HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

WULF THE SAXON: A STORY OF THE NORMAN CONQUEST

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PREFACE

Although the immediate results of the Battle of Hastings may have been of less importance to the world than were those of some other great battles, the struggle has, in the long run, had a greater influence upon the destiny of mankind than any other similar event that has ever taken place. That admixture of Saxon, Danish, and British races which had come to be known under the general name of English, was in most respects far behind the rest of Europe. The island was, as it had always been,—except during the rule of two or three exceptionally strong kings,—distracted by internal dissensions. Broad lines of division still separated the North from the South, and under weak Kings the powerful Earls became almost independent. The enterprise that had distinguished their Saxon and Danish ancestors seems to have died out. There was a general indisposition to change, and except in her ecclesiastical buildings, England made but little progress in civilization from the time of Alfred to that of Harold. Its insular position cut it off from taking part in that rapid advance which, beginning in Italy, was extending throughout Europe. The arrival, however, of the impetuous Norman race, securing as it did a close connection with the Continent, quickened the intellect of the people, raised their intelligence, was of inestimable benefit to the English, and played a most important part in raising England among the nations. Moreover, it has helped to produce the race that has peopled Northern America, Australia, and the south of Africa, holds possession of India, and stands forth as the greatest civilizer in the world. The Conquest of England by the Normans was achieved without even a shadow of right or justice. It was at the time an unmixed curse to England; but now we can recognize the enormous benefits that accrued when in his turn the Englishman conquered the Norman, and the foreign invaders became an integral portion of the people they had overcome. For the historical details of the story, I have only had to go to Freeman's magnificent *History of the Norman Conquest of England*, which I hope will be perused by all of my readers who are able to obtain it.

G. A. HENTY

CHAPTER I. – A QUARREL

The great Abbey of Westminster was approaching its completion; an army of masons and labourers swarmed like bees upon and around it, and although differing widely in its massive architecture, with round Saxon windows and arches, from the edifice that was two or three generations later to be reared in its place,—to serve as a still more fitting tomb for the ashes of its pious founder,—it was a stately abbey, rivalling the most famous of the English fanes of the period.

From his palace hard by King Edward had watched with the deepest interest the erection of the minster that was the dearest object of his life. The King was surrounded by Normans, the people among whom he had lived until called from his retirement to ascend the throne of England, and whom he loved far better than those over whom he reigned. He himself still lived almost the life of a recluse. He was sincerely anxious for the good of his people, but took small pains to ensure it, his life being largely passed in religious devotions, and in watching over the rise of the abbey he had founded.

A town had risen around minster and palace, and here the workmen employed found their lodgings, while craftsmen of all descriptions administered to the wants both of these and of the nobles of Edward's court.

From one of the side doors of the palace a page, some fifteen or sixteen years of age, ran down the steps in haste. He was evidently a Saxon by his fair hair and fresh complexion, and any observer of the time would have seen that he must, therefore, be in the employment of Earl Harold, the great minister, who had for many years virtually ruled England in the name of its king.

The young page was strongly and sturdily built. His garb was an English one, but with some admixture of Norman fashions. He wore tightly-fitting leg coverings, a garment somewhat resembling a blouse of blue cloth girded in by a belt at the waist, and falling in folds to the knee. Over his shoulders hung a short mantle of orange colour with a hood. On his head was a cap with a wide brim that was turned up closely behind, and projected in a pointed shovel shape in front. In his belt was a small dagger. He wore shoes of light yellow leather fastened by bands over the insteps. As he ran down the steps of the palace he came into sharp contact with another page who had just turned the corner of the street.

"I crave your pardon, Walter Fitz-Urse," he said hurriedly, "but I was in haste and saw you not."

The other lad was as clearly Norman as the speaker was Saxon. He was perhaps a year the senior in point of age, and taller by half a head, but was of slighter build. The expression of his face differed as widely from that of the Saxon as did his swarthy complexion and dark hair, for while the latter face wore a frank and pleasant expression, that of the Norman was haughty and arrogant.

"You did it on purpose," he said angrily, "and were we not under the shadow of the palace I would chastise you as you deserve."

The smile died suddenly out from the Saxon's face. "Chastise me!" he repeated. "You would find it somewhat difficult, Master Fitz-Urse. Do you think you are talking to a Norman serf? You will please to remember you are in England; but if you are not satisfied with my apology, I will ride with you a few miles into the country, and we will then try with equal arms where the chastisement is to fall."

The Norman put his hand to his dagger, but there was an ominous growl from some men who had paused to listen to the quarrel.

"You are an insolent boor, Wulf of Steyning, and some day I will punish you as you deserve."

"Some day," the Saxon laughed, "we shall, I hope, see you and all your tribe sent across the Channel. There are few of us here who would not see your backs with pleasure."

"What is this?" an imperious voice demanded; and turning round, Wulf saw William, the Norman Bishop of London, who, followed by several monks and pages, had pushed his way through the crowd. "Walter Fitz-Urse, what means this altercation?"

"The Saxon ran against me of set purpose, my lord," Walter Fitz-Urse said, in tones of deep humility, "and because I complained he challenged me to ride with him into the country to fight, and then he said he hoped that some day all the Normans would be sent across the Channel."

"Is this so?" the prelate said sternly to Wulf; "did you thus insult not only my page, but all of us, his countrymen?"

"I ran against him by accident," Wulf said, looking up fearlessly in the prelate's face. "I apologized, though I know not that I was more in fault than he; but instead of taking my apology as one of gentle blood should do, he spoke like a churl, and threatened me with chastisement, and then I did say that I hoped he and all other Normans in the land would some day be packed across the Channel."

"Your ears ought to be slit as an insolent varlet."

"I meant no insolence, my Lord Bishop; and as to the slitting of my ears, I fancy Earl Harold, my master, would have something to say on that score."

The prelate was about to reply, but glancing at the angry faces of the growing crowd, he said coldly:

"I shall lay the matter before him. Come, Walter, enough of this. You are also somewhat to blame for not having received more courteously the apologies of this saucy page."

The crowd fell back with angry mutterings as he turned, and, followed by Walter Fitz-Urse and the ecclesiastics, made his way along the street to the principal entrance of the palace. Without waiting to watch his departure, Wulf, the Saxon page, pushed his way through the crowd, and went off at full speed to carry the message with which he had been charged.

"Our king is a good king," a squarely-built man,—whose bare arms with the knotted muscles showing through the skin, and hands begrimed with charcoal, indicated that he was a smith,—remarked to a gossip as the little crowd broke up, "but it is a grievous pity that he was brought up a Norman, still more that he was not left in peace to pass his life as a monk as he desired. He fills the land with his Normans; soon as an English bishop dies, straightway a Norman is clapped into his place. All the offices at court are filled with them, and it is seldom a word of honest English is spoken in the palace. The Norman castles are rising over the land, and his favourites divide among them the territory of every English earl or thane who incurs the king's displeasure. Were it not for Earl Harold, one might as well be under Norman sway altogether."

"Nay, nay, neighbour Ulred, matters are not so bad as that. I dare say they would have been as you say had it not been for Earl Godwin and his sons. But it was a great check that Godwin gave them when he returned after his banishment, and the Norman bishops and nobles hurried across the seas in a panic. For years now the king has left all matters in the hands of Harold, and is well content if only he can fast and pray like any monk, and give all his thoughts and treasure to the building of yonder abbey."

"We want neither a monk nor a Norman over us," the smith said roughly, "still less one who is both Norman and monk I would rather have a Dane, like Canute, who was a strong man and a firm one, than this king, who, I doubt not, is full of good intentions, and is a holy and pious monarch, but who is not strong enough for a ruler. He leaves it to another to preserve England in peace, to keep in order the great Earls of Mercia and the North, to hold the land against Harold of Norway, Sweyn, and others, and, above all, to watch the Normans across the water. A monk is well enough in a convent, but truly 'tis bad for a country to have a monk as its king."

"There have been some war-loving prelates, Ulred; men as ambitious as any of the great earls, and more dangerous, because they have learning."

"Ay, there have been great prelates," the smith agreed. "Look at Lyfing of Worcester, to whom next only to Godwin the king owed his throne. He was an Englishman first and a bishop afterwards, and was a proof, if needed, that a man can be a great churchman and a great patriot and statesman too. It was he rather than Godwin who overcame the opposition of the Danish party, and got the Witan at last to acquiesce in the choice of London and Wessex, and to give their vote to Edward.

"Well was it he did so. For had he failed we should have had as great a struggle in England as when Alfred battled against the Danes. We of London and the men of Wessex under the great Earl were bent upon being ruled by a prince of our own blood. The last two Danish kings had shown us that anything is better than being governed by the Northmen. It was Lyfing who persuaded the Earl of Mercia to side with Wessex rather than with Northumbria, but since Lyfing, what great Englishman have we had in the church? Every bishopric was granted by Edward to Norman priests, until Godwin and his sons got the upper hand after their exile. Since then most of them have been given to Germans. It would seem that the king was so set against Englishmen that only by bringing in foreigners can Harold prevent all preferment going to Normans. But what is the consequence? They say now that our church is governed from Rome, whereas before Edward's time we Englishmen did not think of taking our orders from Italy.

"There will trouble come of it all, neighbour. Perhaps not so long as Edward reigns, but at his death. There is but one of the royal race surviving, and he, like Edward, has lived all his life abroad. There can be no doubt what the choice of Englishmen will be. Harold has been our real ruler for years. He is wise and politic as well as brave, and a great general. He is our own earl, and will assuredly be chosen. Then we shall have trouble with the Normans. Already they bear themselves as if they were our masters, and they will not give up their hold without a struggle. Men say that William, their duke, makes no secret of his hope to become master of England, in which case God help us all. But that won't come as long as Harold lives and Englishmen can wield sword and battle-axe. As for myself, I have patched many a Norman suit of armour, but, by St. Swithin, I shall have far more pleasure in marring than I have ever had in mending them."

"Know you who were the boys who had that contention just now?"

"The Norman is a page of William, our Norman bishop; I know no more of him than that the other is Wulf, who is a ward and page of Earl Harold. His father was thane of Steyning in South Sussex, one of Godwin's men, and at his death two years ago Harold took the lad into his household, for he bore great affection for Gyrth, who had accompanied him in his pilgrimage to Rome, and fought by his side when he conquered the Welsh. It was there Gyrth got the wound that at last brought about his death. Wulf has been to my smithy many times, sometimes about matters of repairs to arms, but more often, I think, to see my son Osgod. He had seen him once or twice in calling at the shop, when one day Osgod, who is somewhat given to mischief, was playing at ball, and drove it into the face of a son of one of the Norman lords at court. The boy drew his dagger, and there would have been blood shed, but Wulf, who was passing at the time, and saw that the thing was a pure mishap and not the result of set intention, threw himself between them.

"There was a great fuss over it, for the boy took his tale to his father, who demanded that Osgod should be punished, and would doubtless have gained his end had not Wulf spoken to Earl Harold, who intervened in the matter and persuaded the Norman to let it drop. Since then the boys have been great friends in their way. Osgod is a year older than the young thane, and has already made up his mind to be his man when he grows up, and he has got me to agree to it, though I would rather that he had stuck to my handicraft. Still, the prospect is not a bad one. Harold will be King of England, Wulf will be a powerful thane, and will doubtless some day hold high place at court, and as he seems to have taken a real liking to Osgod, the boy may have good chances.

"Wulf will make a good fighting man one of these days. Harold sees that all his pages are well instructed in arms, and the two boys often have a bout with blunted swords when Wulf comes to my smithy; and, by my faith, though I have taught Osgod myself, and he already uses his arms well, the young thane is fully a match for him. You would hardly believe that the boy can read as well as a monk, but it is so. Earl Harold, you know, thinks a good deal of education, and has founded a college at Waltham. He persuaded Wulf's father to send him there, and, indeed, will take none as his pages unless they can read. I see not what good reading can do to most men, but doubtless for one who is

at court and may hold some day a high post there, it is useful to be able to read deeds and grants of estates, instead of having to trust others' interpretation."

"I wondered to see you press forward so suddenly into the crowd, neighbour, seeing that you are a busy man, but I understand now that you had an interest in the affair."

"That had I. I was holding myself in readiness, if that Norman boy drew his dagger, to give him such a blow across the wrist with my cudgel that it would be long before he handled a weapon again. I fear Wulf has got himself into trouble. The bishop will doubtless complain to the king of the language used by one of Harold's pages, and though the earl is well able to see that no harm comes to the lad, it is likely he will send him away to his estates for a time. For he strives always to avoid quarrels and disputes, and though he will not give way a jot in matters where it seems to him that the good of the realm is concerned, he will go much farther lengths than most men would do in the way of conciliation. Look how he has borne with Tostig and with the Earls of Mercia. He seems to have no animosity in his nature, but is ready to forgive all injuries as soon as pardon is asked."

The smith was not far wrong in his opinion as to what was likely to happen. As soon as Wulf returned to the palace he was told that the earl desired his presence, and he proceeded at once to the apartment where Harold transacted public business. It was a hall of considerable size; the floor was strewed with rushes; three scribes sat at a table, and to them the earl dictated his replies and decisions on the various matters brought before him. When he saw Wulf enter he rose from his seat, and, beckoning to him to follow, pushed aside the hangings across a door leading to an apartment behind and went in. Wulf had no fear whatever of any severe consequence to himself from his quarrel with Walter Fitz-Urse, but he was ashamed that his thoughtlessness should have given the slightest trouble to the earl, for, popular as he was among all classes of men in southern England, Harold was an object of love as well as respect to his dependents, and indeed to all who came in close contact with him.

The earl was now forty-one years of age. He was very tall, and was considered the strongest man in England. His face was singularly handsome, with an expression of mingled gentleness and firmness. His bearing was courteous to all. He united a frank and straightforward manner with a polished address rare among his rough countrymen. Harold had travelled more and farther than any Englishman of his age. He had visited foreign courts and mingled with people more advanced in civilization than were those of England or Normandy, and was centuries ahead of the mass of his countrymen. He was an ardent advocate of education, a strong supporter of the national church, an upholder of the rights of all men, and although he occasionally gave way to bursts of passion, was of a singularly sweet and forgiving disposition.

