EDGAR JOHN GEORGE

DANES, SAXONS AND NORMANS; OR, STORIES OF OUR ANCESTORS

John Edgar

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Содержание

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PREFACE

In the following pages I have endeavoured to tell in a popular way the story of the Norman Conquest, and to give an idea of the principal personages who figured in England at the period when that memorable event took place; and I have endeavoured, I hope not without some degree of success, to treat the subject in a popular and picturesque style, without any sacrifice of historic truth.

With a view of rendering the important event which I have attempted to illustrate, more intelligible to the reader, I have commenced by showing how the Normans under Rolfganger forced a settlement in the dominions of Charles the Simple, whilst Alfred the Great was struggling with the Danes in England, and have recounted the events which led to a connexion between the courts of Rouen and Westminster, and to the invasion of England by William the Norman.

It has been truly observed that the history of the Conquest is at once so familiar at first sight, that it appears superfluous to multiply details, so difficult to realize on examination, that a writer feels himself under the necessity of investing with importance many particulars previously regarded as uninteresting, and that the defeat at Hastings was not the catastrophe over which the curtain drops to close the Saxon tragedy, but "the first scene in a new act of the continuous drama." I have therefore continued my narrative for many years after the fall of Harold and the building of Battle Abbey, and have traced the Conqueror's career from the coast of Sussex to the banks of the Humber and the borders of the Tweed.

For the same reason I have narrated the quarrels which convulsed the Conqueror's own family – have related how son fought against father, and brother against brother – and have indicated the circumstances which, after a fierce war of succession in England, resulted in the peaceful coronation of Henry Plantagenet, and the establishment of that great house whose chiefs were so long the pride of England and the terror of her foes.

J. G. E.

I.
ROLFGANGER AND HIS COMRADES

One day towards the close of the ninth century, Harold, King of Norway, exasperated at the insubordination and contumacy of the chiefs among whom that land of mountain, and forest, and fiord was divided, vowed not to cut his fair hair till he had reduced the whole country to his sovereign authority. The process proved, as he doubtless foresaw, somewhat difficult and slow. Indeed, the chiefs of Norway, who were, in fact, petty kings, disputed the ground inch by inch, and Harold was occupied for so many years ere consummating his victories, that his hair, growing ridiculously long and thick, led to his receiving the surname of "Hirsute."

Even after having sustained numerous defeats on the land, the fierce chiefs – all Vikings, and, like their adversaries, worshippers of Odin – taking to the sea, ravaged the coasts and islands, and excited the Norwegians to rebellion. Harold, however, resolved to do his work thoroughly, went on board his war-fleet, sailed in pursuit of his foes, and, having sunk several of their vessels, forced the others to seek refuge in the Hebrides, where the exiled war-chiefs – many of them ancestors of the Anglo-Norman nobles – consoled themselves with horns of potent drink, with schemes for conquering kingdoms, and with the hope of better fortune and brighter days.

It appears that in the long and arduous struggle which gave him the sole and undisputed sovereignty of Norway, Harold had been faithfully served by a Jarl named Rognvald; and it was to this Jarl's timber-palace, in Möre, that the victorious King repaired to celebrate the performance of his vow. Elate with triumphs, perhaps more signal than he had anticipated, Harold made himself quite at home; and having, before indulging in the Jarl's good cheer, refreshed himself with a bath and combed his hair, he requested Rognvald to cut off his superfluous locks.

"Now, Jarl," exclaimed Harold, when this operation was over, "methinks I should no longer be called 'Hirsute.'"

"No, King," replied Rognvald, struck with surprise and pleasure at the improvement in Harold's appearance; "your hair is now so beautiful that, instead of being surnamed 'Hirsute,' you must be surnamed 'Harfagher.'"

It happened that Rognvald, by his spouse Hilda, had a son named Rolf, or Roll, who was regarded as the foremost among the noble men of Norway. He was as remarkable for his sagacity in peace, and for his courage in war as for his bulk and stature, which were such that his feet touched the ground when he bestrode the horses of the country. From this peculiarity the son of Rognvald found himself under the necessity of walking when engaged in any enterprise on the land; and this circumstance led to his becoming generally known among his countrymen as Rolfganger.

But the sea appears to have been Rolfganger's favourite element. From his youth he had delighted in maritime adventures, and in such exploits as made the men of the north celebrated as sea-kings; and one day, when returning from a cruise in the Baltic, he, while off the coast of Wighen, shortened sail, and ventured on the exercise of a privilege of impressing provisions, long enjoyed by sea-kings, and known as "strandhug." But he found that, with Harold Harfagher on the throne, and stringent laws against piracy in force, the rights of property were not thus to be set at defiance. In fact, the peasants whose flocks had been carried away complained to the King; and the King, without regard to the offender's rank, ordered him to be tried by a Council of Justice.

Notwithstanding Rognvald's services to the King and his personal influence with Harold Harfagher, Rolfganger's chance of escaping sentence of banishment appeared slight. Moved, however, by maternal tenderness, Hilda, the spouse of Rognvald, made an effort to save her son. Presenting herself at the rude court of Norway, she endeavoured to soften the King's heart.

"King," said she, "I ask you, for my husband's sake, to pardon my son."

"Hilda," replied Harold, "it is impossible."

"What!" exclaimed Hilda, rearing herself to her full height; "am I to understand that the very name of our race has become hateful to you? Beware," continued she, speaking in accents of menace, "how you expel from the country and treat as an enemy a man of noble race. Listen, King, to what I tell you. It is dangerous to attack the wolf. When once he is angered, let the herd in the forest beware!"

But Harold Harfagher was determined to make the laws respected, and, notwithstanding Hilda's vague threats, a sentence of perpetual exile was passed against her tall son. Rolfganger, however, was not a man to give way to despair. Fitting out his ships in some rocky coves, still pointed out, he embarked at an island off the mouth of Stor-fiord, took a last look at his native country, with its rugged scenery, its rapids, cataracts, and fiords, forests of dark pine and mountains of white snow, herds of reindeer and clouds of birds, and, sailing for the Hebrides, placed himself at the head of the banished Norwegians, who speedily, under his auspices, resolved on a grand piratical enterprise, which they did not doubt would result in conquest and plunder.

Having cut their cable and given the reins to the great sea-horses – such was their expression – the Normans made an attempt to land in England, where Alfred the Great then reigned. Defeated in this attempt by the war-ships with which the Saxon King guarded the coast, they turned their prows towards France, and, entering the mouth of the Seine, sailed up the river, pillaging the banks as they proceeded, and, with little delay, found themselves admitted into Rouen, on which they fixed as their future capital.

It was the year 876 when Rolfganger and his comrades sailed up the Seine; and on becoming aware of their presence in France, Charles the Simple, who then, as heir of Charlemagne, wielded the French sceptre with feeble hand, summoned the warriors of his kingdom to stop the progress of the Normans. An army, accordingly, was mustered and sent, under the command of the Duke of France, to encounter the grim invaders. Before fighting, however, the French deemed it prudent to tempt the Normans with offers of lands and honours, on condition of their submitting to King Charles, and sent messengers to hold a parley. But the Normans treated the proposals with lofty disdain.

"Go back to your King," cried they, "and say that we will submit to no man, and that we will assert dominion over all we acquire by force of arms."

With this answer the ambassadors returned to the French camp, and ere long the Normans were attacked in their entrenchments. But Rolfganger and his comrades rushed to arms, and fought with such courage that the French suffered a complete defeat, and the Duke of France fell by the hand of a fisherman of Rouen.

The Normans, after vanquishing the host of King Charles, found themselves at liberty to pursue their voyage; and Rolfganger, availing himself of the advantage, sailed up the Seine, and laid siege to Paris. Baffled in his attempt to enter the city, the Norman hero consoled himself by taking Bayeux, Evreux, and other places, and gradually found himself ruling as a conqueror over the greater part of Neustria. At Evreux, he seized as his prey a lady named Popa, the daughter of Count Beranger, whom he espoused; and, becoming gradually more civilized, he rendered himself wonderfully popular with the inhabitants of the district subject to his sway.

Meanwhile the French suffered so severely from the hostility of the Normans, that Charles the Simple recognised the expediency of securing the friendship of warriors so formidable. With this object he sent the Archbishop of Rouen to negotiate with Rolfganger, and the result was that the Sea-King consented to become a Christian, to wed Gisla, the daughter of Charles, and to live at peace with France, on condition that the French monarch ceded to him the province of Neustria.

Matters having reached this stage, preparations were made to ratify the treaty in a solemn manner, and for that purpose Charles the Simple and Rolfganger agreed to hold a conference at the village at St. Clair, on the green-margined Epte. Each was accompanied by a numerous train, and, while the French pitched their tents on one side of the river, the Normans pitched theirs on the other. At the appointed hour, however, Rolfganger crossed the Epte, approached the chair of state, placed

his hand between those of the King, took, without kneeling, the oath of fealty, and then, supposing the ceremony was over, turned to depart.

"But," said the Frenchmen, "it is fitting that he who receives such a gift of territory should kneel before the King and kiss his foot."

"Nay," exclaimed Rolfganger; "never will I kneel before a mortal; never will I kiss the foot of any man."

The French counts, however, insisted on this ceremony, and Rolfganger, with an affectation of simplicity, made a sign to one of his comrades. The Norman, obeying his chief's gesture, immediately stepped forward and seized upon Charles's foot. Neglecting, however, to bend his own knee, he lifted the King's foot so high in the effort to bring it to his lips, that the chair of state was overturned, and the heir of Charlemagne lay sprawling on his back.

At this ludicrous incident the Normans raised shouts of derisive laughter, and the French held up their hands in horror. For a few moments all was confusion, but fortunately no serious quarrel resulted; and soon after, Rolfganger was received into the Christian Church, and married to Gisla, the King's daughter, at Rouen.

Rolfganger, having begun life anew as a Christian and a Count, divided the territory of Neustria among his comrades, and changed its name to Normandy. Maintaining internal order by severe laws, and administering affairs with vigour, he soon became famous as the most successful justiciary of the age. Such was the security felt under his government, that mechanics and labourers flocked to establish themselves in the newly-founded state, and the Normans applied themselves to the arts of peace with as much ardour as they had previously exhibited in their predatory enterprises.

