

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS – VOLUME 05**

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
Harold : the Last of the
Saxon Kings — Volume 05

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton Harold : the Last of the Saxon Kings — Volume 05

BOOK V. DEATH AND LOVE

CHAPTER I

Harold, without waiting once more to see Edith, nor even taking leave of his father, repaired to Dunwich¹, the capital of his earldom. In his absence, the King wholly forgot Algar and his suit; and in the mean while the only lordships at his disposal, Stigand, the grasping bishop, got from him without an effort. In much wrath, Earl Algar, on the fourth day, assembling all the loose men-at-arms he could find around the metropolis, and at the head of a numerous disorderly band, took his way into Wales, with his young daughter Aldyth, to whom the crown of a Welch king was perhaps some comfort for the loss of the fair Earl; though the rumour ran that she had long since lost her heart to

¹ Dunwich, now swallowed up by the sea.—Hostile element to the house of Godwin.

her father's foe.

Edith, after a long homily from the King, returned to Hilda; nor did her godmother renew the subject of the convent. All she said on parting, was, "Even in youth the silver cord may be loosened, and the golden bowl may be broken; and rather perhaps in youth than in age, when the heart has grown hard, wilt thou recall with a sigh my counsels."

Godwin had departed to Wales; all his sons were at their several lordships; Edward was left alone to his monks and relic-venders. And so months passed.

Now it was the custom with the old kings of England to hold state and wear their crowns thrice a year, at Christmas, at Easter, and at Whitsuntide; and in those times their nobles came round them, and there was much feasting and great pomp.

So, in the Easter of the year of our Lord 1053, King Edward kept his court at Windshore², and Earl Godwin and his sons, and many others of high degree, left their homes to do honour to the King. And Earl Godwin came first to his house in London—near the Tower Palatine, in what is now called the Fleet—and Harold the Earl, and Tostig, and Leofwine, and Gurth, were to meet him there, and go thence, with the full state of their sub-thegns, and cnechts, and house-carles, their falcons, and their hounds, as become men of such rank, to the court of King Edward.

Earl Godwin sate with his wife, Githa, in a room out of the Hall, which looked on the Thames,—awaiting Harold, who

² Windsor.

was expected to arrive ere nightfall. Gurth had ridden forth to meet his brother, and Leofwine and Tostig had gone over to Southwark, to try their band-dogs on the great bear, which had been brought from the north a few days before, and was said to have hugged many good hounds to death, and a large train of thegns and house-carles had gone with them to see the sport; so that the old Earl and his lady the Dane sate alone. And there was a cloud upon Earl Godwin's large forehead, and he sate by the fire, spreading his hands before it, and looking thoughtfully on the flame, as it broke through the smoke which burst out into the cover, or hole in the roof. And in that large house there were no less than three "covers," or rooms, wherein fires could be lit in the centre of the floor; and the rafters above were blackened with the smoke; and in those good old days, ere chimneys, if existing, were much in use, "poses, and rheumatisms, and catarrhs," were unknown, so wholesome and healthful was the smoke. Earl Godwin's favourite hound, old, like himself, lay at his feet, dreaming, for it whined and was restless. And the Earl's old hawk, with its feathers all stiff and sparse, perched on the dossal of the Earl's chair and the floor was pranked with rushes and sweet herbs—the first of the spring; and Githa's feet were on her stool, and she leaned her proud face on the small hand which proved her descent from the Dane, and rocked herself to and fro, and thought of her son Wolnoth in the court of the Norman.

"Githa," at last said the Earl, "thou hast been to me a good wife and a true, and thou hast borne me tall and bold sons, some

of whom have caused us sorrow, and some joy; and in sorrow and in joy we have but drawn closer to each other. Yet when we wed thou wert in thy first youth, and the best part of my years was fled; and thou wert a Dane and I a Saxon; and thou a king's niece, and now a king's sister, and I but tracing two descents to thegn's rank."

Moved and marvelling at this touch of sentiment in the calm earl, in whom indeed such sentiment was rare, Githa roused herself from her musings, and said, simply and anxiously:

"I fear my lord is not well, that he speaks thus to Githa!"

The Earl smiled faintly.

"Thou art right with thy woman's wit, wife. And for the last few weeks, though I said it not to alarm thee, I have had strange noises in my ears, and a surge, as of blood, to the temples."

"O Godwin! dear spouse," said Githa, tenderly, "and I was blind to the cause, but wondered why there was some change in thy manner! But I will go to Hilda to-morrow; she hath charms against all disease."

