome every enemy but one, a fire dragon keeping watch over an enormous treasure hidden among the mountains. One day a wanderer stumbles upon the enchanted cave and, entering, takes a jeweled cup while the fire-drake sleeps heavily. That same night the dragon, in a frightful rage, belching forth fire and smoke, rushes down upon the nearest villages, leaving a trail of death and terror behind him.

Again Beowulf goes forth to champion his people. As he approaches the dragon's cave, he has a presentiment that death lurks within:

Sat on the headland there the warrior king;
Farewell he said to hearth-companions true,
The gold-friend of the Geats; his mind was sad,
Death-ready, restless. And Wyrd was drawing nigh,
Who now must meet and touch the aged man,
To seek the treasure that his soul had saved
And separate his body from his life.¹

¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2417-2423, a free rendering.

There is a flash of illumination, like that which comes to a dying man, in which his mind runs back over his long life and sees something of profound meaning in the elemental sorrow moving side by side with magnificent courage. Then follows the fight with the fire-drake, in which Beowulf, wrapped in fire and smoke, is helped by the heroism of Wiglaf, one of his companions. The dragon is slain, but the fire has entered Beowulf's lungs and he knows that Wyrd is at hand. This is his thought, while Wiglaf removes his battered armor:

"One deep regret I have: that to a son
I may not give the armor I have worn,
To bear it after me. For fifty years
I ruled these people well, and not a king
Of those who dwell around me, dared oppress
Or meet me with his hosts. At home I waited
For the time that Wyrd controls. Mine own I kept,
Nor quarrels sought, nor ever falsely swore.
Now, wounded sore, I wait for joy to come."¹

He sends Wiglaf into the fire-drake's cave, who finds it filled with rare treasures and, most wonderful of all, a golden banner from which light proceeds and illumines all the darkness. But Wiglaf cares little for the treasures; his mind is full of his dying chief. He fills his hands with costly ornaments and hurries to throw them at his hero's feet. The old man looks with sorrow at the gold, thanks the "Lord of all" that by death he has gained more riches for his people, and tells his faithful thane how his body shall be burned on the Whale ness, or headland:

"My life is well paid for this hoard; and now
Care for the people's needs. I may no more
Be with them. Bid the warriors raise a barrow
After the burning, on the ness by the sea,
On Hronesness, which shall rise high and be
For a remembrance to my people. Seafarers
Who from afar over the mists of waters
Drive foamy keels may call it Beowulf's Mount
Hereafter." Then the hero from his neck
Put off a golden collar; to his thane,
To the young warrior, gave it with his helm,
Armllet and corslet; bade him use them well.
"Thou art the last Wægmunding of our race,
For fate has swept my kinsmen all away.
Earls in their strength are to their Maker gone,
And I must follow them."²

¹ Lines 2729-2740, a free rendering.

² Morley's version, ll. 2799-2816.

Beowulf was still living when Wiglaf sent a messenger hurriedly to his people; when they came they found him dead, and the huge dragon dead on the sand beside him.

Then the Goth's people reared a mighty pile
 With shields and armour hung, as he had asked,
 And in the midst the warriors laid their lord,
 Lamenting. Then the warriors on the mount
 Kindled a mighty bale fire; the smoke rose
 Black from the Swedish pine, the sound of flame
 Mingled with sound of weeping; . . . while smoke
 Spread over heaven. Then upon the hill
 The people of the Weders wrought a mound,
 High, broad, and to be seen far out at sea.
 In ten days they had built and walled it in
 As the wise thought most worthy; placed in it
 Rings, jewels, other treasures from the hoard.
 They left the riches, golden joy of earls,
 In dust, for earth to hold; where yet it lies,
 Useless as ever. Then about the mound
 The warriors rode, and raised a mournful song
 For their dead king; exalted his brave deeds,
 Holding it fit men honour their liege lord,
 Praise him and love him when his soul is fled.
 Thus the [Geat's] people, sharers of his hearth,
 Mourned their chief's fall, praised him, of kings, of men
 The mildest and the kindest, and to all
 His people gentlest, yearning for their praise.¹

One is tempted to linger over the details of the magnificent ending: the unselfish heroism of Beowulf, the great prototype of King Alfred; the generous grief of his people, ignoring gold and jewels in the thought of the greater treasure they had lost; the memorial mound on the low cliff, which would cause every returning mariner to steer a straight course to harbor in the remembrance of his dead hero; and the pure poetry which marks every noble line. But the epic is great enough and simple enough to speak for itself. Search the literatures of the world, and you will find no other such picture of a brave man's death.

