

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**HAROLD : THE LAST
OF THE SAXON
KINGS — VOLUME 12**

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Harold : the Last of the
Saxon Kings — Volume 12

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BOOK XII. THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS

CHAPTER I

In the heart of the forest land in which Hilda's abode was situated, a gloomy pool reflected upon its stagnant waters the still shadows of the autumnal foliage. As is common in ancient forests in the neighbourhood of men's wants, the trees were dwarfed in height by repeated loppings, and the boughs sprang from the hollow, gnarled boles of pollard oaks and beeches; the trunks, vast in girth, and covered with mosses and whitening canker-stains, or wreaths of ivy, spoke of the most remote antiquity: but the boughs which their lingering and mutilated life put forth, were either thin and feeble with innumerable branchlets, or were centred on some solitary distorted limb which the woodman's axe had spared. The trees thus assumed all manner of crooked,

deformed, fantastic shapes—all betokening age, and all decay—all, in despite of the noiseless solitude around, proclaiming the waste and ravages of man.

The time was that of the first watches of night, when the autumnal moon was brightest and broadest. You might see, on the opposite side of the pool, the antlers of the deer every now and then, moving restlessly above the fern in which they had made their couch; and, through the nearer glades, the hares and conies stealing forth to sport or to feed; or the bat wheeling low, in chase of the forest moth. From the thickest part of the copse came a slow human foot, and Hilda, emerging, paused by the waters of the pool. That serene and stony calm habitual to her features was gone; sorrow and passion had seized the soul of the Vala, in the midst of its fancied security from the troubles it presumed to foresee for others. The lines of the face were deep and care-worn—age had come on with rapid strides—and the light of the eye was vague and unsettled, as if the lofty reason shook, terrified in its pride, at last.

"Alone, alone!" she murmured, half aloud: "yea, evermore alone! And the grandchild I had reared to be the mother of kings—whose fate, from the cradle, seemed linked with royalty and love—in whom, watching and hoping for, in whom, loving and heeding, methought I lived again the sweet human life—hath gone from my hearth—forsaken, broken-hearted—withering down to the grave under the shade of the barren cloister! Is mine heart, then, all a lie? Are the gods who led Odin from the

Scythian East but the juggling fiends whom the craven Christian abhors? Lo! the Wine Month has come; a few nights more, and the sun which all prophecy foretold should go down on the union of the icing and the maid, shall bring round the appointed day: yet Aldyth still lives, and Edith still withers; and War stands side by side with the Church, between the betrothed and the altar. Verily, verily, my spirit hath lost its power, and leaves me bowed, in the awe of night, a feeble, aged, hopeless, childless woman!"

Tears of human weakness rolled down the Vala's cheeks. At that moment, a laugh came from a thing that had seemed like the fallen trunk of a tree, or a trough in which the herdsman waters his cattle, so still, and shapeless, and undefined it had lain amongst the rank weeds and night-shade and trailing creepers on the marge of the pool, The laugh was low yet fearful to hear.

Slowly, the thing moved, and rose, and took the outline of a human form; and the Prophetess beheld the witch whose sleep she had disturbed by the Saxon's grave.

"Where is the banner?" said the witch, laying her hand on Hilda's arm, and looking into her face with bleared and rheumy eyes, "where is the banner thy handmaids were weaving for Harold the Earl? Why didst thou lay aside that labour of love for Harold the King? Hie thee home, and bid thy maidens ply all night at the work; make it potent with rune and with spell, and with gums of the seid. Take the banner to Harold the King as a marriage-gift; for the day of his birth shall be still the day of his nuptials with Edith the Fair!"

Hilda gazed on the hideous form before her; and so had her soul fallen from its arrogant pride of place, that instead of the scorn with which so foul a pretender to the Great Art had before inspired the King-born Prophetess, her veins tingled with credulous awe.

"Art thou a mortal like myself," she said after a pause, "or one of those beings often seen by the shepherd in mist and rain, driving before them their shadowy flocks? one of those of whom no man knoweth whether they are of earth or of Helheim? whether they have ever known the lot and conditions of flesh, or are but some dismal race between body and spirit, hateful alike to gods and to men?"

The dreadful hag shook her head, as if refusing to answer the question, and said:

"Sit we down, sit we down by the dead dull pool, and if thou wouldst be wise as I am, wake up all thy wrongs, fill thyself with hate, and let thy thoughts be curses. Nothing is strong on earth but the Will; and hate to the will is as the iron in the hands of the war-man."

"Ha!" answered Hilda, "then thou art indeed one of the loathsome brood whose magic is born, not of the aspiring soul, but the fiendlike heart. And between us there is no union. I am of the race of those whom priests and kings revered and honoured as the oracles of heaven; and rather let my lore be dimmed and weakened, in admitting the humanities of hope and love, than be lightened by the glare of the wrath that Lok and

Rana bear the children of men."

"What, art thou so base and so doting," said the hag, with fierce contempt, "as to know that another has supplanted thine Edith, that all the schemes of thy life are undone, and yet feel no hate for the man who hath wronged her and thee?—the man who had never been king if thou hadst not breathed into him the ambition of rule? Think, and curse!"

