

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS – VOLUME 09**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

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Saxon Kings — Volume 09**

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton Harold : the Last of the Saxon Kings — Volume 09

BOOK IX. THE BONES OF THE DEAD

CHAPTER I

William, Count of the Normans, sate in a fair chamber of his palace of Rouen; and on the large table before him were ample evidences of the various labours, as warrior, chief, thinker, and statesman, which filled the capacious breadth of that sleepless mind.

There lay a plan of the new port of Cherbourg, and beside it an open MS. of the Duke's favourite book, the Commentaries of Caesar, from which, it is said, he borrowed some of the tactics of his own martial science; marked, and dotted, and interlined with his large bold handwriting, were the words of the great Roman. A score or so of long arrows, which had received some skilful improvement in feather or bolt, lay carelessly scattered over some architectural sketches of a new Abbey Church, and the proposed charter for its endowment. An open cyst, of the beautiful workmanship for which the English goldsmiths were then pre-eminently renowned, that had been among the parting gifts of Edward, contained letters from the various potentates near and far, who sought his alliance or menaced his repose.

On a perch behind him sate his favourite Norway falcon unhooded, for it had been taught the finest polish in its dainty education—viz., "to face company undisturbed." At a kind of easel at the farther end of the hall, a dwarf, misshapen in limbs, but of a face singularly acute and intelligent, was employed in the outline of that famous action at Val des Dunes, which had been the scene of one of the most brilliant of William's feats in arms—an outline intended to be transferred to the notable "stitchwork" of Matilda the Duchess.

Upon the floor, playing with a huge boar-hound of English breed, that seemed but ill to like the play, and every now and then snarled and showed his white teeth, was a young boy, with something of the Duke's features, but with an expression more open and less sagacious; and something of the Duke's broad build of chest and shoulder, but without promise of the Duke's stately stature, which was needed to give grace and dignity to a strength otherwise cumbrous and graceless. And indeed, since William's visit to England, his athletic shape had lost much of its youthful symmetry, though not yet deformed by that corpulence which was a disease almost as rare in the Norman as the Spartan.

Nevertheless, what is a defect in the gladiator is often but a beauty in the prince; and the Duke's large proportions filled the eye with a sense both of regal majesty and physical power. His countenance, yet more than his form, showed the work of time; the short dark hair was worn into partial baldness at the temples by the habitual friction of the casque, and the constant indulgence of wily stratagem and ambitious craft had deepened the wrinkles round the plotting eye and the firm mouth: so that it was only by an effort like that of an actor, that his aspect regained the knightly and noble frankness it had once worn. The accomplished prince was no longer, in truth, what the bold warrior had been,—he was greater in state and less in soul. And already, despite all his grand qualities as a ruler, his imperious nature had betrayed signs of what he (whose constitutional sternness the

Norman freemen, not without effort, curbed into the limits of justice) might become, if wider scope were afforded to his fiery passions and unsparing will.

Before the Duke, who was leaning his chin on his hand, stood Mallet de Graville, speaking earnestly, and his discourse seemed both to interest and please his lord.

"Eno'!" said William, "I comprehend the nature of the land and its men,—a land that, untaught by experience, and persuaded that a peace of twenty or thirty years must last till the crack of doom, neglects all its defences, and has not one fort, save Dover, between the coast and the capital,—a land which must be won or lost by a single battle, and men (here the Duke hesitated,) and men," he resumed with a sigh, "whom it will be so hard to conquer that, pardex, I don't wonder they neglect their fortresses. Enough I say, of them. Let us return to Harold,—thou thinkest, then, that he is worthy of his fame?"

"He is almost the only Englishman I have seen," answered De Graville, "who hath received scholarly rearing and nurture; and all his faculties are so evenly balanced, and all accompanied by so composed a calm, that methinks, when I look at and hear him, I contemplate some artful castle,—the strength of which can never be known at the first glance, nor except by those who assail it."

"Thou art mistaken, Sire de Graville," said the Duke, with a shrewd and cunning twinkle of his luminous dark eyes. "For thou tellest me that he hath no thought of my pretensions to the English throne,—that he inclines willingly to thy suggestions to come himself to my court for the hostages,—that, in a word, he is not suspicious."