¹ Lines 3156-3182 (Morley's version).

Concerning the history of *Beowulf* a whole library has been written, and scholars still differ too radically for us to express a positive judgment. This much, however, is clear, — that there existed, at the time the poem was composed, various northern legends of Beowa, a half-divine hero, and the monster Grendel. The latter has been interpreted in various ways, — sometimes as a bear, and again as the malaria of the marsh lands. For those interested in symbols the simplest interpretation of these myths is to regard Beowulf's successive fights with the three dragons as the overcoming, first, of the overwhelming danger of the sea, which was beaten back by the dykes; second, the conquering of the sea itself, when men learned to sail upon it; and third, the conflict with the hostile forces of nature, which are overcome at last by man's indomitable will and perseverance.

All this is purely mythical; but there are historical incidents to reckon with. About the year 520 a certain northern chief, called by the chronicler Chochilaicus (who is generally identified with the Hygelac of the epic), led a huge plundering expedition up the Rhine. After a succession of battles he was overcome by the Franks, but — and now we enter a legendary region once more — not until a gigantic nephew of Hygelac had performed heroic feats of valor, and had saved the remnants of the host by a marvelous feat of swimming. The majority of scholars now hold that these historical events and personages were celebrated in the epic; but some still assert that the events which gave a foundation for *Beowulf* occurred wholly on English soil, where the poem itself was undoubtedly written. —

The rhythm of *Beowulf* and indeed of all our earliest poetry depended upon accent and alliteration; that is, the beginning of two or more words in the same line with the same sound or letter. The lines were made up of two short halves, separated by a pause. No rime was used; but a musical effect was produced by giving each half line two strongly accented syllables. Each full line, therefore,

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had four accents, three of which (i.e. two in the first half, and one in the second) usually began with the same sound or letter. The musical effect was heightened by the harp with which the gleeman accompanied his singing. The poetical form will be seen clearly in the following selection from the wonderfully realistic description of the fens haunted by Grendel. It will need only one or two readings aloud to show that many of these strange-looking words are practically the same as those we still use, though many of the vowel sounds were pronounced differently by our ancestors.

... Hie dygel lond
 Warigeath, wulf-hleothu, windige næssas,
 Frecne fen-gelad, thær fyrgen-stream
 Under næssa genipu nither gewiteth,
 Flod under foldan. Nis thæt feor heonon,
 Mil-gemearces, thæt se mere standeth,
 Ofer thæm hongiaþ hrinde bearwas

... They (a) darksome land
 Ward (inhabit), wolf cliffs, windy nesses,
 Frightful fen paths where mountain stream
 Under nesses' mists nether (downward) wanders,
 A flood under earth. It is not far hence,
 By mile measure, that the mere stands,
 Over which hang rimy groves.

Widsith. The poem "Widsith," the wide goer or wanderer, is in part, at least, probably the oldest in our language. The author and the date of its composition are unknown; but the personal account of the minstrel's life belongs to the time before the Saxons first came to England.¹ It expresses the wandering life of the gleeman, who goes forth into the world to abide here or there, according as he is rewarded for his singing. From the numerous references to rings and rewards, and from the praise given to generous givers, it would seem

¹ Probably to the fourth century, though some parts of the poem must have been added later. Thus the poet says (ll. 88-102) that he visited Eormanric, who died *cir.* 375, and Queen Ealhild whose father, Eadwin, died *cir.* 561. The difficulty of fixing a date to the poem is apparent. It contains several references to scenes and characters in *Beowulf*.

v.

Sættes þæs stan fah stas risode sumum
 Sæzædere sud byrwe fean heard
 hond locen hrunz men scip song, msear
 pum þa he tosele furdum in hyra spy
 þe sæt pum zanzan epomon setton
 sameþe side scyldas pondas þegn heard
 þð þæs neceðes peal. buzon þato bence
 byrnan hrunz don sud særo zumena
 zanas stodon sæman na særo samod
 æzædere æsc holt uran zneaz ræse
 men þreaz þæpnum zepur þad þaðær
 plone hæled oret mezas æfter hate
 þum pæzn. hpanon þerizead ze þæc
 ze scyldas spræge sypcan zsum helmas
 hepe sceafza heap ic eom hrod zæves
 ær 7om biht. ne seah ic elþeodige þus
 manize men modiglicpan. þenice þizefor
 plenco nalles for þæc sidum. æc forþize