"My curse would wither the heart that is entwined within his," answered Hilda; "and," she added abruptly, as if eager to escape from her own impulses, "didst thou not tell me, even now, that the wrong would be redressed, and his betrothed yet be his bride on the appointed day?"

"Ha! home, then!—home! and weave the charmed woof of the banner, broider it with zimmes and with gold worthy the standard of a king; for I tell thee, that where that banner is planted, shall Edith clasp with bridal arms her adored. And the hwata thou hast read by the bautastein, and in the temple of the Briton's revengeful gods, shall be fulfilled."

"Dark daughter of Hela," said the Prophetess, "whether demon or god hath inspired thee, I hear in my spirit a voice that tells me thou hast pierced to a truth that my lore could not reach. Thou art houseless and poor; I will give wealth to thine age if thou wilt stand with me by the altar of Thor, and let thy galdra unriddle the secrets that have baffled mine own. All foreshown to me hath ever come to pass, but in a sense other than that in which my soul read the rune and the dream, the leaf

and the fount, the star and the Scin-laeca. My husband slain in his youth; my daughter maddened with woe; her lord murdered on his hearthstone; Sweyn, whom I loved as my child,"—the Vala paused, contending against her own emotions,—"I loved them all," she faltered, clasping her hands, "for them I tasked the future. The future promised fair; I lured them to their doom, and when the doom came, lo! the promise was kept! but how?—and now, Edith, the last of my race; Harold, the pride of my pride!—speak, thing of Horror and Night, canst thou disentangle the web in which my soul struggles, weak as the fly in the spider's mesh?"

"On the third night from this, will I stand with thee by the altar of Thor, and unriddle the rede of my masters, unknown and unguessed, whom thou hadst duteously served. And ere the sun rise, the greatest mystery earth knows shall be bare to thy soul!"

As the witch spoke, a cloud passed over the moon; and before the light broke forth again, the hag had vanished. There was only seen in the dull pool, the water-rat swimming through the rank sedges; only in the forest, the grey wings of the owl, fluttering heavily across the glades; only in the grass, the red eyes of the bloated toad.

Then Hilda went slowly home, and the maids worked all night at the charmed banner. All that night, too, the watch-dogs howled in the yard, through the ruined peristyle—howled in rage and in fear. And under the lattice of the room in which the maids broidered the banner, and the Prophetess muttered her charm, there couched, muttering also, a dark, shapeless thing, at which

those dogs howled in rage and in fear.

CHAPTER II

All within the palace of Westminster showed the confusion and dismay of the awful time;—all, at least, save the council-chamber, in which Harold, who had arrived the night before, conferred with his thegns. It was evening: the courtyards and the halls were filled with armed men, and almost with every hour came rider and bode from the Sussex shores. In the corridors the Churchmen grouped and whispered, as they had whispered and grouped in the day of King Edward's death. Stigand passed among them, pale and thoughtful. The serge gowns came rustling round the archprelate for counsel or courage.

"Shall we go forth with the King's army?" asked a young monk, bolder than the rest, "to animate the host with prayer and hymn?"

"Fool!" said the miserly prelate, "fool! if we do so, and the Norman conquer, what become of our abbacies and convent lands? The Duke wars against Harold, not England. If he slay Harold——"

"What then?"

"The Atheling is left us yet. Stay we here and guard the last prince of the House of Cerdic," whispered Stigand, and he swept on.

In the chamber in which Edward had breathed his last, his widowed Queen, with Aldyth, her successor, and Githa and some

other ladies, waited the decision of the council. By one of the windows stood, clasping each other by the hand, the fair young bride of Gurth and the betrothed of the gay Leofwine. Githa sate alone, bowing her face over her hands—desolate; mourning for the fate of her traitor son; and the wounds, that the recent and holier death of Thyra had inflicted, bled afresh. And the holy lady of Edward attempted in vain, by pious adjurations, to comfort Aldyth, who, scarcely heeding her, started ever and anon with impatient terror, muttering to herself, "Shall I lose this crown too?"

In the council-hall debate waxed warm,—which was the wiser, to meet

William at once in the battle-field, or to delay till all the forces Harold might expect (and which he had ordered to be levied, in his rapid march from York) could swell his host?

"If we retire before the enemy," said Gurth, "leaving him in a strange land, winter approaching, his forage will fail. He will scarce dare to march upon London: if he does, we shall be better prepared to encounter him. My voice is against resting all on a single battle."

"Is that thy choice?" said Vebba, indignantly. "Not so, I am sure, would have chosen thy father; not so think the Saxons of Kent. The Norman is laying waste all the lands of thy subjects, Lord Harold; living on plunder, as a robber, in the realm of King Alfred. Dost thou think that men will get better heart to fight

for their country by hearing that their King shrinks from the danger?"