Gradually adopting the French tongue, and refining their manners, Rolfganger's comrades and their heirs were metamorphosed from a band of pagan sea-kings and pirates into the most refined, the most chivalrous, and the most religious race in Christendom – orators from their cradle; warriors charging in chain mail, with resistless courage, at the head of fighting men; and munificent benefactors to religious houses, where holy monks kept alive the flame of ancient learning, and dispensed befitting charities to the indigent and poor.

II.
WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

One glorious afternoon in the autumn of the year 1023, some damsels of humble rank were making merry and dancing joyously under the shade of trees in the neighbourhood of Falaise, when, homeward from the chase, accompanied by knights, squires, and grooms, with his bugle at his girdle, his hawk on his wrist, and his hounds running at his horse's feet, came, riding with feudal pride, that Duke of Normandy whom some, in consideration, perhaps, of substantial favours, called Robert the Magnificent, and whom others, in allusion to his violent temper, characterized as Robert the Devil.

Not being quite indifferent to female charms, Duke Robert reined up, and, as he did so, with an eye wandering from face to form and from form to face, the grace and beauty of one of the dancers arrested his attention and touched his heart. After expressing his admiration, and learning that she was the daughter of a tanner, the duke pursued his way. But he was more silent and meditative than usual; and, soon after reaching the Castle of Falaise, he deputed the most discreet of his knights to go to the father of the damsel to reveal his passion and to plead his cause.

It appears that the negotiation was attended with considerable difficulty. At first, the tanner, who had to be consulted, treated the duke's proposals with scorn; but, after a pause, he agreed to take the advice of his brother, who, as a hermit in the neighbouring forest, enjoyed a high reputation for sanctity. The oracle's response was not quite consistent with his religious pretensions. Though dead, according to his own account, to the vanities of the world, the hermit would seem to have cherished a lingering sympathy with human frailty. At all events, he declared that subjects ought, in all things, to conform to the will of their prince; and the tanner, without further scruple, allowed his daughter to be conducted to the castle of Robert the Devil. In due time Arlette gave birth to a son, destined, as "William the Conqueror," to enrol his name in the annals of fame.

It was the 14th of October, 1024, when William the Norman drew his first breath in the Castle of Falaise. Arlette had previously been startled with a dream, portending that her son should reign over Normandy and England; and no sooner did William see the light than he gave a pledge of that energy which he was in after years to exhibit. Being laid upon the floor, he seized the rushes in his hands, and grasped them with such determination, that the matrons who were present expressed their astonishment, and congratulated Arlette on being the mother of such a boy.

"Be of good cheer," cried one of them, with prophetic enthusiasm; "for verily your son will prove a king!"

At first Robert the Devil did not deign to notice the existence of the boy who was so soon to wear the chaplet of golden roses that formed the ducal diadem of Normandy; but William, when a year old, was presented to the duke, and immediately won the feudal magnate's heart.

"Verily," said he, "this is a boy to be proud of. He is wonderfully like my ancestors, the old dukes of the Normans, and he must be nurtured with care."

From that time the mother and the child were dear to Duke Robert. Arlette was treated with as much state as if a nuptial benediction had been pronounced by the Archbishop of Rouen: and William was educated with more than the care generally bestowed, at that time, on the princes of Christendom. At eight he could read the "Commentaries of Cæsar;" and in after life he was in the habit of repeating a saying of one of the old counts of Anjou, "that a king without letters is a crowned ass."

It happened that, about the year 1033, Robert the Devil, reflecting on his manifold transgressions, and eager to make atonement, resolved on a penitential pilgrimage to Jerusalem. A serious obstacle, however, presented itself. The Norman nobles, with whom the descendant of Rolfganger was in high favour, on being convened, protested loudly against his departure.

"The state," they with one voice exclaimed, "will be in great peril if we are left without a chief."

"By my faith!" said Robert, "I will not leave you without a chief. I have a little bastard – I know he is my son; and he will grow a gallant man, if it please God. Take him, then, as your liege lord; for I declare him my heir, and bestow upon him the whole Duchy of Normandy."

No objections were raised to the Duke's proposal. In fact, everything seems to have gone more smoothly than could have been anticipated. William was formally presented to the assembly, and each feudal lord, placing his hand within those of the boy, took the oath of allegiance with such formalities as were customary.

Having arranged matters to his satisfaction, and placed his son under the protection of the court of France, Duke Robert took the pilgrim's scrip and staff, and, attended by a band of knights, set out for the Holy Sepulchre. On reaching Asia Minor he fell sick, and, dispensing with the company of his knights, hired four Saracens to carry him in a litter onward to Jerusalem. When approaching the Holy City, he was met by a palmer from Normandy, and waved his hand in token of recognition.

"Palmer," cried the duke, "tell my valiant lords that you have seen me carried towards Paradise on the backs of fiends."

The fate of Duke Robert was never clearly ascertained; but from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem it is certain that he did not return to Normandy. Within a year of his departure, indeed, news reached Rouen that the pilgrim-duke had breathed his last at Nice; and the Normans, though without implicitly believing the report, gradually came to think of him as one who had gone to his long home.

With news of the death of Robert the Magnificent came the crisis of the fate of "William the Bastard." Notwithstanding the oath taken with so much ceremony, the Norman barons were in no humour to submit to a boy – and to a boy, especially, who was illegitimate.

It was in vain that the guardians of young William exerted all their energies to establish his power. One pretender after another was put down by the strong hand. But the old Norman seigneurs, who had submitted with reluctance to the rule of legitimate princes, steeled their hearts against the humiliation of bending their knees to a bastard.

Among the nobles of Normandy, by far the haughtiest and most turbulent were the seigneurs of Bessi and Cotentin. These men were proud to excess of their Norwegian descent, and very tenacious of their Scandinavian traditions and customs. Indeed, they treated with something like contempt the conversion of the Normans to Christianity, carried pagan devices on their shields, and rode into battle with the old Scandinavian war-cry of "Thor aide!" Rejoicing, above all things, in the purity of their blood, these ancient seigneurs not only talked with ridicule of the idea of submitting to the son of Arlette, but formed a strong league, marshalled their fighting men, and prepared to display their banners and seize William's person.

When this conspiracy was formed, William had attained his seventeenth year, and, utterly unconscious of his danger, was residing in a castle unprepared for defence. The Counts of Bessi and Cotentin were making ready to mount their war-steeds and secure their prey, when one of their household fools stole away during the night, reached the castle where William was, clamoured for admittance in a loud voice, and would not be silenced till led to the young duke's presence. On getting audience of William, the fool hastily told him of his peril, and warned him to fly instantly.

"What say you?" asked William in surprise.

"I tell you," answered the fool, "that your enemies are coming, and, if you don't fly without delay, you'll be slain."

After some further questioning, William resolved to take the fool's advice, and mounting, spurred rapidly towards the Castle of Falaise. But he was imperfectly acquainted with the country; and he had not ridden far when he missed his way. William reined up his steed, and halted in perplexity and dismay; and his alarm was increased by hearing sounds as of enemies following at no great distance. Fortunately, at that moment, however, he met a peasant, who, by pointing out the way to the fugitive, and setting the pursuers off in a wrong direction, enabled the duke to reach Falaise in safety.

At that time, Henry, grandson of Hugh Capet, figured as King of France, and wore the diadem which his grandsire had torn from the head of the heirs of Charlemagne. In other days, Henry had been protected against the enmity of an imperious mother and a turbulent brother by Robert the Magnificent; and when William hastened to the French court, Henry, moved by the young duke's tale of distress, and remembering Robert's services, promised to give all the aid in his power. Ere long he redeemed his pledge by leading a French army against the insurgents. The result was the defeat of the rebel lords in a pitched battle at the "Val des Dunes," near Caen, and a victory which, for a time, gave security to Arlette's son on the ducal throne of Rollo.

William's youth was so far fortunate. His friends regarded him with idolatry; and his enemies, forced to admit that he seemed not unworthy of his position, became quiescent. The day on which he mounted his horse without placing foot in stirrup was hailed with joy; and the day on which he received knighthood was kept as a holiday throughout Normandy.

As time passed on, William showed himself very ambitious, and somewhat vindictive. He made war on his neighbours in Maine and Britanny on slender provocations, and resented without mercy any offensive allusion to his maternal parentage. One day, when he was besieging the town of Alençon, the inhabitants, to annoy him, beat leather skins on the walls, in allusion to the occupation of his grandfather, and shouted, "Hides, hides!" William, in bitter rage, revenged himself by causing the hands and feet of all his prisoners to be cut off, and thrown by the slingers over the walls into the town.

But, whatever William's faults, he was loved and respected by his friends. Nor could the duke's worst enemy deny that he looked a prince of whom any people might well have been proud. In person he was scarce above the ordinary height; but so grand was his air, and so majestic his bearing, that he seemed to tower above ordinary mortals. His strength of arm was prodigious; and few were the warriors in that age who could even bend his bow. His face was sufficiently handsome to command the admiration of women, and his aspect sufficiently stern to awe men into submission to his will. No prince in Europe was more capable of producing an impression on a beholder than, at the age of twenty-five, was the warrior destined to attempt and accomplish that mighty exploit since celebrated as the Norman Conquest of England.

III.
THE DANES IN ENGLAND

At the time when William the Norman was making good his claim to the Dukedom won by Rolfganger, the Saxons had been settled in England for nearly six centuries. During that long period, however, the country had frequently been exposed to the horrors of civil war and to the inroads of those ruthless Northmen, who "replunged into barbarism the nations over which they swept."

It was about the year 451 that the Saxons, with huge axes on their shoulders, set foot on the shores of Britain. At that period – when the ancient Britons, left by the Roman conquerors at the mercy of the Picts and Scots, were complaining that the barbarians drove them to the sea, and that the sea drove them back to the barbarians – there anchored off the coast of Kent three bulky ships, commanded by Hengist and Horsa, two Saxon chiefs, who claimed descent from Woden, their god of war, and boasted of some military skill acquired when fighting in the ranks of Rome. From Hengist and Horsa, still worshippers of Thor and Woden, the Britons implored aid against the Picts and Scots; and the Saxon chiefs, calling over a band of their countrymen, speedily drove the painted Caledonians to their mountains and fastnesses.