King Edward was respected by his people because, coming after two utterly worthless kings, he had an earnest desire for their good, although that desire seldom led to any very active results. He was a member of their own royal house. He was deeply religious. His life was pure and simple, and although all his tastes and sympathies were with the land in which he had been brought up, Englishmen forgave him this because at least he was a Saxon, while his predecessors had been Danes. But while they respected Edward, for Harold, their real ruler, they felt a passionate admiration. He was a worthy representative of all that was best in the Saxon character. He possessed in an eminent degree the openness of nature, the frank liberality, the indomitable bravery, and the endurance of hardship that distinguished the race. He was Earl of the West Saxons, and as such had special claims to their fealty.

London, it was true, did not lie in his earldom, but in that of his brother Leofwyn, but Leofwyn and Harold were as one—true brothers in heart and in disposition. The gentleness and courtesy of manner that, although natural, had been softened and increased by Harold's contact with foreigners, was not only pardoned but admired because he was England's champion against foreigners. He had fought, and victoriously, alike against the Norwegians, the Danes of Northumbria, and the Welsh, and he struggled as sturdily, though peacefully, against Norman influence in England. Already the dread of Norman preponderance was present in the minds of Englishmen. It was no secret that in his early days Edward had held out hopes, if he had not given an actual promise, to William of Normandy that

he should succeed him. Of late the king had been somewhat weaned from his Norman predilections, and had placed himself unreservedly in Harold's hands, giving to the latter all real power while he confined himself to the discharge of religious exercises, and to the supervision of the building of his abbey, varied occasionally by hunting expeditions, for he still retained a passionate love of the chase; but men knew that the warlike Duke of Normandy would not be likely to forget the promise, and that trouble might come to England from over the sea.

Harold, then, they not only regarded as their present ruler, but as their future king, and as the national leader and champion. Edward had no children. The royal house was extinct save for Edward the Atheling, who, like the present king, had lived all his life abroad, and could have no sympathy with Englishmen. There being, then, no one of the royal house available, who but Harold, the head of the great house of Godwin, the earl of the West Saxons, the virtual ruler of England, could be chosen? The English kings, although generally selected from the royal house, ruled rather by the election of the people as declared by their representatives in the Witan than by their hereditary right. The prince next in succession by blood might, at the death of the sovereign, be called king, but he was not really a monarch until elected by the Witan and formally consecrated.

It had been nine months after he had been acclaimed to the throne by the people of London that King Edward had been elected king by the Witan, and formally enthroned. Thus, then, the fact that Harold did not belong to the royal family mattered but little in the eyes of Englishmen. To them belonged the right of choosing their own monarch, and if they chose him, who was to say them nay?

Wulf felt uncomfortable as he followed the stately figure into the inner room, but he faced the Earl as the door closed behind him with as fearless a look as that with which he had stood before the haughty prelate of London. A slight smile played upon Harold's face as he looked down upon the boy.

"You are a troublesome varlet, Wulf, and the Lord Bishop has been making serious complaint of you to the king. He says that you brawled with his page, Walter Fitz-Urse; that you used insolent words against his countrymen; and that you even withstood himself. What have you to say to this?"

"The brawling was on the part of the bishop's page and not of mine, my lord. I was running out to carry the message with which you charged me to Ernulf of Dover when I ran against Fitz-Urse. That was not my fault, but a pure mischance, nevertheless I expressed my regret in fitting terms. Instead of accepting them, he spoke insolently, talked of chastising me, and put his hand on the hilt of his dagger. Then, my lord, I grew angry too. Why should I, the page of Earl Harold, submit to be thus contemptuously spoken to by this young Norman, who is but the page of an upstart bishop, and whom, if your lordship will give permission, I would right willingly fight, with swords or any other weapons. Doubtless, in my anger, I did not speak respectfully of Walter's countrymen, and for this I am sorry, since it has been the ground of complaint and of trouble to you."

"In fact, Wulf, you spoke as a quarrelsome boy and not as the page of one who has the cares of this kingdom on his shoulders, and whose great desire is to keep peace between all parties," the earl put in gravely.

For the first time Wulf hung his head:

"I was wrong, my lord."

"You were wrong, Wulf; it is not good always to say what we think; and you, as my page, should bear in mind that here at court it behoves you to behave and to speak not as a headstrong boy, but as one whose words may, rightly or wrongly, be considered as an echo of those you may have heard from me. And now to the third charge, that you withstood the prelate; a matter that, in the king's eyes, is a very serious one."

"The bishop would give ear to nought I had to say. He listened to his own page's account and not to mine, and when I said in my defence that though I did use the words about the Normans, I did so merely as one boy quarrelling with the other, he said I ought to have my ears slit. Surely, my lord, a free-born thane is not to be spoken to even by a Norman bishop as if he were a Norman serf. I only

replied that before there was any slitting of ears your lordship would have a say in the matter. So far, I admit, I did withstand the bishop, and I see not how I could have made other reply."

"It would have been better to have held your peace altogether, Wulf."

"It would, my lord, but it would also surely have been better had the bishop abstained from talking about slitting ears."

"That would have been better also, but two wrongs do not make a right. I was present when the bishop made his complaint, and upon my inquiring more into the matter, his version was somewhat similar to yours. I then pointed out to him that if holy bishops lost their tempers and used threats that were beyond their power to carry into effect, they must not be too severe upon boys who forget the respect due to their office. Nevertheless, I admitted that you were wrong, and I promised the king, who was perhaps more disturbed by this incident than there was any occasion for, that I would take you to task seriously, and that to avoid any further brawl between you and young Fitz-Urse, you should for a time be sent away from court. I did this on the agreement that the bishop should, on his part, admonish Walter Fitz-Urse against discourteous behaviour and unseemly brawling, and had I known that he had put his hand on his dagger, I would have gone further. Have you any witnesses that he did so?"

"Yes, my lord; I saw the smith Ulred among those standing by, and doubtless he would see the action."

"That is well," Harold said. "I shall acquaint the bishop with the fact when I tell him that I have ordered you to leave for your estate at Steyning, and that if his page denies it, I have witnesses to prove the truth of your assertions. I think in that case he will be glad to drop the matter, for were I to mention the fact to the king, he, who has a horror of the drawing of weapons, would order Walter Fitz-Urse to be sent back to Normandy. So your exile is not likely to be of long duration. You understand, Wulf, that I am not seriously angered with you in this matter. You are but a boy, and one cannot expect that you will behave as a prudent man; but remember, lad, even a boy's words may do mischief, especially when placed as you are. There may come a time when you shall show by deeds and not by words your feelings against the Normans, but till then bear yourself prudently. We Saxons are over given to hasty words, and this is a fault. I myself, as all men know, have no love for the Normans, but no one has heard me speak against them. The king loves them, as is but natural, seeing that he was brought up amongst them, and I have not withstood his wishes in the matter, trying only that a certain amount of preferment in the land should be bestowed upon those who are its owners and not strangers to it and its tongue. You will ride this afternoon for Steyning, Wulf, but I hope it will not be long before you are back again. If I had my own way in the matter, I should think that sufficient had already been said and done in so trifling a matter as a boys' quarrel; but as it has been brought before our king by a bishop, it is in the king's eyes a serious business, for assuredly he himself would have borne a reproof from William of London more meekly than you did, and having therefore become a church matter, it is altogether beyond my power to interfere. At any rate, a short sojourn on your estate will do you no harm; it is sometime since you were there, and it is a good thing that the lord of the soil should be well known by those over whom he is placed."

Wulf bowed deeply and withdrew. The prospect of a visit for a few weeks or even months to Steyning was not a terrible one. It was some years since he had stayed there for any time. He had been two years at Waltham, and since his father's death had been for the most part with Harold, and the thought of an unrestricted life and of spending his time as he chose, hunting and hawking, and going about among his tenants, was by no means unpleasant. He was quite satisfied that Harold was not seriously angered with him, and for anything else he cared little.

As he understood that his duties as a page were at present at an end, he thought he would first call upon Ulred the smith, to ask him if he had seen Walter Fitz-Urse handle his dagger, and also to tell Osgod that he was going away for a time. He found the smith at work.

"Good morning, Master Wulf; though this is not the first time I have seen you today, for I was at hand when you had that quarrel with the Norman page."

"Yes, I caught sight of your face, Ulred. It was about that I have come to you. The bishop has made complaint against me to the king, and Earl Harold has ordered me to go down to Steyning for a time. Of course I acted wrongly in speaking as I did to the bishop, but so far as Walter Fitz-Urse is concerned I maintain that I did no wrong. I told my lord as much, and that the Norman put hand upon his dagger. The earl said that if I could prove that it would benefit my case. I told him that I had seen you close by, but that I did not know whether you saw the page do it."

"Assuredly I did," the smith replied, "and had my cudgel in readiness to tap him on the wrist if he had drawn his dagger. I would testify the same before King Edward himself."

"Thank you, Ulred, I will tell my lord so."

"I am sorry you are to be sent away from court. That is a bad job, Master Wulf, and Osgod here will miss you greatly."

"That shall I," the lad said. "Could you not take me down with you, young master? You could teach me there how to comport myself as your squire, so that when the time comes that you need one, I should know my duties. Besides, you could practise on me with sword and battle-axe."

"I could not do much in the way of teaching you, Osgod, seeing as yet I am myself but a learner, but I should be glad, in truth, to have you with me, and it would be good for me to keep up my practice in arms. I shall feel almost like a stranger there, and should like to have one I know with me. I could ask Earl Harold to let me have a horse for you from his stables, where he has two or three score doing nothing."

"With your favour, sir, I would rather trust to my own feet. I am a stout walker, and though I shall not be able to keep up with you, I think that each night I can get to the hostelrie where you may put up; but, if not, it matters little, I can make my way after you and join you there—that is, if my father will give me permission to go."

"You may as well go sooner as later," the smith said. "Since you have taken into your head that you will be Master Wulf's man, I see not that it will benefit you remaining in the forge. You know enough now to mend a broken rivet and to do such repairs to helm and armour as may be needed on an expedition; therefore, if the young thane is minded to take you I have naught to say against it."

"Then so shall it be," Wulf said, "I shall see my Lord Harold before I start, and will tell him that you are minded to be my man, and that I am minded so to take you. He will not object, I am sure, but it were best to ask him, since, when I return to court, I shall have you about me."

"When do you start, Master Wulf?"

"I am ordered to go to-day; therefore, as soon as I have seen the earl again I shall be off."

"Where will you sleep to-night?"

"I shall ride to Guildford this afternoon."

"Then you had better lay aside your hammer at once, Osgod," the smith said, "and don fresh clothes, and make your best suit into a bundle and start without delay; it is but ten o'clock, and you may be at Guildford before sunset. 'Tis but thirty miles, and eight hours' walking will take you there. If the young thane tells you that Lord Harold makes objection to his taking you, you can turn your face backward to-morrow and no harm will be done."

"I shall overtake you before you are half-way, Osgod, and can then take you up behind me on my horse; and now I will go back to the palace. I may have to wait some time before I can see Earl Harold. From sunrise to sunset he has but a few moments to himself, and I shall have to watch my time to get a word with him."

It was not, indeed, until two o'clock in the afternoon that Wulf had a chance of speaking to the duke. Then, seeing that he was for the moment alone, he entered the room and stood with bowed head waiting for Harold to address him.

"So you have come to say good-bye, Wulf," the latter said kindly; "it is best so, boy. A time in the country will do you good, and there will be much for you to do down there. I have ordered two of my men to be in readiness to mount and ride with you, for I would not that you should go unattended. One of them will bear a message from me and a letter under my hand to the steward, and will tell him that although you will, of course, remain as my ward until you come of age, you are in all respects to be treated as if you were already my sworn man, and thane. It would be well if you could gather among your tenants twenty stout men as house-carls. The steward is ordered to pay to you whatever moneys you may require, and to account for them to me when he sends me in his checkers. These house-carls will, of course, be paid. There must be ample store of armour at Steyning for them, for your father was followed by forty house-carls when he went with me to the Welsh wars. One of the men who goes with you is a stout man-at-arms and is one of my own house-carls; he will remain with you and will instruct your men in arms and teach them to fight shoulder to shoulder. There may be bad times ere long, and it is upon trained troops and not upon hasty levies that we must most depend. In time I trust you will be able to place fifty such men in the field, but at present twenty will suffice. Have you aught to say to me before you go?"

"Yes, my lord; first, to thank you for your kindness, and to say that I will carry out your instructions; secondly, to tell you that Ulred the smith saw Walter Fitz-Urse handle his dagger, and was standing ready to knock it from his hand did he draw it. Lastly, that Ulred's son Osgod, who is a stout lad a year older than myself, and for his age well accustomed to arms, desires to be sworn as my man and to serve me in hall and in field. I like him much and have almost daily practised with him in arms, and I should be glad to have him with me if you see no objection."

"Not at all, Wulf; it is well that a man should have at his side one in whom he can altogether trust, be he of gentle blood or simple man-at-arms."

"Then I may take him down with me, my lord?"

"Yes, if it pleases you. Can he ride?"

"Not as yet, my lord, I will see that he is instructed down at Steyning. He started to walk this morning, understanding that if you refused him permission to be my man he would at once return. We shall overtake him on the road."

"Bid one of your escort take him up behind," the earl said, "I like his spirit. See that he is fittingly apparelled. You shall hear from me ere long."

Half an hour later Wulf mounted, and with his two followers rode from Westminster.

CHAPTER II. – COUNTRY LIFE

Far from being depressed, Wulf felt his spirits rise as he rode away on his banishment from court, for instead of feeling it a disgrace he regarded it as a step forward in life. Earl Harold could certainly, had he been so inclined, have smoothed down the angry prelate, and could have retained him at court; but by the way he had spoken, Wulf was convinced that the earl let him go because he thought that it was good for him to be away. For four years he had been under tutelage, first at Waltham, and then at the court. In the last position his life had indeed been a pleasant one, for as one of Harold's pages he had mixed with all the noble youths of the court, and had had a place at every festive gathering. Still, he had been but a page, and treated as a boy. Now he was to go forth, and to learn his duties as his father's successor.