"Thou speakest well and wisely," said Haco; and all eyes turned to the young son of Sweyn, as to one who best knew the character of the hostile army and the skill of its chief. "We have now with us a force flushed with conquest over a foe hitherto deemed invincible. Men who have conquered the Norwegian will not shrink from the Norman. Victory depends upon ardour more than numbers. Every hour of delay damps the ardour. Are we sure that it will swell the numbers? What I dread most is not the sword of the Norman Duke, it is his craft. Rely upon it, that if we meet him not soon, he will march straight to London. He will proclaim by the way that he comes not to seize the throne, but to punish Harold, and abide by the Witan, or, perchance, by the word of the Roman pontiff. The terror of his armament, unresisted, will spread like a panic through the land. Many will be decoyed by his false pretexts, many awed by a force that the King dare not meet. If he come in sight of the city, think you that merchants and cheapmen will not be daunted by the thought of pillage and sack? They will be the first to capitulate at the first house which is fired. The city is weak to guard against siege; its walls long neglected; and in sieges the Normans are famous. Are we so united (the King's rule thus fresh) but what no cabals, no dissensions will break out amongst ourselves? If the Duke come, as come he will, in the name of the Church, may not the Churchmen set up some new pretender to the crown

— perchance the child Edgar? And, divided against ourselves, how ingloriously should we fall! Besides, this land, though never before have the links between province and province been drawn so close, hath yet demarcations that make the people selfish. The Northumbrians, I fear, will not stir to aid London, and Mercia will hold aloof from our peril. Grant that William once seize London, all England is broken up and dispirited; each shire, nay, each town, looking only to itself. Talk of delay as wearing out the strength of the foe! No, it would wear out our own. Little eno', I fear, is yet left in our treasury. If William seize London, that treasury is his, with all the wealth of our burgesses. How should we maintain an army, except by preying on the people, and thus discontenting them? Where guard that army? Where are our forts? where our mountains? The war of delay suits only a land of rock and defile, or of castle and breast-work. Thegns and warriors, ye have no castles but your breasts of mail. Abandon these, and you are lost."

A general murmur of applause closed this speech of Haco, which, while wise in arguments our historians have overlooked, came home to that noblest reason of brave men, which urges prompt resistance to foul invasion.

Up, then, rose King Harold.

"I thank you, fellow-Englishmen, for that applause with which ye have greeted mine own thoughts on the lips of Haco. Shall it be said that your King rushed to chase his own brother from the soil of outraged England, yet shrunk from the sword of the Norman

stranger? Well indeed might my brave subjects desert my banner if it floated idly over these palace walls while the armed invader pitched his camp in the heart of England. By delay, William's force, whatever it might be, cannot grow less; his cause grows more strong in our craven fears. What his armament may be we rightly know not; the report varies with every messenger, swelling and lessening with the rumours of every hour. Have we not around us now our most stalwart veterans—the flower of our armies—the most eager spirits—the vanquishers of Hardrada? Thou sayest, Gurth, that all should not be perilled on a single battle. True. Harold should be perilled, but wherefore England? Grant that we win the day; the quicker our despatch, the greater our fame, the more lasting that peace at home and abroad which rests ever its best foundation on the sense of the power which wrong cannot provoke unchastised. Grant that we lose; a loss can be made gain by a king's brave death. Why should not our example rouse and unite all who survive us? Which the nobler example—the one best fitted to protect our country—the recreant backs of living chiefs, or the glorious dead with their fronts to the foe? Come what may, life or death, at least we will thin the Norman numbers, and heap the barriers of our corpses on the Norman march. At least, we can show to the rest of England how men should defend their native land! And if, as I believe and pray, in every English breast beats a heart like Harold's, what matters though a king should fall?—Freedom is immortal."

He spoke; and forth from his baldric he drew his sword. Every blade, at that signal, leapt from the sheath: and, in that council-hall at least, in every breast beat the heart of Harold.

CHAPTER III

The chiefs dispersed to array their troops for the morrow's march; but Harold and his kinsmen entered the chamber where the women waited the decision of the council, for that, in truth, was to them the parting interview. The King had resolved, after completing all his martial preparations, to pass the night in the Abbey of Waltham; and his brothers lodged, with the troops they commanded, in the city or its suburbs. Haco alone remained with that portion of the army quartered in and around the palace.

They entered the chamber, and in a moment each heart had sought its mate; in the mixed assembly each only conscious of the other. There, Gurth bowed his noble head over the weeping face of the young bride that for the last time nestled to his bosom. There, with a smiling lip, but tremulous voice, the gay Leofwine soothed and chided in a breath the maiden he had wooed as the partner for a life that his mirthful spirit made one holiday: snatching kisses from a cheek no longer coy.

But cold was the kiss which Harold pressed on the brow of Aldyth; and with something of disdain, and of bitter remembrance of a nobler love, he comforted a terror which sprang from the thought of self.

"Oh, Harold!" sobbed Aldyth, "be not rashly brave: guard thy life for my sake. Without thee, what am I? Is it even safe for me to rest here? Were it not better to fly to York, or seek refuge with

Malcolm the Scot?"

"Within three days at the farthest," answered Harold, "thy brothers will be in London. Abide by their counsel; act as they advise at the news of my victory or my fall."