"Leave Hilda in peace, to give her charms to the young; age defies Wigh and Wicca. Now hearken to me. I feel that my thread is nigh spent, and, as Hilda would say, my Fylgia forewarns me that we are about to part. Silence, I say, and hear me. I have done proud things in my day; I have made kings and built thrones, and I stand higher in England than ever thegn or earl stood before. I would not, Githa, that the tree of my house, planted in the storm, and watered with lavish blood, should wither away."

The old Earl paused, and Githa said, loftily:

"Fear not that thy name will pass from the earth, or thy race from power. For fame has been wrought by thy hands, and sons have been born to thy embrace; and the boughs of the tree thou hast planted shall live in the sunlight when we its roots, O my husband, are buried in the earth."

"Githa," replied the Earl, "thou speakest as the daughter of kings and the mother of men; but listen to me, for my soul is heavy. Of these our sons, or first-born, alas! is a wanderer and outcast—Sweyn, once the beautiful and brave; and Wolnoth, thy darling, is a guest in the court of the Norman, our foe. Of the rest, Gurth is so mild and so calm, that I predict without fear that he will be warrior of fame, for the mildest in hall are ever the boldest in field. But Gurth hath not the deep wit of these tangled times; and Leofwine is too light, and Tostig too fierce. So wife mine, of these our six sons, Harold alone, dauntless as Tostig, mild as Gurth, hath his father's thoughtful brain. And, if the King remains as aloof as now from his royal kinsman, Edward the Atheling, who"—the Earl hesitated and looked round—"who so near to the throne when I am no more, as Harold, the joy of the ceorls, and the pride of the thegns?—he whose tongue never falters in the Witan, and whose arm never yet hath known defeat in the field?"

Githa's heart swelled, and her cheek grew flushed.

"But what I fear the most," resumed the Earl, "is, not the enemy without, but the jealousy within. By the side of Harold

stands Tostig, rapacious to grasp, but impotent to hold—able to ruin, strengthless to save."

"Nay, Godwin, my lord, thou wrongest our handsome son."

"Wife, wife," said the Earl, stamping his foot, "hear me and obey me; for my words on earth may be few, and while thou gainsayest me the blood mounts to my brain, and my eyes see through a cloud."

"Forgive me, sweet lord," said Githa, humbly.

"Mickle and sore it repents me that in their youth I spared not the time from my worldly ambition to watch over the hearts of my sons; and thou wert too proud of the surface without, to look well to the workings within, and what was once soft to the touch is now hard to the hammer. In the battle of life the arrows we neglect to pick up, Fate, our foe, will store in her quiver; we have armed her ourselves with the shafts—the more need to beware with the shield. Wherefore, if thou survivest me, and if, as I forebode, dissension break out between Harold and Tostig, I charge thee by memory of our love, and reverence for my grave, to deem wise and just all that Harold deems just and wise. For when Godwin is in the dust, his House lives alone in Harold. Heed me now, and heed ever. And so, while the day yet lasts, I will go forth into the marts and the guilds, and talk with the burgesses, and smile on their wives, and be, to the last, Godwin the smooth and the strong."

So saying; the old Earl arose, and walked forth with a firm step; and his old hound sprang up, pricked its ears, and followed

him; the blinded falcon turned its head towards the clapping door, but did not stir from the dossel.

Then Githa again leant her cheek on her hand, and again rocked herself to and fro, gazing into the red flame of the fire,—red and fitful through the blue smoke,—and thought over her lord's words. It might be the third part of an hour after Godwin had left the house, when the door opened, and Githa, expecting the return of her sons, looked up eagerly, but it was Hilda, who stooped her head under the vault of the door; and behind Hilda came two of her maidens, bearing a small cyst, or chest. The Vala motioned to her attendants to lay the cyst at the feet of Githa, and that done, with lowly salutation they left the room.

The superstitions of the Danes were strong in Githa; and she felt an indescribable awe when Hilda stood before her, the red light playing on the Vala's stern marble face, and contrasting robes of funereal black. But, with all her awe, Githa, who, not educated like her daughter Edith, had few feminine resources, loved the visits of her mysterious kinswoman. She loved to live her youth over again in discourse on the wild customs and dark rites of the Dane; and even her awe itself had the charm which the ghost tale has to the child;—for the illiterate are ever children. So, recovering her surprise, and her first pause, she rose to welcome the Vala, and said:

"Hail, Hilda, and thrice hail! The day has been warm and the way long; and, ere thou takest food and wine, let me prepare for thee the bath for thy form, or the bath for thy feet. For as sleep

to the young, is the bath to the old."

Hilda shook her head.

