

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS – VOLUME 08**

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Saxon Kings — Volume 08

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BOOK VIII. FATE

CHAPTER I

Some days after the tragical event with which the last chapter closed, the ships of the Saxons were assembled in the wide waters of Conway; and on the small fore-deck of the stateliest vessel, stood Harold, bareheaded, before Aldyth, the widowed Queen. For the faithful bard had fallen by the side of his lord; . . . the dark promise was unfulfilled, and the mangled clay of the jealous Gryffyth slept alone in the narrow bed. A chair of state, with dossel and canopy, was set for the daughter of Algar, and behind stood maidens of Wales, selected in haste for her attendants.

But Aldyth had not seated herself; and, side by side with her dead lord's great victor, thus she spoke:

"Woe worth the day and the hour when Aldyth left the hall of

her fathers and the land of her birth! Her robe of a queen has been rent and torn over an aching heart, and the air she has breathed has reeked as with blood. I go forth, widowed, and homeless, and lonely; but my feet shall press the soil of my sires, and my lips draw the breath which came sweet and pure to my childhood. And thou, O Harold, standest beside me, like the shape of my own youth, and the dreams of old come back at the sound of thy voice. Fare thee well, noble heart and true Saxon. Thou hast twice saved the child of thy foe—first from shame, then from famine. Thou wouldst have saved my dread lord from open force, and dark murder; but the saints were wroth, the blood of my kinsfolk, shed by his hand, called for vengeance, and the shrines he had pillaged and burned murmured doom from their desolate altars. Peace be with the dead, and peace with the living! I shall go back to my father and brethren; and if the fame and life of child and sister be dear to them, their swords will never more leave their sheaths against Harold. So thy hand, and God guard thee!"

Harold raised to his lips the hand which the Queen extended to him; and to Aldyth now seemed restored the rare beauty of her youth; as pride and sorrow gave her the charm of emotion, which love and duty had failed to bestow.

"Life and health to thee, noble lady," said the Earl. "Tell thy kindred from me, that for thy sake, and thy grandsire's, I would fain be their brother and friend; were they but united with me, all England were now safe against every foe, and each peril. Thy daughter already awaits thee in the halls of Morcar; and when

time has scarred the wounds of the past, may thy joys re-bloom in the face of thy child. Farewell, noble Aldyth!"

He dropped the hand he had held till then, turned slowly to the side of the vessel, and re-entered his boat. As he was rowed back to shore, the horn gave the signal for raising anchor, and the ship, righting itself, moved majestically through the midst of the fleet. But Aldyth still stood erect, and her eyes followed the boat that bore away the secret love of her youth.

As Harold reached the shore, Tostig and the Norman, who had been conversing amicably together on the beach, advanced towards the Earl.

"Brother," said Tostig, smiling, "it were easy for thee to console the fair widow, and bring to our House all the force of East Anglia and Mercia." Harold's face slightly changed, but he made no answer.

"A marvellous fair dame," said the Norman, "notwithstanding her cheek be somewhat pinched, and the hue sun-burnt. And I wonder not that the poor cat-king kept her so close to his side."

"Sir Norman," said the Earl, hastening to change the subject, "the war is now over, and, for long years, Wales will leave our Marches in peace.—This eve I propose to ride hence towards London, and we will converse by the way."

"Go you so soon?" cried the knight, surprised. "Shall you not take means utterly to subjugate this troublesome race, parcel out the lands among your thegns, to hold as martial fiefs at need, build towers and forts on the heights, and at the river mouths?"

—where a site, like this, for some fair castle and vawmure? In a word, do you Saxons merely overrun, and neglect to hold what you win?"

"We fight in self-defence, not for conquest, Sir Norman. We have no skill in building castles; and I pray you not to hint to my thegns the conceit of dividing a land, as thieves would their plunder. King Gryffyth is dead, and his brothers will reign in his stead. England has guarded her realm, and chastised the aggressors. What need England do more? We are not like our first barbarous fathers, carving out homes with the scythe of their saexes. The wave settles after the flood, and the races of men after lawless convulsions."

Tostig smiled, in disdain, at the knight, who mused a little over the strange words he had heard, and then silently followed the Earl to the fort.

But when Harold gained his chamber, he found there an express, arrived in haste from Chester, with the news that Algar, the sole enemy and single rival of his power, was no more. Fever, occasioned by neglected wounds, had stretched him impotent on a bed of sickness, and his fierce passions had aided the march of disease; the restless and profitless race was run.

The first emotion which these tidings called forth was that of pain. The bold sympathise with the bold; and in great hearts, there is always a certain friendship for a gallant foe. But recovering the shock of that first impression, Harold could not but feel that England was free from its most dangerous subject

—himself from the only obstacle apparent to the fulfilment of his luminous career.