"Certes, he is not suspicious," returned Mallet.

"And thinkest thou that an artful castle were worth much without warder or sentry,—or a cultivated mind strong and safe, without its watchman,—Suspicion?"

"Truly, my lord speaks well and wisely," said the knight, startled; "but Harold is a man thoroughly English, and the English are a gens the least suspecting of any created thing between an angel and a sheep."

William laughed aloud. But his laugh was checked suddenly; for at that moment a fierce yell smote his ears, and looking hastily up, he saw his hound and his son rolling together on the ground, in a grapple that seemed deadly. William sprang to the spot; but the boy, who was then under the dog, cried out, "Laissez aller! Laissez aller! no rescue! I will master my own foe;" and, so saying, with a vigorous effort he gained his knee, and with both hands griped the hound's throat, so that the beast twisted in vain, to and fro, with gnashing jaws, and in another minute would have panted out its last.

"I may save my good hound now," said William, with the gay smile of his earlier days, and, though not without some exertion of his prodigious strength, he drew the dog from his son's grasp.

"That was ill done, father," said Robert, surnamed even then the Courthose, "to take part with thy son's foe."

"But my son's foe is thy father's property, my vaillant," said the Duke; "and thou must answer to me for treason in provoking quarrel and feud with my own fourfooted vavasour."

"It is not thy property, father; thou gavest the dog to me when a whelp."

"Fables, Monseigneur de Courthose; I lent it to thee but for a day, when thou hadst put out thine ankle bone in jumping off the rampire; and all maimed as thou went, thou hadst still malice enow in thee to worry the poor beast into a fever."

"Give or lent, it is the same thing, father; what I have once, that will I hold, as thou didst before me, in thy cradle."

Then the great Duke, who in his own house was the fondest and weakest of men, was so doltish and doting as to take the boy in his arms and kiss him, nor, with all his far-sighted sagacity, deemed he that in that kiss lay the seed of the awful curse that grew up from a father's agony; to end in a son's misery and perdition.

Even Mallet de Graville frowned at the sight of the sire's infirmity, —even Turolde the dwarf shook his head. At that moment an officer entered, and announced that an English nobleman,

apparently in great haste (for his horse had dropped down dead as he dismounted), had arrived at the palace, and craved instant audience of the Duke. William put down the boy, gave the brief order for the stranger's admission, and, punctilious in ceremonial, beckoning De Graville to follow him, passed at once into the next chamber, and seated himself on his chair of state.

In a few moments one of the seneschals of the palace ushered in a visitor, whose long moustache at once proclaimed him Saxon, and in whom De Graville with surprise recognised his old friend, Godrith. The young thegn, with a reverence more hasty than that to which William was accustomed, advanced to the foot of the days, and, using the Norman language, said, in a voice thick with emotion:

"From Harold the Earl, greeting to thee, Monseigneur. Most foul and unchristian wrong hath been done the Earl by thy liegeman, Guy, Count of Ponthieu. Sailing hither in two barks from England, with intent to visit thy court, storm and wind drove the Earl's vessels towards the mouth of the Somme¹; there landing, and without fear, as in no hostile country, he and his train were seized by the Count himself, and cast into prison in the castle of Belrem². A dungeon fit but for malefactors holds, while I speak, the first lord of England, and brother-in-law to its king. Nay, hints of famine, torture, and death itself, have been darkly thrown out by this most disloyal count, whether in earnest, or with the base view of heightening ransom. At length, wearied perhaps by the Earl's firmness and disdain, this traitor of Ponthieu hath permitted me in the Earl's behalf to bear the message of Harold. He came to thee as to a prince and a friend; sufferest thou thy liegeman to detain him as a thief or a foe?"

"Noble Englishman," replied William, gravely, "this is a matter more out of my cognisance than thou seemest to think. It is true that Guy, Count of Ponthieu, holds fief under me, but I have no control over the laws of his realm. And by those laws, he hath right of life and death over all stranded and waifed on his coast. Much grieve I for the mishap of your famous Earl, and what I can do, I will; but I can only treat in this matter with Guy as prince with prince, not as lord to vassal. Meanwhile I pray you to take rest and food; and I will seek prompt counsel as to the measures to adopt."