"Bringer of sleep am I, and the baths I prepare are in the halls of Valhalla. Offer not to the Vala the bath for mortal weariness, and the wine and the food meet for human guests. Sit thee down, daughter of the Dane, and thank thy new gods for the past that hath been thine. Not ours is the present, and the future escapes from our dreams; but the past is ours ever, and all eternity cannot revoke a single joy that the moment hath known."

Then seating herself in Godwin's large chair, she leant over her seid-staff, and was silent, as if absorbed in her thoughts.

"Githa," she said at last, "where is thy lord? I came to touch his hands and to look on his brow."

"He hath gone forth into the mart, and my sons are from home; and Harold comes hither, ere night, from his earldom."

A faint smile, as of triumph, broke over the lips of the Vala, and then as suddenly yielded to an expression of great sadness.

"Githa," she said, slowly, "doubtless thou rememberest in thy young days to have seen or heard of the terrible hell-maid Belsta?"

"Ay, ay," answered Githa shuddering; "I saw her once in gloomy weather, driving before her herds of dark grey cattle. Ay, ay; and my father beheld her ere his death, riding the air on a wolf, with a snake for a bridle. Why askest thou?"

"Is it not strange," said Hilda, evading the question, that Belsta, and Heidr, and Hulla of old, the wolf-riders, the men-

devourers, could win to the uttermost secrets of galdra, though applied only to purposes the direst and fellest to man, and that I, though ever in the future,—I, though tasking the Nornas not to afflict a foe, but to shape the careers of those I love,—I find, indeed, my predictions fulfilled; but how often, alas! only in horror and doom!"

"How so, kinswoman, how so?" said Githa, awed yet charmed in the awe, and drawing her chair nearer to the mournful sorceress. "Didst thou not foretell our return in triumph from the unjust outlawry, and, lo, it hath come to pass? and hast thou not" (here Githa's proud face flushed) "foretold also that my stately Harold shall wear the diadem of a king?"

"Truly, the first came to pass," said Hilda; "but——" she paused, and her eye fell on the cyst; then breaking off she continued, speaking to herself rather than to Githa—"And Harold's dream, what did that portend? the runes fail me, and the dead give no voice. And beyond one dim day, in which his betrothed shall clasp him with the arms of a bride, all is dark to my vision—dark—dark. Speak not to me, Githa; for a burthen, heavy as the stone on a grave, rests on a weary heart!"

A dead silence succeeded, till, pointing with her staff to the fire, the Vala said, "Lo, where the smoke and the flame contend—the smoke rises in dark gyres to the air, and escapes, to join the wrack of clouds. From the first to the last we trace its birth and its fall; from the heart of the fire to the descent in the rain, so is it with human reason, which is not the light but the smoke;

it struggles but to darken us; it soars but to melt in the vapour and dew. Yet, lo, the flame burns in our hearth till the fuel fails, and goes at last, none know whither. But it lives in the air though we see it not; it lurks in the stone and waits the flash of the steel; it coils round the dry leaves and sere stalks, and a touch re-illuminates it; it plays in the marsh—it collects in the heavens—it appals us in the lightning—it gives warmth to the air—life of our life, and the element of all elements. O Githa, the flame is the light of the soul, the element everlasting; and it liveth still, when it escapes from our view; it burneth in the shapes to which it passes; it vanishes, but its never extinct."

So saying, the Vala's lips again closed; and again both the women sate silent by the great fire, as it flared and flickered over the deep lines and high features of Githa, the Earl's wife, and the calm, unwrinkled, solemn face of the melancholy Vala.

CHAPTER II

While these conferences took place in the house of Godwin, Harold, on his way to London, dismissed his train to precede him to his father's roof, and, striking across the country, rode fast and alone towards the old Roman abode of Hilda. Months had elapsed since he had seen or heard of Edith. News at that time, I need not say, was rare and scarce, and limited to public events, either transmitted by special nuncius or passing pilgrim, or borne from lip to lip by the talk of the scattered multitude. But even in his busy and anxious duties, Harold had in vain sought to banish from his heart the image of that young girl, whose life he needed no Vala to predict to him was interwoven with the fibres of his own. The obstacles which, while he yielded to, he held unjust and tyrannical, obstacles allowed by his reluctant reason and his secret ambition—not sanctified by conscience—only inflamed the deep strength of the solitary passion his life had known; a passion that, dating from the very childhood of Edith, had, often unknown to himself, animated his desire of fame, and mingled with his visions of power. Nor, though hope was far and dim, was it extinct. The legitimate heir of Edward the Confessor was a prince living in the Court of the Emperor, of fair repute, and himself wedded; and Edward's health, always precarious, seemed to forbid any very prolonged existence to the reigning king. Therefore, he thought that through the successor,

whose throne would rest in safety upon Harold's support, he might easily obtain that dispensation from the Pope which he knew the present king would never ask—a dispensation rarely indeed, if ever, accorded to any subject, and which, therefore, needed all a king's power to back it.