After having rescued the Britons from their northern neighbours, the Saxons did not exhibit any haste to leave the country which they had delivered. Indeed, these mighty sons of Woden rather seemed ambitious of making Britain their own; and Hengist, having settled in Lincolnshire, gave a great feast. Among other guests who on this occasion came to the Saxon's stronghold was Vortigern, a King among the Britons, and, his eye being arrested and his heart inflamed by the grace and beauty of Rowena, the daughter of Hengist, while she presented the wassail-cup on bended knee, he became so desperately enamoured that he never rested till the fair and fascinating Saxon was his wife. After the marriage of Vortigern and Rowena, the Saxons plainly intimated their intention of being masters of Britain, and, the sword having been drawn, the two races – the Saxons and the Celts – commenced that struggle which lasted for more than a hundred and fifty years, during which King Arthur and the Knights of his Round Table are said to have wrought those marvellous exploits which have been celebrated by chroniclers and bards.

At length, however, the Saxons, in spite of prolonged resistance, established their supremacy, and, during the existence of the Saxon Heptarchy, which included the whole country, subject to seven Princes, the conquerors of Britain became converts to Christianity, and members of the Catholic Church; and, abandoning the worship of Thor and Woden, they endeavoured to show their zeal by erecting churches and monasteries.

As time passed on, Egbert, King of Wessex, in 827 prevailed over all rivals, formed the separate provinces into a single state, and reigned as King of England. But while the Saxons were still engaged in putting down the Celts and cutting each other to pieces, a band of grim adventurers one morning sailed into the port of Teignmouth. In the discharge of his duty, a Saxon magistrate proceeded to the shore to learn whence they came and what they wanted. Without deigning an answer, the strangers slew the magistrate and his attendants, plundered the town, carried the booty to their ships, and then, hoisting their sails, took their departure. This was the first appearance in England of those Danes who were, ere long, to rend the Anglo-Saxon empire in pieces, and place their King on the English throne.

In fact, from the time of this their first visit to the English coast, the Danes were constantly finding their way to England, and signalising their inroads by every kind of barbarity. They were the most reckless of pirates and pagans, calling the ocean their home and the tempest their servant, and delighting to shed the blood of Christian priests, to desecrate churches, and to stable their steeds in chapels. In their cruel inroads, they tossed infants on the points of their spears, and mocked the idea of tears and mourning. For them, indeed, death had no terrors, for they believed themselves secure,

especially if they fell in battle, of being conveyed to Valhalla; and gloried in the prospect of feasting in the halls of Odin, waited on by lovely damsels, and quaffing beer out of huge cups of horn. Settling gradually in Northumberland, East Anglia, and Mercia, the Danes occupied the whole country north of the Thames. Only one province remained to the Saxons, that of Wessex, which then extended from the mouth of the Thames to the Bristol Channel.

Such was the state of affairs when, in 871, a Saxon King, named Ethelred, was slain in a conflict with the Danes, and was succeeded by his son, Alfred, afterwards Alfred the Great, but then a youth of twenty-two. At first, the courage and ability of the young King inspired the Saxons with high hopes. But Alfred, puffed up with conceit of his superior knowledge, despised those whom he governed, and his contemptuous indifference to their opinions and wishes rendered him ere long so very unpopular that when, after having reigned seven years, he was under the necessity of preparing against an inroad of the Danes, he found himself, to his mortification, almost unsupported. In vain the King, after the fashion of his ancestors, sent messengers of war to town and hamlet, bearing the arrow and naked sword, and proclaiming, "Let each man that is not a nothing leave his house and come!" So few obeyed the summons that Alfred, deeply mortified, abandoned his throne, and sought refuge in Cornwall.

It was at this dismal period that Alfred found shelter in the hut of a swineherd, and, while examining his arrows, allowed the cakes to burn. "Stupid man!" cried the swineherd's wife, unaware of his quality, "you will not take the trouble to prevent my bread from burning, though you're always so glad to eat it."

But, ere long, Alfred emerged from his obscure lurking-place, visited the Danish camp disguised as a harper, and, while entertaining the rude Northmen with music and song, became so well acquainted with the situation of affairs that he took immediate steps to restore the old Saxon nationality. Summoning fighting men of the Saxon race from every quarter, Alfred met the Danes in the field, vanquished them in eight battles, and finally reduced them to submission and obedience.

After the death of Alfred the Great, who had, after his restoration, reigned with lustre and glory, Ethelstane, pursuing Alfred's conquests, recovered York, crossed the Tweed, defeated the Danes and Cambrians at Bamborough, and brought the whole island under his dominion. For some time after Ethelstane's triumphs, the Saxons were allowed unmolestedly to sow and reap, to buy and sell, to marry and give in marriage.

In 994, however, Sweyn, King of Denmark, turned his eyes covetously towards England, where Ethelred the Unready then reigned; and forthwith, in company with Olaf, King of Norway, undertook an expedition. Despairing of opposing the invaders with success, Ethelred bribed them with a large sum of money to retire, and both of them withdrew, after having sworn not again to trouble England. Nevertheless, in 1001, Sweyn, in whom the spirit of the pirate was strong, reappeared; and the Saxon King, seeing no way of getting rid of such a foe except by bribery, agreed to pay an annual tribute, to be levied throughout England under the name of "Dane-gold."

Sweyn, to whom an arrangement that was every year to replenish his treasury seemed satisfactory, returned to Denmark. Many Danes, however, remained in England, and conducted themselves with such intolerable insolence that the Saxons projected a general massacre of their unwelcome guests, and fixed on St. Brice's Day, 1002, for the execution of their hoarded vengeance. Ethelred, who, having lost his first wife, Elgira, the mother of Edmund Ironsides, had espoused Emma, sister of the Duke of Normandy, and who deemed himself secure in the alliance of the heir of Rolfganger, unhappily consented to the massacre, and, on the appointed day, the Saxons applied themselves to the work of extermination, little dreaming what would be the consequences.

No sooner did Sweyn hear of the massacre of St. Brice, than he vowed revenge, and, embarking with a mighty force, landed in England, and commenced a work of bloodshed, carnage, sacrilege, destruction, and every kind of enormity. Ethelred, after a vain attempt at resistance, fled to Normandy, with Emma his wife, and their two sons, Alfred and Edward; while Sweyn, left a victor, caused himself to be proclaimed King of England. But he did not live long to enjoy his conquests.

One day, while feasting at Thetford, drinking to excess, and threatening to spoil the monastery of St. Edmund, he suddenly felt as if he had been violently struck, and the chiefs, who sat around in a circle, observed that his face underwent a rapid change.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sweyn, gasping for breath, "I have been struck by this St. Edmund with a sword!"

"Nay," said the Danish chiefs, who did not share their King's superstitious feeling, "there is no St. Edmund here."

Death, however, seemed written on Sweyn's face, and horror took possession of his soul. After suffering terrible tortures for three days, he breathed his last, and left his claims and pretensions to his son Canute, who, coming victoriously out of that struggle with Edmund Ironsides, in which the royal Saxon, after repeatedly defeating the Danes, perished by the hand of an assassin, succeeded to the English throne, where he was destined to render his name memorable and his memory illustrious as Canute the Great.

It appears that, during these unfortunate struggles with the Danes, Ethelred and his son Edmund Ironsides relied much on the services of a man whom the Saxon King delighted to honour, and whom English historians have since branded as one of the most infamous traitors that ever breathed English air. This was Edric Streone, who had obtained from Ethelred the Earldom of Mercia, and who evinced his gratitude for that and countless favours by betraying his benefactor and suborning a ruffian to stab his benefactor's son.

After Ironsides' murder, Edric hastened to Canute and claimed a reward. Not unwilling, perhaps, to profit by the treachery, but abhorring the traitor, the Danish conqueror had recourse to dissimulation, and spoke to Edric in language which raised the villain's hopes.

"Depend upon it," said Canute, "I will set your head higher than any man's in the realm;" and, by way of redeeming his promise, he soon after ordered the traitor to be beheaded.

"King," cried Edric, in amazement, "remember you not your promise?"

"I do," answered Canute, with grim humour. "I promised to set your head higher than other men's, and I will keep my word." And having ordered Edric to be executed, he caused the body to be flung into the Thames, and the head to be placed high over the highest of the gates of London.

After having won considerable popularity among the Saxons by the execution of Edric Streone, Canute, who figured as King of Denmark and Norway, as well as England, endeavoured to strengthen his position by a matrimonial alliance. With this view the royal Dane wedded Emma of Normandy, the widow of Ethelred; and it was supposed that, at his death, Hardicanute, the son whom he had by this fair descendant of Rolfganger, was to succeed to the English throne.

In 1035, however, when Canute the Great went the way of all flesh, and when his remains were laid in the Cathedral of Winchester, there was living in London one of his illegitimate sons, named Harold, who, from his swiftness in running, was surnamed Harefoot. Immediately, Harold Harefoot claimed the crown, and a contest took place between his adherents and those of Hardicanute, who was then in Denmark. Harold Harefoot, however, being favoured by the Danes of London, carried the day; and finding that the Archbishop refused to perform the ceremony of coronation, he placed the crown on his head with his own hand, became an avowed enemy of the Church, lived as one "who had abjured Christianity," and displayed his contempt for religious rites by having his table served and sending out his dogs to hunt at the hour when people were assembling for worship.

After reigning four years, however, he breathed his last, and was buried at Westminster.

When Harold Harefoot died, Hardicanute was at Bruges with his mother, the Norman Emma, and he immediately sailed for England. No attempt seems to have been made to restore the Saxon line. Indeed, Hardicanute found himself received with general joy, and commenced his career as King of England by causing the body of his half-brother to be dug out of his tomb at Westminster and thrown into the Thames. Hardicanute then abandoned himself to gluttony and drunkenness, and

scandalously oppressed the nation over which he swayed the sceptre. His career, however, was brief, and his end was so sudden, that some have ascribed it to foul play.

It was the 8th of June, 1041, and Hardicanute was celebrating the wedding of a Danish chief at Lambeth. Nobody expected a catastrophe, for he was still little more than twenty, and his constitution was remarkably strong. While revelling and carousing, however, he suddenly tossed up his arms and dropped on the floor a corpse. Some ascribed the death of Hardicanute to poison, but none lamented his fate; and, by the Saxons, the event was rather hailed as a sign for the restoration of the Saxon line and the heirs of Alfred.