A PAGE FROM THE MANUSCRIPT OF BEOWULF

that literature as a paying profession began very early in our history, and also that the pay was barely sufficient to hold soul and body together. Of all our modern poets, Goldsmith wandering over Europe paying for his lodging with his songs is most suggestive of this first recorded singer of our race. His last lines read:

Thus wandering, they who shape songs for men
Pass over many lands, and tell their need,
And speak their thanks, and ever, south or north,
Meet someone skilled in songs and free in gifts,
Who would be raised among his friends to fame
And do brave deeds till light and life are gone.
He who has thus wrought himself praise shall have
A settled glory underneath the stars.¹

Deor's Lament. In "Deor" we have another picture of the Saxon scop, or minstrel, not in glad wandering, but in manly sorrow. It seems that the scop's living depended entirely upon his power to please his chief, and that at any time he might be supplanted by a better poet. Deor had this experience, and comforts himself in a grim way by recalling various examples of men who have suffered more than himself. The poem is arranged in strophes, each one telling of some afflicted hero and ending with the same refrain: *His sorrow passed away; so will mine.* "Deor" is much more poetic than "Widsith," and is the one perfect lyric² of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Weland for a woman knew too well exile.
Strong of soul that earl, sorrow sharp he bore;
To companionship he had care and weary longing,
Winter-freezing wretchedness. Woe he found again, again,
After that Nithhad in a need had laid him—
Staggering sinew-wounds — sorrow-smitten man!
*That he overwent; this also may I.*³

The Seafarer. The wonderful poem of "The Seafarer" seems to be in two distinct parts. The first shows the hardships

¹ Lines 135-143 (Morley's version).

² A lyric is a short poem reflecting some personal emotion, like love or grief. Two other Anglo-Saxon poems, "The Wife's Complaint" and "The Husband's Message," belong to this class.

³ First strophe of Brooke's version, *History of Early English Literature*.

of ocean life; but stronger than hardships is the subtle call of the sea. The second part is an allegory, in which the troubles of the seaman are symbols of the troubles of this life, and the call of the ocean is the call in the soul to be up and away to its true home with God. Whether the last was added by some monk who saw the allegorical possibilities of the first part, or whether some sea-loving Christian scop wrote both, is uncertain. Following are a few selected lines to show the spirit of the poem:

The hail flew in showers about me; and there I heard only
The roar of the sea, ice-cold waves, and the song of the swan;
For pastime the gannets' cry served me; the kittiwakes' chatter
For laughter of men; and for mead drink the call of the sea mews.
When storms on the rocky cliffs beat, then the terns, icy-feathered,
Made answer; full oft the sea eagle forebodingly screamed,
The eagle with pinions wave-wet. . . .
The shadows of night became darker, it snowed from the north;
The world was enchained by the frost; hail fell upon earth;
'T was the coldest of grain. Yet the thoughts of my heart now are
throbbing

To test the high streams, the salt waves in tumultuous play.
Desire in my heart ever urges my spirit to wander,
To seek out the home of the stranger in lands afar off.

There is no one that dwells upon earth, so exalted in mind,
But that he has always a longing, a sea-faring passion
For what the Lord God shall bestow, be it honor or death.
No heart for the harp has he, nor for acceptance of treasure,
No pleasure has he in a wife, no delight in the world,
Nor in aught save the roll of the billows; but always a longing,
A yearning uneasiness, hastens him on to the sea.

The woodlands are captured by blossoms, the hamlets grow fair,
Broad meadows are beautiful, earth again bursts into life,
And all stir the heart of the wanderer eager to journey,
So he meditates going afar on the pathway of tides.
The cuckoo, moreover, gives warning with sorrowful note,
Summer's harbinger sings, and forebodes to the heart bitter sorrow.

Now my spirit uneasily turns in the heart's narrow chamber,
Now wanders forth over the tide, o'er the home of the whale,
To the ends of the earth — and comes back to me.

Eager and greedy,
The lone wanderer screams, and resistlessly drives my soul onward,
Over the whale-path, over the tracts of the sea.¹

¹ *Seafarer*, Part I, Iddings' version, in *Translations from Old English Poetry*.

