

Elfreda the Saxon

Chapter I

Lady de Valery

“**Y**ES, I am Saxon, unmistakably Saxon,” and the lady sighed as she glanced at her fair, shapely, but not very small hands and feet.

She lifted her eyes from her offending hands in a minute or two, and looked across the undulating pastures to the woods beyond. From her elevated position on the turret of her castle-home she could see every object for miles around, and she gazed long and steadfastly at the curling wreaths of smoke that rose from an irregular group of buildings on the edge of the distant wood. “I wonder, I wonder—” she began, but there she suddenly stopped, for one of her bower-maidens drew near, and the Lady de Valery would not have one of her attendants overhear her self-communing for half her jewels. She fondly thought that they believed

UNDULATING: *rolling*

BOWER-MAIDENS: *lady's maids*

SELF-COMMUNING: *talking to herself*

she was a Norman, and not one of the despised race whom the conquerors of England had made "hewers of wood and drawers of water" when they proclaimed themselves masters of the soil; but if her servants and attendants did not know that the long, low-roofed farmhouse just within view was her childhood's home, the lady herself never forgot it, nor her haughty lord either, although both were careful to conceal the fact from the knowledge of their children. Sometimes a wish had entered the lady's heart that the old homestead would be burned down in one of the quarrels that were perpetually occurring between the followers of the two families, for her brother as heartily despised the Norman usurpers of the land as they did the conquered race, and into this feeling theows and house-carls, lithsmen and pages, entered, each espousing the cause of his master, and showing his enmity to the other upon every possible occasion.

Sir Valence de Valery would, doubtless, have preferred that the humble home of his beautiful wife had been at a greater distance from his lordly castle; but he was too true a knight to take any mean advantage, or allow his followers to do more than carry off a few head of cattle or sheep by way of reprisals for some infringement of his rights as lord of the woods and plains from Crowland minister to the village of Bourne.

THEOWS: *slaves*

HOUSE-CARLS: *household men-servants*

LITHSMEN: *mercenary troops from the shipmen's guild*

ESPOUSING: *embracing*

It might have been otherwise, and, doubtless, was in the earlier years of the Norman rule; for the stalwart Saxon had been compelled to labor at the building of these mighty Norman keeps, and then, when they were finished, evil men took possession of them, and robbed and oppressed all who came within their reach. But there had been an end of most of these evil practices since Sir Valence had succeeded to his inheritance, for he was a sworn knight of chivalry, and by his vows he was pledged to defend the helpless and oppressed—not to wrong any man by false speech or robbery—and, unlike many of his brother knights, he believed his vow included the defense of even the downtrodden Saxon race as well as the honor of haughty Norman dames; and so with as much honor and reverence as he would have wedded a Norman lady of his own rank, had he wooed and won Alfruda Ericson, the Saxon.

Many years had passed since she came, a shy, girlish bride, to live within the strong, gloomy-looking castle she had often shuddered at before, and sons and daughters had been born to them, who were taught all the arts and accomplishments deemed needful for Norman knights and ladies, with the usual scorn for the conquered race.

It was not often that the Lady de Valery indulged in such a reverie as then occupied her mind, for she generally banished all thought of her old

REPRISALS: *use of force to pay back for damage suffered*

MINSTER: *a large or important church*

STALWART: *strong, sturdy*

REVERIE: *meditation*

home and relatives as quickly as they arose; but now these thoughts would not be dispelled try as she would, and so she had given herself up to them until interrupted by the appearance of her bower-maiden.

“My lady, a messenger bearing a letter awaits thee in the great hall,” said the maid.

“Send the messenger to me,” commanded the lady in an imperious tone, “or bring the letter thyself.”

“Nay, but the child will not give up the letter to any but the Lady de Valery herself; she is so commanded by—”

“Nay, trouble me not with such whimsies, but fetch the letter hither and I will read it anon,” interrupted the lady.

To venture a further protest would probably bring a sharp blow from the lady’s spindle, which hung at her side, and so the maid turned at once and descended the steep winding stairs built in the thickness of the outer wall.