He paused abruptly, for he heard close beside him the broken voice of Gurth's bride, in answer to her lord. "Think not of me, beloved; thy whole heart now be England's. And if—if"—her voice failed a moment, but resumed proudly, "why even then thy wife is safe, for she survives not her lord and her land!"

The King left his wife's side, and kissed his brother's bride.

"Noble heart!" he said; "with women like thee for our wives and mothers, England could survive the slaughter of thousand kings."

He turned, and knelt to Githa. She threw her arms over his broad breast, and wept bitterly.

"Say—say, Harold, that I have not reproached thee for Tostig's death. I have obeyed the last commands of Godwin my lord. I have deemed thee ever right and just; now let me not lose thee, too. They go with thee, all my surviving sons, save the exile Wolnoth,—him whom now I shall never behold again. Oh, Harold!—let not mine old age be childless!"

"Mother,—dear, dear mother, with these arms round my neck I take new life and new heart. No! never hast thou reproached me for my brother's death—never for aught which man's first duty enjoined. Murmur not that that duty commands us still. We are the sons, through thee, of royal heroes; through my father,

of Saxon freemen. Rejoice that thou hast three sons left, whose arms thou mayest pray God and his saints to prosper, and over whose graves, if they fall, thou shalt shed no tears of shame!"

Then the widow of King Edward, who (the crucifix clasped in her hands) had listened to Harold with lips apart and marble cheeks, could keep down no longer her human woman's heart; she rushed to Harold as he still knelt to Githa—knelt by his side, and clasped him in her arms with despairing fondness:

"O brother, brother, whom I have so dearly loved when all other love seemed forbidden me;—when he who gave me a throne refused me his heart; when, looking at thy fair promise, listening to thy tender comfort,—when, remembering the days of old, in which thou wert my docile pupil, and we dreamed bright dreams together of happiness and fame to come,—when, loving thee methought too well, too much as weak mothers may love a mortal son, I prayed God to detach my heart from earth!—Oh, Harold! now forgive me all my coldness. I shudder at thy resolve. I dread that thou should meet this man, whom an oath hath bound thee to obey. Nay, frown not—I bow to thy will, my brother and my King. I know that thou hast chosen as thy conscience sanctions, as thy duty ordains. But come back—Oh, come back—thou who, like me," (her voice whispered,) "hast sacrificed the household hearth to thy country's altars,—and I will never pray to Heaven to love thee less— my brother, O my brother!"

In all the room were then heard but the low sounds of sobs and broken exclamations. All clustered to one spot—Leofwine and

his betrothed— Gurth and his bride—even the selfish Aldyth, ennobled by the contagion of the sublime emotion,—all clustered round Githa the mother of the three guardians of the fated land, and all knelt before her, by the side of Harold. Suddenly, the widowed Queen, the virgin wife of the last heir of Cerdic, rose, and holding on high the sacred rood over those bended heads, said, with devout passion:

"O Lord of Hosts—We Children of Doubt and Time, trembling in the dark, dare not take to ourselves to question thine unerring will. Sorrow and death, as joy and life, are at the breath of a mercy divine, and a wisdom all-seeing: and out of the hours of evil thou drawest, in mystic circle, the eternity of Good. 'Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.' If, O Disposer of events, our human prayers are not adverse to thy pre-judged decrees, protect these lives, the bulwarks of our homes and altars, sons whom the land offers as a sacrifice. May thine angel turn aside the blade—as of old from the heart of Isaac! But if, O Ruler of Nations, in whose sight the ages are as moments, and generations but as sands in the sea, these lives are doomed, may the death expiate their sins, and, shrived on the battle-field, absolve and receive the souls!"

CHAPTER IV

By the altar of the Abbey Church of Waltham, that night, knelt Edith in prayer for Harold.

She had taken up her abode in a small convent of nuns that adjoined the more famous monastery of Waltham; but she had promised Hilda not to enter on the novitiate, until the birthday of Harold had passed. She herself had no longer faith in the omens and prophecies that had deceived her youth and darkened her life; and, in the more congenial air of our Holy Church, the spirit, ever so chastened, grew calm and resigned. But the tidings of the Norman's coming, and the King's victorious return to his capital, had reached even that still retreat; and love, which had blent itself with religion, led her steps to that lonely altar. And suddenly, as she there knelt, only lighted by the moon through the high casements, she was startled by the sound of approaching feet and murmuring voices. She rose in alarm—the door of the church was thrown open—torches advanced—and amongst the monks, between Osgood and Ailred, came the King. He had come, that last night before his march, to invoke the prayers of that pious brotherhood; and by the altar he had founded, to pray, himself, that his one sin of faith forfeited and oath abjured, might not palsy his arm and weigh on his soul in the hour of his country's need.