Harold's steward, who had since the thane's death acted as the earl's agent in the management of the estate, would instruct him doubtless in his civil duties, while the soldier who rode behind him would teach him how to lead men in battle, and how to make the fighting force of the estate efficient. Beyond these duties his time would be his own. He would have responsibilities, but they would be the responsibilities of a thane towards his tenants, and not of a page towards his master. He was going away a boy, but if it pleased Harold that he should remain away for two years he would return a thane. A young one, indeed, but one who had learned the duties of his station, and who, if needs be, could take his place in the field of battle at the head of his followers. For, even putting aside the Normans, from whom the earl seemed to think the greatest danger would come, there was never any long cessation of fighting in England.

There were the Welsh, who were always turbulent; the Danes of Northumbria, who were still a distinct people, although throughout the rest of England their identity was fast being merged into that of the Saxons. There were the Norsemen, still ready to take every opportunity of interfering in the affairs of England, or, if none offered, to plunder and harry the coast. There were the earls of Mercia, who bore no great love to the house of Godwin, and who resented the ascendency of the West Saxons. Lastly, there was Harold's brother Tostig, a fiery and turbulent noble, now Earl of Northumbria, who was jealous of Harold, ever ready to join in plots, and in close alliance with Norway already; he had several times withstood the royal authority, and would assuredly again become a fomenter of trouble should he see a favourable opportunity. At the king's death, if not before, that opportunity would be sure to present itself. Harold would be certainly chosen king by the people of London and by the West Saxons, but almost as certainly would his claim be disputed by the earls of Mercia on one hand, and by Tostig and the Danes on the other. Wulf was sure, therefore, that the work spent in preparing his tenants to take the field when called upon to do so, would not be wasted.

Full of these thoughts he rode for some miles from Westminster without addressing himself to the two men behind him; then, bethinking him that these were trusted followers of the earl, and had been specially told off by him to accompany and stay with him, he called them up to his side. Wulf had donned a riding suit instead of court attire, which, in deference to the king's partiality for the Normans, was, even among the staunchest opposers of the foreigners, a compromise between Saxon and Norman fashions. He now wore a tunic of a bright green cloth, girded in at the waist and reaching only to the knee. Over this was worn a garment closely resembling the Roman toga, though somewhat less ample. The folds in front fell below the waist, but it was looped up at each shoulder by a brooch, leaving the arms bare. His legs were clad in tightly-fitting trousers, and his feet in somewhat high shoes. On his head he wore a cap in shape closely resembling the Phrygian bonnet. He was armed with a dagger, and a short sword, which hung by a leather strap, two or three inches long, from his belt. The outer garment had a hood which could in bad weather be drawn over the head.

The man who was the bearer of Harold's orders to the steward wore a civilian dress, not unlike that of Wulf's. He occupied the position of a confidential scribe to Harold. The other wore the garb

of a soldier. He was clothed from head to foot in a tight fitting leather suit, upon which were sewn iron rings overlapping each other, and strongly resembling in appearance the chain-armour of later days. His casque, with a curtain of leather similarly covered and affording a protection to the neck, cheeks, and throat, hung from his saddle-bow, and he wore a cap with a long projecting peak, while a cloak was thrown over his shoulders and fell almost to his feet.

"I am afraid you will find it but dull time with me, Leof," Wulf said as they came up abreast of him, "for the earl says that he has charged you to remain with me at Steyning."

"I shall not be sorry for that," the soldier said bluntly, "for I shall be right glad to be away from these Normans who fill every place at court and swagger there as if Englishmen were but dirt under their feet. Moreover, I love not London nor its ways, and shall be glad to be down again among honest country folk, though I would still rather be following my lord the earl in the field."

"And you, Master Gurth, will your stay down at Steyning be a long one?"

"No, indeed. I have but to bear my master's wishes and instructions to the steward, and to stay for a few days to see that they are carried out according to his desires. I am not like Leof, for I prefer life in London, where one meets with learned monks and others, can obtain sometimes the use of a choice manuscript, and can hear the news from beyond the seas, whereas in the country there is nought to talk about save beeves and sheep. I like the journey well enough, though I would that the animal I bestrode were more gentle in his paces. He has for the last half-hour been fretting on the rein to place himself by the side of yours. Horses are well enough for nobles and fighting men, but for a peaceful scrivener like myself a chair makes a far more comfortable seat."

The soldier gave a contemptuous grunt, and Wulf laughed. "It is well that we have not all the same tastes, but for my part a seat in a chair tires me more than one in a saddle, and I am never more happy than when galloping briskly along," and he shook the reins, a signal which the horse had been expecting for a considerable time, and at once responded to by breaking into a canter.

"Stay you, I pray, Master Wulf," the scrivener cried in great tribulation as his horse followed the example of its companion. "Even if the animal does not break my neck he will jolt the life out of me. I pray you curb him in if you would not see me prone in the dust; and if I am disabled, who is to carry the earl's message to the steward?"

Wulf reined in his horse. "Pardon me, good Gurth. I had forgotten that you are not accustomed to journey on horseback. I was scarce conscious, indeed, that I touched my horse, but he is used to travel more rapidly, and was so eager to be off at the slightest hint that I was willing that he should do so. We will try and journey soberly for the rest of the distance."

Osgod was overtaken, plodding steadily along the road, fifteen miles from town. Leof took him up on his horse, and they reached Guildford just as the sun was setting. The inn, which stood in the principal street of the town, was a low building built with a massive framework filled in with bricks. The ground-floor was occupied by a single room. At one end was the great fireplace where, over a pile of blazing logs, were hung many cauldrons and pots. Round the room ran a raised bench some six feet wide on which the guests disposed themselves for sleep at night; rough tables and benches occupied the rest of the room. Some twenty or thirty travellers were seated at these. Few were eating, but the greater portion had horns of beer or mead before them. As Wulf and his companions entered, after giving over their horses to one of the helpers, the host, seeing by his attire that he was of condition above the ordinary, came forward and led him to the end of the room nearest the fire, where the floor was raised a foot and a half above the general level, forming a sort of dais where travellers of distinction could take their meals apart from the rest of the guests. Leof was now spokesman.

"We will have supper, and of your best, master host, for we have ridden from London. We are in the service of Earl Harold, and are riding with this young thane, Wulf of Steyning."

The name of Earl Harold was sufficient to gain for them the best attentions of their host, and in twenty minutes supper was served, consisting of trout broiled over the fire, swine's flesh, and a stew of fowls and smoked bacon flavoured with herbs. Wulf took the head of the table, and the other

three sat a short distance below him. The dishes were handed round, and each with his dagger cut off his portion and ate it on his wooden platter with the assistance of dagger and fingers only, for the utility of forks was at that time a matter undreamt of. After the meal was over, the host brought a ewer of water with a napkin, and each dipped his fingers into the water, an operation necessary even for the most dainty feeder. Presently a glee singer came in, and for an hour amused the guests with songs, for the most part of a patriotic character.

Wulf was then conducted by the host to a small chamber upstairs, where there was the luxury of a bed stuffed with straw. The rest of the travellers, including Wulf's companions, merely wrapped themselves in their cloaks and lay down on the raised bench which ran round the room.

On the afternoon of the third day the party arrived at Steyning. It was four years since Wulf had been at home, and he gave a shout of pleasure as his eye fell on the long low house with its background of trees, and touching his horse with his heel he left his companions behind and galloped towards the door. An old servitor came out.

"Why, Cedric, do you not know me? I am Wulf, whom you first taught to play single-stick and to draw a bow."

"Why, surely it is my young master," Cedric said, taking the hand that Wulf held out to him and placing it to his lips; "this is a glad day indeed for us all. We have longed sorely for a sight of you, for though I say nought against Master Egbert the steward, who is well liked by all, it is not the same as having our lord with us. You have come to stay, I trust."

"For a time at any rate, Cedric. Earl Harold wishes me to learn my duties as a thane and to fit myself to lead my people in the field if it be necessary."

"I trust that it never will be so," Cedric said, "but as we fought under your father so will we all be ready to fight under you should it be needful. The men of Steyning were never backward when there was fighting to be done, and in my young days there was no lack of that, though we have had quiet times since King Edward came to the throne."

The house was not built for the purpose of resistance, for, unlike the Normans, the Saxons did not deem it necessary to convert their houses into castles. It was, however, massively framed, the windows on the ground-floor were barred, the door was strong and solid, and after nightfall none could come in or go out without the knowledge and consent of the master. Wulf's companions came up just as the steward himself appeared at the door. He knew both Gurth and Leof, having himself been in the service of Harold before being deputed by him to manage the estates of Steyning during the earl's guardianship of its thane.

"The earl sends his greetings to you, Egbert," Gurth said, "and he has sent us hither with the young thane, who, as the letter I bring from the earl will inform you, has come down to take up his position as lord here, and to learn from you all things connected with his estate."

"Welcome to Steyning, thane," the steward said, doffing his cap; "it is well that you should be here. I have done my best to carry out the earl's commands to keep all things in readiness for your coming, and to be just and fair to the tenants, seeing that they pay their dues, and yet not pressing too hardly upon them if things go not well with them; but it is always best that the master should be in his own place, and right willingly do I give over my authority to you."

"The authority has been in good hands, I know well," Wulf said, "and right heartily do I thank you for having so well filled my place; but I would not take up my thaneship as yet I am but a boy, and have to learn my duties from you, and shall account myself but as your pupil. I know something of the ways of court, but nothing at all of those of the country, and it will be long before I am fit to take the control of things into my own hands."

They had by this time entered the great hall which formed the common room of the establishment. Its arrangement was similar to that of the room at the inn, with its raised dais for the master, his family, and guests, while the rest of the room was devoted to the retainers and servants. The cooking, however, was carried on in a room apart. There were two fireplaces, one upon the dais

and the other in the body of the hall. On the walls hung trophies of the chase and arms of all sorts. The wooden roof was supported by massive beams, and with the exception of the trophies on the walls there was no attempt at decoration of any kind. During the residence of the family at the house, however, the hangings of tapestry, the work of generations of dames of Steyning, their daughters and maids, hung upon the walls round the dais.

The news quickly spread of the arrival of the young thane, and a score of men and eight or ten women and maids flocked into the hall to welcome him, and as he stood on the dais each in turn came forward to kiss his hand and salute him.

"I think my first order must be," he said to the steward, "that a cask of your best ale be broached."

"That shall be done at once," Egbert replied; "there is never a lack of drink here, but the best is none too good for the occasion. And who is this youth with you?" he went on when he had given the necessary orders, pointing to Osgod, who was standing somewhat shyly apart.

"He is my friend, and is going to be my body attendant and squire," Wulf said. "He, like myself, knows nothing as yet of his duties, but that he will be faithful and trusty I know full well, and the earl himself said that I did wisely to bring him with me."

"I will myself instruct him in his duties," Egbert said, "which indeed are not hard to learn by one of willing mind. He will stand behind you at table, will hand you your cup and take your orders. In the old times it would have been his duty to see that you were not struck down by a traitorous blow while you drank, but those days are passed. When in the field he will carry your helmet till you need to put it on; will keep close to you in the fight and guard you with his shield from arrows, and with his sword from attacks from behind; he will carry your banner, and see that as long as he has strength to hold it, it floats fairly out as a rallying point for your men. In the field indeed his duties are numerous, but at home in peace, beyond seeing that your arms are bright and clean, and that your orders are carried out properly, he will have but little to do. It is well that you brought him with you, for otherwise you would have had to choose one of the sons of your tenants, and the choice would have been a difficult one, for each would have desired the honour, and whichever you chose there would have been sore jealousy among the others."

The next day there was a great gathering in the hall. The whole of the tenants attended, and took the oath to be Wulf's men, as they had been those of his father, to obey his orders, and to follow him in the field with the due number of men according to the size of their holdings; while Wulf on his part swore to protect them from all wrong and oppression, to be a just master, calling upon them only for such service as he was entitled to demand, and exacting no feus or payments beyond those customary. A bullock had been killed, and after the ceremony was over all present sat down to a banquet at which much ale was drunk and feasting went on till nightfall.

The next morning Wulf, accompanied by Leof and Egbert, rode round the estate, choosing among the sons of the tenants thirty stout young men willing to enrol themselves as house-carls, receiving a regular rate of pay, and ready at all times to give service under arms, and to remain in the field as long as they might be required, whereas the general levy could only be kept under arms for a limited time. He had already gone into the matter with Leof, who pointed out that, as at present he had no wish to keep up any show or to have a body of armed men in the house, it would suffice if the men were exercised every day for a month, and after that merely practised with sword and battle-axe for two or three hours once a week. On these terms he had no difficulty in obtaining considerably more than the number he asked for, and finally fifty men were enrolled.

For those carls helmets were bought and coats of ringed armour made, and for a month they exercised daily. Of manoeuvring there was little indeed. The Saxons and Danes alike fought in line, with but room enough between them to swing their battle-axes. Each carried a spear as well as an axe, and when repelling the assault of an enemy closed up so that their shields well-nigh touched each other. Their exercise was generally either to engage in combats between chosen pairs, or, dividing

into two parties, to fight line against line with blunted poles for spears and with stout cudgels for axes. Leof in these combats acted as judge, decided which side had gained the victory, praised the skilful, and chided the careless and sluggish. He gave lessons in the use of the sword and battle-axe to Wulf and Osgod, sometimes pitting them against each other, sometimes fighting himself against Wulf, and teaching Osgod how to assist his master by covering him with his shield.

Sometimes he would order three or four of the men to shoot with blunted arrows at Wulf, whom he taught to catch them on his shield or to sever the shafts with a blow of his sword, while Osgod standing by helped to cover him when two or three arrows flew at him together. This was a daily exercise, and even after the month's regular work was over some of the men came up every day to shoot, until Wulf had attained such coolness and skill that he could in the great majority of cases cut the shafts in two with his sword.

But the whole day was by no means given up to warlike exercises. Wulf rode out with the steward inspecting the houses and farms, learning what there was to be learned of the rude processes of agriculture, investigating the complaints of the depredations committed by errant herds of swine or by neighbours' cattle and sheep, seeing what was required in the repairs of farmhouses, and learning from Egbert to discriminate between those who were unable to pay their dues owing to misfortune, illness, or murrain among the animals, and those whose losses were due to their own sloth or carelessness. Upon these visits, too, the arms of the tenants were inspected to ascertain that they could properly fulfil their service if summoned to take the field.

