

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS — VOLUME 11**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

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Saxon Kings — Volume 11**

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton Harold : the Last of the Saxon Kings — Volume 11

BOOK XI. THE NORMAN SCHEMER, AND THE NORWEGIAN SEA-KING

CHAPTER I

It was the eve of the 5th of January—the eve of the day announced to King Edward as that of his deliverance from earth; and whether or not the prediction had wrought its own fulfilment on the fragile frame and susceptible nerves of the King, the last of the line of Cerdic was fast passing into the solemn shades of eternity.

Without the walls of the palace, through the whole city of London, the excitement was indescribable. All the river before the palace was crowded with boats; all the broad space on the Isle of Thorney itself, thronged with anxious groups. But a few days before the new-built Abbey had been solemnly consecrated; with the completion of that holy edifice, Edward's life itself seemed done. Like the kings of Egypt, he had built his tomb.

Within the palace, if possible, still greater was the agitation; more dread the suspense. Lobbies, halls, corridors, stairs, ante-rooms, were filled with churchmen and thegns. Nor was it alone for news of the King's state that their brows were so knit, that their breath came and went so short. It is not when a great chief is dying, that men compose their minds to deplore a loss. That comes long after, when the worm is at its work, and comparison between the dead and the living often rights the one to wrong the other. But while the breath is struggling, and the eye glazing, life, busy in the bystanders, murmurs, "Who shall be the heir?" And, in this instance, never had suspense been so keenly wrought up into hope and terror. For the news of Duke William's designs had now spread far and near; and awful was the doubt, whether the abhorred Norman should receive his sole sanction to so arrogant a claim from the parting assent of Edward. Although, as we have seen, the crown was not absolutely within the bequests of a dying king, but at the will of the Witan, still, in circumstances so unparalleled, the utter failure of all natural heirs, save a boy feeble in mind as body, and half foreign by birth and rearing; the love borne by Edward to the Church; and the sentiments, half of pity half of reverence, with which he was regarded throughout the land;—his dying word would go far to influence the council and select the successor. Some whispering to each other, with pale lips, all the dire predictions then current in men's mouths and breasts; some in moody silence; all lifted eager eyes, as, from time to time, a gloomy Benedictine passed in the direction to or fro the King's chamber.

In that chamber, traversing the past of eight centuries, enter we with hushed and noiseless feet—a room known to us in many a later scene and legend of England's troubled history, as "THE PAINTED CHAMBER," long called "THE CONFESSOR'S." At the farthest end of that long and lofty space, raised upon a regal platform, and roofed with regal canopy, was the bed of death.

At the foot stood Harold; on one side knelt Edith, the King's lady; at the other Alred; while Stigand stood near—the holy rood in his hand—and the abbot of the new monastery of Westminster by Stigand's side; and all the greatest thegns, including Morcar and Edwin, Gurth and Leofwine, all the more illustrious prelates and abbots, stood also on the dais.

In the lower end of the hall, the King's physician was warming a cordial over the brazier, and some of the subordinate officers of the household were standing in the niches of the deep-set windows; and they—not great eno' for other emotions than those of human love for their kindly lord—they wept.

The King, who had already undergone the last holy offices of the Church, was lying quite quiet, his eyes half closed, breathing low but regularly. He had been speechless the two preceding days; on this he had uttered a few words, which showed returning consciousness. His hand, reclined on the coverlid, was clasped in his wife's who was praying fervently. Something in the touch of her hand, or the sound of her murmur, stirred the King from the growing lethargy, and his eyes opening, fixed on the kneeling lady.

"Ah?" said he faintly, "ever good, ever meek! Think not I did not love thee; hearts will be read yonder; we shall have our guerdon."

The lady looked up through her streaming tears. Edward released his hand, and laid it on her head as in benediction. Then motioning to the abbot of Westminster, he drew from his finger the ring which the palmer had brought to him¹, and murmured scarce audibly:

"Be this kept in the House of St. Peter in memory of me!"

"He is alive now to us—speak—" whispered more than one thegn, one abbot, to Alred and to Stigand. And Stigand, as the harder and more worldly man of the two, moved up, and bending over the pillow, between Alred and the King, said:

"O royal son, about to win the crown to which that of earth is but an idiot's wreath of withered leaves, not yet may thy soul forsake us. Whom commendest thou to us as shepherd to thy bereaven flock? whom shall we admonish to tread in those traces thy footsteps leave below?"