"Now, then, to London," whispered the voice of his ambition. "Not a foe rests to trouble the peace of that empire which thy conquests, O Harold, have made more secure and compact than ever yet has been the realm of the Saxon kings. Thy way through the country that thou hast henceforth delivered from the fire and sword of the mountain ravager, will be one march of triumph, like a Roman's of old; and the voice of the people will echo the hearts of the army; those hearts are thine own. Verily Hilda is a prophetess; and when Edward rests with the saints, from what English heart will not burst the cry, 'LONG LIVE HAROLD THE KING?'"

CHAPTER II

The Norman rode by the side of Harold, in the rear of the victorious armament. The ships sailed to their havens, and Tostig departed to his northern earldom.

"And now," said Harold, "I am at leisure to thank thee, brave Norman, for more than thine aid in council and war;—at leisure now to turn to the last prayer of Sweyn, and the often-shed tears of Githa my mother, for Wolnoth the exile. Thou seest with thine own eyes that there is no longer pretext or plea for thy Count to detain these hostages. Thou shalt hear from Edward himself that he no longer asks sureties for the faith of the House of Godwin; and I cannot think that Duke William would have suffered thee to bring me over this news from the dead if he were not prepared to do justice to the living."

"Your speech, Earl of Wessex, goes near to the truth. But, to speak plainly and frankly, I think William, my lord, hath a keen desire to welcome in person a chief so illustrious as Harold, and I guess that he keeps the hostages to make thee come to claim them." The knight, as he spoke, smiled gaily; but the cunning of the Norman gleamed in the quick glance of his clear hazel eye.

"Fain must I feel pride at such wish, if you flatter me not," said Harold; "and I would gladly myself, now the land is in peace, and my presence not needful, visit a court of such fame. I hear high praise from cheapman and pilgrim of Count William's wise care

for barter and trade, and might learn much from the ports of the Seine that would profit the marts of the Thames. Much, too, I hear of Count William's zeal to revive the learning of the Church, aided by Lanfranc the Lombard; much I hear of the pomp of his buildings, and the grace of his court. All this would I cheerfully cross the ocean to see; but all this would but sadden my heart if I returned without Haco and Wolnoth."

"I dare not speak so as to plight faith for the Duke," said the Norman, who, though sharp to deceive, had that rein on his conscience that it did not let him openly lie; "but this I do know, that there are few things in his Countdom which my lord would not give to clasp the right hand of Harold and feel assured of his friendship."

Though wise and farseeing, Harold was not suspicious;—no Englishman, unless it were Edward himself, knew the secret pretensions of William to the English throne; and he answered simply:

"It were well, indeed, both for Normandy and England, both against foes and for trade, to be allied and well-liking. I will think over your words, Sire de Graville, and it shall not be my fault if old feuds be not forgotten, and those now in thy court be the last hostages ever kept by the Norman for the faith of the Saxon."

With that he turned the discourse; and the aspiring and able envoy, exhilarated by the hope of a successful mission, animated the way by remarks—alternately lively and shrewd—which drew the brooding Earl from those musings, which had now grown

habitual to a mind once clear and open as the day.

Harold had not miscalculated the enthusiasm his victories had excited. Where he passed, all the towns poured forth their populations to see and to hail him; and on arriving at the metropolis, the rejoicings in his honour seemed to equal those which had greeted, at the accession of Edward, the restoration of the line of Cerdic.

According to the barbarous custom of the age, the head of the unfortunate sub-king, and the prow of his special war-ship, had been sent to Edward as the trophies of conquest: but Harold's uniform moderation respected the living. The race of Gryffyth¹ were re-established on the tributary throne of that hero, in the persons of his brothers, Blethgent and Rigwatle, "and they swore oaths," says the graphic old chronicler, "and delivered hostages to the King and the Earl that they would be faithful to him in all things, and be everywhere ready for him, by water, and by land, and make such renders from the land as had been done before to any other king."