IV.
EARL GODWIN

ONE morning, at the time when Edmund Ironside and Canute were struggling desperately for the kingdom of England, and when the son of Ethelred had just defeated the son of Sweyn in a great battle in Warwickshire, a Danish captain – Ulf by name – separated from his men, and, flying to save his life, entered a wood with the paths of which he was quite unacquainted. Halting in one of the glades, and looking round in extreme perplexity, he felt relieved by the approach of a young Saxon, in the garb of a herdsman, driving his father's oxen to the pastures.

"Thy name, youth," said Ulf to the herdsman, saluting him after the fashion of his country.

"I," answered the herdsman, "am Godwin, son of Wolwoth; and thou, if I mistake not, art one of the Danes."

"It is true," said Ulf. "I have wandered about all night, and now I beg you tell me how far I am from the Danish camp, or from the ships stationed in the Severn, and by what road I can reach them."

"Mad," exclaimed Godwin, "must be the Dane who looks for safety at the hands of a Saxon."

"Nevertheless," said Ulf, "I entreat thee to leave thy herd and guide me to the camp, and I promise that thou shalt be richly rewarded."

"The way is long," said Godwin, shaking his head, "and perilous would be the attempt. The peasants, emboldened by victory, are everywhere up in arms, and little mercy would they show either to thee or thy guide."

"Accept this, youth," said the Dane, coaxingly, as he drew a gold ring from his finger.

"No," answered Godwin, after examining the jewel with curiosity, "I will not take the ring, but I will give you what aid I can."

Having thus promised his assistance to Ulf, Godwin took the Danish captain under his guidance, and led him to Wolwoth's cottage hard by, and, when night came, prepared to conduct him, by bye-paths, to the camp. They were about to depart when Wolwoth, with a tear in his eye, laid his hand in that of the Dane.

"Stranger," said the old man, "know that it is my only son who trusts to your good faith. For him there will be no safety among his countrymen from the moment he has served you as a guide. Present him, therefore, to Canute, that he may be taken into your king's service."

"Fear not, Saxon," said Ulf, "I will do more than you ask for your son. I will treat him as my own."

The Dane and Godwin then left Wolwoth's cottage, and, under the guidance of the young herdsman, the Dane reached the camp in safety. Nor was his promise forgotten. On entering his tent, Ulf seated Godwin on a seat as highly-raised as his own, and, from that hour, treated him with paternal kindness.

It was under such romantic circumstances, if we may credit ancient chroniclers and modern historians, that Godwin entered on that marvellous career which was destined to conduct him to more than regal power in England. Presented by Ulf to Canute, the son of Wolwoth soon won the favour of the Danish king; nor was he of a family whose members ever allowed any scrupulous adherence to honour to stand in the way of ambitious aspirations. Indeed, he was nephew of that Edric Streone who had betrayed Ethelred the Unready, and whom Canute had found it necessary to sacrifice to the national indignation; and it has been observed that, "even as kinsman to Edric, who, whatever his crimes, must have retained a party it was wise to conciliate, Godwin's favour with Canute, whose policy would lead him to show marked distinction to any able Saxon follower, ceases to be surprising."

But, however that may have been, Godwin, protected by the king and inspired by ambition, rose rapidly to fame and fortune. Having accompanied Canute to Denmark, and afterwards signalized his

military skill by a great victory over the Norwegians, he returned to England with the reputation of being, of all others, the man whom the Danish King delighted to honour. No distinction now appeared too high to be conferred on the son of Wolwoth. Ere long he began to figure as Earl of Wessex, and husband of Thyra, one of Canute's daughters.

Godwin's marriage with the daughter of Canute did not increase the Saxon Earl's popularity. Indeed, Thyra was accused of sending young Saxons as slaves to Denmark, and regarded with much antipathy. One day, however, Thyra was killed by lightning; soon after, her only son was drowned in the Thames; and Godwin lost no time in supplying the places of his lady and his heir.

Again at liberty to gratify his ambition by a royal alliance, he wedded Githa, daughter of Sweyne, Canute's successor on the throne of Denmark; and the Danish princess, as time passed on, made her husband father of six sons – Sweyne, Harold, Tostig, Gurth, Leofwine, and Wolwoth – besides two daughters – Edith and Thyra – all destined to have their names associated in history with that memorable event known as the Norman Conquest.

Meanwhile, Godwin was taking that part in national events which he hoped would raise him to still higher power among his countrymen, when Canute the Great breathed his last, and was laid at rest in the cathedral at Winchester. Then there arose a dispute about the sovereignty of England between Hardicanute and Harold Harefoot. The South declared for Hardicanute, the North for Harefoot. Both had their chances; but Harold Harefoot being in England at the time, as we have seen, while Hardicanute was in Denmark, had decidedly the advantage over his rival.

Godwin, however, favouring Hardicanute, invited Queen Emma to England. He assumed the office of Protector, and received the oaths of the men of the South. But for once the son of Wolwoth found fortune adverse to his policy; and, having waited till Emma made peace with Harold Harefoot, the potent Earl also swore obedience, and allowed the claims of Hardicanute to rest.

But when time passed over, and affairs took a turn, when Harold Harefoot died, and Hardicanute, having come to England, ascended the throne, excited the national discontent by imposing excessive taxes, and was perpetually alarmed, in the midst of his debaucheries, with intelligence of tax-gatherers murdered and cities in insurrection, it became pretty clear that the Danish domination must, ere long, come to an end. Then Godwin, who had ever a keen eye to his interest, doubtless watched the signs of the times with all the vigilance demanded by the occasion, and marked well the course of events which were occurring to place the game in his hands. Accordingly, when, in the summer of 1041, Hardicanute expired so suddenly at Lambeth, while taking part in the wedding festivities of one of his Danish chiefs, Godwin perceived that the time had arrived for the restoration of Saxon royalty. With his characteristic energy, he raised his standard, and applied himself to the business. His success was even more signal than he anticipated. Indeed, if he had chosen, he might have ascended the throne of Alfred and of Canute. But his policy was to increase his own power without exciting the envy of others. With this view he assembled a great council at Gillingham. Acting by his advice, the assembled chiefs resolved on calling to the throne, not the true heir of England – the son of Edmund Ironsides, who resided in Hungary, and probably had a will of his own – but an Anglo-Saxon prince who had been long absent from England – an exile known to be inoffensive in character as well as interesting from misfortune, and with whom Godwin doubtless believed he could do whatever he pleased. At all events, it was as King-maker, and not as King, that the ennobled son of Wolwoth aspired, at this crisis, to influence the destinies of England.

V.
EDWARD THE CONFESSOR

While Duke William was overcoming his enemies in Normandy, and Earl Godwin was putting an end to the domination of the Danes in England, there might have been observed about the Court of Rouen a man of mild aspect and saintly habits, who had reached the age of forty. He was an exile, a Saxon prince, and one of the heirs of Alfred.

It was about the opening of the eleventh century that King Ethelred, then a widower, and father of Edmund Ironsides, espoused Emma, sister of Richard, Duke of Normandy. From this marriage sprung two sons and a daughter. The sons were named Edward and Alfred; the name of the daughter was Goda.

Edward was a native of England, and drew his first breath, in the year 1002, at Islip, near Oxford. At an early age, however, when the massacre of the Danes on the day of St. Brice resulted in the exile of Ethelred, Edward, with the other children of Ethelred and Emma, found refuge at the Court of Normandy. It was there that the youth of Edward was passed; it was there that his tastes were formed; and it was there that, brooding over the misfortunes of his country and his race, he sought consolation in those saintly theories and romantic practices which distinguished him so widely from the princes of that fierce and adventurous period which preceded the first Crusade.

When Ethelred the Unready breathed his last, in 1016, and Canute the Great demanded the widowed queen in marriage, and Emma, delighted at the prospect of still sharing the throne of England, threw herself into the arms of the royal Dane, her two sons, Edward and Alfred, remained for a time securely in Normandy. Indeed, they do not appear to have been by any means pleased at the idea of their mother uniting her fate with a man whom they had regarded as their father's mortal foe. However, as years passed over, the sons of Ethelred received an invitation from Harold Harefoot to visit their native country, and they did not think fit to decline. At all events, it appears that Alfred proceeded to England, and that he went attended by a train of six hundred Normans.

On arriving in England, Alfred was immediately invited by Harold Harefoot to come to London, and, not suspecting any snare, he hastened to present himself at court. No sooner, however, had the Saxon prince reached Guildford than he was met by Earl Godwin, conducted under some pretence into the Castle, separated from his attendants – who were massacred by hundreds – and then put in chains, to be conveyed to the Isle of Ely, where he was deprived of his sight, and so severely treated that he died of misery and pain.

Edward, who had remained in Normandy, soon learned with horror that his brother had been murdered; and when Hardicanute succeeded Harold Harefoot, he hastened to England to demand justice on Godwin. Hardicanute received his half-brother with kindness, promised that he should have satisfaction, and summoned the Earl of Wessex to answer for the murder of Prince Alfred. But Godwin's experience was great, and his craft was equal to his experience. Without scruple, he offered to swear that he was entirely guiltless of young Alfred's death, and at the same time presented Hardicanute with a magnificent galley, ornamented with gilded metal, and manned by eighty warriors, every one of whom had a gilded axe on his left shoulder, a javelin in his right hand, and bracelets on each arm. The young Danish king looked upon this gift as a most conclusive argument in favour of Godwin's innocence – and the son of Wolwoth was saved.

Edward returned to Normandy, and passed the next five years of his life in monkish austerities. But when the Danish domination came to an end, and the Grand Council was held at Gillingham, Godwin, as if to atone for consigning one of the sons of Ethelred to a tomb, hastened to place the other on a throne. Edward, then in his fortieth year, was accordingly elected king, and, on reaching

England, was crowned at Winchester, in that sacred edifice where his illustrious ancestors and their Danish foes reposed in peace together.

It is related by the chroniclers of this period, that when Edward, arrayed in royal robes, and accompanied by bishops and nobles, was on the point of entering the church to be crowned, a man afflicted with leprosy sat by the gate.

"What do you there?" cried the king's friends. "Move out of the way."

"Nay," said Edward, meekly, "suffer him to remain."

"King!" cried the leper, in a loud voice, "I conjure you, by the living God, to have me carried into the church, that I may pray to be made whole!"