But in a few minutes she returned again with empty hands. “The girl will not part with the letter, my lady,” she said.

“The messenger is a girl!” exclaimed her mistress, “and will not deliver her missive to thy keeping?”

“She saith it is of such moment that she should see the Lady de Valery herself, and that her—”

IMPERIOUS: *commanding, noble*

WHIMSIES: *silliness*

ANON: *immediately*

SPINDLE: *a wooden rod used for spinning thread*

“Lead her to the bower,” commanded her mistress, “I will see her ere long;” and she turned once more to gaze at the distant farmhouse, and wonder why it was she could not divest herself of the unwelcome thoughts that would obtrude themselves upon her mind.

“Perhaps this messenger and her letter may drive away the strange foreboding that seems to be creeping over me!” exclaimed the lady after some little time; and she rose from her seat and descended to her bower, where her maids were busy with distaff and spindle, and where, as she expected, her visitor awaited her.

One glance, however, at the fair, childish face made the lady tremble and shiver with an undefined apprehension of coming evil; and before she took the letter she commanded her bower-maidens to withdraw, and as they silently obeyed she secured the heavy oaken door with its wooden latch, and drew the tapestry curtain before it. Then she stepped back and took the letter mechanically, her eyes still riveted on the girl’s face. “From whence hast thou come, child?” she asked at length.

“From Jerusalem,” answered the girl in a low, sweet voice, speaking in French with a better accent than the lady herself.

Lady de Valery started. “From Jerusalem!” she exclaimed. “And thy mother and grandfather, child?”

MOMENT: *importance*

DIVEST: *free*

OBTRUDE: *thrust*

DISTAFF: *a staff used in spinning wool or flax*

“They are dead,” whispered the girl. “They died in the dreadful siege, before Saladin and his hosts of paynim soldiers took the holy city.”

The lady seemed to breathe more freely, and she glanced at the unopened letter she still held in her hand. “Thy mother is dead!” she repeated, “and thy grandfather too! Did they bid thee bring this letter to me?”

“My mother bade me bring it to her sister, the Lady de Valery,” answered the girl, looking full in the proud lady’s face as she spoke.

“Hush, hush, child! be not rash in thy speech concerning this matter,” said the lady quickly; and, to hide her confusion and gain time to arrange her thoughts, she retired to a distant window to read the letter.

But the reading of this seemed to add to her perplexity and before she read to the end she crushed it in her hand, and came back again to where the girl sat.

“Dost thou know aught concerning the contents of this missive?” she asked.

“Yes; the good brother who wrote it read it aloud to my mother as her head rested on my shoulder just before she died.”

“Was the ‘good brother’ a monk?” asked the lady.

“A monk and a knight—one of the noble brethren of the Hospital of St. John,” answered the girl.

This answer seemed to perplex and annoy the lady more than anything that had been said before. "I am ruined, disgraced!" she mentally exclaimed. "Every knight in England will know that I am a Saxon, and every proud Norman dame will take her seat at the tournament before me;" and Lady de Valery marched up and down the room, kicking the rushes and sweet herbs that were strewn upon the floor in every direction. For nearly half an hour she so paced, and then, casting her eyes upon the hour-glass that stood near, she suddenly stopped. "My children will be here very soon," she said. "I cannot give thee an answer concerning this letter now—not until Sir Valence hath seen it. Thou mayst come tomorrow," she added as the girl slowly rose from her seat. She lifted her soft blue eyes pleadingly to the lady's face, but she turned proudly away, and drawing aside the tapestry curtain said, as she pointed to the door, "Be careful and discreet in thy speech when thou comest again;" and then she returned to the window once more to watch for the return of her children from their ramble in the garden.

In a few minutes they came trooping in—two boys and three girls—almost too eager to pay the accustomed reverence on entering their mother's presence, for each was anxious to tell the wonderful news of the arrival of a holy palmer, who had come straight from the Holy Land, bringing with him news that made every Christian heart stand

PALMER: *a pilgrim who has visited the Holy Land and carries a palm branch as proof*

still with affright, for the holy city had been retaken by the Saracens after being a Christian kingdom eighty-eight years.