Not long after this, Mallet de Graville returned to Normandy, with gifts for William from King Edward, and special requests from that prince, as well as from the Earl, to restore the hostages. But Mallet's acuteness readily perceived, that in much Edward's mind had been alienated from William. It was clear, that the Duke's marriage and the pledges that had crowned the union

¹ Gryffyth left a son, Caradoc; but he was put aside as a minor, according to the Saxon customs.

were distasteful to the asceticism of the saint king: and with Godwin's death, and Tostig's absence from the court, seemed to have expired all Edward's bitterness towards that powerful family of which Harold was now the head. Still, as no subject out of the House of Cerdic had ever yet been elected to the Saxon throne, there was no apprehension on Mallet's mind that in Harold was the true rival to William's cherished aspirations. Though Edward the Atheling was dead, his son Edgar lived, the natural heir to the throne; and the Norman, (whose liege had succeeded to the Duchy at the age of eight,) was not sufficiently cognisant of the invariable custom of the Anglo-Saxons, to set aside, whether for kingdoms or for earldoms, all claimants unfitted for rule by their tender years. He could indeed perceive that the young Atheling's minority was in favour of his Norman liege, and would render him but a weak defender of the realm, and that there seemed no popular attachment to the infant orphan of the Germanised exile: his name was never mentioned at the court, nor had Edward acknowledged him as heir,—a circumstance which he interpreted auspiciously for William. Nevertheless, it was clear that, both at court and amongst the people, the Norman influence in England was at the lowest ebb; and that the only man who could restore it, and realise the cherished dreams of his grasping lord, was Harold the all-powerful.

CHAPTER III

Trusting, for the time, to the success of Edward's urgent demand for the release of his kinsmen, as well as his own, Harold was now detained at the court by all those arrears of business which had accumulated fast under the inert hands of the monk-king during the prolonged campaigns against the Welch; but he had leisure at least for frequent visits to the old Roman house; and those visits were not more grateful to his love than to the harder and more engrossing passion which divided his heart.

The nearer he grew to the dazzling object, to the possession of which Fate seemed to have shaped all circumstances, the more he felt the charm of those mystic influences which his colder reason had disdained. He who is ambitious of things afar, and uncertain, passes at once into the Poet-Land of Imagination; to aspire and to imagine are yearnings twin-born.

When in his fresh youth and his calm lofty manhood, Harold saw action, how adventurous soever, limited to the barriers of noble duty; when he lived but for his country, all spread clear before his vision in the sunlight of day; but as the barriers receded, while the horizon extended, his eye left the Certain to rest on the Vague. As self, though still half concealed from his conscience, gradually assumed the wide space love of country had filled, the maze of delusion commenced: he was to shape fate out of circumstance,—no longer defy fate through virtue; and

thus Hilda became to him as a voice that answered the questions of his own restless heart. He needed encouragement from the Unknown to sanction his desires and confirm his ends. But Edith, rejoicing in the fair fame of her betrothed, and content in the pure rapture of beholding him again, reposed in the divine credulity of the happy hour; she marked not, in Harold's visits, that, on entrance, the Earl's eye sought first the stern face of the Vala—she wondered not why those two conversed in whispers together, or stood so often at moonlight by the Runic grave. Alone, of all womankind, she felt that Harold loved her, that that love had braved time, absence, change, and hope deferred; and she knew not that what love has most to dread in the wild heart of aspiring man, is not persons, but things,—is not things, but their symbols.

So weeks and months rolled on, and Duke William returned no answer to the demands for his hostages. And Harold's heart smote him, that he neglected his brother's prayer and his mother's accusing tears.

Now Githa, since the death of her husband, had lived in seclusion and apart from town; and one day Harold was surprised by her unexpected arrival at the large timbered house in London, which had passed to his possession. As she abruptly entered the room in which he sate, he sprang forward to welcome and embrace her; but she waved him back with a grave and mournful gesture, and sinking on one knee, she said thus:

"See, the mother is a suppliant to the son for the son. No, Harold, no—I will not rise till thou hast heard me. For years,

long and lonely, have I lingered and pined,—long years! Will my boy know his mother again? Thou hast said to me, 'Wait till the messenger returns.' I have waited. Thou hast said, 'This time the Count cannot resist the demand of the King.' I bowed my head and submitted to thee as I had done to Godwin my lord. And I have not till now claimed thy promise; for I allowed thy country, thy King, and thy fame to have claims more strong than a mother. Now I tarry no more; now no more will I be amused and deceived. Thine hours are thine own—free thy coming and thy going. Harold, I claim thine oath. Harold, I touch thy right hand. Harold, I remind thee of thy troth and thy plight, to cross the seas thyself, and restore the child to the mother."

"Oh, rise, rise!" exclaimed Harold, deeply moved. "Patient hast thou been, O my mother, and now I will linger no more, nor hearken to other voice than your own. I will see the King this day, and ask his leave to cross the sea to Duke William."

Then Githa rose, and fell on the Earl's breast weeping.