"Unworthy should I be of heaven if I did not," Edward replied; and, stooping forward, he raised the leprous man on his back, bore him into the church, and prayed earnestly, and not in vain, for his restoration. Roger Hoveden even asserts that the king's prayers were heard, and that the leper was made whole from that hour. But, in any case, there can be no doubt that on the fierce nobles and people of his realm such a scene as this must have produced a strange impression. It was believed that Edward's sanctity gave him the power to heal; and belief in the influence which his hand was in this way supposed to have, led to the custom of English sovereigns touching for the king's evil.

In fact, however, people soon discovered that Edward was more of a monk than a monarch; and far happier would he have been if he had remained in Normandy, and sought refuge from the rude and wicked world in the quiet of a cloister. It soon appeared, moreover, that the son of Ethelred was intended to be king but in name; and that the son of Wolwoth was to be virtually sovereign of England. The plan was not unlikely to succeed. Indeed, Edward was so saintly and so simple, that Godwin might, to the hour of his death, have exercised all real power, had he not, with the vulgar ambition natural to such a man, risked everything for the chance of his posterity occupying the English throne.

It appears that Godwin, by his marriage with Githa, the Danish princess, had, besides six sons, two daughters, Edith and Thyra. Edith, at the time of the restoration of the Saxon monarchy, is described as having been young, beautiful, and remarkable for her learning. It can hardly be doubted that her character and disposition contrasted favourably with the other members of the family that then domineered in England; and she was praised for not resembling them. "As the thorn produces the rose," people said, "so Godwin produced Edith."

The idea of making his daughter the wife of a king, and perhaps living to see his grandson wear a crown, fired Godwin's imagination; and it is even said that Edward, before leaving Normandy, was forced to swear, in the most solemn manner, that, if elected, he would marry Edith. But however that may have been, the imperious Earl insisted on the meek king becoming his son-in-law; and a man who, even in the days of his youth, had been much too saintly to think of matrimony, was compelled, when turned of forty, to espouse a woman on the hands of whose father was his brother's blood, and to whose family he had, naturally enough, a thorough aversion.

VI.
THE KING AND THE KING-MAKER

It was 1042 when Edward – afterwards celebrated as the Confessor – found himself placed by the hand of Godwin on the throne of his ancestors, and provided with a wife and queen in the person of Edith, Godwin's daughter. At first, matters went pleasantly enough, and, indeed, appeared promising. But no real friendship could exist between the Anglo-Saxon king and the man whom he regarded as his brother's murderer. Ere six years passed, Godwin and the king were foes, and England was the scene of discord and disorder.

At that time the prejudice of the Anglo-Saxons against foreigners was peculiarly strong. Before returning to the land of his birth, therefore, Edward was under the necessity of promising that he should bring with him no considerable number of Normans. The condition was observed in so far that few Normans did accompany Edward to England. But no sooner was he seated on the throne, and in a position to grant favours, than his palace was open to all comers; and guests from the court of Rouen flocked to the court of Westminster.

When Edward's Norman friends presented themselves, they met with the most cordial welcome; and being, for the most part, men of adventurous talents, they soon began to look upon the country as their property, and grasped at every office which the king had to bestow. Ere long, Norman priests found themselves bishops in England; Norman warriors figured as governors of English castles; and the court became so thoroughly Normanized, that the national dress, language, and manners, went wholly out of fashion.

The Anglo-Saxon nobles do not appear to have manifested any jealousy of the king's friends. In fact, their inclination was quite the reverse. The polish and refinement of their new associates excited their admiration, and they hastened to adopt the Norman fashions. Throwing aside their long cloaks, they assumed the short Norman mantle, with its wide sleeves; they neglected their native tongue to imitate, as well as they could, the language spoken by Norman prelates and warriors; and, instead of signing their names, as of old, they began to affix seals to their deeds. The Anglo-Saxon dress, manners, and language were no longer accounted worthy of men who pretended to rank and breeding.

Meanwhile, Godwin not only steadily abstained from adopting the Norman fashions, but looked upon the king's foreign friends as mortal foes, and regarded everything about them with hatred. He felt, with pain, that they kept alive the memory of Prince Alfred and their murdered countrymen, and he perceived with uneasiness that each new arrival had the effect of weakening his influence with the king. It was under such circumstances that he set his face against foreigners, and found means of exciting the popular prejudices against the man whom, for selfish purposes, he had, to the exclusion of the true heir, placed on the English throne. The multitude, ever ready to be deluded, took precisely the view Godwin wished, and began to speak of the pampered and overgrown adventurer as a neglected and long-suffering patriot.

"Is it astonishing," said one, "that the author and support of Edward's reign should be indignant at seeing new men from a foreign nation raised above him?"

"And yet," observed another, "never does he utter a harsh word to the man whom he himself created king."

"Curse all Norman favourites!" exclaimed a third.

"And," cried a fourth, "long life to the great chief – to the chief magnanimous by sea and land!"

While such was the situation of affairs, Eustace, Count of Boulogne, happened, in the year 1048, to come as a guest to England. Eustace was husband of Edward's sister, Goda; and the king naturally strove to make the visit of his brother-in-law as pleasant as possible. After remaining for some time at the English court, however, Eustace prepared to return home; but on reaching

Dover, where he intended to embark, an awkward quarrel took place between his attendants and the townsmen. A fray was the consequence; and in a conflict which took place, twenty of the count's men were unfortunately slain. Angry and indignant at the slaughter of his followers, Eustace, instead of embarking, turned back to demand redress, and hastened to lay his complaint before the king, who was then keeping his court in the castle of Gloucester.

Edward, ashamed of the riot, and horrified at the bloodshed, promised that condign punishment should be inflicted on the perpetrators of the outrage, and deputed the duty to Godwin, in whose earldom the town of Dover was included.

"Go without delay," said Edward, "and chastise by a military execution, those who have attacked my relative with arms in their hands, and who have disturbed the peace of the country."

"Nay," said Godwin, "it is not right to condemn, without hearing, men whom it is your duty to protect."

Nettled by the tone of Godwin's refusal, and aware of the refractory spirit by which the earl was animated, Edward gave way to anger, and convoked a great council at Gloucester. Before this assembly Godwin was summoned to answer for his conduct. Instead of appearing, the Earl of Wessex mustered an army with the object of setting Edward at defiance. England seemed on the verge of a civil war, but a peace was patched up by the mediation of Siward, Earl of Northumberland, and Leofric, Earl of Mercia, husband of that Godiva whose equestrian feat at Coventry the grateful citizens have since so often commemorated. But the efforts of Siward and Leofric proved vain. The king and Godwin indeed pretended to be reconciled. But neither was sincere. Ere long, the quarrel broke out afresh with great bitterness; and the earl, finding the king much more resolute than could have been expected, consulted his safety by escaping with his wife and family to Flanders.

Freed from the presence of his imperious father-in-law, and feeling himself at length a king in reality, Edward passed sentence of outlawry on Godwin and his sons, seized on their earldoms, and confiscated their property. Even Edith, the queen, did not escape her share of the adversity of her house. After being deprived of her lands and money she was sent to a convent in Hampshire, and condemned in a cloister to sigh with regret over the ambition that had united her fate with that of a man who had regarded her with a sentiment akin to horror.

"It is not meet," said Edward's Norman friends, ironically, "that while this woman's family undergo all the evils of exile, she herself should sleep upon down."

"But the King's wife!" remonstrated the Anglo-Saxon nobles.

"Tush!" answered the Normans, significantly; "she is his wife only in name."

While Godwin was an exile in Flanders, William, Duke of Normandy, paid a visit to the King of England. Edward received his kinsman with great affection, entertained him magnificently, and treated him with such distinction as encouraged the Norman Duke's most ambitious hopes. Indeed, it has been said that "William appeared in England more a king than Edward himself, and that his ambitious mind was not slow in conceiving the hope of becoming such in reality." Nor did William return to Normandy without tokens of Edward's good will. Magnificent presents of armour, horses, dogs, and falcons were the substantial pledges with which the monk-king accompanied his assurances of friendship for the warrior-duke.

But, meantime, Godwin grew weary of exile and eager for revenge. Impatient to return to England, and to wreak his fury on the Norman favourites, the banished earl resolved, at all hazards, on leaving Flanders. Having obtained ships from Count Baldwin, he sailed from Bruges; and, soon after Edward had witnessed the departure of his martial kinsman for Normandy, the fleet of his outlawed father-in-law sailed up the Thames and anchored at Southwark.

Edward was in London when Godwin's fleet appeared in this menacing attitude; and, assembling his council, the king, with a flash of ancestral spirit, evinced a strong desire to oppose force to force. But, though the Norman courtiers were anxious to come to blows with their mortal foe, the king was the only Englishman who participated in their sentiments. Not only were the citizens of

London all ready to take up arms for the outlawed earl; but even Siward and Leofric, the chiefs who had ever stood in opposition to Godwin, were in favour of his restoration; and the soldiers who formed the royal army were animated by such an antipathy to the foreign favourites, that it was felt they could not be depended on in the event of matters being pushed to extremity. In these circumstances, the king reluctantly consented to refer the question to a council of nobles; and this council, presided over by Robert Stigand, Bishop of East Anglia, decided that the whole case should be submitted for judgment to the Witenagemote, the National Council of the Anglo-Saxons.

On learning what had occurred, the Norman courtiers perceived that there was no hope for them but in escape. Without hesitation, therefore, they mounted their horses, and spurred from the palace of Westminster. Headed by Robert, Archbishop of Canterbury, and William, Bishop of London, a troop of Norman knights and gentlemen dashed eastward, fought their way through the city, and, making for the coast, embarked in fishing-boats; others fled to northern castles, held by Hugh the Norman, and Osbert, surnamed Pentecost; and thence, with Hugh and Osbert, made for the north, crossed the Tweed, and sought security on Scottish soil. No mercy, they well knew, could be expected at the hands of Godwin, and quite as little at the hands of a multitude believing in his patriotism and exasperated against his foes.

Meanwhile, the Witenagemote having been convoked, and all the best men in the country having assembled to take part in the deliberations, Godwin spoke in his own defence. The proceedings, as had been foreseen from the beginning, resulted in the revocation of the sentence of outlawry against the earl and his sons, and restoration to their lands and honours. An exception was, indeed, made in the case of Godwin's eldest son, Sweyn, who, having debauched the abbess of Leominster, and murdered his kinsman, Earl Beorn, was deemed unworthy of the company of Christians and warriors. But Sweyn relieved his family from all awkwardness on this point by voluntarily undertaking a penitential pilgrimage on foot to the Holy Sepulchre.

