

LITERATURE, &c.

THE SEA-KINGS IN ENGLAND.

BY E. ATHERSTONE.

We are indebted for the following spirited extract, to a review of the above named work, in the Liverpool Albion.

“Edmund, meantime, found his return to the place of conflict less easy than he had expected. Several small groups of flying Northmen encountered, and held a fierce, but always a brief contest with him. The roar of battle behind them, and the strength and desperate resistance of their antagonist, deterred them from a protracted struggle with him. At length, however, an enemy presented himself upon whom Edmund became the instant and resolved aggressor. Flying at great speed, he beheld a warrior, completely armed, who bore in his hand the renowned raven banner. The superstitious reverence with which this was regarded by the Northmen was well known to Edmund, and the loss of it would, he knew, more damp their spirits than the most complete overthrow in battle. As we have already intimated, this banner was supposed to be possessed of magical powers; to announce victory by the spreading of its wings; and to fortel, by the drooping of its head, when disaster was at hand. It was said to have been the work of the three sisters of Hubbo, the daughters of Ragner Lodbrog, in one noon tide: was beheld with great reverence, and never entrusted in battle, except to some chief of uncommon strength, skill, and courage. The raven had soared above a hundred fights, and had never been in danger of capture. Now, however, peril the most eminent threatened it: and it was by the command of Hubbo himself that the brave warrior who bore it had fled from the hopeless battle, that he might preserve this treasure, at least, from the spoiler. Amleth, the standard bearer, a tall and powerful man had burst unharmed through all opposition, and was now, with rapid strides, hastening to place it in safety. He passed not far distant from Edmund, who, after a fierce contest with some flying Northmen, was now pursuing his way toward the thick of the battle, and longing to stand front to front against the terrible and abhorred Hubbo. The sight of the raven, whose gilded pole gleamed brightly to the moon as it passed him, instantly, however, changed his course, and with all his speed he pursued, and soon overtook the bearer, who, hearing his footsteps close behind him, and discerning him at one glance to be an enemy, assailed him with a backward stroke of his sword, such as Edmund had never till then witnessed. His own was uplifted in anticipation of a blow, but it was beaten down, and his shield cut through till the sword of the Dane touched upon his gauntlet. Here, then, was an antagonist likely to put to proof the skill and strength which, among his own countrymen, Edmund had never found matched. Amleth still flew onward, for the preservation of the banner was of more importance than could be his success in fight with an enemy; and he calculated, that probably, his first greeting might have rendered a second unnecessary; but Edmund with a fleet foot, shot soon before him, and compelled him to turn aside, and ultimately to stop and defend himself.

“Hound of a Saxon!” cried the Dane, as he drove the banner-staff into the ground, and with the speed of thought brought down his shield, which had been thrust high up the arm near the elbow, that he might freely grasp the flag,—“hound of a Saxon! thy moments shall soon be told. The curse of Odin upon thee for delaying me thus! Ha! hast thou got it?”

“As he spoke the last words, he discharged upon his enemy a tremendous blow, that made the shield ring again; but Edmund now, more on his guard, and better aware of the prodigious force of his antagonist, caught the blow upon the centre of his uplifted buckler, where its thickness and strength were far greater than at the rim, upon which the former stroke had alighted, and in his turn discharged upon the Dane a blow which fell upon the helmet, and sent him staggering several paces backward. A second stroke, before the stunned senses of the Dane returned, drove him, after a giddy reel, to the ground, and Edmund sprang forward to seize upon his prize. But this was already in the hands of some flying Northmen, who had snatched it up as they passed, though they did not choose to stop and take part in the combat. They were, however, seen ere they had proceeded many paces; and the young Saxon was instantly upon them. Bursting through those who were hindmost, Edmund struck down the soldier who carried the flag, and, dropping his shield, caught the pole before it fell with its bearer to the ground. Every sword was directed upon him, but his mail held him secure, while his opponents, common soldiers only, whose defensive armour was nothing better than a coat and helmet of thick leather, quite unable to resist a sword wielded by such an arm as his, fell at every stroke.