The Saxon's face showed disappointment and dismay at this answer, so different from what he had expected; and he replied with the natural honest bluntness which all his younger affection of Norman manners had never eradicated:

"Food will I not touch, nor wine drink, till thou, Lord Count, hast decided what help, as noble to noble, Christian to Christian, man to man, thou givest to him who has come into this peril solely from his trust in thee."

"Alas!" said the grand dissimulator, "heavy is the responsibility with which thine ignorance of our land, laws, and men would charge me. If I take but one false step in this matter, woe indeed to thy lord! Guy is hot and haughty, and in his droits; he is capable of sending me the Earl's head in reply to too dure a request for his freedom. Much treasure and broad lands will it cost me, I fear, to ransom the Earl. But be cheered; half my duchy were not too high a price for thy lord's safety. Go, then, and eat with a good heart, and drink to the Earl's health with a hopeful prayer."

"And it please you, my lord," said De Graville, "I know this gentle thegn, and will beg of you the grace to see to his entertainment, and sustain his spirits."

"Thou shalt, but later; so noble a guest none but my chief seneschal should be the first to honour." Then turning to the officer in waiting, he bade him lead the Saxon to the chamber tenanted by William Fitzosborne (who then lodged within the palace), and committed him to that Count's care.

As the Saxon sullenly withdrew, and as the door closed on him, William rose and strode to and fro the room exultingly.

"I have him! I have him!" he cried aloud; "not as free guest, but as ransomed captive. I have him—the Earl!—I have him! Go, Mallet, my friend, now seek this sour-looking Englishman; and,

¹ Roman de Rou, see part ii. 1078.

² Belrem, the present Beaurain, near Montreuil.

hark thee! fill his ear with all the tales thou canst think of as to Guy's cruelty and ire. Enforce all the difficulties that lie in my way towards the Earl's delivery. Great make the danger of the Earl's capture, and vast all the favour of release. Comprehendest thou?"

"I am Norman, Monseigneur," replied De Grville, with a slight smile; "and we Normans can make a short mantle cover a large space. You will not be displeased with my address."

"Go then—go," said William, "and send me forthwith—Lanfranc—no, hold—not Lanfranc, he is too scrupulous; Fitzosborne—no, too haughty. Go, first, to my brother, Odo of Bayeux, and pray him to seek me on the instant."

The knight bowed and vanished, and William continued to pace the room, with sparkling eyes and murmuring lips.

CHAPTER II

Not till after repeated messages, at first without talk of ransom and in high tone, affected, no doubt, by William to spin out the negotiations, and augment the value of his services, did Guy of Ponthieu consent to release his illustrious captive,—the guerdon, a large sum and un bel manoir³ on the river Eaulne. But whether that guerdon were the fair ransom fee, or the price for concerted snare, no man now can say, and sharper than ours the wit that forms the more likely guess. These stipulations effected, Guy himself opened the doors of the dungeon; and affecting to treat the whole matter as one of law and right, now happily and fairly settled, was as courteous and debonnaire as he had before been dark and menacing.

He even himself, with a brilliant train, accompanied Harold to the Chateau d'Eu⁴, whither William journeyed to give him the meeting; and laughed with a gay grace at the Earl's short and scornful replies to his compliments and excuses. At the gates of this chateau, not famous, in after times, for the good faith of its lords, William himself, laying aside all the pride of etiquette which he had established at his court, came to receive his visitor; and aiding him to dismount embraced him cordially, amidst a loud fanfaron of fifes and trumpets.

The flower of that glorious nobility, which a few generations had sufficed to rear out of the lawless pirates of the Baltic, had been selected to do honour alike to guest and host.

There were Hugo de Montfort and Roger de Beaumont, famous in council as in the field, and already grey with fame. There was Henri, Sire de Ferrers, whose name is supposed to have arisen from the vast forges that burned around his castle, on the anvils of which were welded the arms impenetrable in every field. There was Raoul de Tancarville, the old tutor of William, hereditary Chamberlain of the Norman Counts; and Geoffroi de Mandeville, and Tonstain the Fair, whose name still preserved, amidst the general corruption of appellations, the evidence of his Danish birth; and Hugo de Grantmesnil, lately returned from exile; and Humphrey de Bohun, whose old castle in Carcutan may yet be seen; and St. John, and Lacie, and D'Aincourt, of broad lands between the Maine and the Oise; and William de Montfichet, and Roger, nicknamed "Bigod," and Roger de Mortemer; and many more, whose fame lives in another land than that of Neustria! There, too, were the chief prelates and abbots of a church that since William's accession had risen into repute with Rome and with Learning, unequalled on this side the Alps; their white aubes over their gorgeous robes; Lanfranc, and the Bishop of Coutance, and the Abbot of Bec, and foremost of all in rank, but not in learning, Odo of Bayeux.