The King made a slight gesture of impatience; and the Queen, forgetful of all but her womanly sorrow, raised her eye and finger in reproof that the dying was thus disturbed. But the stake was too weighty, the suspense too keen, for that reverent delicacy in those around; and the thegns pressed on each other, and a murmur rose, which murmured the name of Harold.

"Bethink thee, my son," said Alred, in a tender voice tremulous with emotion; "the young Atheling is too much an infant yet for these anxious times."

Edward signed his head in assent.

"Then," said the Norman bishop of London, who till that moment had stood in the rear, almost forgotten amongst the crowd of Saxon prelates, but who himself had been all eyes and ears. "Then," said Bishop William, advancing, "if thine own royal line so fail, who so near to thy love, who so worthy to succeed, as William thy cousin, the Count of the Normans?"

Dark was the scowl on the brow of every thegn, and a muttered "No, no: never the Norman!" was heard distinctly. Harold's face flushed, and his hand was on the hilt of his ateghar. But no other sign gave he of his interest in the question.

The King lay for some moments silent, but evidently striving to re- collect his thoughts. Meanwhile the two archprelates bent over him— Stigand eagerly, Alred fondly.

Then raising himself on one arm, while with the other he pointed to Harold at the foot of the bed, the King said:

"Your hearts, I see, are with Harold the Earl: so be it." At those words he fell back on his pillow; a loud shriek burst from his wife's lips; all crowded around; he lay as the dead.

At the cry, and the indescribable movement of the throng, the physician came quick from the lower part of the hall. He made his way abruptly to the bedside, and said chidingly, "Air, give him air." The throng parted, the leach moistened the King's pale lips with the cordial, but no breath seemed to come forth, no pulse seemed to beat; and while the two prelates knelt before the human body and

¹ Brompt. Chron.

by the blessed rood, the rest descended the dais, and hastened to depart. Harold only remained; but he had passed from the foot to the head of the bed.

The crowd had gained the centre of the hall, when a sound that startled them as if it had come from the grave, chained every footstep—the sound of the King's voice, loud, terribly distinct, and full, as with the vigour of youth restored. All turned their eyes, appalled; all stood spell-bound.

There sate the King upright on the bed, his face seen above the kneeling prelates, and his eyes bright and shining down the Hall.

"Yea," he said, deliberately, "yea, as this shall be a real vision or a false illusion, grant me, Almighty One, the power of speech to tell it."

He paused a moment, and thus resumed:

"It was on the banks of the frozen Seine, this day thirty-and-one winters ago, that two holy monks, to whom the gift of prophecy was vouchsafed, told me of direful woes that should fall on England; 'For God,' said they, 'after thy death, has delivered England into the hand of the enemy, and fiends shall wander over the land.' Then I asked in my sorrow, 'Can nought avert the doom? and may not my people free themselves by repentance, like the Ninevites of old?' And the Prophets answered, 'Nay, nor shall the calamity cease, and the curse be completed, till a green tree be sundered in twain, and the part cut off be carried away; yet move, of itself, to the ancient trunk, unite to the stem, bud out with the blossom, and stretch forth its fruit.' So said the monks, and even now, ere I spoke, I saw them again, there, standing mute, and with the paleness of dead men, by the side of my bed!"

These words were said so calmly, and as it were so rationally, that their import became doubly awful from the cold precision of the tone. A shudder passed through the assembly, and each man shrunk from the King's eye, which seemed to each man to dwell on himself. Suddenly that eye altered in its cold beam; suddenly the voice changed its deliberate accent; the grey hairs seemed to bristle erect, the whole face to work with horror; the arms stretched forth, the form writhed on the couch, distorted fragments from the lips: "Sanguelac! Sanguelac!—the Lake of Blood," shrieked forth the dying King, "the Lord hath bent his bow—the Lord hath bared his sword. He comes down as a warrior to war, and his wrath is in the steel and the flame. He boweth the mountains, and comes down, and darkness is under his feet!"