So in that hope, and fearful lest it should be quenched for ever by Edith's adoption of the veil and the irrevocable vow, with a beating, disturbed, but joyful heart he rode over field and through forest to the old Roman house.

He emerged at length to the rear of the villa, and the sun, fast hastening to its decline, shone full upon the rude columns of the Druid temple. And there, as he had seen her before, when he had first spoken of love and its barriers, he beheld the young maiden.

He sprang from his horse, and leaving the well-trained animal loose to browse on the waste land, he ascended the knoll. He stole noiselessly behind Edith, and his foot stumbled against the gravestone of the dead Titan-Saxon of old. But the apparition, whether real or fancied, and the dream that had followed, had long passed from his memory, and no superstition was in the heart springing to the lips, that cried "Edith" once again.

The girl started, looked round, and fell upon his breast. It was some moments before she recovered consciousness, and then, withdrawing herself gently from his arms, she leant for support against the Teuton altar.

She was much changed since Harold had seen her last: her cheek had grown pale and thin, and her rounded form seemed

wasted; and sharp grief, as he gazed, shot through the soul of Harold.

"Thou hast pined, thou hast suffered," said he, mournfully: "and I, who would shed my life's blood to take one from thy sorrows, or add to one of thy joys, have been afar, unable to comfort, perhaps only a cause of thy woe."

"No, Harold," said Edith, faintly, "never of woe; always of comfort, even in absence. I have been ill, and Hilda hath tried rune and charm all in vain. But I am better, now that Spring hath come tardily forth, and I look on the fresh flowers, and hear the song of the birds."

But tears were in the sound of her voice, while she spoke.

"And they have not tormented thee again with the thoughts of the convent?"

"They? no;—but my soul, yes. O Harold, release me from my promise; for the time already hath come that thy sister foretold to me; the silver cord is loosened, and the golden bowl is broken, and I would fain take the wings of the dove, and be at peace."

"Is it so?—Is there peace in the home where the thought of Harold becomes a sin?"

"Not sin then and there, Harold, not sin. Thy sister hailed the convent when she thought of prayer for those she loved."

"Prate not to me of my sister!" said Harold, through his set teeth. "It is but a mockery to talk of prayer for the heart that thou thyself rendest in twain. Where is Hilda? I would see her."

"She hath gone to thy father's house with a gift; and it was to

watch for her return that I sate on the green knoll."

The Earl then drew near and took her hand, and sate by her side, and they conversed long. But Harold saw with a fierce pang that Edith's heart was set upon the convent, and that even in his presence, and despite his soothing words, she was broken-spirited and despondent. It seemed as if her youth and life had gone from her, and the day had come in which she said, "There is no pleasure."

Never had he seen her thus; and, deeply moved as well as keenly stung, he rose at length to depart; her hand lay passive in his parting clasp, and a slight shiver went over her frame.

"Farewell, Edith; when I return from Windshore, I shall be at my old home yonder, and we shall meet again."

Edith's lips murmured inaudibly, and she bent her eyes to the ground.

Slowly Harold regained his steed, and as he rode on, he looked behind and waved oft his hand. But Edith sate motionless, her eyes still on the ground, and he saw not the tears that fell from them fast and burning; nor heard he the low voice that groaned amidst the heathen ruins, "Mary, sweet mother, shelter me from my own heart!"

The sun had set before Harold gained the long and spacious abode of his father. All around it lay the roofs and huts of the great Earl's special tradesmen, for even his goldsmith was but his freed ceorl. The house itself stretched far from the Thames inland, with several low courts built only of timber, rugged and

shapeless, but filled with bold men, then the great furniture of a noble's halls.

Amidst the shouts of hundreds, eager to hold his stirrup, the Earl dismounted, passed the swarming hall, and entered the room, in which he found Hilda and Githa, and Godwin, who had preceded his entry but a few minutes.

In the beautiful reverence of son to father, which made one of the loveliest features of the Saxon character³ (as the frequent want of it makes the most hateful of the Norman vices), the all-powerful Harold bowed his knee to the old Earl, who placed his hand on his head in benediction, and then kissed him on the cheek and brow.

"Thy kiss, too, dear mother," said the younger Earl; and Githa's embrace, if more cordial than her lord's, was not, perhaps, more fond.