So great the assemblage of Quens and prelates, that there was small room in the courtyard for the lesser knights and chiefs, who yet hustled each other, with loss of Norman dignity, for a sight of the lion which guarded England. And still, amidst all those men of mark and might, Harold, simple and calm, looked as he had looked on his war-ship in the Thames, the man who could lead them all!

From those, indeed, who were fortunate enough to see him as he passed up by the side of William, as tall as the Duke, and no less erect—of far slighter bulk, but with a strength almost equal, to a practised eye, in his compacter symmetry and more supple grace,—from those who saw him thus, an admiring murmur rose; for no men in the world so valued and cultivated personal advantages as the Norman knighthood.

Conversing easily with Harold, and well watching him while he conversed, the Duke led his guest into a private chamber in the third floor⁵ of the castle, and in that chamber were Haco and Wolnoth.

³ Roman de Rou, part ii. 1079.

⁴ William of Poitiers, "apud Aucense Castrum."

⁵ As soon as the rude fort of the middle ages admitted something of magnificence and display, the state rooms were placed in the

"This, I trust, is no surprise to you," said the Duke, smiling; "and now I shall but mar your commune." So saying, he left the room, and Wolnoth rushed to his brother's arms, while Haco, more timidly, drew near and touched the Earl's robe.

As soon as the first joy of the meeting was over, the Earl said to Haco, whom he had drawn to his breast with an embrace as fond as that bestowed on Wolnoth:

"Remembering thee a boy, I came to say to thee, 'Be my son;' but seeing thee a man, I change the prayer;—supply thy father's place, and be my brother! And thou, Wolnoth, hast thou kept thy word to me? Norman is thy garb, in truth; is thy heart still English?"

"Hist!" whispered Haco; "hist! We have a proverb, that walls have ears."

"But Norman walls can hardly understand our broad Saxon of Kent, I trust," said Harold, smiling, though with a shade on his brow.

"True; continue to speak Saxon," said Haco, "and we are safe."

"Safe!" echoed Harold.

"Haco's fears are childish, my brother," said Wolnoth, "and he wrongs the Duke."

"Not the Duke, but the policy which surrounds him like an atmosphere," exclaimed Haco. "Oh, Harold, generous indeed wert thou to come hither for thy kinsfolk—generous! But for England's weal, better that we had rotted out our lives in exile, ere thou, hope and prop of England, set foot in these webs of wile."

"Tut!" said Wolnoth, impatiently; "good is it for England that the Norman and Saxon should be friends." Harold, who had lived to grow as wise in men's hearts as his father, save when the natural trustfulness that lay under his calm reserve lulled his sagacity, turned his eye steadily on the faces of his two kinsmen; and he saw at the first glance that a deeper intellect and a graver temper than Wolnoth's fair face betrayed characterised the dark eye and serious brow of Haco. He therefore drew his nephew a little aside, and said to him:

"Forewarned is forearmed. Deemest thou that this fairspeoken Duke will dare aught against my life?"

"Life, no; liberty, yes."

Harold startled, and those strong passions native to his breast, but usually curbed beneath his majestic will, heaved in his bosom and flashed in his eye.

"Liberty!—let him dare! Though all his troops paved the way from his court to his coasts, I would hew my way through their ranks."

"Deemest thou that I am a coward?" said Haco, simply, "yet contrary to all law and justice, and against King Edward's well-known remonstrance, hath not the Count detained me years, yea, long years, in his land? Kind are his words, wily his deeds. Fear not force; fear fraud."