The lands embraced by Wulf's feof were of considerable extent, reaching down to the sea, where they were some eight miles broad, and running back twelve miles beyond Steyning. Several small hamlets lay within it, and in case of war he could summon more than three hundred men to his banner. Several of the neighbouring thanes rode in as soon as they heard that Wulf had returned to fill his father's place at Steyning, and these visits were duly returned. But accustomed as Wulf had been to the orderliness of the court of the ascetic King Edward the rude manners and nightly revelry of these rough thanes by no means pleased him, so that he was glad when the visits were over, and he could remain quietly at home, where he was not without frequent guests.

The most regular of his visitors was the prior of the monastery at Bramber, which had been founded by the piety of one of Wulf's ancestors. The prior had, though Wulf was ignorant of it, received a letter from Earl Harold asking him to befriend Wulf, to encourage him to keep up the studies he had followed at Waltham, and to see that he did not fall into the drinking habit so common among the Saxons. The priest was well fitted for the mission. He was by no means a strict disciplinarian, but the monastery had the reputation of being one of the best managed in Sussex, and among the monks were many of good blood. He was passionately fond of art, and encouraged its exercise among the monks, so that the illuminated missals of Bramber were highly prized, and added largely to the revenues of the monastery.

The prior had been one of the monks at Waltham, and owed his elevation to the influence of Earl Harold with the late thane of Steyning. He was well taught in all the learning of the day, and having been for a time at Westminster, knew more of court life than the majority of the priors of isolated monasteries, and could suit his conversation to his hearer. Harold had said in his letter, "The lad has good parts. He is somewhat full of mischief, and has got into a scrape here by a quarrel with a Norman page, and by failing somewhat in the respect due to William of London, who took his compatriot's part with too much zeal. But Wulf is shrewd, and benefited greatly by his stay at Waltham, and both for the lad's own sake and for my friendship with the good thane, his father, I would fain that he grew up not only a sturdy Englishman, as to which I have no manner of doubt, but one who may some day play his part at court, and be a worthy friend and counsellor of an English king. Therefore I pray you, father, to keep an eye on the lad, and spare him what time you can from your duties. Tell him not that I have written to you, for it is the nature of youth to be averse to anything that looks like guardianship."

Such a request from Earl Harold was regarded by the prior as an order, and a few days after Wulf was installed at Steyning the prior rode over on his palfrey, accompanied only by the almoner of the convent.

"Peace to you, my son," he said, as Wulf bowed respectfully to him, "I have called not only as the prior of the monastery founded by the piety of one of the thanes of Steyning, but to welcome one who was a pupil at Earl Harold's college of Waltham, in which I at one time was a preceptor. Not when you were there, for I was installed here just before your good father's death."

"I left there two years since," Wulf said, "in order to be one of Earl Harold's pages; but I have not forgotten my reading, for the earl insists that his pages give two hours a day to study."

"Tis a good rule," the prior said, "for learning is like a weapon, it soon becomes rusted when thrown aside. You will, I hope, continue the habit."

"I should wish to do so, father, but there are no manuscripts here."

"In that at least I can supply your wants," the prior said. "My monastery has a good library, and it will be quite at your service, and also my advice in any matters that may concern you. My almoner here, brother John, knows pretty well the circumstances of most of your people, and may be able to tell you where your alms may be well bestowed, and where they would do more harm than good. The worthless are ever the most importunate, and for every honest man in need there are twenty rogues abegging."

The ice once broken, the prior came over frequently. His conversation was bright and interesting. He himself was engaged in writing a history of the Saxon and Danish monarchs from the times of Alfred, and had stores of anecdotes of people and events of whom Wulf had before heard only vague traditions from the wandering singers and story-tellers who travelled the country, and were welcome guests in every household. As Wulf was urged by the prior to come over whenever time hung on his hands, his visits to the monastery were naturally very much more frequent than those of the prior to Steyning. Sometimes he would sit in the private apartment of the prior, but more often he spent his time studying the rare manuscripts, or watching the monks at their work of copying and illuminating. If he went in the evening he generally sat in the refectory, where the monks for the most part spent their evening in talk and harmless amusement, for the strict rules and discipline that prevailed in monastic establishments on the Continent had been unknown up to that time in England, although some of the Norman bishops were doing their best to introduce them into the establishments in their dioceses,—a proceeding that caused great discontent, and was strongly opposed by the English monks. These had, hitherto, regarded monastic life as one of work for the good of the poor, and as affording for those who wished it a tranquil retirement from the trials of the world. Moreover, it offered special attractions to those of quiet and studious tastes, since the monasteries provided the architects and the painters, the teachers and the writers, and it was here alone that learning was maintained and fostered. Consequently, at Bramber there was none of that monastic asceticism that prevailed abroad, and later became the rule in England also.

During the day the monks had their pursuits according to their tastes. There were those who worked in the copying and painting room. There were some who drew plans for churches or the dwellings of the wealthy, and who sometimes went out and superintended the carrying out of their designs. Some were in charge of the garden, where the work was chiefly done by the lay servitors, and where the herbs and simples were grown that were used in the concoction of the medicines distributed among the sick, and highly prized throughout the country round. Two or three were skilled in music, and these taught and conducted the choir, while two acted as teachers to youths, the sons of thanes and others, who, moved by the ardour with which their earl advocated learning, intrusted their sons to the monks for education. Then when the day's work was done, and vespers sung in the chapel, the monks gathered in the refectory. The conversation was of a bright and varied description, and as Wulf moved about from group to group he listened to the talk with far greater pleasure than he had ever derived from that at court, and largely increased his knowledge in many respects.

National matters were discussed with keen interest, for the monks were all English, and viewed with bitter hostility the elevation of foreigners to the chief dignities of the church, not only because they were foreigners, but because they introduced innovations of all kinds, and sought to reduce the Church of England to subjection to Rome, whereas previously it had been wholly independent of Papal authority. In secular matters, too, there were dangers that threatened the tranquillity of the country. Chief among these were the turbulence and ambition of Tostig, and the menace to the kingdom by his extensive earldom of Northumbria with its alien Danish population, which was rendered more serious by his alliance with the kings of Norway.

Then, too, it was doubtful whether the great central earldom of Mercia could be relied upon to act cordially with the West Saxons; Griffith of Wales was still restless and turbulent; and lastly, there was the ever-present menace of the Norman duke. Had England been united it could have laughed at the pretensions of the Duke of Normandy; but with Northumbria ready at any moment to break into civil war, and with Mercia doubtful, the claim of Normandy, however shadowy and indefensible, could not but be considered as a grave element of danger.

Listening to the talk of the monks Wulf learned much more as to the actual situation than he had done in the court of the Normanized king, and his feelings of patriotism became more and more developed and strengthened, while he applied himself with even greater ardour to his military exercises, as he recognized more fully the necessity that might arise for every West Saxon to be ready to take his place in the line of battle. The evenings that he spent at home were by no means dull. It was only in considerable towns that there were inns for the accommodation of travellers. Everywhere else these were dependent upon hospitality, and no door was ever closed in their faces. It was seldom that less than five or six travellers rested for the night at Steyning, and often that number was largely exceeded. Besides the wayfarers there were the professional wanderers, the minstrels, the story-tellers, and occasionally a troupe of buffoons.

All these were welcome, for they brought the news from without; the last rumours in London concerning the quarrels of the earls; the movements of the Danish ships that were harrying the coast, and those of the vessels Earl Harold despatched to cope with them; the prices of wool and hides in the chief markets; and even reports of what was happening beyond the seas. Leaving the dais, Wulf would go down and listen to the talk of the travellers, or, when they were of a degree above the common, have them up beside him, and question them as to their journeyings, the places they had visited, and the personages they had seen. Thus his hours were fully occupied from morning until night. He found far less time than he had expected for sport, and although he occasionally went out with his falcons or hunted the stag in the forest, which covered a wide extent of country beyond the hills, it was but seldom that he could find leisure for these amusements.

"It seems to me that you are always doing something, Wulf," Osgod said one day. "It is not at all the sort of life I should have thought a young thane would live. Why, you work many more hours a day than I did in my father's forge. It is either books, or the affairs of the tenants, or visiting the monastery all day when you are not at work with your sword exercises. When I have done with my work with Leof I like to lie down in the sun and take it quietly, and I cannot understand how you can be for ever on foot."

"I have so many things to do, Osgod; there is so much to learn, and I do not wish to grow up a mere beer swiller like Edmund of Angmering or Ethelred of Arundel. Their lives are, as far as I can see, no whit higher or more worthy than that of their own serfs, from whom they differ only that they eat more, drink more, and sleep on softer beds. Earl Harold expects better things than that of me, and I want to make myself worthy of being one of those in whom he can place confidence and on whom he can depend in case of trouble. I have heard him say how bad it is for England that our thanes are, in learning and culture, so far behind the nobles of other countries, and that if England is ever to take her place among great nations it must be by her thanes first raising themselves to the level of the nobles abroad, who are the counsellors of their kings. I can never hope to be anything

like Earl Harold, who is the wisest and greatest of Englishmen, but I do hope so to fit myself that some day he may think me worthy of trust and confidence."

"Well, master," Osgod said lazily, "every one to his liking. I hope to be a good soldier and your true servant, but as for all this thinking and learning it would weary me to death."

CHAPTER III. – AT COURT

Two months after Wulf had gone down to Steyning one of Harold's men brought a short letter from the earl himself. "I am glad to hear, Wulf," it began, "from my steward, Egbert, that you are applying yourself so heartily to your work. I have also good accounts of you from the Prior of Bramber, who sometimes writes to me. He is a good and wise man, as well as a learned one, and I am right glad to hear that you are spending your time so well. I told you that you should hear if there was any alteration in your affair. Some change was made as soon as you had left; for, two days later, meeting William of London in the presence of the king, I told him that I had inquired further into the matter, and had found that you were by no means the aggressor in the quarrel with young Fitz-Urse, for that he had fingered his dagger, and would doubtless have drawn it had there not been many bystanders. I also said that, with all respect to the bishop, it would have been better had he not inclined his ears solely to the tale of his page, and that under the circumstances it was scarcely wonderful that, being but a boy, you had defended yourself when you were, as you deemed, unjustly accused.

"The prelate sent at once for his page, who stoutly denied that he had touched the hilt of his dagger, but I too had sent off for Ulred, the armourer, and he brought with him a gossip who had also been present. I asked the king's permission to introduce them, and they entirely confirmed your story. Fitz-Urse exclaimed that it was a Saxon plot to do him harm, and I could see that the bishop was of the same opinion; but the king, who is ever anxious to do justice, declared at once that he was sure that the two craftsmen were but speaking the truth. He sternly rebuked Fitz-Urse as a liar, and signified to the bishop that he would do well to punish him severely by sending him back to Normandy, for that he would not tolerate his presence at court—an order which the bishop obeyed with very bad grace. But at any rate the lad was sent away by a ship a week later.

"After the bishop had left the audience-chamber the king said that he was afraid he had acted with harshness to you, as it seemed that the fault was by no means wholly on your side, and that I could at once recall you if I wished to do so. I thanked his majesty dutifully, but said I thought it were best in all ways that for a time you should remain away from court. In the first place, you deserved some punishment for your want of respect for the bishop, to whom you should have submitted yourself, even if you had thought him unjust. In the second place, as Fitz-Urse had been sent away, it would create an animosity against you on the part of his countrymen at court were you to reappear at once; and lastly, that I considered it would be to your benefit to pass at least some months on your estates, learning your duties as thane, and making the acquaintance of your people. Therefore, I wished you to continue at Steyning. It will assuredly be pleasant for you to know that you are no longer to be considered as being there in consequence of having fallen under the king's displeasure, but simply because it is my wish that you should for a time dwell among your people, and fit yourself to be a wise lord to them."

Wulf was much pleased at the receipt of this letter, partly because the fact that he had been sent away in disgrace stung him, and he had felt obliged frankly to acknowledge to the neighbouring thanes that he had been sent down on account of a quarrel with a Norman page; but chiefly because it showed the kindly interest that Harold felt in him, and that although absent he had still thought of him.

It was nigh ten months before he heard again. During that time he had grown a good deal, and although he would never be tall, his frame had so widened out that it was evident he would grow into an exceptionally powerful man.

At sixteen he was still a boy, and although his position at Steyning, where, although still under the nominal tutelage of the earl's steward, he was practically lord and master, accustomed to play the part of host within its walls, and that of feudal lord over the wide estates, had given him the habits of authority and the bearing of one who respected himself, the merry expression of his face, aided by a slight upward turn of his nose, showed that in other respects he was unchanged. He had learned

with his weapons all that Leof could teach him. He could wield a light battle-axe, and with his sword could turn aside or sever an arrow however sharply shot at him, provided that he had time to mark its flight. With a quarter-staff he was a match for any youth on the estate, and he could hurl a dart with unerring aim.

Osgod had sprung up into a powerful young fellow, taller than his master by well-nigh a head, and his equal in exercises requiring strength rather than quickness and skill. His duties at table had been delegated to another, for there was a certain clumsiness in Osgod's strength that no teaching could correct; and in his eagerness to serve his master he so frequently spilled the contents of a cup, or upset a platter, that even Egbert acknowledged that it was hopeless to attempt to make a skilful servitor of him.

The earl's second letter contained only the words:

"Come up to London as soon as you receive this. Leave Egbert in charge of everything as before."

Although the time had not seemed long, and his occupations were so varied that he had never felt dull since he had come down, Wulf was delighted to receive the summons. He had, unconsciously to himself, begun to feel restless, and to wonder whether Earl Harold had altogether forgotten his existence.

"We are going back to London, Osgod," he shouted.

"I am right glad of it," the young giant said, stretching his arms lazily. "I am grievously tired of the country, and had it not been that nothing would induce me to leave your service, I have thought sometimes that I would gladly be back again in my father's smithy, hammering away on hot iron. I used to think it would be the grandest thing possible to have nothing to do, but I have found that one can have too much of a good thing. Certainly I am glad to be going back, but I am not sure whether it won't be worse at court than it is here."

"Perhaps we may not be staying there," Wulf said encouragingly. "Maybe the earl is going to start on some expedition; though we have heard of no trouble, either in the North or in Wales. But even if I stay at court, Osgod, you will often be able to be away, and can spend some hours a day at the smithy, where, if you like, you can take off your smock and belabour iron to your heart's content. I should say you would be a rare help to your father, for, as Leof says, for a downright solid blow there are not many men who could surpass you."