As if revived but for these tremendous denunciations, while the last word left his lips the frame collapsed, the eyes set, and the King fell a corpse in the arms of Harold.

But one smile of the sceptic or the world-man was seen on the paling lips of those present: that smile was not on the lips of warriors and men of mail. It distorted the sharpened features of Stigand, the world-man and the miser, as, passing down, and amidst the group, he said, "Tremble ye at the dreams of a sick old man?"²

² See Note P.

CHAPTER II

The time of year customary for the National Assembly; the recent consecration of Westminster, for which Edward had convened all his chief spiritual lords, the anxiety felt for the infirm state of the King, and the interest as to the impending succession—all concurred to permit the instantaneous meeting of a Witan worthy, from rank and numbers, to meet the emergency of the time, and proceed to the most momentous election ever yet known in England. The thegns and prelates met in haste. Harold's marriage with Aldyth, which had taken place but a few weeks before, had united all parties with his own; not a claim counter to the great Earl's was advanced; the choice was unanimous. The necessity of terminating at such a crisis all suspense throughout the kingdom, and extinguishing the danger of all counter intrigues, forbade to men thus united any delay in solemnising their decision; and the august obsequies of Edward were followed on the same day by the coronation of Harold.

It was in the body of the mighty Abbey Church, not indeed as we see it now, after successive restorations and remodellings, but simple in its long rows of Saxon arch and massive column, blending the first Teuton with the last Roman masonries, that the crowd of the Saxon freemen assembled to honour the monarch of their choice. First Saxon king, since England had been one monarchy, selected not from the single House of Cerdic—first Saxon king, not led to the throne by the pale shades of fabled ancestors tracing their descent from the Father-God of the Teuton, but by the spirits that never know a grave—the arch- eternal givers of crowns, and founders of dynasties-Valour and Fame.

Alred and Stigand, the two great prelates of the realm, had conducted Harold to the church³, and up the aisle to the altar, followed by the chiefs of the Witan in their long robes; and the clergy with their abbots and bishops sung the anthems—"Fermetur manus tua," and "Gloria Patri."

And now the music ceased; Harold prostrated himself before the altar, and the sacred melody burst forth with the great hymn, "Te Deum."

As it ceased, prelate and thegn raised their chief from the floor, and in imitation of the old custom of Teuton and Northman—when the lord of their armaments was borne on shoulder and shield—Harold mounted a platform, and rose in full view of the crowd.

"Thus," said the arch-prelate, "we choose Harold son of Godwin for lord and for king." And the thegns drew round, and placed hand on Harold's knee, and cried aloud, "We choose thee, O Harold, for lord and for king." And row by row, line by line, all the multitude shouted forth, "We choose thee, O Harold, for lord and king." So there he stood with his calm brow, facing all, Monarch of England, and Basileus of Britain.

Now unheeded amidst the throng, and leaning against a column in the arches of the aisle, was a woman with her veil round her face; and she lifted the veil for a moment to gaze on that lofty brow, and the tears were streaming fast down her cheek, but her face was not sad.

"Let the vulgar not see, to pity or scorn thee, daughter of kings as great as he who abandons and forsakes thee!" murmured a voice in her ear; and the form of Hilda, needing no support from column or wall, rose erect by the side of Edith. Edith bowed her head and lowered the veil, as the King descended the platform and stood again by the altar, while clear through the hushed assembly rang the words of his triple promise to his people:

"Peace to His Church and the Christian flock."

³ It seems by the coronation service of Ethelred II. still extant, that two bishops officiated in the crowning of the King; and hence, perhaps, the discrepancy in the chronicles, some contending that Harold was crowned by Alred, others, by Stigand. It is noticeable, however, that it is the apologists of the Normans who assign that office to Stigand, who was in disgrace with the Pope, and deemed no lawful bishop. Thus in the Bayeux tapestry the label, "Stigand," is significantly affixed to the officiating prelate, as if to convey insinuation that Harold was not lawfully crowned. Florence, by far the best authority, says distinctly, that Harold was crowned by Alred. The ceremonial of the coronation described in the text, is for the most part given on the authority of the "Cotton MS." quoted by Sharon Turner, vol. iii. p. 151.

"Interdict of rapacity and injustice."