"I fear neither," answered Harold, drawing himself up, "nor do I repent me one moment—No! nor did I repent in the dungeon of that felon Count, whom God grant me life to repay with fire and sword for his treason—that I myself have come hither to demand my kinsmen. I come in the name of England, strong in her might, and sacred in her majesty."

Before Haco could reply, the door opened, and Raoul de Tancarville, as Grand Chamberlain, entered, with all Harold's Saxon train, and a goodly number of Norman squires and attendants, bearing rich vestures.

The noble bowed to the Earl with his country's polished courtesy, and besought leave to lead him to the bath, while his own squires prepared his raiment for the banquet to be held in his honour. So all further conference with his young kinsmen was then suspended.

The Duke, who affected a state no less regal than that of the Court of France, permitted no one, save his own family and guests, to sit at his own table. His great officers (those imperious lords) stood beside his chair; and William Fitzosborne, "the Proud Spirit," placed on the board with his

own hand the dainty dishes for which the Norman cooks were renowned. And great men were those Norman cooks; and often for some "delicate," more ravishing than wont, gold chain and gem, and even "bel maneir," fell to their guerdon⁶. It was worth being a cook in those days!

The most seductive of men was William in his fair moods; and he lavished all the witcheries at his control upon his guest. If possible, yet more gracious was Matilda the Duchess. This woman, eminent for mental culture, for personal beauty, and for a spirit and ambition no less great than her lord's, knew well how to choose such subjects of discourse as might most flatter an English ear. Her connection with Harold, through her sister's marriage with Tostig, warranted a familiarity almost caressing, which she assumed towards the comely Earl; and she insisted, with a winning smile, that all the hours the Duke would leave at his disposal he must spend with her.

The banquet was enlivened by the song of the great Taillefer himself, who selected a theme that artfully flattered alike the Norman and the Saxon; viz., the aid given by Rolfganger to Athelstan, and the alliance between the English King and the Norman founder. He dexterously introduced into the song praises of the English, and the value of their friendship; and the Countess significantly applauded each gallant compliment to the land of the famous guest. If Harold was pleased by such poetic courtesies, he was yet more surprised by the high honour in which Duke, baron, and prelate evidently held the Poet: for it was among the worst signs of that sordid spirit, honouring only wealth, which had crept over the original character of the Anglo-Saxon, that the bard or scop, with them, had sunk into great disrepute, and it was even forbidden to ecclesiastics⁷ to admit such landless vagrants to their company.

Much, indeed, there was in that court which, even on the first day, Harold saw to admire—that stately temperance, so foreign to English excesses, (but which, alas! the Norman kept not long when removed to another soil)—that methodical state and noble pomp which characterised the Feudal system, linking so harmoniously prince to peer, and peer to knight—the easy grace, the polished wit of the courtiers—the wisdom of Lanfranc, and the higher ecclesiastics, blending worldly lore with decorous, not pedantic, regard to their sacred calling—the enlightened love of music, letters, song, and art, which coloured the discourse both of Duke and Duchess and the younger courtiers, prone to emulate high example, whether for ill or good—all impressed Harold with a sense of civilisation and true royalty, which at once saddened and inspired his musing mind—saddened him when he thought how far behind-hand England was in much, with this comparatively petty principality—inspired him when he felt what one great chief can do for his native land.

The unfavorable impressions made upon his thoughts by Haco's warnings could scarcely fail to yield beneath the prodigal courtesies lavished upon him, and the frank openness with which William laughingly excused himself for having so long detained the hostages, "in order, my guest, to make thee come and fetch them. And, by St. Valery, now thou art here, thou shalt not depart, till, at least, thou hast lost in gentler memories the recollection of the scurvy treatment thou hast met from that barbarous Count. Nay, never bite thy lip, Harold, my friend, leave to me thy revenge upon Guy. Sooner or later, the very maneir he hath extorted from me shall give excuse for sword and lance, and then, pardex, thou shalt come and cross steel in thine own quarrel. How I rejoice that I can show to the beau frere of my dear cousin and seigneur some return for all the courtesies the English King and kingdom bestowed upon me! To-morrow we will ride to Rouen; there, all knightly sports shall be held to grace thy coming; and by St. Michael, knight-saint of the Norman, nought less will content me than to have thy great name in the list of my chosen chevaliers. But the night wears now, and thou sure must need sleep;" and, thus talking, the Duke himself led the way to Harold's chamber, and insisted on removing the ouche from his robe of state. As he did so, he passed his hand, as if

⁶ A manor (but not, alas! in Normandy) was held by one of his cooks, on the tenure of supplying William with a dish of dillegrout.