The value of the prize alone could have made them, at such a moment, strenuous in their resistance against a man so much their over-match in strength and advantage of arms. Of the five who had first encountered him, two only were, at length, left; and these turned to flight almost at the moment when his former, and more terrible adversary, Amleth, having recovered from the stunning effect of the blows which had cut through his steel helmet, and sent down his cheeks a gentle trickling of blood, again, and with more bitter fury, advanced upon him. Edmund was now without his shield which he had dropped at the instant when he snatched the standard from the soldier, and which had been carried off by one of those who fled. Amleth appeared to be fully recovered; and the young Saxon began to doubt whether he should at last carry off his prize. He resolved, however, that nothing but death should make him surrender it, and bound himself up, therefore for a desperate struggle. The thought, indeed, glanced through his mind, that he might avoid the combat, and secure the prize by swiftness of foot; but this was an expedient so galling to his pride, that he could not bow himself to it. These reflections, however, were the work of but a moment, in the interval betwixt the re-appearance of Amleth, and the instant attack which that formidable warrior made upon him.

“The first motion of Edmund was to dart forward the pole of the banner in his left hand against the face of his enemy; and this he did with such rapidity and force, that, had the point held to the mark, this one blow would, probably have decided the contest. But Amleth was now better aware of the adversary whom he had to deal with, and active to ward against every attack. He saw and, with infinite nimbleness, started to one side and avoided the thrust. In the same moment he let fall a hissing blow which, though dexterously parried by the sword of Edmund, glanced upon the strong pole of the banner, and shore it like a twig. The returning stroke of the Saxon was caught upon the shield of Amleth; but the admirable temper of the metal seemed proof against every force and the blade jarred with a violence that threatened to shiver it.

“In their shields and swords the Northern warriors were more particular than in any other part of their warlike accoutrements. The method by which they tempered their steel is unknown; but, like the heroes of Troy and Greece, they delighted in feigning their armour and weapons to be the work of supernatural powers, impassive and irresistible when opposed to any mere earthly material. Against a sword and shield of such formidable pretension, Edmund had now nothing to oppose but a weapon confessedly wrought by human hands; finely tempered, it is true, but, as he soon found, very inferior to that of his antagonist. The rest of his armour was, however, far superior to the Dane, or the contest might soon have terminated fatally to him. The helmet and mail complete had, it may be remembered, been the gift of Leofric, to whose great uncle—a man of uncommon size and strength, and the devoted friend of young Egbert at the time when he fled France to avoid the machinations of Brihtric, king of Wessex—it had been presented by the emperor Charlemagne, whose banners he had followed through half the countries of Europe, and whose regard and admiration he had excited by many acts of heroic bravery. This armour was of Milan steel, engrained with gold, splendid at once, and of the most admirable temper. For this rare treasure Edmund had often been the envy of Sigifred and other warriors, who had nothing of the kind to compare with it; and, truly, it now stood him in good stead.

“The second stroke of Amleth thundered upon his left side like the blow of a sledge hammer upon an anvil, but with as little effect, though the concussion made every bone in his body jar. It, however, made Edmund more fully aware of the disadvantage at which he fought from the loss of his buckler, and put him upon a more cautious method of fighting. The enormous shield (so the Northmen term'd the large shield) of his enemy covered him from head to foot; and it was only at the moments when he laid himself a little open in the act of striking, that the Saxon had any chance of reaching at the head, or the more pervious armour which covered the body of his foe. With astonishing dexterity he avoided, by rapid backward leaps, the blows that he feared too frequently to catch upon his sword, which seemed, at every stroke that it met, to jar as if about to fly into shivers. Meantime, he forgot not the use of his banner-pole, about six feet of which still remained, and which he sometimes darted at the face of Amleth in a way that called for the most cautious guard on the part of the Dane. Every thrust of this novel weapon he instantly followed up by a sword stroke aimed at whatever part seemed in the least exposed, and had already in this way inflicted two severe wounds upon the left thigh of the Northman, when his sword, at length, as he feared, in stopping a tremendous blow from that of his antagonist, broke short at the hilt, and

the fragments clashed on the ground. The weapon of his enemy drove on unchecked, and fell upon the crest of the Saxon with a force that made him stagger. Amleth saw his advantage, and again lifted his dreadful weapon to end the combat. But, in confidence of victory, he forgot caution, turned aside his shield to give the full weight of his body to the blow, and, at that instant, Edmund darted forward his banner pole with the speed of light, struck him full on the brow, and drove him without a struggle, to the ground. The terrible sword, which seemed to be descending like the messenger of death from that vigorous arm, dropped, as if fallen from the fingers of an infant. The huge shield gave out a dull clang as it sank, with the body of its master, heavily to the earth. Amleth neither stirred nor breathed again. The banner-pole had entered the forehead, and death followed on the instant.