Osgod laughed. "Leof has not forgiven that blow I dealt him a month ago, when I flattened in his helmet with my blunted axe and stretched him senseless on the ground; in faith, I meant not to hit so hard, but he had been taunting me with my slowness, and seeing an opening for a blow at his head I could not resist it, and struck, as he was always telling me to do, quickly."

"You well-nigh killed him," Wulf said, shaking his head; "he has not taken an axe in his hand since, at least not with either of us. He said to me the first time I invited him to a bout, it was high time a man should give up teaching when he came to be struck senseless by a boy."

"Not much of a boy," Osgod replied, "seeing that I stand over six feet high, and got my muscles hardened early at the forge. However, he bears me no ill-will; all he ever said to me on the matter was, 'I am glad to see that you can shake off your sluggishness sometimes, Osgod; I should have been less earnest in my advice to you to strike more quickly if I had thought that you were going to do it at my expense. Keep those blows for your master's enemies, lad. If you deal them to his friends you will lessen their number.'"

"Have my horse brought round at once, Osgod, have the wallets packed, and be ready to start in an hour's time. I cannot go without riding over to say good-bye to the prior and some of the monks. Do you, when you have packed, follow me; it is not greatly out of the way, and I shall meet you on the road. A short half-hour will suffice for me there."

"So Harold has sent for you, Wulf?" the prior said, when the young thane told him that he was on the point of starting for London. "'Tis as well. Come back when you may, you will now be fit to

rule at Steyning, and to rule well, but I foresee that we are likely to have you but seldom down here. You are in good train to rise high among Englishmen. You already possess the favour of Earl Harold, who is, in all respects but name, King of England. You possess far more learning than most young men of your rank, and as Harold rightly thinks much of such knowledge, you are likely, if you live, to learn more. But better than this, so far as your prospects are concerned in the troubled times that may be coming, you are quick witted and ready. I hear that you are already very proficient in arms, and a match for most grown men. Best of all, so far as your future happiness is concerned, you have a kind heart and a good disposition. You could scarce be a page of Earl Harold's and not be a true Englishman and patriot; therefore, my son, I think that I can predict a bright and honourable future for you if Harold lives and reigns King of England. Be steadfast and firm, lad. Act ever in what your heart tells you is the right; be neither hasty nor quarrelsome. But,"—he broke off with a smile, "you have had one lesson that way already. Now I will detain you no longer. *Pax vobiscum*, may God keep and guard you! If opportunity offer, and a messenger comes this way, write me a few lines; news of you will be always welcome at Bramber."

Leaving the prior, Wulf paid a hurried visit to the chambers where the monks were engaged in their various avocations, and then started at a canter and met Osgod coming along with a sumpter-horse carrying the wallets, a store of provisions for the way, and Wulf's arms and armour fastened to the crupper of his saddle.

"You have done well, Osgod," Wulf said as he turned his horse, and at a quieter pace proceeded beside him. "I forgot to give you any directions or to speak about your bringing a pack-horse with you, but I am glad you thought of it, for our steeds would have been heavily burdened had all that baggage been divided between them."

"We go back more heavily laden than we came," Osgod remarked. "My wardrobe was then of the scantiest, and your own has been considerably added to since we came here. Truly, Wulf, I feel that I have changed mightily in this year, and can scarce believe that it is but a twelvemonth back since I flung down my hammer and started on my tramp to Guildford with a change of clothes dangling from the end of my cudgel. I was glad when you and your party overtook me, for I was badly scared once or twice when I met a rough fellow or two on the way, though, fortunately, they did not deem me worth robbing. We could give a good account of four or five of such knaves now."

"There has been a change indeed, Osgod, and in me as much as in you, though I have not shot up into such huge proportions. I was a page then, and had learned but to obey. I am a boy still, but I have begun to learn to rule; at any rate, to rule myself. I have not conquered my fault of hastiness altogether."

Osgod smiled broadly.

"You are quick in temper still, Wulf. You remember it was but yesterday that you rated me soundly because I had fed your hawks early, and they were too lazy to fly when you wanted them."

"Well, it was annoying," Wulf laughed; "and you deserved rating, since you have been told over and over again that the hawks were not to be fed early in the morning. Besides, the rating did you no harm."

"None at all, master. I know that you mean not what you say, and hard words break no bones. I should have thought no more of it had you yourself not remarked that you were still somewhat hasty of temper."

"I was wrong, Osgod," Wulf said, holding out his hand, "but you know that I love you, and that though your carelessness and forgetfulness chafe me sorely at times, I mean not what I say."

"I know it, master, and I would not have you other than you are. I suppose it is the thickness of my skull that prevents me from taking in all that I am told, and perhaps if I had more to do I might do it better. I shall be able to play my part when it comes to hard blows, and you must remember that no one can excel in all things. A staghound is trusty and sure when on the chase, but he could not be taught to fetch and to carry and to perform all sorts of tricks such as were done by the little

mongrel cur that danced to the order of the mountebank the other evening. My father always said I was a fool, and that, though for a piece of rough hammering I was by no means amiss, I should never learn the real intricacies of repairing fine armour. Everything has its good, you see, Master Wulf; for had my father thought better of me in his trade, I doubt if he would ever have given me leave to quit it, and go as your man."

"I have no doubt that is so, Osgod, and heartily glad am I that you showed no genius for smith's work. Nature evidently intended you to damage casques and armour rather than to repair them. You have not got all my clothes with you," he added, as he looked round at the led horse.

"No indeed, Wulf," Osgod said, "nor a quarter of them, for in truth your wardrobe has grown prodigiously since we came here. I had to talk it over with Egbert, having but little faith in my own wits. He advised me to take the two suits that were most fitted for court, saying that if he heard you were going to remain there he would send on the rest in charge of a couple of well-armed men."

"That is the best plan, doubtless," Wulf agreed. "My hawking suit and some of the others would be useless to me at court, and it would have been folly to have burdened ourselves with them if we are likely to return hither shortly."

"Where shall we stop to-night?" Osgod asked.

"At the monastery of the Grey Friars, where we put up on our way from London. It will not be a long ride, but we started late. To-morrow we shall of course make a long day's journey to Guildford. I don't know what travellers would do were it not for the priories."

"Sleep in the woods, Wulf, and be none the worse for it. For myself, I would rather lie on the sward with a blazing fire and the greenwood overhead, than sleep on the cold stones in a monk's kitchen, especially if it happened to be a fast-day and one had gone to rest on a well-nigh empty stomach."

"It is never so bad as that," Wulf laughed; "as a rule, however much the monks may fast, they entertain their guests well."

"If it is an English monastery they do," Osgod admitted, "but not where there is a Norman prior, with his new-fangled notions, and his vigils and fasts and flagellations. If I ever become a monk, which I trust is not likely, I will take care to enter a Saxon house, where a man may laugh without its being held to be a deadly sin, and can sleep honestly without being wakened up half a dozen times by the chapel bell."

"You would assuredly make but a bad monk, Osgod, and come what will I do not think you will ever take to that vocation. But let us urge on our horses to a better pace, or the kitchen will be closed, and there will be but a poor chance of supper when we reach the priory."

"Well, Osgod," Wulf asked the next morning as they rode on their way, "how did you fare last night?"

"Well enough as to the eating, there was a haunch of cold venison that a king needn't have grumbled at, but truly my bones ache now with the hardness of my couch. Couch! there was but the barest handful of rushes on the cold stone floor, and I woke a score of times feeling as if my bones were coming through the skin."

"You have been spoilt, Osgod, by a year of sleeping softly. I marked more than once how thickly the rushes were strewn in that corner in which you always slept. How will it be when you have to stand the hardships of a soldier's life?"

"I can sleep well on the ground with my cloak round me," Osgod said steadily, "and if the place be hard you have but to take up a sod under your hip-bone and another under your shoulder, and you need not envy one who sleeps on a straw bed. As to cold and wet, I have never tried sleeping out of doors, but I doubt not that I can stand it as well as another. As to eating and drinking, they say that Earl Harold always looks closely after his men, and holds that if soldiers are to fight well they must be fed well. At any rate, Master Wulf, I shall be better off than you will, for I have never been accustomed, as you have, to such luxuries as a straw bed; and I doubt whether you ever went

hungry to bed as I have done many and many a time, for in the days when my father hoped to make an armourer of me I was sent off supperless whenever I bungled a job or neglected his instructions. I wonder what the earl can want you for in such haste?"

"I do not suppose he wants me in any haste at all. He may have spoken to the king about me, and when Edward again spoke of my returning he would simply send for me to come at once."

Such indeed proved to be the case. When he waited on Harold as soon as he arrived the latter held out his hand; "I am glad to see you back again, Wulf. A year of country air and exercise has done wonders for you, and though you are not as tall as you might be, you have truly widened out into fair proportions, and should be able to swing a battle-axe of full weight. Thinking it was time for you to return here, I spoke to the king, who was in high good-humour, for he had been mightily pleased that morning at some of the figures the monks have wrought in stone for the adornment of his Church of St. Peter; therefore he not only consented to your return, but chided me gently for not having called you up to town before. 'The matter had altogether slipped my mind,' he said; 'I told you that he might return directly it was shown that it was the bishop's page who was in fault, and from that day I have never thought of it.'

"I told the king that I had purposely kept silence, for I thought the day had come when you should learn your duties down there instead of dawdling away your time at court. You need not put on a page's attire any more. You will remain here as my ward, and I have had so good an account from the good prior of Bramber that in a short time I shall be able to receive your oath as Thane of Steyning. You will attend me to court this evening as one of my gentlemen, and I will then present you to the king, whom it is well that you should thank for having pardoned you. I hear from the prior that the varlet you took down with you has grown into a big man, and is well-nigh as tall as I am already. He must have lodging with my followers while you are here."

Finding that he was to remain for the present at Westminster, Wulf sent off a messenger at once to request Egbert to forward the rest of his clothes immediately. That evening the earl took him into a chamber, where the king was seated surrounded by a few of his favourites.

"This is Wulf of Steyning, my lord king," Harold said, "the youth who was unfortunate enough to incur your royal displeasure a year since, and who has upon your order returned from his estates. I have had excellent accounts of him from my good friend the prior of Bramber, who speaks well alike of his love of study and his attention to the affairs of his estate. I have also heard from other hands of his progress in military exercises, and that he bids fair to become a valiant and skilful soldier of your majesty. He has prayed me to express his thanks to your majesty for having pardoned him, and having authorized me to enrol him again in the ranks of my followers here."

The king nodded pleasantly in answer to the deep bow that Wulf made. "I was somewhat hasty in your matter," he said graciously, "and dealt out somewhat hard measure to you, but doubtless, as Earl Harold said, your stay in the country has been for your good, and I am glad to hear that the worthy prior of Bramber speaks so well of you."

The earl gave a little nod to Wulf, and the latter, gathering that his case was concluded, and that he could now go at once, retired with another deep obeisance.

Leaving the palace he made his way to the armourer's, whither he had sent Osgod as soon as they arrived. The smith doffed his cap as he entered. "I am right glad to see you back again, young master. My son gave me a rare surprise, for truly when he walked in I did not know him again, not having had him in my thoughts or having heard of his arrival. The varlet saw that I did not know him, and said, 'Canst mend me a broken dagger, master armourer?'

"'That can I,' I answered, and would have said more, when a laugh came from his great mouth that well-nigh shook the house, and I knew that it was my son, though the note was deeper than his used to be, and was, as I told him, more like the bellow of a bull than the laugh of a young fellow of eighteen. His mother looked in from behind the shop and said, 'Surely that must have been Osgod's laugh.' 'It was,' I said, 'and there he stands before you. The impudent rascal has topped me by over

half a head, though I am a fair height myself.' Then she carried him away, and I saw no more of him until I had finished my work. Since supper he has been telling me somewhat of what he has been doing down with you, which, as far as I can learn, amounts to nothing, save the exercising of his arms and the devouring of victuals."

"He did all there was to do, Ulred, except that he could not bring that long body and those loose arms of his to offer me cup or platter without risk to my garments, and even Egbert was forced to agree that he should never be able to make a courtly servant of him; but save in that matter Osgod has got on right well. He has always been ready when I wanted him, and prepared at once to start with me either on foot or horseback whenever I wished to go out. He is growing into a mighty man-at-arms, and well-nigh broke the skull as well as the casque of the captain and teacher of my house carls. Another two years, if he goes on as he has done and we go into battle again, no thane in the land will have a stouter body-guard."

"Are you going to stay in London, Master Wulf?"

"Yes; that is, while the earl is here. When he is away hunting or attending to the affairs of the state I suppose I shall go with him. Osgod of course will go with me. While here I shall have but little use for his services, and he can be at home most part of the day."

"Then I trust you will soon be off," the smith said bluntly, "for to have a youth six feet and a hand in height hanging about doing nothing would set all the men thinking it well that they too should be idle. Osgod was always ready enough for a talk, though I do not say he could not work when it was necessary, but now that he is in your worship's service and under no orders of mine, his tongue will never cease wagging."

"Oh, I am ready to work a bit, father. I know how long it took me to hammer out a bar before, and I shall be curious to find out in what time I can do it now."

"I doubt you will spoil more than you make, Osgod. Still, I too shall be curious to see how many strokes you can give with the big hammer, and how quickly you can beat a bar into a blade."

The stay in town was, however, of short duration, for four days later the earl told him that he was going down to his house at Bosham, and that he was to accompany him.

"'Tis three months since I was away from London," he said. "The king is going down into Hereford to hunt, and I am therefore free for a while, as there are no matters of state that press at present, though I fear that ere very long the Welsh will be up again. I hear that their King Griffith, not content with the beating he had a short time since, is again preparing for war. Still it may be some time before the storm bursts, and I am longing to be down again among the green woods or afloat on the water."

Harold took with him a large party of personal friends, his brother Wulfnoth, and his nephew Hakon. Among the party was Beorn, a young thane, who also was a ward of the earl. He was two years older than Wulf, but there had been a close friendship between them at Edward's court. Shortly after Wulf's departure Beorn had also been sent by the earl to his estates in Hampshire, and had been recalled at the same time.