Edith stifled the cry that rose to her lips, as the torches fell on the pale and hushed and melancholy face of Harold; and she

crept away under the arch of the vast Saxon columns, and into the shade of abutting walls. The monks and the King, intent on their holy office, beheld not that solitary and shrinking form. They approached the altar; and there the King knelt down lowlily, and none heard the prayer. But as Osgood held the sacred rood over the bended head of the royal suppliant, the Image on the crucifix (which had been a gift from Alred the prelate, and was supposed to have belonged of old to Augustine, the first founder of the Saxon Church—so that, by the superstition of the age, it was invested with miraculous virtues) bowed itself visibly. Visibly, the pale and ghastly image of the suffering God bowed over the head of the kneeling man; whether the fastenings of the rood were loosened, or from what cause soever,—in the eyes of all the brotherhood, the Image bowed.¹

A thrill of terror froze every heart, save Edith's, too remote to perceive the portent, and save the King's, whom the omen seemed to doom, for his face was buried in his clasped hands. Heavy was his heart, nor needed it other warnings than its own gloom.

Long and silently prayed the King; and when at last he rose, and the monks, though with altered and tremulous voices, began their closing hymn, Edith passed noiselessly along the wall, and, stealing through one of the smaller doors which communicated to the nunnery annexed, gained the solitude of her own chamber. There she stood, benumbed with the strength of her emotions

¹ Palgrave—"Hist. of Anglo-Saxons."

at the sight of Harold thus abruptly presented. How had the fond human heart leapt to meet him! Twice, thus, in the august ceremonials of Religion, secret, shrinking, unwitnessed, had she, his betrothed, she, the partner of his soul, stood aloof to behold him. She had seen him in the hour of his pomp, the crown upon his brow,—seen him in the hour of his peril and agony, that anointed head bowed to the earth. And in the pomp that she could not share, she had exulted; but, oh, now—now,—oh now that she could have knelt beside that humbled form, and prayed with that voiceless prayer!

The torches flashed in the court below; the church was again deserted; the monks passed in mute procession back to their cloister; but a single man paused, turned aside, and stopped at the gate of the humbler convent: a knocking was heard at the great oaken door, and the watch-dog barked. Edith started, pressed her hand on her heart and trembled. Steps approached her door—and the abbess, entering, summoned her below, to hear the farewell greeting of her cousin the King.

Harold stood in the simple hall of the cloister: a single taper, tall and wan, burned on the oak board. The abbess led Edith by the hand, and at a sign from the King, withdrew. So, once more upon earth, the betrothed and divided were alone.

"Edith," said the King, in a voice in which no ear but hers could have detected the struggle, "do not think I have come to disturb thy holy calm, or sinfully revive the memories of the irrevocable past: where once on my breast, in the old fashion of

our fathers, I wrote thy name, is written now the name of the mistress that supplants thee. Into Eternity melts the Past; but I could not depart to a field from which there is no retreat—in which, against odds that men say are fearful, I have resolved to set my crown and my life—without once more beholding thee, pure guardian of my happier days! Thy forgiveness for all the sorrow that, in the darkness which surrounds man's hopes and dreams, I have brought on thee (dread return for love so enduring, so generous and divine!)—thy forgiveness I will not ask. Thou alone perhaps on earth knowest the soul of Harold; and if he hath wronged thee, thou seest alike in the wronger and the wronged, but the children of iron Duty, the servants of imperial Heaven. Not thy forgiveness I ask—but—but—Edith, holy maid! angel soul!—thy—thy blessing!" His voice faltered, and he inclined his lofty head as to a saint.

"Oh that I had the power to bless!" exclaimed Edith, mastering her rush of tears with a heroic effort; "and methinks I have the power—not from virtues of my own, but from all that I owe to thee! The grateful have the power to bless. For what do I not owe to thee—owe to that very love of which even the grief is sacred? Poor child in the house of the heathen, thy love descended upon me, and in it, the smile of God! In that love my spirit awoke, and was baptised: every thought that has risen from earth, and lost itself in heaven, was breathed into my heart by thee! Thy creature and thy slave, hadst thou tempted me to sin, sin had seemed hallowed by thy voice; but thou saidst 'True love is virtue,' and so

I worshipped virtue in loving thee. Strengthened, purified, by thy bright companionship, from thee came the strength to resign thee—from thee the refuge under the wings of God—from thee the firm assurance that our union yet shall be—not as our poor Hilda dreams, on the perishable earth,—but there! oh, there! yonder by the celestial altars, in the land in which all spirits are filled with love. Yes, soul of Harold! there are might and holiness in the blessing the soul thou hast redeemed and reared sheds on thee!"

And so beautiful, so unlike the Beautiful of the common earth, looked the maid as she thus spoke, and laid hands, trembling with no human passion, on that royal head—that could a soul from paradise be made visible, such might be the shape it would wear to a mortal's eye! Thus, for some moments both were silent; and in the silence the gloom vanished from the heart of Harold, and, through a deep and sublime serenity, it rose undaunted to front the future.

No embrace—no farewell kiss—profaned the parting of those pure and noble spirits—parting on the threshold of the grave. It was only the spirit that clasped the spirit, looking forth from the clay into measureless eternity. Not till the air of night came once more on his brow, and the moonlight rested on the roofs and fanes of the land entrusted to his charge, was the man once more the human hero; not till she was alone in her desolate chamber, and the terrors of the coming battle-field chased the angel from her thoughts was the maid inspired, once more the weeping woman.