The Fight at Finnsburgh and Waldere. Two other of our oldest poems well deserve mention. The "Fight at Finnsburgh" is a fragment of fifty lines, discovered on the inside of a piece of parchment drawn over the wooden covers of a book of homilies. It is a magnificent war song, describing with Homeric power the defense of a hall by Hnæf¹ with sixty warriors, against the attack of Finn and his army. At midnight, when Hnæf and his men are sleeping, they are surrounded by an army rushing in with fire and sword. Hnæf springs to his feet at the first alarm and wakens his warriors with a call to action that rings like a bugle blast:

This no eastward dawning is, nor is here a dragon flying,
Nor of this high hall are the horns a burning;
But they rush upon us here — now the ravens sing,
Growling is the gray wolf, grim the war-wood rattles,
Shield to shaft is answering.²

The fight lasts five days, but the fragment ends before we learn the outcome. The same fight is celebrated by Hrothgar's gleeman at the feast in Heorot, after the slaying of Grendel.

"Waldere" is a fragment of two leaves, from which we get only a glimpse of the story of Waldere (Walter of Aquitaine) and his betrothed bride Hildgund, who were hostages at the court of Attila. They escaped with a great treasure, and in crossing the mountains were attacked by Gunther and his warriors, among whom was Walter's former comrade, Hagen. Walter fights them all and escapes. The same story was written in Latin in the tenth century, and is also part of the old German *Nibelungenlied*. Though the saga did not originate with the Anglo-Saxons, their version of it is the oldest that has come down to us. The chief significance of these "Waldere" fragments lies in the evidence they afford that our ancestors were familiar with the legends and poetry of other Germanic peoples.

¹ It is an open question whether this poem celebrates the fight at which Hnæf, the Danish leader, fell, or a later fight led by Hengist, to avenge Hnæf's death.

² Brooke's translation, *History of Early English Literature*. For another early battle song see Tennyson's "Battle of Brunanburh."

II. ANGLO-SAXON LIFE

We have now read some of our earliest records, and have been surprised, perhaps, that men who are generally described in the histories as savage fighters and freebooters could produce such excellent poetry. It is the object of the study of all literature to make us better acquainted with men,—not simply with their deeds, which is the function of history, but with the dreams and ideals which underlie all their actions. So a reading of this early Anglo-Saxon poetry not only makes us acquainted, but also leads to a profound respect for the men who were our ancestors. Before we study more of their literature it is well to glance briefly at their life and language.

The Name. Originally the name Anglo-Saxon denotes two of the three Germanic tribes, — Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, — who in the middle of the fifth century left their homes on the shores of the North Sea and the Baltic to conquer and colonize distant Britain. Angeln was the home of one tribe, and the name still clings to the spot whence some of our forefathers sailed on their momentous voyage. The old Saxon word *angul* or *ongul* means a hook, and the English verb *angle* is used invariably by Walton and older writers in the sense of fishing. We may still think, therefore, of the first Angles as hook-men, possibly because of their fishing, more probably because the shore where they lived, at the foot of the peninsula of Jutland, was bent in the shape of a fishhook. The name Saxon from *seax*, *sax*, a short sword, means the sword-man, and from the name we may judge something of the temper of the hardy fighters who preceded the Angles into Britain. The Angles were the most numerous of the conquering tribes, and from them the new home was called Anglaland. By gradual changes this became first Englelond and then England.

More than five hundred years after the landing of these tribes, and while they called themselves Englishmen, we find the Latin writers of the Middle Ages speaking of the inhabitants

of Britain as *Anglisaxones*,—that is, Saxons of England,—to distinguish them from the Saxons of the Continent. In the Latin charters of King Alfred the same name appears; but it is never seen or heard in his native speech. There he always speaks of his beloved "Englelond" and of his brave "Englisc" people. In the sixteenth century, when the old name of Englishmen clung to the new people resulting from the union of Saxon and Norman, the name Anglo-Saxon was first used in the national sense by the scholar Camden¹ in his *History of Britain*; and since then it has been in general use among English writers. In recent years the name has gained a wider significance, until it is now used to denote a spirit rather than a nation, the brave, vigorous, enlarging spirit that characterizes the English-speaking races everywhere, and that has already put a broad belt of English law and English liberty around the whole world.