Beorn was far less strong and active than Wulf, having been very weakly during the early years of his life, nor had he had the same advantages of education, as he only became Harold's ward a year after Wulf was installed as a page at Westminster. He was a youth of good and generous disposition, and looked with feelings of admiration upon the strength and skill in arms of the younger lad, and especially at his power of reading.

"I can never be like you there, Wulf," he would say, "but I hope I may some day grow as strong as you and as skilful in arms."

Beorn's stay in the country had done much for him, his thin tall frame had filled out and there was a healthy colour on his cheek. He had practised diligently at military exercises, and although he found when, on the first day after Wulf's arrival in London, he challenged him to a trial in arms, he was still very greatly his inferior in skill and strength, he bade fair to become a gallant fighter.

"It is a disappointment to me, Wulf," he said as he picked up the battle-axe that had been struck from his hand and sent flying across the hall by a sweeping blow of Wulf's weapon. "I have really worked very hard, and I did think that I ought to have caught you up, seeing that I am two years the elder. But you have gained more than I have. I did as well as the other youths who were taught with me by the house-carl Harold sent down with me, but I am sure I shall never be as quick or hit as strongly as you do."

"Oh yes, you will, Beorn. Age is nothing. You see you were sick and ailing till you were fifteen years old, so those years counted for nothing, and instead of being two years older than I am you are many years younger. In another four or five years you will come to your full strength, and will be able to strike a far heavier blow than I can now; although I do not say heavier than I may be able to do then, as you are neither so wide nor so deep chested as I am. But what does it matter, one only fights sometimes. You have other advantages, you are gentler in speech and manner and have a handsome face. When we were pages together the bower-maidens of the queen always made much of you, while they called me impudent, and would give me many a slap on the cheek."

"Well, you deserved it richly, Wulf, for you were always playing tricks upon them—hiding their distaffs or tangling their thread, and giving them pert answers when they wanted you to do their errands. Well, I hope we shall be always great friends, Wulf. Your estates lie not far from mine, and though we can scarce be called neighbours we shall be within a day's ride of each other, and I trust that we shall fight together under the good earl, and often spend our time at each other's houses, and hunt and feast together."

"I hope we shall be much together, Beorn," Wulf said warmly, "and that we shall be sworn friends; but as for feasting, I care but little for it. We Saxon thanes are too fond both of food and wine-cup, and though I am no monk I would that our customs could be altered. I hate foreigners, but their ways are in many respects better than ours. The Normans, it is true, may not be much better than we are, but then they are but Northmen a little civilized; but I have heard the earl say that the French, and still more the Italians, are vastly ahead of us in all arts, and bear themselves with a courtesy and gentleness to each other that puts to shame our rough manners."

"We should be neither happier nor better that I can see, Wulf, did we adopt the manners of these Italians you speak of instead of our own."

"Perhaps not, Beorn, but we should be able to make the people happier and better if we could raise them."

"I will not even grant that, Wulf. Think you that the smith and the shepherd, the bowmaker and the weaver, would be any the happier could they read or even write than they are as they sing Saxon songs over their work? I should like to be able to read, because Harold thinks much of it, but except for that I see not that it would do me much good. If the king makes me any further grant of land it will be doubtless properly made out, and I can get a clerk or a monk to read it to me. My steward will keep the tallies of the tenants' payments. I can learn the history of our forefathers as well from the songs and tales of the gleemen as from books."

"You are as bad as my man Osgod," Wulf said indignantly.

"Well, you need not get hot about it, good Wulf," Beorn laughed. "When you come to see me I will have gleemen to sing the deeds of our fathers to you. When I come to you I will sit as mum as a mouse while you read to me from some monk's missal. I will force you neither to eat nor to drink more than it pleases you, and you shall give me as much to eat and drink as it pleases me, then we shall be both well satisfied. As for your man Osgod, I wish I had such a fellow. He will be well-nigh a giant one of these days, and in strength may come to rival the earl, who is said to be the strongest man on English soil."

"He is a good fellow, Beorn, and I could wish for no better to hold a shield over me in the day of battle or to stand back to back with me in a hand-to-hand fight."

"You should get him to stand in front of you," Beorn laughed. "He would be a rare screen against arrows and javelins."

The friends were well pleased when they heard they were both to accompany Harold to Bosham, which was one of the favourite abodes of the Earls of Wessex. It had originally been built as a hunting-seat, but Godwin had grown to love the place, with its woods extending for miles back and its quiet landlocked harbour, and additions had been made until it had grown to be, in point of size at least, a residence worthy of the great earls, and Harold preferred it to any of the many mansions belonging to him. It was a large and gay party that rode down the road through the quiet woods of Surrey and Sussex. They put up each night at the houses of thanes, where, as notice had been sent of their coming, they were royally entertained, and those selected were proud to afford hospitality to the earl.

For a week they stayed at Bosham, hunting in the forests, going off in parties under the guidance of the foresters, some who cared not for hard labour, hunting in the woods between Bosham and the hills, while others went far inland into the weald, which was for the most part covered by a great forest, with but a few scattered hamlets here and there. Smoke rising among the trees showed where the charcoal-burners were at work, or where the furnaces were glowing, converting the ore into the tough iron that furnished arms and armour for the greater portion of the men of the south. At the end of the week the earl announced to his guests that he had provided a new diversion for them.

"You see those three ships in the harbour," he said. "They were brought here last night, and three hundred men have been at work all day preparing them for our reception. I propose that we all embark with our dogs and servants, and sail along the coast, landing where we please and taking our sport. As we sail eastward there are abundant forests, and the game is far more plentiful than here, and our trip will partake of the character of an adventure in thus dropping upon unknown places. Tents have been stored on board the vessels, with abundance of good cheer of all kinds, so that we can establish ourselves where we will, and sleep on shore instead of rocking uneasily on the waves."

The proposal was received with acclamation, and the following morning the whole party embarked upon the three ships. The largest was occupied by Harold himself, his brother and nephew, and six or seven of his principal thanes. In this craft too went Wulf and Beorn with their men. On issuing from the harbour the ships' heads were turned to the east. The wind was light and fitful, the sails therefore were not loosed, and they proceeded under oars. There was but little tide until they reached the extremity of the long point of Selsea, past which they were hurried at great speed by the rapid current. Rowing closer inshore they got into quieter water, and continued their way until tide turned, when they anchored, and landing with their dogs hunted in the woods for some hours.

On their return to the sea-shore they found the tents erected and supper prepared, and the sport having been good they remained another day. The tide took them the next day past the shore of Wulf's estate, and he begged the earl to land there and to pass a day or two with his company at Steyning; but all were bent upon the chase, and they kept on until they reached the point where the white cliffs began to rise from the edge of the water. Here they landed again, and spent two or three days in hunting. Neither Wulf nor Beorn had been to sea before, and the quiet motion of the ships with their bellying sails and banks of sturdy oarsmen delighted them. There had been scarcely any motion, and neither had felt the qualms which they had been warned were generally experienced for a while by those who went upon the sea for the first time.

When the journey was resumed Wulf was struck with surprise and almost awe by the mighty cliffs that rose up from the water's edge. Neither he nor Beorn had seen anything like this, for although both their estates bordered the sea, the shores were flat, and vessels, if needs be, could be hauled up on shore.

"What would happen if a gale were to burst upon us here?" Wulf said to his companion. "If the waves were to dash us against those white rocks the ships would be broken up like egg-shells."

"Your question is answered," Beorn said, as a bay suddenly opened to their sight. "You see we are going in here, and shall anchor snugly somewhere up this river in front of us, which is truly the

best haven we have seen since we left Bosham." Half an hour later the vessels were moored to the bank, close to a wooden bridge which spanned the little river.

CHAPTER IV. – A STORM

After hunting for two days in the forests lying behind Newhaven, and in the valley in which Lewes lies, they again embarked. The master of Harold's ship had expressed some doubts as to the weather, but as he stated that it was but some eight miles round the great cliff that they saw to the east, and that beyond this the rocks ceased and there was a bay in which they could ride at anchor, or if necessary beach their vessels, it was determined to proceed, as Harold had the day before been visited by a thane whose house lay but two miles from the shore, and had accepted his invitation for the party to take up their abode there for a few days, as he promised them good sport in the forest. The cliffs rose higher as they proceeded. They kept closer inshore, and although they could see that the clouds were flying rapidly overhead they felt no breeze whatever, being protected from the wind by the lofty cliffs. The master was evidently uneasy, for he urged the rowers to exert themselves to the utmost. Wulf and Beorn stood looking with amazement at the cliffs towering up beside them.

"Is it not strange that they should rise like this—like a wall from the water?" Wulf said. "Had they been built up by human hands they could scarcely have been more erect and regular. I have never seen anything at all like it on land."

"Then it must be something formed by the sea, Wulf. Do you see those caverns at the foot of the cliff, and in some places you see there is a mound of rocks as if newly formed? It may be that this white stone is soft, and that the sea beating against the foot wears it away in time, and then the rock overhead gives way by its weight and so leaves an upright wall. Perhaps, long back, these hills were like other hills, sloping gradually down into the sea; but in time, perhaps many, many years before the Romans landed here, the sea began to eat them away, and has continued to do so ever since, until they are as we see them."

"That may be so, Beorn. My father has told me that he could remember when our estates stretched a good half-mile farther seaward, but had since been eaten away by the waves, and he says that his father had told him the same thing; therefore, as you say, in many hundreds of years even hills, if the stone were soft, might also be worn away. There we are rounding the point, and beyond there are no more cliffs; doubtless it is in this bay that the Shipmaster Edred thinks to anchor."

At that moment their conversation was cut short by a tremendous gust of wind rushing down the sloping hill into the bay striking them with such terrible force that the ship heeled over until the water rushed above the bulwark. The men were thrown against each other, and several fell down to leeward. The confusion was heightened by the fact that the great sail, which was but loosely furled to its yard, burst the ropes, and the wind catching it buried the craft still further, and she would have filled and sunk had not the ship-master seized the tiller, and aided by the two sailors there pushed it up, and so the boat's head payed off from the wind and ran before it.

The master shouted to the men to lower the sail, which was bellying and flapping violently, but before his orders could be obeyed there was a crash. The mast snapped off at the slings of the yard, and the wreck fell over the bow of the boat. All hands were employed for some minutes in getting the sail on board and furling it to its yard, which was laid lengthways along the thwarts. It was found that three men standing in the bows had been killed, and several others badly hurt. The vessel was by this time some distance from shore. Nothing could be done until she was freed of the water, with which she was nigh half-full, and all hands were employed in bailing it out.

The squall had increased rather than lessened in fury, and by the time the water was cleared out they were two miles from the headland. Orders were then given to man the oars again but it was found that several of these had been lost, having been washed away when the men leapt up, believing that the boat would capsize, or had slipped from the rowlocks unnoticed while they were engaged in getting in the sail. This was a serious misfortune, for every oar was needed to force her through the

water in the teeth of the wind, which was blowing directly off shore. The remaining oars were all double-banked, Harold himself and his thanes taking their places among the rowers.

For an hour they laboured their hardest, but at the end of that time they were farther from shore than when they began, the force of the wind acting on the poop and broad hull driving her seaward faster than the rowers could force her shoreward. The sea, too, was now getting up, and the motion of the vessel rendered it increasingly difficult to row. Edred left his place at the tiller and went forward to Harold.

"My lord," he said, "it is useless. In spite of your efforts we are drifting farther and farther out, and from the look of the sky I fear that we are going to have a great gale, and there is nothing to do but to set a little sail and to run before it. Maybe there will presently be a shift of wind, which may enable us to make for shore. At present you are but exhausting yourselves in vain, and the sea will soon get up so much that it will be impossible to use the oars."

"So be it," Harold replied; and at the master's orders the oars were laid in, and the men prepared to get sail upon her. A sailor climbed up the mast and fastened the stays close to the point which was broken off. Then another joined him, and a block was lashed to the mast just below the stays, and the halliards were rove through it; then Edred brought out a small sail, and this was hoisted, and the vessel, which had before been rolling heavily, began to glide swiftly through the water. They had had the satisfaction of seeing that their consorts, although like themselves nearly capsized by the squall, had suffered no damage, but after lowering their sails and yards to the deck, had succeeded in rowing into the bay, their lighter hull and draught enabling the oars to drive them through the water in the teeth of the wind.

"She is going along finely now," Wulf said.

"Yes," Beorn agreed; "but before night there is like to be a sea that will try her."

Harold held a consultation with the master, and presently all the men were called to work. The great sail was unrolled from its yard and a portion cut off, somewhat wider than the beam of the boat, and in length reaching from the bow to the mast. Nails and hammers were brought up from the little cabin, and the canvas was stretched from bulwark to bulwark and strongly nailed to the wood on either side, oars being first lashed across at short intervals to support it.

"I suppose that is for us to lie under, Master Wulf?" Osgod said. "It is a pity it was not erected before, for there is not a man on board who is not drenched to the skin."

"It is not put there to keep you dry, Osgod, but to keep the waves from coming into the ship. But she goes over them well. The wind is getting up, Osgod, and we shall have a great sea presently."

"Then why don't we turn and sail back again? It seems to me to be folly to be running away from the land if such is going to be the weather."

"How can we sail back again? Do you not see that it is the wind that is blowing us off, and the vessel must go as the wind takes her. One can go a little this way or that, but no man ever yet sailed in the teeth of the wind."

"This is the first time I have ever been to sea," Osgod said, "and I trust it will be the last. The tossing of the ship makes me strangely giddy, and many of the servants are downright ill with it. Why men should go on the water when they can walk upon the land is more than I can say. I think I will go and lie down under the shelter of the sail, for indeed I feel as if I were about to die."

Wulf himself was feeling strangely uncomfortable. As long as they had been at work he had not felt unwell, for the necessity of holding on to the bulwarks or ropes, and the excitement of their strange position, had saved him from experiencing many qualms; but both he and Beorn were soon glad to follow Osgod's example, and to lie down on the boards under the rowers' benches. Fiercer and fiercer blew the wind, more and more violent became the motion of the ship; masses of water fell on the canvas forward, as she plunged into the waves, and would have soon beaten it in had it not been for the support of the oars. By evening most of the men were lying under the shelter, while Harold's

brother and friends had retired to the little cabin in the stern. The earl himself remained by the side of the ship-master, who had taken his place close to the tiller, which was worked by four men.

"Think you that she will weather it, Edred?"