A little after sunrise the abbess, who was distantly akin to

the house of Godwin, sought Edith, so agitated by her own fear, that she did not remark the trouble of her visitor. The supposed miracle of the sacred Image bowing over the kneeling King, had spread dismay through the cloisters of both nunnery and abbey; and so intense was the disquietude of the two brothers, Osgood and Ailred, in the simple and grateful affection they bore their royal benefactor, that they had obeyed the impulse of their tender credulous hearts, and left the monastery with the dawn, intending to follow the King's march², and watch and pray near the awful battle-field. Edith listened, and made no reply; the terrors of the abbess infected her; the example of the two monks woke the sole thought which stirred through the nightmare dream that suspended reason itself; and when, at noon the abbess again sought the chamber, Edith was gone;—gone, and alone—none knew wherefore—one guessed whither.

All the pomp of the English army burst upon Harold's view, as, in the rising sun, he approached the bridge of the capital. Over that bridge came the stately march,—battle-axe, and spear, and banner, glittering in the ray. And as he drew aside, and the forces filed before him, the cry of; "God save King Harold!" rose with loud acclaim and lusty joy, borne over the waves of the river, startling the echoes in the ruined keape of the Roman, heard in the halls restored by Canute, and chiming, like a chorus, with the chaunts of the monks by the tomb of Sebba in St. Paul's—by the tomb of Edward at St. Peter's.

² Palgrave—"Hist. of Anglo-Saxons."

With a brightened face, and a kindling eye, the King saluted his lines, and then fell into the ranks towards the rear, where among the burghers of London and the lithsmen of Middlesex, the immemorial custom of Saxon monarchs placed the kingly banner. And, looking up, he beheld, not his old standard with the Tiger heads and the Cross, but a banner both strange and gorgeous. On a field of gold was the effigies of a Fighting Warrior; and the arms were bedecked in orient pearls, and the borders blazed in the rising sun, with ruby, amethyst, and emerald. While he gazed, wondering, on this dazzling ensign, Haco, who rode beside the standard-bearer, advanced, and gave him a letter.

"Last night," said he, "after thou hadst left the palace, many recruits, chiefly from Hertfordshire and Essex, came in; but the most gallant and stalwart of all, in arms and in stature, were the lithsmen of Hilda. With them came this banner, on which she has lavished the gems that have passed to her hand through long lines of northern ancestors, from Odin, the founder of all northern thrones. So, at least, said the bode of our kinswoman."

Harold had already cut the silk round the letter, and was reading its contents. They ran thus:—

"King of England, I forgive thee the broken heart of my grandchild. They whom the land feeds, should defend the land. I send to thee, in tribute the best fruits that grow in the field, and the forest, round the house which my husband took from the bounty of Canute;—stout hearts and strong hands! Descending

alike, as do Hilda and Harold (through Githa thy mother,) from the Warrior God of the North, whose race never shall fail—take, O defender of the Saxon children of Odin, the banner I have broidered with the gems that the Chief of the Asas bore from the East. Firm as love be thy foot, strong as death be thy hand, under the shade which the banner of Hilda,—under the gleam which the jewels of Odin,—cast on the brows of the King! So Hilda, the daughter of monarchs, greets Harold the leader of men."

Harold looked up from the letter, and Haco resumed:

"Thou canst guess not the cheering effect which this banner, supposed to be charmed, and which the name of Odin alone would suffice to make holy, at least with thy fierce Anglo-Danes, hath already produced through the army."

"It is well, Haco," said Harold with a smile. "Let priest add his blessing to Hilda's charm, and Heaven will pardon any magic that makes more brave the hearts that defend its altars. Now fall we back, for the army must pass beside the hill with the crommell and gravestone; there, be sure, Hilda will be at watch for our march, and we will linger a few moments to thank her somewhat for her banner, yet more justly, methinks, for her men. Are not yon stout fellows all in mail, so tall and so orderly, in advance of the London burghers, Hilda's aid to our Fyrd?"

"They are," answered Haco.

The King backed his steed to accost them with his kingly greeting; and then, with Haco, falling yet farther to the rear seemed engaged in inspecting the numerous wains, bearing

missiles and forage, that always accompanied the march of a Saxon army, and served to strengthen its encampment. But when they came in sight of the hillock by which the great body of the army had preceded them, the King and the son of Sweyn dismounted and on foot entered the large circle of the Celtic ruin.

By the side of the Teuton altar they beheld two forms, both perfectly motionless: but one was extended on the ground as in sleep or in death; the other sate beside it, as if watching the corpse, or guarding the slumber. The face of the last was not visible, propped upon the arms which rested on the knees, and bidden by the hands. But in the face of the other, as the two men drew near, they recognised the Danish Prophetess. Death in its dreadest characters was written on that ghastly face; woe and terror, beyond all words to describe, spoke in the haggard brow, the distorted lips, and the wild glazed stare of the open eyes. At the startled cry of the intruders on that dreary silence, the living form moved; and though still leaning its face on its hands, it raised its head; and never countenance of Northern Vampire, cowering by the rifled grave, was more fiendlike and appalling.