Matters having been thus arranged, the king accepted from Godwin the oath of peace; and Godwin, as hostages for his good faith, placed his youngest son, Wolnoth, and Haco, the son of Sweyn, in the hands of the king, who sent them to the court of Rouen. At the same time, William, the Norman Bishop of London, was, by the king's wish, recalled to England; but Robert, the Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, was not so fortunate. Stigand, instituted as Robert's successor, took possession of the pallium which the Norman prelate had left behind in his sudden flight.

When her kinsmen were restored to England, Edith, the queen, brought from her convent in Hampshire, once more appeared at the palace of Westminster; and the house of Godwin seemed more firmly established than ever. The king, ceasing to struggle against the earl's influence, occupied his attention with completing the abbey which he had been building at Westminster, and Leofric and Siward seemed to bow to their great rival's power and popularity. But the days of Godwin were numbered.

It was the spring of 1054; Edward was holding his court in the castle of Winchester; and Godwin and his sons were among the guests. One day, when the feast was spread, and the king and the earl were seated at the board, an attendant, who was stepping forward to pour wine into a cup, happened to stumble with one foot, and quickly recovered himself with the other. Edward smiled; and Godwin, willing to give a hint to his sons, who were perpetually brawling with each other, turned towards them.

"Well," remarked the earl, "you see how the brother has come to the support of the brother."

"Ay," said the king, in a significant tone; "brother needs the aid of brother; and would to God my brother Alfred yet lived to aid me!"

"Oh, king!" exclaimed Godwin, startled and irritated, "why is it that, on the slightest recollection of your brother, you ever look so angrily on me?"

Edward deigned no reply; but his pale brow grew stern, and his withered cheek flushed with resentment.

"If," continued the earl, taking a piece of bread in his hand – "if I contributed, even indirectly, to your brother's death, may the God of Heaven grant this may choke me!"

With these words Godwin put the bread into his mouth; and, as he did so, and as the eyes of the king were bent intently on his countenance, the earl fell from his seat.

"It is the judgment of God!" muttered the courtiers with a shudder.

Tostig and Gurth, two of Godwin's sons, rushed forward, raised him in their arms, and bore him from the hall; and, five days later, the Earl of Wessex was a corpse.

VII.
MATILDA OF FLANDERS

On the memorable day on which William the Norman, during the exile of Earl Godwin, appeared as an honoured guest in the halls of Westminster, and speculated on the probability of figuring, at no distant period, as King of England, the crown worn by Edward the Confessor was not the only prize on which the young duke had set his mind. In fact, love was blended with ambition in William's heart. He had determined, somewhat in defiance of canon and precedent, to espouse Matilda of Flanders; and no one who visited Bruges and looked upon the fair and intelligent face of that graceful Flemish princess could have wondered that a warrior-duke, not yet thirty, should meditate the indiscretion of defying popes and prelates to enjoy the privilege of calling her his own.

Matilda's pedigree was such as to make her a desirable bride for the struggling son of Duke Robert. She was one of the daughters of Baldwin, Count of Flanders, by Adele, daughter of Robert, King of France; and, through an Anglo-Saxon ancestress, she had in her veins the blood of Alfred the Great. But even with a much less illustrious descent, Matilda would have been highly distinguished among the princesses of the eleventh century. Nature had gifted the daughter of Count Baldwin with beauty and talent, and careful education had rendered her one of the most attractive and captivating among the high-born maidens of whom Christendom could boast. William's ambition and his heart were naturally enough fascinated with the idea of wedding a princess of such rank and beauty; and while yet he found the coronal of Normandy sitting somewhat uneasily on his brow, he sent ambassadors to the Court of Flanders to demand Matilda's hand.

Notwithstanding William's illegitimate birth and disputed title, Count Baldwin expressed no objection to accept him as a son-in-law. Indeed, the count, feeling that William could prove a valuable friend or a formidable foe, hailed the proposal with gratification. But two obstacles immediately presented themselves – one difficulty was the repugnance of Matilda, the other was the laws of the Church.

Matilda had no stronger objections to being led to the altar than other ladies of her age. In fact, she is understood to have already dreamed of the bridal veil and the marriage vow, and to have been eager to become the spouse of a Saxon nobleman named Brihtrik, who had appeared at her father's court. Perhaps Matilda's thoughts had dwelt on Brihtrik longer than prudence warranted. In any case, when the ambassadors from Rouen presented themselves at Bruges, she set herself decidedly against the proposal of which they were the bearers.

"Why," said Baldwin, "do you object to the Count of the Normans?"

"Mention him not!" exclaimed Matilda, with a disdainful toss of her finely-shaped head. "I will not have a bastard for my husband!"

But William, who feared not man's wrath, was not to be daunted by woman's scorn. Every day he became more convinced of the necessity of uniting himself with some princess capable, by her rank and lineage, of giving dignity to his position. It appears, moreover, that the warrior-duke really entertained a strong affection for Matilda; and he seized an opportunity of manifesting the excess of his attachment by a violent kind of love-making, which has long been out of fashion.

It is related that one day, when Matilda had been at mass, and was quietly walking with her ladies of honour along the streets of Bruges on her way to the palace, to employ her hands with the embroidery work for which she was destined to become famous, and perhaps to occupy her thoughts with the fair Saxon noble who had won her young heart without giving his in return, William, arrayed as if for battle and mounted on horseback, suddenly and unexpectedly made his appearance. Alighting with a bound, he seized the princess in his strong arms, shook her, beat her, rolled her on

the ground, and fearfully damaged her rich garments. After this extraordinary exhibition, he sprang into his saddle, set spurs to his horse, and rode away at full speed.

It might have been supposed that William's violent conduct would have increased Matilda's aversion to the match. The reverse, however, was the case. The princess, in fact, appears to have been overwhelmed by such a proof of affection.

"I am now convinced of the sincerity of his love," she said, "and I will offer no further objections to taking him as a husband."

Ere Matilda began to conquer the repugnance she had expressed to a union with the son of Duke Robert, William found, to his annoyance, that the Church opposed his marriage with the fair Flemish princess, on the ground of their being within the prohibited degrees of relationship. It would seem, in fact, that Adele, Countess of Flanders, had, in early youth, been betrothed to William's uncle, Richard, Duke of Normandy; so that the mother of Matilda stood in the relationship of aunt to the Norman duke, "an affinity," as has been observed, "quite near enough to account for, if not to justify the interference of the Church."

Nevertheless, William did not despair. Indeed, he had thoroughly made up his mind to be Matilda's husband and Baldwin's son-in-law, and to permit no priest to baffle him in a matrimonial scheme which ambition and love alike rendered dear to his heart. It was in vain that Pope Nicholas set himself in opposition to the marriage, and that the legitimate heirs of Rolfganger prepared to take advantage of a rupture between the son of Arlette and the See of Rome. William's perseverance and policy overcame all obstacles, and at length, with a dispensation in his hand, he claimed and received the bride he had so long wooed.

It was after his visit to the Court of Westminster, in 1052, and after the restoration of Godwin and his sons to their country, that William the Norman led Matilda of Flanders to the altar, and flattered himself that, by espousing a descendant of Alfred, he had smoothed his way to the throne from which Alfred had ruled England.

VIII.
SIWARD THE DANE

At the time when Godwin and Edward were at feud, and when the earl was browbeating the saintly prince whom he had placed on the English throne – among the Saxons and Normans who assembled around the king to discuss a grave question, or strike a great blow, might have been observed an aged warrior of gigantic stature, leaning on a two-handed sword, and regarding Saxon thane and Norman count with an expression indicative of some degree of calm contempt. His dress recalled the days of Canute and Hardicanute; his hair was white with years; his frame was bowed with time; but his spirit was such as time could neither bend nor break; and his eye still glanced at the sight of battle-axe and shield. "Gray and vast, as some image of a gone and mightier age, towered over all Siward, the son of Beorn, the great Earl of Northumberland."

Siward was one of the most remarkable men who figured in the reign of Edward the Confessor, and he had a history still more remarkable than himself. A Dane, and of noble birth, he had, at an early age, left his native shores, with an idea, perhaps, of emulating the feats of Hasting or Haveloke. Landing in the Orcades, he engaged in single combat, and put to the rout a large dragon, which had long been the terror of the rude islanders. After performing this exploit, Siward put to sea, left the Orcades behind, and, guiding his ship as a horseman does a steed, reached the northern coast of England. Having sprung ashore, and wandered into the forest in quest of adventures, he met a venerable old man, with a long white beard, who entered into conversation with him, presented him with a mystic banner, and gave him some sage advice.

"This banner," said the venerable man, "is called 'the raven of earthly terror;' take it as thy standard; direct thy voyage southward to the mouth of a river called the Thames, which will lead thee to a city called London, where reigns the son of Canute, who will bid thee welcome, and aid thee to become great in this land."

Siward does not appear to have disdained the idea of exchanging the pine plank for the rush-strewed hall. At all events, he took the mystic banner and the advice of the venerable man, steered his course towards the Thames, and, reaching London, presented himself to the king. It was an age when men of huge proportions and fearless hearts were in great request; and Siward's reception was all that could have been wished.

The favour shown by the Danish king to Siward naturally made him the object of envy. Many absurd stories were consequently circulated about his origin and parentage. He was described as the grandson of a bear; and Tostig, Earl of Huntingdon, took occasion to affront him before the whole court. But the adventurous Dane gave his enemies a lesson which they never forgot. Defying Tostig to mortal combat, he signalized his prowess beyond all dispute, and terminated the duel by cutting off his antagonist's head. More convinced than ever of Siward's value as an adherent, Hardicanute bestowed on him the earldom which Tostig had enjoyed.

After being installed as Earl of Huntingdon, Siward played his part with energy and wisdom. The ability he displayed seemed fully to justify his sudden rise to importance, and a circumstance ere long occurred which gave him an opportunity of still further advancing his fortunes.

It happened that Uchtred, the great Saxon Earl of Northumberland, having been gathered to his fathers, Eadulph, the son of Uchtred, ruled from the Humber to the Tweed. Not content, however, with this territory, Eadulph undertook an expedition against the Welsh, and committed fearful depredations. Enraged at the northern earl making war without his consent, Hardicanute resolved on a severe chastisement, and entrusted Siward with the duty of inflicting it. Aware of his danger, Eadulph mounted, and hastened towards London to implore the king's clemency. But it was

too late. While Eadulph was on his way south, Siward, going north, met him face to face. A conflict ensued. Eadulph fell, and Siward carried his head to Hardicanute.