"I have little fear about that, my lord. She is a staunch boat, and I have been aboard her in seas as heavy as this. Besides, that thought of yours of stretching the canvas across her bow has greatly improved her chances. The water runs off as fast as it falls on it, and none comes on board. Had it not been for this every man would have had to bail all night. No, I have no fear of her weathering the gale. What I am afraid of is, that if this wind continues to blow we shall assuredly be lost on the coast of Normandy."

"That would be an ill fortune, indeed, for I know that the Normans count all that are cast on their shores as lawful prey; and even if we reach the land in safety and escape murder at the hands of the lord of the soil and his people, I may fall into the hands of Duke William, who is assuredly no friend of mine, seeing that I stand in the way of his designs upon the throne of England. Truly it was an evil moment when the thought of taking to the sea occurred to me, and I would give a broad slice of my earldom to be back at Bosham."

Hour by hour the waves increased in size and violence, and often poured in over the sides. The number of men on board was too great for all to work effectively. They therefore were divided into two parties, one being engaged in bailing while the other lay under cover, the change being made every hour. Wulf preferred working to lying still, for as the craft rolled the water washed over them, while the din of the waves striking the ship's side, and the cataracts of spray falling on to the canvas above were deafening, and it was impossible to get a moment's sleep. All were glad when morning broke, although the scene that met their eyes was the reverse of comforting. Small as was the amount of sail the vessel tore through the water under the pressure of the following wind. Great waves with white crests pursued her, and as they neared her stern it seemed to Wulf that they must inevitably fall over and crush her. The spray torn from the crest by the wind filled the air. The wind shrieked in the cordage, and the vessel creaked and groaned as she rolled from side to side.

"I would not have believed if I had not seen it, that the sea could be so violent and ill-behaved," Wulf shouted to Osgod, who was then standing beside him.

"If my clothes were but dry and my stomach full I would not mind so much," Osgod replied; "but to be drenched in water all night and to have nought to eat in the morning, takes the courage out of one mightily. How long, think you, will this go on?"

"That no one can say. It may last two or three days."

"And no food all that time!" Osgod exclaimed in dismay.

"We could stand that well enough, Osgod; but I do not think there is much chance of our being called upon to do so, for I heard one of the sailors say that unless the storm abates marvellously we are likely to be cast upon the French coast before nightfall."

"I should be glad to be cast anywhere so it were out of this. At least, whether it be France or England, there must be food to be had on shore."

"You do not understand, Osgod. Unless we happen to be cast upon a shelving coast with sand or gravel the craft may be dashed to pieces, and all lose their lives; for assuredly none could swim long in such a sea as this."

"Well, we must hope that we shall find a shore such as you speak of," Osgod said tranquilly; "but for my part, I am content to take the risk rather than wait another three days before getting anything to eat."

"And I would rather fast for a week than run the risk of the ship being broken up on the rocks," Wulf replied. "I can swim but little even in calm water, and I am sure that I could do nothing among those waves."

"I can swim, and will look after you," Osgod said confidently. "I used to swim every day in the Thames."

Wulf shook his head. "I daresay you might look after me if I fell into the Thames, Osgod, but it is a very different thing in a sea like this. These waves would dash a swimmer hither and thither as if he were but a chip of wood; besides, the spray would smother him. Even at this height above the water it is difficult to breathe when one turns round and faces the wind. I think that our only hope lies in running upon a flat shore, where the waves will wash the vessel up so high that we may be able to leap out from the bow on to the land beyond the reach of their fury."

Late in the afternoon one of the sailors on the poop astern shouted out that land was visible, and it was not long before it could be seen from the deck. All eyes were directed anxiously towards it.

"It is a rocky coast," Edred said, "but the rocks are not high, and if we can manage to direct the vessel between two of them we may escape. At present it is needful that most of the crew should keep in the stern, but when we are about to strike they must all run suddenly forward, so as to leap out as soon as she touches the ground. There will be but little time given to them, for assuredly the seas will batter her to pieces the moment she falls among the rocks."

Harold issued the order. All were to remain at their posts until he gave the word, and were then to run forward. The master scanned the shore anxiously.

"See you, my lord, that opening right ahead of us? It seems to me barely the width of the ship, but if I can direct her truly between the rocks methinks that most of the crew will gain the land. I shall myself take the helm. That is my duty and my right, and should I not succeed in making the shore, I shall at least die well contented with the thought that you who are the hope of England will be saved."

"I would fain stay with you, Edred."

"That cannot be, my lord. As it is my duty to stay by the ship to the last, so it is your first duty to save your life for England. I need no aid, for the vessel steers well, and by the help of a rope round the tiller I can manage her alone. Farewell, my lord, if we are not to meet again on earth. A very few minutes will decide our fate."

"Swimming will be of no use there, Osgod," Wulf said. "Look how the spray dashes itself against the black rocks."

"I thought not that it would be so bad," Osgod replied. "I wonder the master does not cast anchor."

"The ropes would not hold for a moment," Wulf said, "and when they broke we might drift broadside on to the rocks, which would mean destruction for all. The master is steering for that narrow opening between these two great rocks ahead. It will be but two or three minutes now before our fate is decided."

At this moment Harold shouted:

"Let each man make his peace with God." And baring his head he stood silently for a minute or two, imitated by all on board. Then Harold again raised his voice in a shout that was heard above the storm:

"Move forward now all of you, but not further forward than the mast; for if her head were too far down the master could not hold her straight. Moreover, the mast will assuredly fall forward and crush those in front of it. Therefore, let no man go forward of it until the ship strikes."

The sailors had already cut away the canvas stretched across the bow, and all on board clustered just aft the mast. Wulf looked back, and saw the master standing alone on the poop, with his eyes fixed in front of him and a look of grim resolve on his face. Then he turned again to look ahead. The scene was terrible. On either side extended a long line of white foam. Great masses of water were hurled against the rocks with a thundering crash, and the spray flew high up into the air, and then, caught by the wind, was carried far inland. The rocks were now but a few lengths ahead, and the passage between them looked terribly narrow, so narrow that he doubted if the ship could possibly pass through them. Not a word was spoken on board as the ship neared the opening. Now she swerved a little to one side, now a little to the other, as the waves lifted her stern and swept her along, but the hand of the master checked her immediately, and brought her head back to the line.

She was but a length away from the passage when there was a crash that shook her from stem to stern; then another great wave lifted her, and Wulf saw a black wall of rock gleaming with the water that streamed down it. The wall of rock flashed past the bulwarks so closely that he could have touched it. A moment later the ship struck again, this time with a force that threw many off their feet, while the mast fell over the bow. Then once more she lifted, shot a few feet further, then struck with tremendous force and remained stationary.

There was a grinding and splintering of planks, as the men rushed forward, and then a wave swept over the vessel, carrying all on deck before it into the cove beyond the rock, rolling them over and over up a sandy shore behind. Some managed to dig their hands and feet into the sand and to scramble out; more were sucked back again by the receding waters. As Wulf found himself in the water he felt his arm clutched, and Osgod shouted in his ear: "Do not struggle, I can keep you up!"

When thrown up on the sand Wulf tried in vain to resist the backward rush of the water; he and Osgod were borne out again. When the next wave again swept them up Wulf saw the earl standing knee-deep in the water, and as he was swept past, Harold seized him and Osgod, and with tremendous strength lifted them right out of the water. "Keep still!" he shouted; "your weight will help me to keep my feet." Wulf felt his supporter quiver as the water rushed out, for he was waist-deep now; but directly afterwards he set them both down on their feet, saying, "Run before the next wave comes." Ten yards farther and they were beyond the reach of the sea. Harold was with them, and directed those who had got ashore to form lines, taking hold of each other's hands, and so to advance far into the surf and grasp their comrades as they were swept up. Many were saved in this way, although some of the rescuers were badly hurt by floating pieces of wreckage, for the vessel had entirely broken up immediately after her course had been arrested.

As soon as all who could be seen were brought ashore it was found that ten men were missing, among whom was the master of the ship, most of them having probably been struck by floating timbers. As soon as it was certain that no more would come ashore alive Harold called the men together. Rough litters were made of oars and pieces of sail, for the conveyance of those who had broken limbs or were too much injured to walk, and the party prepared for a start. By this time several men, apparently of the fishing class, had approached, but stood a short distance away, evidently waiting for the departure of the party before beginning the work of collecting whatever the sea might cast up. Harold went over to them, and asked in the Norman tongue:

"What shore is this, and how far is it to the nearest town where we can obtain shelter and assistance?"

"You are in Ponthieu, in the territories of Count Conrad. The town of St. Valery is but two miles along the coast. There you can obtain all you need."

Returning to his men, Harold ordered the wounded to be raised, and the party at once set out. Harold had already taken off his gold chain and rings, and had told his companions to do the same, in order that the cupidity of the natives might not be excited nor their rank guessed at. As soon as they started Wulf went up to him.

"My lord," he said, "I fear that you have already been recognized by one of the fishermen. I saw him looking earnestly at you, and then whisper to one of his companions. After doing so he hurried away."

"That is bad news, Wulf; but I could hardly expect that I should be long unrecognized. There are many vessels come and go between the northern ports and our own, and in St. Valery there must be numbers of sailors and fishermen who have seen me in London. Besides, we are sure to be questioned by the count as to our rank and condition, and even could we conceal it for a while, the news is certain to be brought ere long from England of our having been blown off the coast, and when it was known it would be speedily guessed that we were the missing party. Hark you, Wulf; I have never heard aught good of Count Conrad, and one cannot say what steps he may take to force us to pay a heavy ransom, but it is like enough that he will do all he can to prevent the news of my being in his hands

from reaching the ears of the duke. It is likely that you and Beorn, being but lads, will be watched less rigorously than the rest of us. Should this be so, try, if you find an opportunity, to send the news to the duke that we are all held prisoners here. I shall, of course, endeavour to communicate with him, but some chance may occur by which you can do so more readily than I can."

"I will try to do so, my lord; but I trust this Norman count will treat you with all due honour and courtesy."

Wulf then fell back to Beorn's side, and half an hour later the shipwrecked party entered the gates of St. Valery. The townspeople flocked round them, and as soon as they learned that they were a party of shipwrecked Saxons who had been blown by the gale from England, they were led to the house of the officer in command of the town. He asked them a few questions, saying, "I must refer the matter to the count. By the usages of our land all who are cast upon it become his prisoners, to be put to ransom or otherwise as he may decide. However, food shall be supplied you at once, but you must be content to remain under guard until his pleasure is known."

They were accordingly at once placed in a disused granary, under the charge of a strong guard. Food was brought to them, and as soon as they had consumed this, most of the men threw themselves on the ground, worn out by their long exertions.

"This is a sorry welcome, Wulf, after our escape from the sea," Beorn said. "Truly the land seems as inhospitable as the ocean."

"It is not pleasant, Beorn, but at present I feel so thankful for my escape from those terrible waves that even the thought that we are all prisoners to this petty noble does not greatly concern me. Doubtless William of Normandy, who is the liege lord of the land, will speedily take us out of his hands. Were we alone it may be that we should suffer a long stay in his dungeons, but Harold and his brother are far too important personages to be allowed to remain in the hands of one of the duke's vassals."

"It is shameful," Beorn said indignantly. "I do not say that those who are cast on our shores may not be often pillaged and ill-treated by the common folk, but surely none of gentle blood would fail to show them kindness and hospitality."

"That is so on our coast of Sussex, but I have heard that further west, and certainly among the Danes of Northumbria, vessels cast on the coast are considered as gifts from the sea, and even the lives of those who gain the shore are not often respected. I regret much that Harold should be with us. It is true that his being here will doubtless shorten the term of our imprisonment, but it is unfortunate that he should fall into the hands of William, who is as famous for craft and subtlety as he is for bravery and skill as a leader."

"But what can he gain from Harold?" Beorn asked. "Our earl is well-nigh as much known throughout Europe as William of Normandy, and all Christendom would cry out with shame were he treated with ought but courtesy by the duke."

"I doubt not that he will treat him with courtesy, Beorn, but he may well wring some concessions from him before he lets him depart. He may bargain that the Normans may be again allowed to hold land in England, and to build their castles, as they did before Godwin and his sons returned from exile, and the Normans had to fly the land, save those around the person of the king. He may beg so many bishoprics for Norman priests. There is no saying what concessions he may extort. Of all princes in Europe I had rather Harold had fallen into the hands of any other than into those of William of Normandy."

"Truly I have never troubled my head about such matters, Wulf, and thought that it would be time to do so when I became a thane, and had a vote at the Witan."

"I have heard much of them from the prior of Bramber, who is a true Englishman, and though a priest, learned in all matters that appertain to the history of times past and of our own; he impressed upon me that just as a boy must practise arms if he is to bear them worthily as a man, so he should

study the story of our kings, and learn what is passing, not only in our own country but in others, if he is ever to raise his voice in council."

Harold and his thanes sat apart discussing the position, their conclusion being very similar to that arrived at by Wulf. Chivalry had but slight influence as yet in the West of Europe. Kings and princes cared little as to the means by which they attained an end. Rivals to a throne were put out of the way without scruple; the profession of arms was a business like any other, carried on for gain; a captured foe was valued chiefly for the amount of ransom that could be obtained for him; petty barons and powerful nobles alike levied exactions on those who might fall into their hands, unless previously provided with a safe-conduct. Years later, when King Richard was made a prisoner on his return from the Holy Land, it was only because of his great exploits for the recapture of the Holy Sepulchre that any feeling of reprobation was excited against his captors. Thus then, although Normandy was at peace with England, it did not seem an unnatural thing to Harold and his companions that the noble into whose hands they had fallen should demand a heavy ransom, or that the Duke of Normandy himself should utilize the opportunity for his advantage.

On the following morning they heard a large body of horsemen ride up. A minute later the governor accompanied by a Norman noble entered. They were followed by a number of men-at-arms, among whom was a fisherman.

"Now, fellow," the count said to this man, "which is the Saxon Harold?"

"I am," Harold said, advancing a step before his companions. "I am Harold, Earl of Wessex. I have with my companions been cast on your shores. I expect honourable treatment, and am willing to pay any reasonable ransom should you demand one."

"We will talk of that afterwards," the count said roughly; "for the present you go with me to my castle at Beaurain. But first do you and your men hand over all valuables that you may possess; they are forfeited to me, being cast up on my land."