The Life. If the literature of a people springs directly out of its life, then the stern, barbarous life of our Saxon forefathers would seem, at first glance, to promise little of good literature. Outwardly their life was a constant hardship, a perpetual struggle against savage nature and savage men. Behind them were gloomy forests inhabited by wild beasts and still wilder men, and peopled in their imagination with dragons and evil shapes. In front of them, thundering at the very dikes for entrance, was the treacherous North Sea, with its fogs and storms and ice, but with that indefinable call of the deep that all men hear who live long beneath its influence. Here they lived, a big, blond, powerful race, and hunted and fought and sailed, and drank and feasted when their labor was done. Almost the first thing we notice about these big, fearless, childish men is that they love the sea; and because they love it they hear and answer its call:

¹ William Camden (1551-1623), one of England's earliest and greatest antiquarians. His first work, *Britannia*, a Latin history of England, has been called "the common sun whereat our modern writers have all kindled their little torches."

... No delight has he in the world,
Nor in aught save the roll of the billows; but always a longing,
A yearning uneasiness, hastens him on to the sea.¹

As might be expected, this love of the ocean finds expression in all their poetry. In *Beowulf* alone there are fifteen names for the sea, from the *holm*, that is, the horizon sea, the "upmounding," to the *brim*, which is the ocean flinging its welter of sand and creamy foam upon the beach at your feet. And the figures used to describe or glorify it—"the swan road, the whale path, the heaving battle plain"—are almost as numerous. In all their poetry there is a magnificent sense of lordship over the wild sea even in its hour of tempest and fury:

Often it befalls us, on the ocean's highways,
In the boats our boatmen, when the storm is roaring,
Leap the billows over, on our stallions of the foam.²

The Inner Life. A man's life is more than his work; his dream is ever greater than his achievement; and literature reflects not so much man's deed as the spirit which animates him; not the poor thing that he does, but rather the splendid thing that he ever hopes to do. In no place is this more evident than in the age we are now studying. Those early sea kings were a marvelous mixture of savagery and sentiment, of rough living and of deep feeling, of splendid courage and the deep melancholy of men who know their limitations and have faced the unanswered problem of death. They were not simply fearless freebooters who harried every coast in their war galleys. If that were all, they would have no more history or literature than the Barbary pirates, of whom the same thing could be said. These strong fathers of ours were men of profound emotions. In all their fighting the love of an untarnished glory was uppermost; and under the warrior's savage exterior was hidden a great love of home and homely virtues,

¹ From Iddings' version of *The Seafarer*.

² From *Andreas*, ll. 511 ff., a free translation. The whole poem thrills with the old Saxon love of the sea and of ships.

and a reverence for the one woman to whom he would presently return in triumph. So when the wolf hunt was over, or the desperate fight was won, these mighty men would gather in the banquet hall, and lay their weapons aside where the open fire would flash upon them, and there listen to the songs of Scop and Gleeman, — men who could put into adequate words the emotions and aspirations that all men feel but that only a few can ever express :

Music and song where the heroes sat —
The glee-wood rang, a song uprose
When Hrothgar's scop gave the hall good cheer.¹

It is this great and hidden life of the Anglo-Saxons that finds expression in all their literature. Briefly, it is summed up in five great principles, — their love of personal freedom, their responsiveness to nature, their religion, their reverence for womanhood, and their struggle for glory as a ruling motive in every noble life.

In reading Anglo-Saxon poetry it is well to remember these five principles, for they are like the little springs at the head of a great river, — clear, pure springs of poetry, and out of them the best of our literature has always flowed. Thus when we read,

Blast of the tempest — it aids our oars ;
Rolling of thunder — it hurts us not ;
Rush of the hurricane — bending its neck
To speed us whither our wills are bent,

we realize that these sea rovers had the spirit of kinship with the mighty life of nature ; and kinship with nature invariably expresses itself in poetry. Again, when we read,

Now hath the man
O'ercome his troubles. No pleasure does he lack,
Nor steeds, nor jewels, nor the joys of mead,
Nor any treasure that the earth can give,
O royal woman, if he have but thee,²

¹ From *Beowulf*, ll. 1063 ff., a free translation.