CHAPTER IV

It so chanced, while this interview took place between Githa and the Earl, that Gurth, hawking in the woodlands round Hilda's house, turned aside to visit his Danish kinswoman. The prophetess was absent, but he was told that Edith was within; and Gurth, about to be united to a maiden who had long won his noble affections, cherished a brother's love for his brother's fair betrothed. He entered the gynocœcium, and there still, as when we were first made present in that chamber, sate the maids, employed on a work more brilliant to the eye, and more pleasing to the labour, than that which had then tasked their active hands. They were broidering into a tissue of the purest gold the effigy of a fighting warrior, designed by Hilda for the banner of Earl Harold: and, removed from the awe of their mistress, as they worked their tongues sang gaily, and it was in the midst of song and laughter that the fair young Saxon lord entered the chamber. The babble and the mirth ceased at his entrance; each voice was stilled, each eye cast down demurely. Edith was not amongst them, and in answer to his inquiry the eldest of the maidens pointed towards the peristyle without the house.

The winning and kindly thegn paused a few moments, to admire the tissue and commend the work, and then sought the peristyle.

Near the water-spring that gushed free and bright through the

Roman fountain, he found Edith, seated in an attitude of deep thought and gloomy dejection. She started as he approached, and, springing forward to meet him, exclaimed:

"O Gurth, Heaven hath sent thee to me, I know well, though I cannot explain to thee why, for I cannot explain it to myself, but know I do, by the mysterious bodements of my own soul, that some great danger is at this moment encircling thy brother Harold. Go to him, I pray, I implore thee, forthwith; and let thy clear sense and warm heart be by his side."

"I will go instantly," said Gurth, startled. "But do not suffer, I adjure thee, sweet kinswoman, the superstition that wraps this place, as a mist wraps a marsh, to infect thy pure spirit. In my early youth I submitted to the influence of Hilda; I became man, and outgrew it. Much, secretly, has it grieved me of late, to see that our kinswoman's Danish lore has brought even the strong heart of Harold under his spell; and where once he only spoke of duty, I now hear him speak of fate."

"Alas! alas!" answered Edith, wringing her hands; "when the bird hides its head in the brake, doth it shut out the track of the hound? Can we baffle fate by refusing to heed its approaches? But we waste precious moments. Go, Gurth, dear Gurth! Heavier and darker, while we speak, gathers the cloud on my heart."

Gurth said no more, but hastened to remount his steed; and Edith remained alone by the Roman fountain, motionless and sad, as if the nymph of the old religion stood there to see the lessening stream well away from the shattered stone, and know

that the life of the nymph was measured by the ebb of the stream.

Gurth arrived in London just as Harold was taking a boat for the palace of Westminster, to seek the King; and, after interchanging a hurried embrace with his mother, he accompanied Harold to the palace, and learned his errand by the way. While Harold spoke, he did not foresee any danger to be incurred by a friendly visit to the Norman court; and the interval that elapsed between Harold's communication and their entrance into the King's chamber, allowed no time for mature and careful reflection.

Edward, on whom years and infirmity had increased of late with rapid ravage, heard Harold's request with a grave and deep attention, which he seldom vouchsafed to earthly affairs. And he remained long silent after his brother-in-law had finished;—so long silent, that the Earl, at first, deemed that he was absorbed in one of those mystic and abstracted reveries, in which, more and more as he grew nearer to the borders of the World Unseen, Edward so strangely indulged. But, looking more close, both he and Gurth were struck by the evident dismay on the King's face, while the collected light of Edward's cold eye showed that his mind was awake to the human world. In truth, it is probable that Edward, at that moment, was recalling rash hints, if not promises, to his rapacious cousin of Normandy, made during his exile. And, sensible of his own declining health, and the tender years of the young Edgar, he might be musing over the terrible pretender to the English throne, whose claims his earlier indiscretion might

seem to sanction.

Whatever his thoughts, they were dark and sinister, as at length he said, slowly:

"Is thine oath indeed given to thy mother, and doth she keep thee to it?"

"Both, O King," answered Harold, briefly.

"Then I can gainsay thee not. And thou, Harold, art a man of this living world; thou playest here the part of a centurion; thou sayst 'Come,' and men come—'Go,' and men move at thy will. Therefore thou mayest well judge for thyself. I gainsay thee not, nor interfere between man and his vow. But think not," continued the King in a more solemn voice, and with increasing emotion, "think not that I will charge my soul that I counselled or encouraged this errand. Yea, I foresee that thy journey will lead but to great evil to England, and sore grief or dire loss to thee."²

"How so, dear lord and King?" said Harold, startled by Edward's unwonted earnestness, though deeming it but one of the visionary chimeras habitual to the saint. "How so? William thy cousin hath ever borne the name of one fair to friend, though fierce to foe. And foul indeed his dishonour, if he could meditate harm to a man trusting his faith, and sheltered by his own roof-tree."

