ATHELSTAN: A POEM. BOOK I-VII

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649215065

Athelstan: a poem. Book I-VII by Anonymous

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd. Cover @ 2017

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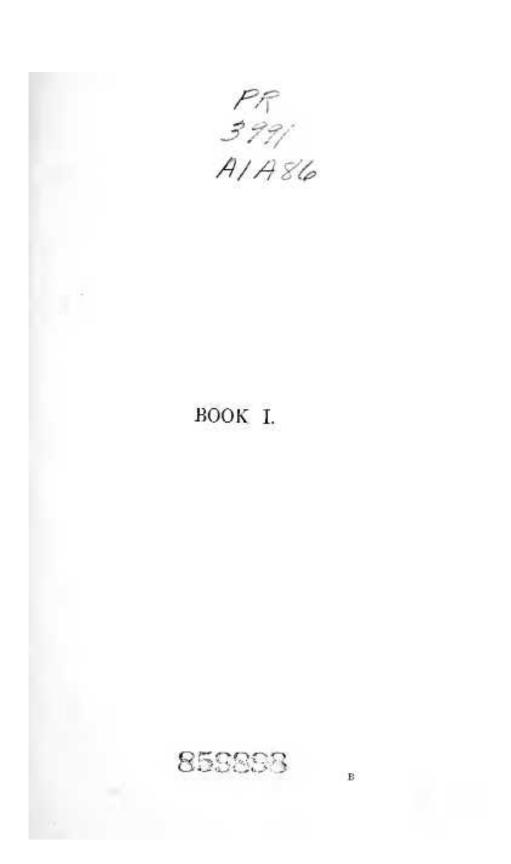
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ATHELSTAN.

ATHELSTAN:

A POEM.

LONDON: EDWARD MOXON & CO., DOVER STREET. 1862.



Noise choked the narrow streets of Winchester, A noise to rouse the morning from its bed, When steel met steel, and heart encounter'd heart With the keen hate of hours. The sombre air Was tortured into sound, as arrows whirr'd Like birds of iron beak, and missive spears Knock'd at the breasts that fronted them, to seek An entry into life—alas! for man That such a scene where ghastly wounds unmake The beauty which God made of face and form Should have a grandeur in it! "Tis the stake, The chance of loss in such a mortal game, That turns red carnage from a murd'rous fiend To a destroying angel. On one side,

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The smaller number'd, there were ranged a few With better arms, and bearing more composed, For the stern work they handled : at their head Was Ælfred, the ambitions Ætheling. He, fighting for a crown, of such an aim Fought worthy, throwing into voice and arm The weight of his great venture ; with each shout That cheer'd his friends, he struck a for to earth.*

The fight was straiten'd by the little breadth Of the old city's threads of winding road, Where buildings of all sorts, some timber-ribb'd, Tall, and stone-corner'd, others shed-like, thatch'd With broad-leaf'd water-flags, stood opposite With slender interval ; where fortress-house

^{*} Historically the opposition of Ælfred to Athelstan's succession, is surrounded with numerous difficulties. On what he founded his claims to succeed the son of the Great Alfred, has never been explained, and is, perhaps, not susceptible of explanation; but that foul play was used toward him cannot be doubted. Rome has always been ready to oblige such princes as have displayed an inclination to curich its treasury, which Athelstan's policy, as well as his superstition, induced him to do; and therefore we are little surprised at the series of tragical incidents which terminated Ælfred's career.

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Of noble Thane, jostled the shiv'ring hut That crouch'd beside it ; or the huckster's shop, With all its small display of daily wares Spread out and open to the air and eye, Fronted a palace of the priests of Christ.

Adown the central lane a wavy crowd Of men pour'd, struggling in uncertain fray, On dashing, or forced backward as the luck Of victory bore them---'twas the profitless rage Of party-passion, and the taste of blood That turn'd the current of humanity : Men slew their neighbours, and then scream'd for joy. Half-arm'd, and arm'd, and unarm'd citizens, And old and young, struck out, and stabb'd, or tore With naked hands, dyeing their clothes with blood As the true colour of their loyalty.

Amid the many combatants were two Pre-eminent in noise and action ; one

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Was young and tall, and angularly built, And strong, and quick of limb, nor over-clothed. His features had a false and wasted look, The ineffaceable stamp of suffering vice. The other was a portlier man, though short, And drest in such habiliments as mark'd A lot which Fortune had made comfortable. His syrce was wove of linen ; to his knee Adorn'd with trimmings, loosely flow'd and large His linen tunic, while his feet were housed Within an old similitude of shoes : But, to leave free his movements, he had left His decent sigum safely hung at home. "Twas a strong party-feeling which had forced The eitizen to risk his gotten wealth And the few years of life which yet remain'd To make him own himself an aged man. The two fought boldly on opposing sides, And 'mid the thick confusion of the fray The younger sought the elder, for he strove

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