"Equity and mercy in his judgments, as God the gracious and just might show mercy to him."
And deep from the hearts of thousands came the low "Amen."

Then after a short prayer, which each prelate repeated, the crowd saw afar the glitter of the crown held over the head of the King. The voice of the consecrator was heard, low till it came to the words "So potently and royally may he rule, against all visible and invisible foes, that the royal throne of the Angles and Saxons may not desert his sceptre."

As the prayer ceased, came the symbolical rite of anointment. Then pealed the sonorous organ⁴, and solemn along the aisles rose the anthem that closed with the chorus which the voice of the multitude swelled, "May the King live for ever!" Then the crown that had gleamed in the trembling hand of the prelate, rested firm in its splendour on the front of the King. And the sceptre of rule, and the rod of justice, "to sooth the pious and terrify the bad," were placed in the royal hands. And the prayer and the blessings were renewed,— till the close; "Bless, Lord, the courage of this Prince, and prosper the works of his hand. With his horn, as the horn of the rhinoceros, may he blow the waters to the extremities of the earth; and may He who has ascended to the skies be his aid for ever!"

Then Hilda stretched forth her hand to lead Edith from the place. But Edith shook her head and murmured "But once again, but once!" and with involuntary step moved on.

Suddenly, close where she paused, the crowd parted, and down the narrow lane so formed amidst the wedged and breathless crowd came the august procession;—prelate and thegn swept on from the Church to the palace; and alone, with firm and measured step, the diadem on his brow, the sceptre in his hand, came the King. Edith checked the rushing impulse at her heart, but she bent forward, with veil half drawn aside, and so gazed on that face and form of more than royal majesty, fondly, proudly. The King swept on and saw her not; love lived no more for him.

⁴ Introduced into our churches in the ninth century.

CHAPTER III

The boat shot over the royal Thames. Borne along the waters, the shouts and the hymns of swarming thousands from the land shook, like a blast, the gelid air of the Wolf month. All space seemed filled and noisy with the name of Harold the King. Fast rowed the rowers,—on shot the boat; and Hilda's face, stern and ominous, turned to the still towers of the palace, gleaming wide and white in the wintry sun. Suddenly Edith lifted her hand from her bosom, and said passionately:

"O mother of my mother, I cannot live again in the house where the very walls speak to me of him; all things chain my soul to the earth; and my soul should be in heaven, that its prayers may be heard by the heedful angels. The day that the holy Lady of England predicted hath come to pass, and the silver cord is loosed at last. Ah why, why did I not believe her then? why did I then reject the cloister? Yet no, I will not repent; at least I have been loved! But now I will go to the nunnery of Waltham, and kneel at the altars he hath hallowed to the mone and the monechyn."

"Edith," said the Vala, "thou wilt not bury thy life yet young in the living grave! And, despite all that now severs you—yea, despite Harold's new and loveless ties—still clearer than ever it is written in the heavens, that a day shall come, in which you are to be evermore united. Many of the shapes I have seen, many of the sounds I have heard, in the trance and the dream, fade in the troubled memory of waking life. But never yet hath grown doubtful or dim the prophecy, that the truth pledged by the grave shall be fulfilled."

"Oh, tempt not! Oh, delude not!" cried Edith, while the blood rushed over her brow. "Thou knowest this can not be. Another's! he is another's! and in the words thou hast uttered there is deadly sin."

"There is no sin in the resolves of a fate that rules us in spite of ourselves. Tarry only till the year bring round the birth-day of Harold; for my sayings shall be ripe with the grape, and when the feet of the vineherd are red in the Month of the Vine⁵, the Nornas shall knit ye together again!"

Edith clasped her hands mutely, and looked hard into the face of Hilda,—looked and shuddered she knew not why.

The boat landed on the eastern shore of the river, beyond the walls of the city, and then Edith bent her way to the holy walls of Waltham. The frost was sharp in the glitter of the unwarming sun; upon leafless boughs hung the barbed ice-gems; and the crown was on the brows of Harold! and at night, within the walls of the convent, Edith heard the hymns of the kneeling monks; and the blasts howled, and the storm arose, and the voices of destroying hurricanes were blent with the swell of the choral hymns.