It was shortly after the encounter which terminated in the death of Eadulph, that Edward the Confessor ascended the throne of his ancestors. At that time the fortunes of Siward, as foreigner and Dane, were probably in great peril. The event, however, proved to his advantage. There was some dread of a Danish fleet appearing on the Northumbrian coast; and the new king, in considerable alarm, took counsel with his great men.

"What is to be done?" asked the king.

"It is best," answered the thanes, "that the little devil should be first opposed to the great devil. Let Siward the Dane be sent to rule that part of your realm likely to be invaded by the Danes."

The king listened, and, as he was advised, nominated Siward Earl of Northumberland. Siward, repairing to York, the capital of the North, won the favour of the province by espousing Alfleda, granddaughter of Uchtred, and then governed the inhabitants with an ability and a vigour that excited the admiration of Leofric, and roused the jealousy of Godwin. The Danes, considering, perhaps, that their gigantic countryman would be a formidable antagonist to encounter, refrained from any attempt at invasion, and, moreover, sent messages of peace and friendship to Edward. "We will," said they, "allow you to reign unmolested over your country, and content ourselves with the lands which God has given us."

Years passed over, and Siward was keeping his court at York, and ruling Northumberland with complete success, when the unfortunate conflict between the townsmen of Dover and the train of Eustace of Boulogne brought the quarrel of Edward and Godwin to a crisis. Siward and Leofric were then summoned to the king's aid, and commanded to lead their fighting men against the forces of the refractory earl. Both obeyed, and, at their call, the inhabitants of Northumberland and Mercia took up arms. Hostile, however, as Siward and Leofric were to Godwin, they could not help perceiving that the country was wholly on his side. Indeed, the murmurs of their own soldiers convinced the Earls of Northumberland and Mercia of the utter impolicy of pushing matters to extremity. Generously sacrificing resentment to patriotism, they raised their voices in favour of Godwin's restoration and against Godwin's foes.

Scarcely had Godwin gone to his account, when Siward became aware that his own end was drawing nigh. The Danish earl had just returned from that expedition into Scotland which resulted in the overthrow of Macbeth, when he was prostrated with sickness at York. Feeling that the great destroyer was upon him, Siward became horrified at the prospect of dying in bed, and in night-gear.

"Raise me," he said to those who watched his uneasy couch. "Let me die like a warrior, and not huddled up together like a cow!"

"What wouldest thou, great earl?" asked the attendants.

"Put my coat of mail on my back," said Siward; "place my helmet on my head, my shield on my left arm, and my gilt axe in my right hand, that I may expire as a warrior should."

The command of the dying earl was obeyed. Clad, by his own desire, in all the habiliments of war, and sitting up in his bed, Siward, with calm courage, awaited the last enemy, and died with the same martial dignity which had characterized his life. His remains were laid in the monastery of Galmanho, which he had founded at York; and, as a memorial of his prodigious prowess, there was long afterwards shown a rock of granite which he was said to have split with one blow of his mighty battle-axe.

IX.
HAROLD, THE SAXON KING

When Earl Godwin breathed his last, under circumstances so memorable, his second son, Harold, succeeded to his earldom, and inherited his influence. A robust and active man, of tall, though not gigantic stature, with long fair hair, a pleasing countenance, dignified manners, and popular address – such appears to have been Harold, the son of Godwin.

It was when Hardicanute died so suddenly, at the marriage feast at Lambeth, that Harold began to figure in public, and to take a prominent part in national affairs. At that crisis, Harold was one of the first to raise a standard against the Danes, and he is even said to have contributed to the triumph of the Saxon cause, by inviting many of the Danish chiefs to a banquet, and causing them to be put to the sword while over their cups. But, whatever truth there may be in such a story, it seems that Harold shared in the prosperity of the house of Godwin at the opening of Edward's reign, and that when Godwin, outlawed and exiled, in 1048 escaped to Bruges, Harold, with his brother Leofwin, fled to Bristol, and there took shipping for the Irish coast. When Godwin returned from Bruges, Harold and Leofwin, coming from Ireland, joined their father at the Isle of Wight, and took part in that formidable demonstration which startled King Edward and his Norman courtiers in the halls of Westminster.

After the restoration of Godwin, and the banishment of the Normans, Harold would seem to have been higher in Edward's favour than any of his kinsmen; and after the death of Godwin, Harold was quietly put in possession of the vast earldom south of the Thames which his sire had so long enjoyed. Both as regarded military reputation and territorial power he was now foremost among the Anglo-Saxons, and he immensely increased his fame by the skill he displayed in a war with the refractory Welsh.

The originator of this war was Algar, son of the great Leofric, who, becoming discontented, gave his daughter Aldith in marriage to a Welsh prince named Griffith, and encouraged that crowned Celt to make an incursion into the English territories. During this inroad the city of Hereford was sacked and much mischief done; but Harold, on being sent with an army, speedily put the Welsh to the rout, and forced Griffith to submit. Untaught, however, by his severe experience of the superiority of the English, Griffith once more rebelled; and Harold, marching back to the borders of Wales, caused such terror, that, to pacify him, the Welsh sacrificed Griffith to save themselves, and sent the head of the murdered prince to the English camp, on the point of a spear.

After his victories over the Welsh, Harold returned to London, and found himself hailed by the multitude as a conqueror. His popularity was now immense, and wherever he appeared his name was shouted with enthusiasm.

"Harold! Harold the Earl!" was the cry.

"Since Edward the king has no heirs," was the saying, "no man is so worthy to succeed to the crown."

While such was the popularity of the son of Godwin, and while all rivalry with him was so completely out of the question that Algar died of despair and regret, Harold, with a view of recovering his brother Wolnoth and his nephew Haco, who had been sent as hostages to Duke William, and who were still retained at the court of Rouen, proposed to visit Normandy. On intimating his intention to Edward, however, the king hesitated to grant permission.

"Your journey," said the king, "will certainly bring some evil on yourself, and on your country."

"In what way, O king?" asked Harold in amazement.

"I know Duke William and his crafty mind," replied Edward; "he hates you, and will grant you nothing unless he gain greatly by it. The only way to obtain the hostages from him were to send some one else."

"I fear it is otherwise," said Harold.

"Well," said Edward, "I will not prevent your going; but, if you do go, it will be without my consent."

Not much influenced by Edward's warnings, Harold departed for Normandy. As if going on an excursion for pleasure, he set out, surrounded by his gay comrades, with his hawks and his hounds.

But a circumstance soon occurred to make him serious. Having sailed from one of the ports of Sussex, Harold's vessels were driven by contrary winds towards the mouth of the Somme; and the earl, forced to land on the territories of Guy, Count of Ponthieu, was seized by that feudal personage as a captive, despoiled of all his property, and placed securely under lock and key, in the castle of Beaurain.

One day, when William the Norman was at Rouen, a messenger from Harold arrived hurriedly and in haste, with intelligence of his captivity. William expressed high indignation, and demanded extradition of the Saxon earl with a menace, which was meant to serve for ransom. Guy of Ponthieu, however, demanded a fine estate and a large sum of money, and would listen to no proposal less advantageous to himself. William was, in consequence, obliged to grant what the count demanded; and, the matter having been arranged, Harold was set free and conducted to Rouen.

On reaching the Norman capital, Harold met with a reception which soon effaced the remembrance of his captivity in the stronghold of Count Guy. At the same time William intimated that the hostages were at Harold's disposal; but he pressed the earl to remain for a time as his guest, and see something of the land. Harold, who was bold and confident, accepted the invitation; and having, with his companions, been admitted into the Norman order of knighthood, he began to figure prominently in the festivals and pageants of the Norman court.

While Harold the Saxon was in this position, William the Norman undertook an expedition against the Bretons. Before setting out, the martial duke requested Harold's company; and Harold, consenting without hesitation, went with his Saxon comrades to take part in the war. During this campaign, William treated Harold with the utmost consideration; and the Norman duke and the Saxon earl slept in one tent, ate at the same table, and conducted themselves towards each other like men on terms of the most intimate friendship.

In this expedition against the Bretons, Harold and his Saxon companions bore themselves with a courage which excited high admiration; and, in spite of Edward's prophecy, everything seemed to go smoothly; when one day, as the duke and the earl rode along, side by side, enlivening the way with friendly colloquy, William artfully turned the conversation to his early acquaintance with the King of England, and suddenly revealed the ambitious project which was occupying his mind.

"In the days of my youth," said William, turning on his saddle, playing with his bridle-rein, and looking Harold in the face, "your king and I lived under the same roof like brothers; and he then promised that, if ever he came to be King of England, I should be nominated heir to his crown."

Harold, in perplexed surprise, muttered some words.

"Wherefore, Harold," continued William, "if thou wouldst aid me in realizing this promise, be sure that, if I obtain the kingdom, whatever thou askest thou shalt have. What is thine answer?"

"Be it as thou sayest," murmured Harold, taken by surprise, and finding it impossible to answer otherwise than with some vague words of compliance.

"Then," added William, growing bolder in his proposals, "since thou consentest to serve me, thou must engage to fortify the castle of Dover, to dig there a well of fresh water, and when the time comes, to deliver up the place to my people. Moreover, to make the bond between us the stronger, thou must give thy sister Thyra in marriage to one of my barons; and thou must take to wife my daughter Adeliza. On thy departure, thou must leave me, as guarantee for thy promise, one of the

two hostages thou hast come to reclaim, and I will restore him to thee in England when I come there as king."

"I acquiesce in your demands," said Harold, eager to get rid of a subject which every moment became more embarrassing, and, without pursuing the conversation further, the duke and the earl rode on side by side towards Bayeux.

But it soon became apparent that William the Norman was by no means satisfied with the promise he had wrung from his Saxon guest. No sooner had the duke reached Bayeux than he prepared to exact a more solemn and ceremonious pledge; and, having caused such sacred relics as bones of saints to be brought from the churches, placed in a vessel in the council hall of the castle, and covered with a rich cloth of gold, so as to have the appearance of a table, he convoked his barons and prelates on a certain day, and intimated to Harold that his presence would be required.