"Who and what art thou?" said the King; "and how, thus unhonored in the air of heaven, lies the corpse of the noble Hilda? Is this the hand of Nature? Haco, Haco, so look the eyes, so set the features, of those whom the horror of ruthless murder slays even before the steel strikes. Speak, hag, art thou dumb?"

"Search the body," answered the witch, "there is no wound! Look to the throat,—no mark of the deadly gripe! I have seen

such in my day.—There are none on this corpse, I trow; yet thou sayest rightly, horror slew her! Ha, ha! she would know, and she hath known; she would raise the dead and the demon; she hath raised them; she would read the riddle,—she hath read it. Pale King and dark youth, would ye learn what Hilda saw, eh? eh? Ask her in the Shadow-World where she awaits ye! Ha! ye too would be wise in the future; ye too would climb to heaven through the mysteries of hell. Worms! worms! crawl back to the clay—to the earth! One such night as the hag ye despise enjoys as her sport and her glee, would freeze your veins, and sear the life in your eyeballs, and leave your corpses to terror and wonder, like the carcase that lies at your feet!"

"Ho!" cried the King, stamping his foot. "Hence, Haco; rouse the household; summon hither the handmaids; call henchman and ceorl to guard this foul raven."

Haco obeyed; but when he returned with the shuddering and amazed attendants, the witch was gone, and the King was leaning against the altar with downcast eyes, and a face troubled and dark with thought.

The body of the Vala was borne into the house; and the King, waking from his reverie, bade them send for the priests and ordered masses for the parted soul. Then kneeling, with pious hand he closed the eyes and smoothed the features, and left his mournful kiss on the icy brow. These offices fulfilled, he took Haco's arm, and leaning on it, returned to the spot on which they had left their steeds. Not evincing surprise or awe,—emotions

that seemed unknown to his gloomy, settled, impassible nature—Haco said calmly, as they descended the knoll:

"What evil did the hag predict to thee?"

"Haco," answered the King, "yonder, by the shores of Sussex, lies all the future which our eyes now should scan, and our hearts should be firm to meet. These omens and apparitions are but the ghosts of a dead Religion; spectres sent from the grave of the fearful Heathenesse; they may appal but to lure us from our duty. Lo, as we gaze around—the ruins of all the creeds that have made the hearts of men quake with unsubstantial awe—lo, the temple of the Briton!—lo, the fane of the Roman!—lo, the mouldering altar of our ancestral Thor! Ages past lie wrecked around us in these shattered symbols. A new age hath risen, and a new creed. Keep we to the broad truths before us; duty here; knowledge comes alone in the Hereafter."

"That Hereafter!—is it not near?" murmured Haco.

They mounted in silence; and ere they regained the army paused, by a common impulse, and looked behind. Awful in their desolation rose the temple and the altar! And in Hilda's mysterious death it seemed that their last and lingering Genius,—the Genius of the dark and fierce, the warlike and the wizard North, had expired for ever. Yet, on the outskirt of the forest, dusk and shapeless, that witch without a name stood in the shadow, pointing towards them, with outstretched arm, in vague and denouncing menace;—as if, come what may, all change of creed,—be the faith ever so simple, the truth ever so bright and

clear,—there is a SUPERSTITION native to that Border-land between the Visible and the Unseen, which will find its priest and its votaries, till the full and crowning splendour of Heaven shall melt every shadow from the world!

CHAPTER V

On the broad plain between Pevensey and Hastings, Duke William had arrayed his armaments. In the rear he had built a castle of wood, all the framework of which he had brought with him, and which was to serve as a refuge in case of retreat. His ships he had run into deep water, and scuttled; so that the thought of return, without victory, might be banished from his miscellaneous and multitudinous force. His outposts stretched for miles, keeping watch night and day against surprise. The ground chosen was adapted for all the manoeuvres of a cavalry never before paralleled in England nor perhaps in the world,—almost every horseman a knight, almost every knight fit to be a chief. And on this space William reviewed his army, and there planned and schemed, rehearsed and re-formed, all the stratagems the great day might call forth. But more careful, and laborious, and minute, was he in the manoeuvre of a feigned retreat. Not ere the acting of some modern play, does the anxious manager more elaborately marshal each man, each look, each gesture, that are to form a picture on which the curtain shall fall amidst deafening plaudits than did the laborious captain appoint each man, and each movement, in his lure to a valiant foe:—The attack of the foot, their recoil, their affected panic, their broken exclamations of despair;—their retreat, first partial and reluctant, next seemingly hurried and complete,—flying,

but in flight carefully confused:—then the settled watchword, the lightning rally, the rush of the cavalry from the ambush; the sweep and hem round the pursuing foe, the detachment of levelled spears to cut off the Saxon return to the main force, and the lost ground,—were all directed by the most consummate mastership in the stage play, or upokrisis, of war, and seized by the adroitness of practised veterans.