⁷ The Council of Cloveshoe forbade the clergy to harbour poets, harpers, musicians, and buffoons.

carelessly, along the Earl's right arm. "Ha!" said he suddenly, and in his natural tone of voice, which was short and quick, "these muscles have known practice! Dost think thou couldst bend my bow!"

"Who could bend that of—Ulysses?" returned the Earl, fixing his deep blue eye upon the Norman's. William unconsciously changed colour, for he felt that he was at that moment more Ulysses than Achilles.

CHAPTER III

Side by side, William and Harold entered the fair city of Rouen, and there, a succession of the brilliant pageants and knightly entertainments, (comprising those "rare feats of honour," expanded, with the following age, into the more gorgeous display of joust and tourney,) was designed to dazzle the eyes and captivate the fancy of the Earl. But though Harold won, even by the confession of the chronicles most in favour of the Norman, golden opinions in a court more ready to deride than admire the Saxon,—though not only the "strength of his body," and "the boldness of his spirit," as shown in exhibitions unfamiliar to Saxon warriors, but his "manners," his "eloquence, intellect, and other good qualities,"⁸ were loftily conspicuous amidst those knightly courtiers, that sublime part of his character, which was found in his simple manhood and intense nationality, kept him unmoved and serene amidst all intended to exercise that fatal spell which Normanised most of those who came within the circle of Norman attraction.

These festivities were relieved by pompous excursions and progresses from town to town, and fort to fort, throughout the Duchy, and, according to some authorities, even to a visit to Philip the French King at Compiègne. On the return to Rouen, Harold and the six thegns of his train were solemnly admitted into that peculiar band of warlike brothers which William had instituted, and to which, following the chronicles of the after century, we have given the name of Knights. The silver baldric was belted on, and the lance, with its pointed banner, was placed in the hand, and the seven Saxon lords became Norman knights.

The evening after this ceremonial, Harold was with the Duchess and her fair daughters—all children. The beauty of one of the girls drew from him those compliments so sweet to a mother's ear. Matilda looked up from the broidery on which she was engaged, and beckoned to her the child thus praised.

"Adeliza," she said, placing her hand on the girl's dark locks, "though we would not that thou shouldst learn too early how men's tongues can glaze and flatter, yet this noble guest hath so high a repute for truth, that thou mayest at least believe him sincere when he says thy face is fair. Think of it, and with pride, my child; let it keep thee through youth proof against the homage of meaner men; and, peradventure, St. Michael and St. Valery may bestow on thee a mate valiant and comely as this noble lord."

The child blushed to her brow; but answered with the quickness of a spoiled infant—unless, perhaps, she had been previously tutored so to reply: "Sweet mother, I will have no mate and no lord but Harold himself; and if he will not have Adeliza as his wife, she will die a nun."

"Froward child, it is not for thee to woo!" said Matilda, smiling.

"Thou heardst her, noble Harold: what is thine answer?"

"That she will grow wiser," said the Earl, laughing, as he kissed the child's forehead. "Fair damsel, ere thou art ripe for the altar, time will have sown grey in these locks; and thou wouldst smile indeed in scorn, if Harold then claimed thy troth."

"Not so," said Matilda, seriously; "Highborn damsels see youth not in years but in fame—Fame, which is young for ever!"

Startled by the gravity with which Matilda spoke, as if to give importance to what had seemed a jest, the Earl, versed in courts, felt that a snare was round him; and replied in a tone between jest and earnest: "Happy am I to wear on my heart a charm, proof against all the beauty even of this court."

Matilda's face darkened; and William entering at that time with his usual abruptness, lord and lady exchanged glances, not unobserved by Harold.

⁸ ORD. VITAL.

The Duke, however, drew aside the Saxon; and saying gaily, "We Normans are not naturally jealous; but then, till now, we have not had Saxon gallants closeted with our wives;" added more seriously, "Harold, I have a grace to pray at thy hands—come with me."