² Translated from *The Husband's Message*, written on a piece of bark. With wonderful poetic insight the bark itself is represented as telling its story to the wife, from

we know we are dealing with an essentially noble man, not a savage ; we are face to face with that profound reverence for womanhood which inspires the greater part of all good poetry, and we begin to honor as well as understand our ancestors. So in the matter of glory or honor ; it was, apparently, not the love of fighting, but rather the love of honor resulting from fighting well, which animated our forefathers in every campaign. "He was a man deserving of remembrance" was the highest thing that could be said of a dead warrior ; and "He is a man deserving of praise" was the highest tribute to the living. The whole secret of Beowulf's mighty life is summed up in the last line, "Ever yearning for his people's praise." So every tribe had its scop, or poet, more important than any warrior, who put the deeds of its heroes into the expressive words that constitute literature ; and every banquet hall had its gleeman, who sang the scop's poetry in order that the deed and the man might be remembered. Oriental peoples built monuments to perpetuate the memory of their dead ; but our ancestors made poems, which should live and stir men's souls long after monuments of brick and stone had crumbled away. It is to this intense love of glory and the desire to be remembered that we are indebted for Anglo-Saxon literature.

Our First Speech. Our first recorded speech begins with the songs of Widsith and Deor, which the Anglo-Saxons may have brought with them when they first conquered Britain. At first glance these songs in their native dress look strange as a foreign tongue ; but when we examine them carefully we find many words that have been familiar since childhood. We have seen this in *Beowulf* ; but in prose the resemblance

the time when the birch tree grew beside the sea until the exiled man found it and stripped the bark and carved on its surface a message to the woman he loved. This first of all English love songs deserves to rank with Valentine's description of Silvia :

Why, man, she is mine own,
And I as rich in having such a jewel
As twenty seas, if all their sand were pearl,
The water nectar and the rocks pure gold.

Two Gentlemen of Verona, II, 4.

of this old speech to our own is even more striking. Here, for instance, is a fragment of the simple story of the conquest of Britain by our Anglo-Saxon ancestors :

Her Hengest and Æsc his sunu gefuhton with Bryttas, on thære stowe the is gecweden Creccanford, and thær ofslogon feower thusenda wera. And tha Bryttas tha forleton Cent-lond, and mid myclum ege flugon to Lundenbyrig. (At this time Hengest and Aesc, his son, fought against



STONEHENGE, ON SALISBURY PLAIN

Probably the ruins of a temple of the native Britons

the Britons at the place which is called Crayford and there slew four thousand men. And then the Britons forsook Kentland, and with much fear fled to London town.)¹

The reader who utters these words aloud a few times will speedily recognize his own tongue, not simply in the words but also in the whole structure of the sentences.

From such records we see that our speech is Teutonic in its origin ; and when we examine any Teutonic language we learn that it is only a branch of the great Aryan or Indo-European family of languages. In life and language, therefore, we are related first to the Teutonic races, and through them to all the nations of this Indo-European family, which, starting with enormous vigor from their original home (probably in central Europe²), spread southward and westward, driving out the native tribes and slowly developing the mighty civilizations of India, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the wilder but more vigorous life of the Celts and Teutons. In all these

¹ From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, record of the year 457.

² According to Sweet the original home of the Aryans is placed in central or northern Europe, rather than in Asia, as was once assumed. See *The History of Language*, p. 103.

languages — Sanskrit, Iranian, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Teutonic — we recognize the same root words for father and mother, for God and man, for the common needs and the common relations of life ; and since words are windows through which we see the soul of this old people, we find certain ideals of love, home, faith, heroism, liberty, which seem to have been the very life of our forefathers, and which were inherited by them from their old heroic and conquering ancestors. It was on the borders of the North Sea that our fathers halted for unnumbered centuries on their westward journey, and slowly developed the national life and language which we now call Anglo-Saxon.

It is this old vigorous Anglo-Saxon language which forms the basis of our modern English. If we read a paragraph from any good English book, and then analyze it, as we would a flower, to see what it contains, we find two distinct classes of words. The first class, containing simple words expressing the common things of life, makes up the strong framework of our language. These words are like the stem and bare branches of a mighty oak, and if we look them up in the dictionary we find that almost invariably they come to us from our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. The second and larger class of words is made up of those that give grace, variety, ornament, to our speech. They are like the leaves and blossoms of the same tree, and when we examine their history we find that they come to us from the Celts, Romans, Normans, and other peoples with whom we have been in contact in the long years of our development. The most prominent characteristic of our present language, therefore, is its dual character. Its best qualities — strength, simplicity, directness — come from Anglo-Saxon sources ; its enormous added wealth of expression, its comprehensiveness, its plastic adaptability to new conditions and ideas, are largely the result of additions from other languages, and especially of its gradual absorption of the French language after the

Dual Character of our Language