

**THE BURIED
IDEAL, PP. 8-183**

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CHARLES LAWSON

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THE BURIED IDEAL

BY
CHARLES LAWSON



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flourishing. This portrayal is at best in abstract outline only: neither the full figure nor the living soul do we find here. But another place and speech supply both lacks; in whose words the shapes are flesh and the spirit breathes discernible therethrough. To these the reader shall in time be brought.

First, then, we find our Roman author telling us that "it is no disgrace for any German youth to show himself among the members of a Company"; and if we wonder why shame might attach to the position we are duly told by certain Tacitean commentators that the legal standing of a Companion toward his chief was that of slave to lord. Such voluntary slavery was the price paid to a chosen leader by the impecunious or aspiring young Germanic warrior for his living and the gift of battle-horse and terrible "bloody and victorious" battle-spear. But, as our historian has hastened to inform us, so far from being held disgraceful, such a servitude was held in highly honorable demand. "For the strength and glory of each chieftain lay in having always a great band of chosen youth about him, as an ornament in time of peace, a guard in war: by means of them his fame might spread not only through his own tribe but to neighboring nations also, gaining him both reverence and gifts and winning wars with his mere name."

Whereby these bands were soon become an indispensability to the most modest princeling and

might almost dictate their own terms of service. These were not, however, very hard; in addition to good fare and furnishings, they demanded from their leader only ample grounds for admiration of himself; without which, truly, no amount of promised pampering and splendid apparatus could have slightly tempted them. "Shameful is it," says our Roman, "when the battle has been joined, for a prince to be surpassed in bravery." Then, indeed, his band would not be long in taking back their freedom and betaking themselves to a nobler leader. But such necessity was rare enough, if ever it occurred; for the chieftain lived upon his reputation and became in fact the servant of his servants' eyes in order to preserve it.

And what therefor was asked of the companions?— Perfect readiness at all times to surrender their lives utterly. "Shameful is it," Tacitus continues, "for Companions when in battle not to be the equals of their lord in bravery. Yea, truly, it is life-long infamy and crime for any to retreat from fight survivor of his lord. To defend him, guard him, give their bravest deeds to brighten his own glory,— these are the Companions' special part and sacred duty. Princes strive for victory; Companions for their princes."

Here, then, are certain traits of this our chosen type,— thus pictured to us in the skeleton shapes of their politico-economical aspects only, but despite it promising the patient reader much more animated matter when their bones are once em-

bodied in live flesh. Does not, indeed, a pious scholarship in footnote furnish us with the auspicious example of a practising Companionship from a certain late contemporary of Tacitus, one Ammianus Marcellinus, who relates how, when Chief Chochiliacus of the Alamanni had been taken by the Romans, his whole following, unfortunately absent at the earlier time, came after him to share the chances of captivity?

And now we pass from Chochiliacus and his Companions — whose reputation might have been much wider-spread had he possessed a pensionary bard or people not been naturally bashful about naming him — to some whose names and deeds and spirits also have been splendidly enshrined for us by the first craft of English song.

4. POETICAL

History has certified to us through several of her lofty functionaries that the settlement in Britain of her continental conquerors was nothing less than a transfer thither in its fullest form of Anglo-Saxon society. Natural enough, then, that the early English should find nothing alien in the poetical transplantations from whose slips and shoots in time sprang up their epic lay of Beowulf. For such, a cloud of commentators has assured us, were the origins and was the growth of that most ancient modern song. Many other things concerning the said Beowulf they do also

at great length assure us; but concerning any present helpfulness or every-day unliterary value to be got thence they have nothing to say; and we shall therefore in re-visiting the region travel as if on new ground.

With Beowulf on friendly errand to the aid of Hrothgar against Grendel, giant fen-fiend, came his twelve Companions, heartened for whatever fate their chief should find.

And when at evening the hero, having boasted duly—as became one in those days—and disarmed himself to meet the monster on fair terms, had bedded him in the great Hall of Hart, “there bowed themselves to rest about him many a brave sea-fighter,”—the full number, our magniloquent word-smith would say, of that somewhat meagre band. He might slumber, feeling safe in the prowess of his several horse-power hand-grip; not so securely they. For they had heard how “slaughterous death within the wine-hall had snatched away ere now by much too many of the Danish folk, and not one of them thought that he should thereafter see his own dear land, his tribe, or noble city, where he had been reared.” But nonetheless they slept upon the premonition, allowing Grendel, who came scritchng down into the hall toward midnight—“livid flame was standing from his eyes”—to seize upon one of the watch, “rend him unawares, bite his bone-locker, drink his blood, and swallow him in bits.” By which time, however, Beowulf is ready to re-

ceive the visitor with a most gladsome hand of welcome, and his friends awake to find themselves once more in occupancy of the back-ground to his battle-play. And in background they must keep both during that impenetrable mix-up out of which the unbidden guest emerges minus arm and appetite, and while the fight is fought again with speeches and potations. Not until the splendor of their leader's presence disappears in Grendel's pool and stays under nine full days, do they shine again with unreflected light.

To this spot the hero had been brought by Hrothgar's retinue to pay return-call upon Grendel's dam, who had visited the hall in dire vengeance of his death. And when the neighboring bands of water-snakes and consanguineal sea-monsters were for the time being dispossessed by his Companions' spears, Beowulf had gone down into the submarine home of the Grendel family. And become, so thought his poor Companions, almost a member, by incorporation, of the same. So, too, did not doubt the white-haired old men natives, and, having said as much, departed homewards. But "the strangers sat there still upon the ness and, sick in spirit, stared upon the pool. They hoped, but not expected, ever to behold their own dear lord again." Somewhat suggestive, truly, of a certain other ancient twelve — then lacking one — left likewise lonesome and disconsolate.

But when the "helm of seamen" did at length

get back on land, they hastened to him; "God they thanked," interpolates a later piety, "and took joy of their lord, that they might behold him safe once more." And now begins again their own eclipse, which they enter with no specified repinings. His the glory and the torchlight; theirs as great a joy in shadow. Did these simple spirits never guess the high advantages and strong delights of Individualism? Evidently not; perhaps, indeed, they could not have appreciated them.

Nor was Beowulf himself, so far as one can well discover, such an overweening individualist. Contrarily, one can discover him,—when, gifted with large treasure by the grateful Hrothgar, he has returned to Hygelac his overlord and duly told his tale and ably boasted, for the times becomingly, both of his prowess and the prizes it had won,—making some remarks in quite another mood. For he ends with: "These (said prizes) I would gladly bring thee and bestow them joyfully on thee, O king of men. Still doth every good thing begin with thee. Take thou full joy of all." Whereafter the famed hero did not hesitate to enter his own position of eclipse, and contrived to occupy it, says his poet, lawfully—without, when drunken, slaying any of his comrades,—which was something, for those days.

Nor, when Hygelac had gone a-warring once too often, and remained to feed the ravens and the wolves of Friesland, did Beowulf, who, having