“It was not without a kind of pity, that Edmund beheld the fall of so brave an adversary; but neither the time, the place, nor the occasion, permitted useless reflections. He seized the redoubted sword and impassive buckler, caught up the banner, a prize at once, and a weapon of worth to him, and, at a pace, that might allow him to breathe and collect his strength, strode onward toward the place where the battle yet raged.”

FROM THE LANDERS' TRAVELS: UNPUBLISHED.

A NIGHT ON THE NIGER.

WE made no stop whatever on the river, not even at meal-times, our men suffering the canoe to glide down with the stream while they were eating their food. At five in the afternoon they all complained of fatigue, and we looked around us for a landing place, where we might rest awhile, but we could find none, for every village which we saw after that hour was unfortunately situated behind large thick morasses and sloughy bogs, through which, after various provoking and tedious trials, we found it impossible to penetrate. We were employed three hours in the afternoon in endeavouring to find a landing at some village, and though we saw them distinctly enough from the water, we could not find a passage through the morasses, behind which they lay. Therefore we were compelled to relinquish the attempt, and continue our course on the Niger. We passed several beautiful islands in the course of the day, all cultivated and inhabited, but low and flat. The width of the river appeared to vary considerably, sometimes it seemed to be two or three miles across, and at others double that width. The current drifted us along very rapidly, and we guessed it to be running at the rate of three or four miles an hour. The direction of the stream continued nearly east. The day had been excessively warm, and the sun set in beauty and grandeur, shooting forth rays tinged with the most heavenly hues, which extended to the zenith. Nevertheless, the appearance of the firmament, all glorious as it was, betokened a coming storm; the wind whistled through the tall rushes, and darkness soon covered the earth like a veil. This rendered us more anxious than ever to land somewhere, we cared not where, and to endeavour to procure shelter for the night, if not in a village, at least under a tree. Accordingly, raising the drooping spirits of our men, we encouraged them to renew their exertions by setting them the example, and our canoe darted suddenly and swiftly down the current. We were enabled to steer her rightly by the vividness of the lightning, which flashed across the water continually, and by this means also we could distinguish any danger before us, and avoid the numerous small islands with which the river is interspersed, and which otherwise might have embarrassed us very seriously. But though we could perceive almost close to us several lamps burning in comfortable-looking huts, and could plainly distinguish the voices of their occupants, and though we exerted all our strength to get at them, we were foiled in every attempt, by reason of the sloughs and fens, and we were at last obliged to abandon them in despair. Some of these lights, after leading us a long way, eluded our search, and vanished from our sight like an ignis fatuus, and others danced about we know not how. But what was more vexatious than all, after we had got into an inlet, and toiled and tugged for a full half hour against the current, which in this little channel was uncommonly rapid, to approach a village from which we thought it flowed, both village and lights seemed to sink into the earth, the sound of the people's voices ceased of a sudden, and when we fancied we were actually close to the spot, we strained our eyes in vain to see a single hut; all was gloomy, dismal, cheerless and solitary. It seemed the work of enchantment, every thing was as visionary as ‘scorpions grasped in sleep.’ We had paddled along the banks a distance of not less than thirty miles, every inch of which we had attentively examined, but not a bit of dry land could any where be discovered which was firm enough to bear our weight. Therefore, we resigned ourselves to circumstances, and all of us having been refreshed with a little cold rice and honey, and water from the stream, we permitted the canoe to drift down with the current, for our men were too much fatigued with the labours of the day to work any longer. But here a fresh evil arose which we were unprepared to meet. An incredible number of hippopotami arose very near us, and came splashing, snorting, and plunging all round the canoe, and placed us in eminent danger. Thinking to frighten them off, we fired a shot or two at them, but to no purpose only called up from the water out of the fens, about as many more of their unwieldy companions, and we were more closely beset than before. Our people, who had never in all their lives been exposed in a canoe to such huge and formidable beasts, trembled with fear and apprehension, and absolutely wept aloud; and their terror was not a little increased by the dreadful peals of thunder which rattled over their heads, and by the awful darkness which prevailed, broken at intervals by flashes of lightning, whose powerful glare was truly awful. Our people tell us, that these formidable animals frequently upset canoes in the river, when every one in them is sure to perish. These came so close to us, that we could reach them with a butt-end of a gun. When I fired at the first, which I must have hit, every one of them came to the surface of the water, and pursued us so fast over to the north bank, that it was with the greatest difficulty imaginable we