"Greet Hilda, my son," said Godwin, "she hath brought me a gift, and she hath tarried to place it under thy special care. Thou alone must heed the treasure, and open the casket. But when and where, my kinswoman?"

"On the sixth day after thy coming to the King's hall," answered Hilda, not returning the smile with which Godwin spoke,— "on the sixth day, Harold, open the chest, and take out the robe which hath been spun in the house of Hilda for Godwin the Earl. And now, Godwin, I have clasped thine hand, and I have

³ The chronicler, however, laments that the household ties, formerly so strong with the Anglo-Saxon, had been much weakened in the age prior to the Conquest.

looked on thy brow, and my mission is done, and I must wend homeward."

"That shalt thou not, Hilda," said the hospitable Earl; "the meanest wayfarer hath a right to bed and board in this house for a night and a day, and thou wilt not disgrace us by leaving our threshold, the bread unbroken, and the couch unpressed. Old friend, we were young together, and thy face is welcome to me as the memory of former days."

Hilda shook her head, and one of those rare, and for that reason most touching, expressions of tenderness of which the calm and rigid character of her features, when in repose, seemed scarcely susceptible, softened her eye, and relaxed the firm lines of her lips.

"Son of Wolnoth," said she, gently, "not under thy roof-tree should lodge the raven of bode. Bread have I not broken since yestere'en, and sleep will be far from my eyes to-night. Fear not, for my people without are stout and armed, and for the rest there lives not the man whose arm can have power over Hilda."

She took Harold's hand as she spoke, and leading him forth, whispered in his ear, "I would have a word with thee ere we part." Then, reaching the threshold, she waved her hand thrice over the floor, and muttered in the Danish tongue a rude verse, which, translated, ran somewhat thus:

"All free from the knot
Glide the thread of the skein,

And rest to the labour,
And peace to the pain!"

"It is a death-dirge," said Githa, with whitening lips, but she spoke inly, and neither husband nor son heard her words.

Hilda and Harold passed in silence through the hall, and the Vala's attendants, with spears and torches, rose from the settles, and went before to the outer court, where snorted impatiently her black palfrey.

Halting in the midst of the court, she said to Harold, in a low voice:

"At sunset we part—at sunset we shall meet again. And behold, the star rises on the sunset; and the star, broader and brighter, shall rise on the sunset then! When thy hand draws the robe from the chest, think on Hilda, and know that at that hour she stands by the grave of the Saxon warrior, and that from the grave dawns the future. Farewell to thee!"

Harold longed to speak to her of Edith, but a strange awe at his heart chained his lips; so he stood silent by the great wooden gates of the rude house. The torches flamed round him, and Hilda's face seemed lurid in the glare. There he stood musing long after torch and ceorl had passed away, nor did he wake from his reverie till Gurth, springing from his panting horse, passed his arm round the Earl's shoulder, and cried:

"How did I miss thee, my brother? and why didst thou forsake thy train?"

"I will tell thee anon. Gurth, has my father ailed? There is that in his face which I like not."

"He hath not complained of misease," said Gurth, startled; "but now thou speakest of it, his mood hath altered of late, and he hath wandered much alone, or only with the old hound and the old falcon."

Then Harold turned back, and, his heart was full; and, when he reached the house, his father was sitting in the hall on his chair of state; and Githa sate on his right hand, and a little below her sate Tostig and Leofwine, who had come in from the bear-hunt by the river-gate, and were talking loud and merrily; and thegns and cnechts sate all around, and there was wassail as Harold entered. But the Earl looked only to his father, and he saw that his eyes were absent from the glee, and that he was bending his head over the old falcon, which sate on his wrist.

CHAPTER III

No subject of England, since the race of Cerdic sat on the throne, ever entered the courtyard of Windshore with such train and such state as Earl Godwin.—Proud of that first occasion, since his return, to do homage to him with whose cause that of England against the stranger was bound, all truly English at heart amongst the thegns of the land swelled his retinue. Whether Saxon or Dane, those who alike loved the laws and the soil, came from north and from south to the peaceful banner of the old Earl. But most of these were of the past generation, for the rising race were still dazzled by the pomp of the Norman; and the fashion of English manners, and the pride in English deeds, had gone out of date with long locks and bearded chins. Nor there were the bishops and abbots and the lords of the Church,—for dear to them already the fame of the Norman piety, and they shared the distaste of their holy King to the strong sense and homely religion of Godwin, who founded no convents, and rode to war with no relics round his neck. But they with Godwin were the stout and the frank and the free, in whom rested the pith and marrow of English manhood; and they who were against him were the blind and willing and fated fathers of slaves unborn.

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