Not now, O Harold! hast thou to contend against the rude heroes of the

Norse, with their ancestral strategy unimproved! The civilisation of

Battle meets thee now!—and all the craft of the Roman guides the

manhood of the North.

It was in the midst of such lessons to his foot and his horsemen—spears gleaming—pennons tossing—lines reforming—steeds backing, wheeling, flying, circling—that William's eye blazed, and his deep voice thundered the thrilling word; when Mallet de Graville, who was in command at one of the outposts, rode up to him at full speed, and said in gasps, as he drew breath:

"King Harold and his army are advancing furiously. Their object is clearly to come on us unawares."

"Hold!" said the Duke, lifting his hand; and the knights around him halted in their perfect discipline; then after a few brief but distinct orders to Odo, Fitzosborne, and some other of his leading chiefs, he headed a numerous cavalcade of his knights, and rode

fast to the outpost which Mallet had left,—to catch sight of the coming foe.

The horsemen cleared the plain—passed through a wood, mournfully fading into autumnal hues—and, on emerging, they saw the gleam of the Saxon spears rising on the brows of the gentle hills beyond. But even the time, short as it was, that had sufficed to bring William in view of the enemy, had sufficed also, under the orders of his generals, to give to the wide plain of his encampment all the order of a host prepared. And William, having now mounted on a rising ground, turned from the spears on the hill tops, to his own fast forming lines on the plain, and said with a stern smile:

"Methinks the Saxon usurper, if he be among those on the height of yon hills, will vouchsafe us time to breathe! St. Michael gives his crown to our hands, and his corpse to the crow, if he dare to descend."

And so indeed, as the Duke with a soldier's eye foresaw from a soldier's skill, so it proved. The spears rested on the summits. It soon became evident that the English general perceived that here there was no Hardrada to surprise; that the news brought to his ear had exaggerated neither the numbers, nor the arms, nor the discipline of the Norman; and that the battle was not to the bold but to the wary.

"He doth right," said William, musingly; "nor think, O my Quens, that we shall find a fool's hot brain under Harold's helmet of iron. How is this broken ground of hillock and valley named

in our chart? It is strange that we should have overlooked its strength, and suffered it thus to fall into the hands of the foe. How is it named? Can any of ye remember?"

"A Saxon peasant," said De Graville, "told me that the ground was called Senlac³ or Sanglac, or some such name, in their musicless jargon."

"Grammercy!" quoth Grantmesnil, "methinks the name will be familiar eno' hereafter; no jargon seemeth the sound to my ear—a significant name and ominous,—Sanglac, Sanguelac—the Lake of Blood."

"Sanguelac!" said the Duke, startled; "where have I heard that name before? it must have been between sleeping and waking.—Sanguelac, Sanguelac!—truly sayest thou, through a lake of blood we must wade indeed!"

"Yet," said De Graville, "thine astrologer foretold that thou wouldst win the realm without a battle."

"Poor astrologer!" said William, "the ship he sailed in was lost. Ass indeed is he who pretends to warn others, nor sees an inch before his eyes what his own fate will be! Battle shall we have, but not yet. Hark thee, Guillaume, thou hast been guest with this usurper; thou hast seemed to me to have some love for him—a love natural since thou didst once fight by his side; wilt thou go from me to the Saxon host with Hugues Maigrot, the monk, and back the message I shall send?"

³ The battle-field of Hastings seems to have been called Senlac, before the Conquest, Sanguelac after it.

The proud and punctilious Norman thrice crossed himself ere he answered:

"There was a time, Count William, when I should have deemed it honour to hold parle with Harold the brave Earl; but now, with the crown on his head, I hold it shame and disgrace to barter words with a knight unfeal and a man foresworn."

"Nathless, thou shalt do me this favour," said William, "for" (and he took the knight somewhat aside) "I cannot disguise from thee that I look anxiously on the chance of battle. Yon men are flushed with new triumph over the greatest warrior Norway ever knew, they will fight on their own soil, and under a chief whom I have studied and read with more care than the Comments of Caesar, and in whom the guilt of perjury cannot blind me to the wit of a great general. If we can yet get our end without battle, large shall be my thanks to thee, and I will hold thine astrologer a man wise, though unhappy."

"Certes," said De Grville gravely, "it were discourteous to the memory of the star-seer, not to make some effort to prove his science a just one. And the Chaldeans——"

"Plague seize the Chaldeans!" muttered the Duke. "Ride with me back to the camp, that I may give thee my message, and instruct also the monk."

"De Grville," resumed the Duke, as they rode towards the lines, "my meaning is briefly this. I do not think that Harold will accept my offer and resign his crown, but I design to spread dismay, and perhaps revolt amongst his captains; I wish that they

may know that the Church lays its Curse on those who fight against my consecrated banner. I do not ask thee, therefore, to demean thy knighthood, by seeking to cajole the usurper; no, but rather boldly to denounce his perjury and startle his liegemen. Perchance they may compel him to terms— perchance they may desert his banner; at the worst they shall be daunted with full sense of the guilt of his cause."

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