⁵ The Wyn-month: October.

CHAPTER IV

Tostig sate in the halls of Bruges, and with him sate Judith, his haughty wife. The Earl and his Countess were playing at chess, (or the game resembling it, which amused the idlesse of that age,) and the Countess had put her lord's game into mortal disorder, when Tostig swept his hand over the board, and the pieces rolled on the floor.

"That is one way to prevent defeat," said Judith, with a half smile and half frown.

"It is the way of the bold and the wise, wife mine," answered Tostig, rising, "let all be destruction where thou thyself canst win not! Peace to these trifles! I cannot keep my mind to the mock fight; it flies to the real. Our last news sours the taste of the wine, and steals the sleep from my couch. It says that Edward cannot live through the winter, and that all men bruit abroad, there can be no king save Harold my brother."

"And will thy brother as King give to thee again thy domain as Earl?"

"He must!" answered Tostig, "and, despite all our breaches, with soft message he will. For Harold has the heart of the Saxon, to which the sons of one father are dear; and Githa, my mother, when we first fled, controlled the voice of my revenge, and bade me wait patient and hope yet."

Scarce had these words fallen from Tostig's lips, when the chief of his Danish house-carles came in, and announced the arrival of a bode from England.

"His news? his news?" cried the Earl, "with his own lips let him speak his news."

The house-carle withdrew but to usher in the messenger, an Anglo-Dane.

"The weight on thy brow shows the load on thy heart," cried Tostig.

"Speak, and be brief."

"Edward is dead."

"Ha? and who reigns?"

"Thy brother is chosen and crowned."

The face of the Earl grew red and pale in a breath, and successive emotions of envy and old rivalry, humbled pride and fierce discontent, passed across his turbulent heart. But these died away as the predominant thought of self-interest, and somewhat of that admiration for success which often seems like magnanimity in grasping minds, and something too of haughty exultation, that he stood a King's brother in the halls of his exile, came to chase away the more hostile and menacing feelings. Then Judith approached with joy on her brow, and said:

"We shall no more eat the bread of dependence even at the hand of a father; and since Harold hath no dame to proclaim to the Church, and to place on the dais, thy wife, O my Tostig, will have state in far England little less than her sister in Rouen."

"Methinks so will it be," said Tostig. "How now, nuncius? why lookest thou so grim, and why shakest thou thy head?"

"Small chance for thy dame to keep state in the halls of the King; small hope for thyself to win back thy broad earldom. But a few weeks ere thy brother won the crown, he won also a bride in the house of thy spoiler and foe. Aldyth, the sister of Edwin and Morcar, is Lady of England; and that union shuts thee out from Northumbria for ever."

At these words, as if stricken by some deadly and inexpressible insult, the Earl recoiled, and stood a moment mute with rage and amaze. His singular beauty became distorted into the lineaments of a fiend. He stamped with his foot, as he thundered a terrible curse. Then haughtily waving his hand to the bode, in sign of dismissal, he strode to and fro the room in gloomy perturbation.

Judith, like her sister Matilda, a woman fierce and vindictive, continued, by that sharp venom that lies in the tongue of the sex, to incite still more the intense resentment of her lord. Perhaps some female jealousies of Aldyth might contribute to increase her own indignation. But without such frivolous addition to anger, there was cause eno' in this marriage thoroughly to complete the

alienation between the King and his brother. It was impossible that one so revengeful as Tostig should not cherish the deepest animosity, not only against the people that had rejected, but the new Earl that had succeeded him. In wedding the sister of this fortunate rival and despoiler, Harold could not, therefore, but gall him in his most sensitive sores of soul. The King, thus, formally approved and sanctioned his ejection, solemnly took part with his foe, robbed him of all legal chance of recovering his dominions, and, in the words of the bode, "shut him out from Northumbria for ever." Nor was this even all. Grant his return to England; grant a reconciliation with Harold; still those abhorred and more fortunate enemies, necessarily made now the most intimate part of the King's family, must be most in his confidence, would curb and chafe and encounter Tostig in every scheme for his personal aggrandisement. His foes, in a word, were in the camp of his brother.