"Harold, Harold," said Edward, impatiently, "I know William of old. Nor is he so simple of mind, that he will cede aught for thy pleasure, or even to my will, unless it bring some gain to

² Bromton Chron., Knyghton, Walsingham, Hoveden, etc.

himself³. I say no more.—Thou art cautioned, and I leave the rest to Heaven."

It is the misfortune of men little famous for worldly lore, that in those few occasions when, in that sagacity caused by their very freedom from the strife and passion of those around, they seem almost prophetically inspired,—it is their misfortune to lack the power of conveying to others their own convictions; they may divine, but they cannot reason: and Harold could detect nothing to deter his purpose, in a vague fear, based on no other argument than as vague a perception of the Duke's general character. But Gurth, listening less to his reason than his devoted love for his brother, took alarm, and said, after a pause:

"Thinkest thou, good my King, that the same danger were incurred if Gurth, instead of Harold, crossed the seas to demand the hostages?"

"No," said Edward, eagerly, "and so would I counsel. William would not have the same objects to gain in practising his worldly guile upon thee. No; methinks that were the prudent course."

"And the ignoble one for Harold," said the elder brother, almost indignantly. "Howbeit, I thank thee, gratefully, dear King, for thy affectionate heed and care. And so the saints guard thee!"

On leaving the King, a warm discussion between the brothers took place. But Gurth's arguments were stronger than those of Harold, and the Earl was driven to rest his persistence on his own special pledge to Githa. As soon, however, as they had

³ Bromton, Knyghton, etc.

gained their home, that plea was taken from him; for the moment Gurth related to his mother Edward's fears and cautions, she, ever mindful of Godwin's preference for the Earl, and his last commands to her, hastened to release Harold from his pledge; and to implore him at least to suffer Gurth to be his substitute to the Norman court. "Listen dispassionately," said Gurth; "rely upon it that Edward has reasons for his fears, more rational than those he has given to us. He knows William from his youth upward, and hath loved him too well to hint doubts of his good faith without just foundation. Are there no reasons why danger from William should be special against thyself? While the Normans abounded in the court, there were rumours that the Duke had some designs on England, which Edward's preference seemed to sanction: such designs now, in the altered state of England, were absurd—too frantic, for a prince of William's reputed wisdom to entertain. Yet he may not unnaturally seek to regain the former Norman influence in these realms. He knows that in you he receives the most powerful man in England; that your detention alone would convulse the country from one end of it to the other; and enable him, perhaps, to extort from Edward some measures dishonourable to us all. But against me he can harbour no ill design —my detention would avail him nothing. And, in truth, if Harold be safe in England, Gurth must be safe in Rouen? Thy presence here at the head of our armies guarantees me from wrong. But reverse the case, and with Gurth in England, is Harold safe in Rouen? I, but a simple soldier, and homely lord,

with slight influence over Edward, no command in the country, and little practised of speech in the stormy Witan,—I am just so great that William dare not harm me, but not so great that he should even wish to harm me."

"He detains our kinsmen, why not thee!" said Harold.

"Because with our kinsmen he has at least the pretext that they were pledged as hostages: because I go simply as guest and envoy. No, to me danger cannot come. Be ruled, dear Harold."

"Be ruled, O my son," cried Githa, clasping the Earl's knees, "and do not let me dread in the depth of the night to see the shade of Godwin, and hear his voice say, 'Woman, where is Harold?'"

It was impossible for the Earl's strong understanding to resist the arguments addressed to it; and, to say truth, he had been more disturbed that he liked to confess by Edward's sinister forewarnings. Yet, on the other hand, there were reasons against his acquiescence in Gurth's proposal. The primary, and, to do him justice, the strongest, was in his native courage and his generous pride. Should he for the first time in his life shrink from a peril in the discharge of his duty; a peril, too, so uncertain and vague? Should he suffer Gurth to fulfil the pledge he himself had taken? And granting even that Gurth were safe from whatever danger he individually might incur, did it become him to accept the proxy? Would Gurth's voice, too, be as potent as his own in effecting the return of the hostages?

The next reasons that swayed him were those he could not avow. In clearing his way to the English throne, it would be of

no mean importance to secure the friendship of the Norman Duke, and the Norman acquiescence in his pretensions; it would be of infinite service to remove those prepossessions against his House, which were still rife with the Normans, who retained a bitter remembrance of their countrymen decimated⁴

⁴ The word "decimated" is the one generally applied by the historians to the massacre in question; and it is therefore retained here. But it is not correctly applied, for that butchery was perpetrated, not upon one out of ten, but nine out of ten.

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