These were all the facts the young de Valerys had heard, but the boys were eager with their questions.

“My mother, will there be another crusade, and will Guy go to fight the evil paynim hosts?” they asked.

The lady started, and turned pale at the suggestion. “Guy! Where is he?” she asked, looking round the room, for this last suggestion concerning her eldest, her darling son, added to her previous perplexity, seemed to have confused her mind entirely.

The children looked at each other, and then at their mother’s pale face.

“Has Guy come home from Lincoln?” asked Gilbert.

“Home! Nay, nay, thou knowest he is esquire to Sir Hugh de Laney,” replied the lady petulantly, recalling her scattered senses.

“If there is another crusade, and Sir Hugh should lead his knights to the holy war, then Guy would go too, would he not, my mother?”

But the lady could only shake her head. “The saints preserve us from another crusade!” she said at length, and then, hastily dismissing her children, she sent one of her maids to inquire whether her husband had returned from the abbey of

SARACENS: *Arabs*

ESQUIRE: *an attendant to a knight*

PETULANTLY: *irritably*

Crowland, where he had been to consult with the prior about the enclosing of some lands. The girl soon came back, and Sir Valence with her, and as soon as the lady and knight were left alone, she began her story by telling him of the arrival of the palmer.

“Yes, I have heard the direful news, and already my men are furbishing their arms, as though Saladin were at the castle gates. But thou hast had another visitor today, Alftruda!” suddenly added the knight, pausing in his restless walk up and down the room.

“Yes, I have a letter brought by—by—” and there the lady hesitated.

“Brought by thy sister’s child,” said the knight somewhat sternly.

The lady looked up in his face. “How knowest thou she is my sister’s child?” she asked.

But instead of replying to her question he asked, “What is this curse that is said to rest upon thy house—the curse of the Ericsons? I heard naught concerning it until today from the prior of Crowland.”

“There is no curse now!” almost shrieked the lady; “it was but a Norman lie against a Saxon monk, and, to take the curse from his children, my father died close to the holy tomb.”

“And thou hast known this, Alftruda, and kept the secret from me?” said Sir Valence in a grieved tone.

PRIOR: *head of the monastery*

DIREFUL: *terrible*

FURBISHING: *polishing*

The lady's proud head drooped beneath her husband's searching gaze; but at length, with an inward shiver, she said, "How could I tell thee, Valence, that our house was under the spell of the evil one; nathless, too, my father had redeemed it from the power of Satan by prayers and fastings and penances at the sacred sepulcher."

The knight looked pityingly on his wife as she said this. "Didst thou know aught concerning thy father's vow, Alfruda—did he tell thee of this before he went away?"

"He told me the story of the curse even as I have heard it since from the prior of Crowland, for this ancestor who brought the curse upon our race was a monk of Crowland, and spoke slightingly concerning the power of St. Guthlac, who had shown great favor to our family," said the lady.

"This recreant monk was also accused of witchcraft, as well as of teaching strange doctrines to all who came near him, saying the pope was only a proud, evil man, and that it was not lawful to pray to the saints and virgin, besides many other heresies condemned by holy Church. Was this the accusation thou didst hear?"

The lady bowed her head. "But it was Norman against Saxon, and we know how cruelly—"

"Nay, but, Alfruda, thy father believed it or he would not have vowed to take the curse away; and now, alack! his vow hath been broken, for this child should have died within the walls of Jerusalem,

NATHLESS: *nevertheless*

PENANCES: *voluntary punishments for sins committed*

SEPULCHER: *tomb*

and not have returned to her kindred.”

“Then she hath brought the curse back with her!” gasped the lady.

The knight looked pityingly on his wife’s horror-stricken face. “I wish thou hadst told me this story before,” he said gently, and then, by way of comfort, he added, “There will, doubtless, be another crusade, Alftruda, and so the curse may yet be averted from our children.”

RECREANT: *cowardly, unfaithful*

AVERTED: *turned away*