While gnashing his teeth with a wrath the more deadly because he saw not yet his way to retribution,—Judith, pursuing the separate thread of her own cogitations, said:

"And if my sister's lord, the Count of the Normans, had, as rightly he ought to have, succeeded his cousin the Monk-king, then I should have a sister on the throne, and thou in her husband a brother more tender than Harold. One who supports his barons with sword and mail, and gives the villeins rebelling against them but the brand and the cord."

"Ho!" cried Tostig, stopping suddenly in his disordered strides, "kiss me, wife, for those words! They have helped thee to power, and lit me to revenge. If thou wouldst send love to thy sister, take graphium and parchment, and write fast as a scribe. Ere the sun is an hour older, I am on my road to Count William."

CHAPTER V

The Duke of the Normans was in the forest, or park land, of Rouvray, and his Quens and his knights stood around him, expecting some new proof of his strength and his skill with the bow. For the Duke was trying some arrows, a weapon he was ever employed in seeking to improve; sometimes shortening, sometimes lengthening, the shaft; and suiting the wing of the feather, and the weight of the point, to the nicest refinement in the law of mechanics. Gay and debonnair, in the brisk fresh air of the frosty winter, the great Count jested and laughed as the squires fastened a live bird by the string to a stake in the distant sward; and "Pardex," said Duke William, "Conan of Bretagne, and Philip of France, leave us now so unkindly in peace, that I trow we shall never again have larger butt for our arrows than the breast of yon poor plumed trembler."

As the Duke spoke and laughed, all the sere boughs behind him rattled and crunched, and a horse at full speed came rushing over the hard rime of the sward. The Duke's smile vanished in the frown of his pride. "Bold rider and graceless," quoth he, "who thus comes in the presence of counts and princes?"

Right up to Duke William spurred the rider, and then leaped from his steed; vest and mantle, yet more rich than the Duke's, all tattered and soiled. No knee bent the rider, no cap did he doff; but seizing the startled Norman with the gripe of a hand as strong as his own, he led him aside from the courtiers, and said:

"Thou knowest me, William? though not thus alone should I come to thy court, if I did not bring thee a crown."

"Welcome, brave Tostig!" said the Duke, marvelling. "What meanest thou? nought but good, by thy words and thy smile."

"Edward sleeps with the dead!—and Harold is King of all England!"

"King!—England!—King!" faltered William, stammering in his agitation. "Edward dead!—Saints rest him! England then is mine! King!—I am the King! Harold hath sworn it; my Quens and prelates heard him; the bones of the saints attest the oath!"

"Somewhat of this have I vaguely learned from our beau-pere Count Baldwin; more will I learn at thy leisure; but take meanwhile, my word as Miles and Saxon,—never, while there is breath on his lips, or one beat in his heart, will my brother, Lord Harold, give an inch of English land to the Norman."

William turned pale and faint with emotion, and leant for support against a leafless oak.

Busy were the rumours, and anxious the watch, of the Quens and knights, as their Prince stood long in the distant glade, conferring with the rider, whom one or two of them had recognised as Tostig, the spouse of Matilda's sister.

At length, side by side, still talking earnestly, they regained the group; and William, summoning the Lord of Tancarville, bade him conduct Tostig to Rouen, the towers of which rose through the forest trees. "Rest and refresh thee, noble kinsman," said the Duke; "see and talk with Matilda. I will join thee anon."

The Earl remounted his steed, and saluting the company with a wild and hasty grace, soon vanished amidst the groves.

Then William, seating himself on the sward, mechanically unstrung his bow, sighing oft, and oft frowning; and—without vouchsafing other word to his lords than "No further sport to-day!" rose slowly, and went alone through the thickest parts of the forest. But his faithful Fitzosborne marked his gloom, and fondly followed him. The Duke arrived at the borders of the Seine, where his galley waited him. He entered, sat down on the bench, and took no notice of Fitzosborne, who quietly stepped in after his lord, and placed himself on another bench.

The little voyage to Rouen was performed in silence, and as soon as he had gained his palace, without seeking either Tostig or Matilda, the Duke turned into the vast hall, in which he was wont to hold council with his barons; and walked to and fro "often," say the chronicles, "changing posture and attitude, and oft loosening and tightening, and drawing into knots, the strings of his mantle."