At the hour appointed, baron and bishop crowded to the council hall; and William, with a sword in his hand and the coronal of Normandy on his brow, took his seat on the throne, caused two small reliquaries to be placed on the cloth of gold, and intimated, by a gesture, his desire that Harold should approach.

"Harold," said the Duke, "I require thee, before this noble assembly, to confirm, by oath, the promises thou hast made to me – namely, to aid me to obtain the kingdom of England after the death of King Edward, to marry my daughter, and to send thy sister, that I may give her to one of my lords."

"I swear," said Harold, extending his hand over the two reliquaries, "to execute my promise as far as lies in my power, if I live, and if God aid me."

"God aid him!" repeated the barons and bishops who stood around.

The ceremony being thus complete, William made a sign; the cloth of gold was raised; and before Harold's eyes lay bones and entire skeletons of saints, upon which he had, without suspecting their presence, so solemnly sworn. With a shudder and a change of countenance, which did not escape notice, he turned away from the sight. But the oath which he had sworn appeared to the Normans far too sacred ever to be broken; and he was allowed to depart for England with his nephew, the son of Sweyn. William accompanied them to the seaside, made them valuable presents, and repaired to Rouen, rejoicing in the thought, that the man most likely to have baffled his aspirations after the crown of England, was bound, by the most solemn oath, to aid him to the utmost.

Meanwhile, Harold's ships went tilting over the waters; and, on reaching England in a mood the reverse of serene, he hastened to London, presented himself to Edward, and related what had passed between the duke and himself. The saintly king heard the tidings with sadness, and expressed himself in words of woe.

"Did I not warn you," he said, after a painful silence, "warn you over and over again, that I knew Duke William, and that thy journey would bring evil on thyself and on thy country?"

"It is true," said Harold.

"Heaven grant," continued Edward, "that these evils happen not in my time!"

And, in truth, there was little danger of Edward living to witness the troubles in store for the land of his fathers. The king's days were now "dwindling to the shortest span." Aware that he was hourly sinking, Edward occupied himself more and more with religious devotions, and manifested much anxiety for the completion of the Abbey of Westminster, which, under his auspices, had risen on Thorney Island in the form of a cross, with a high tower in the centre. Intending to consecrate this edifice with great splendour at the Christmas of 1065, Edward summoned all the nobles and clergy to be present. But before the appointed day he became too weak to leave his chamber.

Edith, the queen, consequently presided at the consecration; and scarcely was the ceremony over, when Harold became aware that his royal brother-in-law could not survive many days. In fact, Edward, stretched on a bed of sickness, and haunted by terrible visions of fiends wandering over England, was looking, almost with impatience, for the hour that was to deliver him from the evils to come. Nor was the patience of the royal saint put to any long or severe trial.

It was Thursday, the 5th of January, 1066, and the king lay in that chamber of the palace of Westminster long afterwards, when known as "The Painted Chamber," associated with his memory. Robert Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury, with many nobles and prelates, stood by his couch; for Edward was on the eve of going where the weary are at rest; and nobles and prelates were, doubtless, anxious to hear his last will. He was, however, entirely absorbed in melancholy forebodings; and, as passages of Scripture denouncing woe to nations occurred involuntarily to his memory, he repeated them with a wild energy which horrified those who surrounded his couch.

"The Lord has bent his bow," exclaimed the dying king, "the Lord has prepared his sword; he brandishes it like unto a warrior; his wrath is manifested in steel and flame."

"The saints defend us!" muttered those present, terrified at the king's ejaculations.

"Tush!" exclaimed Archbishop Stigand, with a sneer of contempt; "why tremble ye at the dreams of a sick old man?"

In such a frame of mind, Edward the king breathed his last; and it is said that, having been asked whom he wished to succeed to his throne, he named Harold, son of Godwin. But whether or not such was the case, Harold was elected on the day after Edward's funeral, and allowed himself to be crowned at once, in violation of his oath to William the Norman, and in defiance of the claims of Edgar Atheling, grandson of Edmund Ironsides, and heir of the Saxon kings. In order to bind the chiefs of the House of Leofric to his interest, and to render his throne more secure, Harold espoused Aldith, daughter of Earl Algar, and widow of that Griffith whose head the Welsh had sent to him on the point of a spear.

Nevertheless, the position of Harold was encompassed with danger, and the minds of his subjects were filled with gloom and apprehension. As men reflected on the dying words of Edward the king, they recalled to mind old prophecies which increased their alarm. One of these predicted such calamities as the Saxons had never experienced since they left the Elbe; and another, which was more to the point, predicted the conquest of England by a people from France. While vague terrors preyed upon England, the appearance of a comet daunted all hearts, and was regarded, as it seemed to come, as a herald of woe.

"Thou hast then returned," said a monk of the period; "thou hast returned at length, thou who wilt cause so many mothers to weep! Many times have I seen thee shine; but thou lookest to me more terrible now that thou announcest the ruin of my country."

X.
DUKE WILLIAM AND HIS DIFFICULTIES

IT was early one day, about the opening of the year 1066, and the ground was hard with frost, when William the Norman left the palace of Rouen, and crossed the Seine to test some new arrows in the park of Rouvray. While the duke was occupied in stringing that mighty bow which, save himself, no man then living could bend, a messenger from England reached him with tidings of such import, that his colour changed, and his lip quivered with emotion. It was to the effect that Edward the Confessor was dead, and that Harold, son of Godwin, had seized the English crown.

Giving his bow to an attendant, William walked to the margin of the Seine, stepped into his barge, and, without speaking, indicated by a gesture his wish to return to Rouen. On reaching the castle, he entered the great hall, and paced up and down with a restless and excited step, "often," say the chronicles, "changing posture and attitude, and oft loosening and tightening the strings of his mantle." Such, indeed, seemed his agitation, that no member of his household ventured for some time to ask the cause.

Meantime, rumours of the intelligence brought by the messenger from England began to creep about, and a Norman noble, probably William Fitzosborne, the duke's seneschal, and the proudest of Norman magnates, presented himself to learn the actual state of affairs. Fitzosborne, who was Count of Breteuil, and destined one day to higher rank, had such a reputation for *hauteur* that he was surnamed "The Proud Spirit." Without any of that hesitation exhibited by others, he approached William the Norman, and inquired the cause of his emotion.

"My lord," said he, "pray communicate your news. It is bruited about that the King of England is dead, and that Harold, breaking faith with you, has usurped the crown."

"They say truly who so report," answered the duke; "and my grief is touching the death of Edward, and my anger is touching the wrong done me by Harold."

"Sir," said Fitzosborne, "chafe not at what may be amended. For Edward's death, it is true, there is no remedy; but there is a remedy for the injury done you by Harold. Yours is the right, and you have stout warriors. Strike with courage: the work is already half done."

Genius, however, is generally patient; and William was too crafty to spoil his game by indiscreet haste. He went cautiously and gradually to work; and not till he had twice, in courteous phrase, required Harold to fulfil the treaty so solemnly concluded, did he threaten the Saxon with invasion and punishment. Then, however, he cast hesitation to the winds, and resolved on inflicting a signal chastisement. "I doubt not," he said, "of finding that man a feeble foe, who has proved so faithless a friend."

In the meantime negotiations were vigorously commenced at Rome, and Harold was charged before the pontifical court with perjury and sacrilege. The Saxon king was summoned to defend himself, and endeavoured to escape by refusing to acknowledge the jurisdiction of the court. But this did not serve his purpose. The conclave assembled at the Lateran, under the inspiration of the famous Hildebrand, decided that William should enter England, and bring that kingdom back to the Holy See; and a papal bull, directed against Harold and his adherents, was presented to William, along with a consecrated banner, an agnus of gold, and a ring which contained a hair of St. Peter, set in a diamond of great price.

A council of high Norman nobles was now convened at Rouen; and William, addressing his friends, demanded counsel and aid. There was no difference of opinion. All were ready to take part with their duke in the invasion of England, and each man present delighted his soul with visions of rich manors on the Thames or the Mersey. However, they advised him to consult the general feeling

of the community; and, accordingly, the merchants and traders of Normandy, as well as the lords and knights, were summoned to confer with the duke.

Lillebonne was the place appointed for this memorable assembly, and thither came all the wealthiest and most important subjects of Normandy. William, after opening his heart to them, explained his views and craved pecuniary aid, and they then withdrew to deliberate in freedom. The result was not quite satisfactory. The Normans were greatly divided in opinion. Some were anxious to aid the duke with men and money; but others positively objected, declaring that they had already more debts than they could pay.

It was now that William Fitzosborne did better service than a hundred knights could have rendered to his liege lord. Raising his voice above the tumult, he exerted that eloquence for which the Norman nobles were so remarkable.

"Why this confusion and discord?" asked Fitzosborne. "Why dispute thus among ourselves? The duke hath need of us, and he is our lord – "

"William is our lord; but we owe him no aid beyond the seas," interrupted the assembly.

"It is our duty to make offers of aid, rather than to wait his requests," continued Fitzosborne. "He hath need of us now; and if we fail him, and he gains his end, he will remember it to our disadvantage. Let us, then, prove by our acts that we love him, and let us entitle ourselves to his gratitude."

"Doubtless, William is our lord," cried the Normans; "but is it not enough for us to pay him his dues? We owe him no aid beyond the seas. He hath already oppressed us enough with his wars; let him fail in this new enterprise, and our country is undone."

"Well," said Fitzosborne, changing his plan, "let us return to the duke; and I, as knowing the position of each man present, will take upon me to excuse the limited offers of the assembly."

"So be it," was the answer; and the Normans, with Fitzosborne at their head, returned to Duke William's presence.

"Sire," said Fitzosborne, addressing William, "I do not believe that there are in the whole world people more zealous than yours. You know the aids they have given you – the onerous services they have rendered. Well, sire, they will do more. They offer to serve you beyond the seas as they have done here."

"No, no!" cried the Normans, "we did not charge you with such an answer."

"For my own part," continued Fitzosborne, "I will, out of love to you, give sixty well-appointed ships, each charged with fifty fighting men. Forward, then, and spare us in nothing! He who hath hitherto only supplied you with two good mounted soldiers will now supply four."

"We did not say that," cried the Normans, "and it shall not be so. In things within his own country, we will serve the duke, as is due; but we are not bound to assist him to conquer another man's country. Besides, if once we rendered double service, and followed him across the sea, he would make it a right and a custom for the future; he would burden our children with it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.