The Earl followed William into his chamber, which he found filled with chiefs, in high converse; and William then hastened to inform him that he was about to make a military expedition against the Bretons; and knowing his peculiar acquaintance with the warfare, as with the language and manners, of their kindred Welch, he besought his aid in a campaign which he promised him should be brief.

Perhaps the Earl was not, in his own mind, averse from returning William's display of power by some evidence of his own military skill, and the valour of the Saxon thegns in his train. There might be prudence in such exhibition, and, at all events, he could not with a good grace decline the proposal. He enchanted William therefore by a simple acquiescence; and the rest of the evening—deep into night—was spent in examining charts of the fort and country intended to be attacked.

The conduct and courage of Harold and his Saxons in this expedition are recorded by the Norman chroniclers. The Earl's personal exertions saved, at the passage of Coesnon, a detachment of soldiers, who would otherwise have perished in the quicksands; and even the warlike skill of William, in the brief and brilliant campaign, was, if not eclipsed, certainly equalled, by that of the Saxon chief.

While the campaign lasted, William and Harold had but one table and one tent. To outward appearance, the familiarity between the two was that of brothers; in reality, however, these two men, both so able— one so deep in his guile, the other so wise in his tranquil caution— felt that a silent war between the two for mastery was working on, under the guise of loving peace.

Already Harold was conscious that the politic motives for his mission had failed him; already he perceived, though he scarce knew why, that William the Norman was the last man to whom he could confide his ambition, or trust for aid. One day, as, during a short truce with the defenders of the place they were besieging, the Normans were diverting their leisure with martial games, in which Taillefer shone pre-eminent: while Harold and William stood without their tent, watching the animated field, the Duke abruptly exclaimed to Mallet de Gravelle, "Bring me my bow. Now, Harold, let me see if thou canst bend it."

The bow was brought, and Saxon and Norman gathered round the spot.

"Fasten thy glove to yonder tree, Mallet," said the Duke, taking that mighty bow in his hand, and bending its stubborn yew into the noose of the string with practised ease.

Then he drew the arc to his ear; and the tree itself seemed to shake at the shock, as the shaft, piercing the glove, lodged half-way in the trunk.

"Such are not our weapons," said the Earl; "and ill would it become me, unpractised, so to peril our English honour, as to strive against the arm that could bend that arc and wing that arrow. But, that I may show these Norman knights, that at least we have some weapon wherewith we can parry shaft and smite assailer,—bring me forth, Godrith, my shield and my Danish axe."

Taking the shield and axe which the Saxon brought to him, Harold then stationed himself before the tree. "Now, fair Duke," said he, smiling, "choose thou thy longest shaft—bid thy ten doughtiest archers take their bows; round this tree will I move, and let each shaft be aimed at whatever space in my mailless body I leave unguarded by my shield."

"No!" said William, hastily; "that were murder."

"It is but the common peril of war," said Harold, simply; and he walked to the tree.

The blood mounted to William's brow, and the lion's thirst of carnage parched his throat.

"An he will have it so," said he, beckoning to his archers; "let not Normandy be shamed. Watch well, and let every shaft go home; avoid only the head and the heart; such orgulous vaunting is best cured by blood-letting."

The archers nodded, and took their post, each at a separate quarter; and deadly indeed seemed the danger of the Earl, for as he moved, though he kept his back guarded by the tree, some parts of his form the shield left exposed, and it would have been impossible, in his quick-shifting movements,

for the archers so to aim as to wound, but to spare life; yet the Earl seemed to take no peculiar care to avoid the peril; lifting his bare head fearlessly above the shield, and including in one gaze of his steadfast eye, calmly bright even at the distance, all the shafts of the archers.

At one moment five of the arrows hissed through the air, and with such wonderful quickness had the shield turned to each, that three fell to the ground blunted against it, and two broke on its surface.

But William, waiting for the first discharge, and seeing full mark at Harold's shoulder as the buckler turned, now sent forth his terrible shaft. The noble Taillefer with a poet's true sympathy cried, "Saxon, beware!" but the watchful Saxon needed not the warning. As if in disdain, Harold met not the shaft with his shield, but swinging high the mighty axe, (which with most men required both arms to wield it,) he advanced a step, and clove the rushing arrow in twain.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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