Fitzosborne, meanwhile, had sought the ex-Earl, who was closeted with Matilda; and now returning, he went boldly up to the Duke, whom no one else dared approach, and said:

"Why, my liege, seek to conceal what is already known—what ere the eve will be in the mouths of all? You are troubled that Edward is dead, and that Harold, violating his oath, has seized the English realm."

"Truly," said the Duke mildly, and with the tone of a meek man much injured; "my dear cousin's death, and the wrongs I have received from Harold, touch me nearly."

Then said Fitzosborne, with that philosophy, half grave as became the Scandinavian, half gay as became the Frank: "No man should grieve for what he can help—still less for what he cannot help. For Edward's death, I trow, remedy there is none; but for Harold's treason, yea! Have you not a noble host of knights and warriors? What want you to destroy the Saxon and seize his realm? What but a bold heart? A great deed once well begun, is half done. Begin, Count of the Normans, and we will complete the rest."

Starting from his sorely tasked dissimulation; for all William needed, and all of which he doubted, was the aid of his haughty barons; the Duke raised his head, and his eyes shone out.

"Ha, sayest thou so! then, by the Splendour of God, we will do this deed. Haste thou—rouse hearts, nerve hands—promise, menace, win! Broad are the lands of England, and generous a conqueror's hand. Go and prepare all my faithful lords for a council, nobler than ever yet stirred the hearts and strung the hands of the sons of Rou."

CHAPTER VI

Brief was the sojourn of Tostig at the court of Rouen; speedily made the contract between the grasping Duke and the revengeful traitor. All that had been promised to Harold, was now pledged to Tostig—if the last would assist the Norman to the English throne.

At heart, however, Tostig was ill satisfied. His chance conversations with the principal barons, who seemed to look upon the conquest of England as the dream of a madman, showed him how doubtful it was that William could induce his Quens to a service, to which the tenure of their fiefs did not appear to compel them; and at all events, Tostig prognosticated delays, that little suited his fiery impatience. He accepted the offer of some two or three ships, which William put at his disposal, under pretence to reconnoitre the Northumbrian coasts, and there attempt a rising in his own favour. But his discontent was increased by the smallness of the aid afforded him; for William, ever suspicious, distrusted both his faith and his power. Tostig, with all his vices, was a poor dissimulator, and his sullen spirit betrayed itself when he took leave of his host.

"Chance what may," said the fierce Saxon, "no stranger shall seize the English crown without my aid. I offer it first to thee. But thou must come to take it in time, or——"

"Or what?" asked the Duke, gnawing his lip.

"Or the Father race of Rou will be before thee! My horse paws without. Farewell to thee, Norman; sharpen thy swords, hew out thy vessels, and goad thy slow barons."

Scarce had Tostig departed, ere William began to repent that he had so let him depart: but seeking counsel of Lanfranc, that wise minister reassured him.

"Fear no rival, son and lord," said he. "The bones of the dead are on thy side, and little thou knowest, as yet, how mighty their fleshless arms! All Tostig can do is to distract the forces of Harold. Leave him to work out his worst; nor then be in haste. Much hath yet to be done—cloud must gather and fire must form, ere the bolt can be launched. Send to Harold mildly, and gently remind him of oath and of relics—of treaty and pledge. Put right on thy side, and then——"

"Ah, what then?"

"Rome shall curse the forsworn—Rome shall hallow thy banner; this be no strife of force against force, but a war of religion; and thou shalt have on thy side the conscience of man, and the arm of the Church."

Meanwhile, Tostig embarked at Harfleur; but instead of sailing to the northern coasts of England, he made for one of the Flemish ports: and there, under various pretences, new manned the Norman vessels with Flemings, Fins, and Northmen. His meditations during his voyage had decided him not to trust to William; and he now bent his course, with fair wind and favouring weather, to the shores of his maternal uncle, King Sweyn of Denmark.

In truth, to all probable calculation, his change of purpose was politic. The fleets of England were numerous, and her seamen renowned. The Normans had neither experience nor fame in naval fights; their navy itself was scarcely formed. Thus, even William's landing in England was an enterprise arduous and dubious. Moreover, even granting the amplest success, would not this Norman Prince, so profound and ambitious, be a more troublesome lord to Earl Tostig than his own uncle Sweyn?

So, forgetful of the compact at Rouen, no sooner had the Saxon lord come in presence of the King of the Danes, than he urged on his kinsman the glory of winning again the sceptre of Canute.

A brave, but a cautious and wily veteran, was King Sweyn; and a few days before Tostig arrived, he had received letters from his sister Githa, who, true to Godwin's command, had held all that Harold did and counselled, as between himself and his brother, wise and just. These letters had placed the Dane on his guard, and shown him the true state of affairs in England. So King Sweyn, smiling, thus answered his nephew Tostig:

"A great man was Canute, a small man am I: scarce can I keep my Danish dominion from the gripe of the Norwegian, while Canute took Norway without slash and blow⁶; but great as he was, England cost him hard fighting to win, and sore peril to keep. Wherefore, best for the small man to rule by the light of his own little sense, nor venture to count on the luck of great Canute;—for luck but goes with the great."

"Thine answer," said Tostig, with a bitter sneer, "is not what I expected from an uncle and warrior. But other chiefs may be found less afraid of the luck of high deeds."

"So," saith the Norwegian chronicler, "not just the best friends, the Earl left the King," and went on in haste to Harold Hardrada of Norway.

True Hero of the North, true darling of War and of Song, was Harold Hardrada! At the terrible battle of Stiklestad, at which his brother, St. Olave, had fallen, he was but fifteen years of age, but his body was covered with the wounds of a veteran. Escaping from the field, he lay concealed in the house of a Bonder peasant, remote in deep forests, till his wounds were healed. Thence, chaunting by the way, (for a poet's soul burned bright in Hardrada,) "That a day would come when his name would be great in the land he now left," he went on into Sweden, thence into Russia, and after wild adventures in the East, joined, with the bold troop he had collected around him, that famous body-guard of the Greek emperors⁷, called the Vaeringers, and of these he became the chief. Jealousies between himself and the Greek General of the Imperial forces, (whom the Norwegian chronicler calls Gyrger,) ended in Harold's retirement with his Vaeringers into the Saracen land of Africa. Eighty castles stormed and taken, vast plunder in gold and in jewels, and nobler meed in the song of the Scald and the praise of the brave, attested the prowess of the great Scandinavian. New laurels, blood-stained, new treasures, sword-won, awaited him in Sicily; and thence, rough foretype of the coming crusader, he passed on to Jerusalem. His sword swept before him Moslem and robber. He bathed in Jordan, and knelt at the Holy Cross.

Returned to Constantinople, the desire for his northern home seized Hardrada. There he heard that his nephew Magnus, the illegitimate son of St. Olave, had become King of Norway,—and he himself aspired to a throne. So he gave up his command under Zoe the empress; but, if Scald be believed, Zoe the empress loved the bold chief, whose heart was set on Maria her niece. To detain Hardrada, a charge of mal- appropriation, whether of pay or of booty, was brought against him. He was cast into prison. But when the brave are in danger, the saints send the fair to their help! Moved by a holy dream, a Greek lady lowered ropes from the roof of the tower to the dungeon wherein Hardrada was cast. He escaped from the prison, he aroused his Vaeringers, they flocked round their chief; he went to the house of his lady Maria, bore her off to the galley, put out into the Black Sea, reached Novgorod, (at the friendly court of whose king he had safely lodged his vast spoils,) sailed home to the north: and, after such feats as became sea-king of old, received half of Norway from Magnus, and on the death of his nephew the whole of that kingdom passed to his sway. A king so wise and so wealthy, so bold and so dread, had never yet been known in the north. And this was the king to whom came Tostig the Earl, with the offer of England's crown.

⁶ "Snorro Sturleson." Laing.

⁷ The Vaeringers, or Varangi, mostly Northmen; this redoubtable force, the Janissaries of the Byzantine empire, afforded brilliant field, both of fortune and war, to the discontented spirits, or outlawed heroes of the North. It was joined afterwards by many of the bravest and best born of the Saxon nobles, refusing to dwell under the yoke of the Norman. Scott, in "Count Robert of Paris," which, if not one of his best romances, is yet full of truth and beauty, has described this renowned band with much poetical vigor and historical fidelity.

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