Without a word Harold produced his chain of office and other ornaments, and dropped them into a helmet which a soldier at the orders of the count held out for them. His companions did the same, the thanes first and then the two lads.

"That will do," the count said to the soldiers. "That is my share, you can search the rest yourselves."

"I protest against this robbery," Harold said haughtily, "and will proclaim you in all the courts of Europe as one who is false to his station, and who condescends to pillage those whom fortune has cast on his shores."

"You can wait until you get an opportunity to do so," the count sneered; "it is not likely to come for some time. You can do as you like to the others," he went on to the governor, "I want not to be cumbered with them. You can doubtless find work for them on the fortifications, but if you can put them to no use or they are troublesome, cut their throats and throw them into the sea."

The Saxons fingered their knives, but Harold said in their own tongue, "Resistance would be folly, the time may come when we may turn the tables on this fellow." The soldiers now closed round Harold and the thanes and led them out of the house. Here they were ordered to mount each behind a soldier, and as soon as they had done so they rode out from St. Valery, and crossing the river Somme at Abbeville, and the Authie by a ford near Crecy, reached the fortress of Beaurain on the river Canche near the town of Hesdin before nightfall. On the road Wulf watched anxiously for a chance to escape, but none offered itself. Soldiers rode on both sides of the captives, and had he slipped from the horse he could not have hoped to make his escape across an open country. As soon as they entered the fortress Harold and the thanes were all consigned to dungeons, but the count, learning that the two lads had been Harold's pages, said they should wait on himself. "And see," he said to them, "that your service is good, if you do not wish to dangle over the moat at the end of a rope."

"It is a shame that such a man should be a nobleman," Beorn exclaimed indignantly to Wulf, as he saw that the soldiers were placing chains upon Harold before they led him away.

"He is a hateful-looking villain," Wulf said. "It is but lately that he revolted against William. I heard of it from the prior. His brother, the last Count of Ponthieu, joined France in an invasion of Normandy. He fell in an ambush at St. Aubin, and this man became count. For a time he was held prisoner by the duke, but afterwards he was freed, and received back his dominions as a vassal. His face is at once cruel and base. I told you the instructions Harold gave me, Beorn; the need for carrying them out has arrived, and I will try to make my escape without loss of time from this fortress to bear the tidings to the duke."

"I will escape with you, Wulf; two can get on better than one."

"That is so, Beorn, and I would gladly have you with me, but maybe I shall be detected in attempting to escape and be slain, or I may fall into the hands of peasants and be brought back here, and if we were together all hope of letting the duke know of our lord's captivity would be at an end. Therefore it were best that I made the attempt first. If I fail, which is like enough, then do you in turn try to get away and bear the news to the duke."

Beorn did not like to stay behind, but he saw that Wulf's plan was best, and accordingly fell in with it.

"Will you go at once?" he asked.

"No; I will stay for a day or two to lull suspicion. They may watch us just at first, but if they see that we do as we are ordered with good-will they will cease to regard us so narrowly; moreover, it will be needful to know the place well before I devise a plan of escape."

CHAPTER V. – ROUEN

For the next two days the lives of the two young Saxons were well-nigh unbearable. At meals the count by turns abused and jeered at them, and his companions, following his example, lost no opportunity of insulting them in every way.

"If this goes on, Wulf," Beorn said as they threw themselves down on the ground late that night, when the carousal was ended, "I shall snatch the count's dagger from his belt and bury it in his heart, though they put me to death by torture afterwards."

"I thought of doing so myself, Beorn, to-night, when he threw a cup of wine over me. But I said to myself my life is not my own, Harold's rescue depends on it. We are bound as his men to suffer in patience whatever may befall us. In another hour I shall try to make my escape. When it was your turn to wait this evening I stole away for a time, and went to the shed where they keep the war-engines and took thence a coil of rope, which I have hidden in the courtyard. You know that we noticed last night where the sentries were placed, and decided where I might best drop from the wall unobserved. Fortunately the moat is dry at present, though they can turn water into it from the stream at will, so that once down I shall have no difficulty in getting away. Now I want you to go to sleep directly, I shall not stir until you do so, then when you are questioned in the morning you can say that I was by your side when you went to sleep, and that when you woke in the morning the place was vacant. You can say that I told you during the day that I could not suffer these insults much longer, and that you suppose that after you had gone to sleep I must have got up and either killed myself or in some way made my escape."

Beorn lay quiet for a time and then Wulf said suddenly, "I have changed my mind, Beorn; we will go together. I feel it is likely that in his wrath at my escape the count may slay you, and thus the object with which you remained behind would come to nothing, therefore it is best that you go with me."

"I was thinking so myself, Wulf, though I would not say it; but in truth I think the risks we may run in making our way to Rouen are small compared to those of staying here."

"We must lose no time, Beorn. The castle is quiet now, and we must be many miles away from here before morning, for you may be sure the count's horsemen will scour the country far and wide in pursuit of us."

They had that morning, before the count was up and their services were required, wandered about the fortress, apparently paying no attention to anything, but really closely observing the approaches to the walls and the general features of the country outside. They now stole out, keeping in the shadow of the building, until they reached the staircase leading up to the battlements, close to the point Wulf had fixed upon for making their descent. This had been chosen chiefly because no sentry was placed on that part of the wall, the watch generally being careless, as Normandy was at present at peace with its neighbours. When they reached the top of the steps they listened for a short time, but everything was silent. Then they stepped out on to the narrow pathway along the battlements, fastened one end of the rope round a piece of stonework and let the other end drop down into the fosse.

"Shall we both go down together, the rope is strong enough?" Beorn asked.

"It is strong enough, but we had better go separately, Beorn; we are neither of us accustomed to climb ropes, and if the upper one were to slip down too fast he might knock the other off the rope. It makes no matter who goes first. I will if you like, only mind if you hear a footstep approaching let yourself down at once whether I am off the rope or not. Be sure and twist your legs tightly round it, or it will run through your fingers."

Taking hold of the rope he at once swung himself over, and without much difficulty reached the bottom in safety. He had scarcely done so when Beorn came down beside him with a rush.

"What made you come down like that, you narrowly missed coming on my head?"

"I believe I have cut my fingers to the bone," Beorn groaned; "I feel as if I were holding a bar of hot iron. You had scarcely started before I heard voices; they were evidently those of men going their rounds, so I caught hold of the rope and swung myself off, but before I got my legs fairly round the rope I began to slip, and though I gripped it as hard as I could I could not stop myself, but slid down like lightning."

"Hush!" Wulf whispered, "they are coming along above." The voices came nearer until they sounded directly overhead Wulf knew that it was very unlikely they would notice the rope in the dark, but he felt much relieved as he heard them pass on. He waited until they could no longer be heard.

"Now, Beorn, we can safely be off."

It was muddy at the bottom of the fosse, but not so deep as they thought it would be, and they scrambled up the opposite side and then struck across the country south. Presently they came upon a road, which they followed, until after three hours' walking they reached the Authie river, at a spot where the bank was broken down.

"This must be a ford, we had best try to wade across. Anyhow there cannot be very many yards to swim, and we can both manage that."

They found that the bottom was pebbly, and that even in the middle the water was not much above their waists.

"That is something done, at any rate," Beorn said. "Now which way shall we go? This road we are on seems to lead south and we cannot do better than follow it, the stars give us light enough, now that our eyes are accustomed to the darkness."

"Yes, we can keep this road, which is no doubt that by which we travelled before, as far as the village which I heard them call Noyelle, then we shall have to strike off to the left, for that place was not far from Abbeville, and shall have to follow the Somme up some distance, unless we can find means of crossing it."

"I should think we had better leave the road before we get to the village, so as to be well away from it. If any peasant were going to work early and caught sight of us he would be sure to mention it to any horseman who might come along searching for us. I noticed that there were several woods on our right as we rode along."

"That would be the safest way, no doubt," Wulf agreed. "Fortunately we can do without food for to-morrow"—for both had managed to get some supper after they had finished in the hall,—"and having made up my mind to escape to-night I hid away a large piece of bread under my smock. We can manage very well on that."

Accordingly after an hour's walking they left the road and bore to the south-west. But little of the land was cultivated, and they were fortunate in not coming upon any woodland until light began to break in the sky. Then they made their way to the nearest wood, went in for some distance and then threw themselves down, and in a few minutes were fast asleep. Accustomed to judge time by the position of the sun, they saw when they awoke that it was already past noon, and after eating a few mouthfuls of bread they continued their journey. For the most part their course lay among woods, and they did not venture across an open piece of country until after a careful examination to see that no one was in sight.

Shortly after starting they caught sight of a village in the distance, which they afterwards learned was St. Riguier, but with these exceptions saw no human habitation. Late in the afternoon they came down on the bank of the Somme. This was thickly covered with long reeds and rushes, and among these they sat down and ate the rest of their bread, confident that however vigilant the search they would not be traced.

"This is a very different matter to the last crossing," Beorn said. "This is a wide river, and I fear that I could not swim across it."

"Nor should I like to try. But fortunately there is no occasion for us to trust to swimming; for we can pull up or break off a number of these great rushes and make them into two bunches; these will give us ample support for our passage."

"So they will, Wulf; I should never have thought of that."

Two large bundles were soon made, the reeds being tied together by a tough climber that wreathed itself everywhere among them, and as soon as it was quite dark they went down to the water's edge, and found to their satisfaction that the reeds possessed ample buoyancy for their purpose. Wading in they started swimming, resting their chests on the reeds and striking out with their legs, and in a few minutes were on the southern bank of the river.

"Now we must make to the east of south," Wulf said. "I should say if we walk steadily all night we shall be beyond the territory of this vile count. I hope before long we shall strike on some road leading in the right direction, for if we get among the woods again we shall be able to make no progress. But any road we may come upon going at all in the right direction is likely to lead to Rouen."

"How far is it, do you think?"

"I have a very vague idea. The prior had a map of Normandy, and on this he pointed out to me how the duchy had grown since William came as a boy to be its duke. I can remember the general position of the town, but not more than that. I should think from the Somme to Rouen must be over seventy miles and less than a hundred, but more closely than that I cannot guess."

They came upon no road before morning, but as the country was open they made good progress, and when they lay down in a thicket as the day was breaking they calculated that they must be nearly thirty miles south of the Somme.

"I feel that I want sleep," Beorn said, "but still more that I want food. If it is another sixty miles to Rouen I know not how we are going to travel the distance fasting."

"No, we must get some food to morrow or rather to day, Beorn. We have nothing of any value to offer for it. They searched us too closely for anything to escape them. We dare not go into any town or village until we are quite sure that we are beyond the count's territories, but we might enter some solitary hut and pray for a piece of bread for charity, or we can walk all day, by which time we shall surely be well beyond the Count of Ponthieu's territory, and could boldly go into a town. If we are seized, we can demand to be sent to Rouen, saying we are bearers of an important message to Duke William, and even if they do not send us straight on, they would hardly keep us without food."

After sleeping for four or five hours they again started, and after walking some miles came upon a herdsman's cottage The man was out, and his wife looked with surprise at the two lads, whose garments, though stained by sea water and travel, were evidently those of youths of a class above the common. Beorn addressed her in her own language, and told her that they were wayfarers who had lost their road and were grievously in need of food. She at once invited them to come in, and set before them some black bread and some cheese made from goats' milk. They learned to their satisfaction that they had long passed the limits of Ponthieu, and that Rouen was distant about fifty miles.

"The road from Amiens lies five miles to the east," she said; "but it would be shorter for you to keep due south, for it inclines in that direction. You will strike it after seven miles' walking, and after that you cannot miss your way."

After warmly thanking the woman for her hospitality the lads again started, feeling greatly strengthened and refreshed by their meal; but want of sleep told upon them, and when they got within sight of the road they again lay down, and slept until the sun was setting. Resuming their journey they followed the road, and before morning crossed over a range of hills, and presently arrived at a small hamlet close to which was a monastery. Towards this they directed their steps, and seating themselves on the ground near the door, waited until it was unbarred.

"You are early wayfarers, my sons," the monk who opened the gates said as they went up, "and you seem to have travelled far."

"That have we, father, and are sorely in need of food."

The hospitality of the monasteries was unbounded, and the monk at once led them into the kitchen, where bread, meat, and wine were placed before them.

"Truly you were hungry," the monk said smilingly as he watched their onslaught upon the joint.

"We were well-nigh starving, father. For two days we have had nought to eat save a crust of bread we had brought with us, and some that a shepherd's wife bestowed upon us out of charity, and we have walked from near Hesdin."

"I do not ask out of curiosity, my sons," the monk said after a pause, "and you know it is not our custom to question wayfarers who come in to ask our hospitality; but it is strange to see two youths, who by their dress and manner seem to belong to a superior station, in so pitiable a state as you are, and wandering alone, as it would seem, penniless through the country. I ask not your confidence, but if you chose to give it maybe we might aid or advise you. Our prior is a kindly man and very gentle with the faults of others."

"We are Saxons, father. We were wrecked four days since near St. Valery, and are now bound on an errand of high importance to Duke William, to whom it is urgent we should arrive as soon as possible. We have run sore peril on the way, and have been stripped of our money and valuables."

"Is your mission of importance to the duke as well as to yourselves?" the monk asked gravely.

"It is of great importance to him. I am sure that he would consider that any one who assisted us on our way had done him good service."

The monk look earnestly at them. "I will speak to the prior," he said. He returned in a few minutes and bade them follow him.

The prior was a tall, gentle old man. "I have heard your story from brother Gregory," he said, "and I wished to see you that I might judge for myself whether so strange a tale, as that two shipwrecked boys should have important business with our duke, could be believed, before I did aught to help you forward. You look to me honest of purpose and of gentle blood, and not, I am sure, belonging to the class of wayfarer who will trump up any story for the purpose of gaining alms. Whether your errand with the duke is of the importance you deem it I cannot say, but if you give me your word that you consider it an urgent matter, I will aid you to proceed at once."

"We do indeed consider it most urgent, father, and we are sure that the duke will so regard it. We should not have walked well-nigh a hundred miles in two days and nights, and that almost without food, had we not deemed it so."

"Brother Gregory," the prior said, "bid lay-brother Philip at once prepare three palfreys, and tell him he is to ride himself with these two Saxon youths to Rouen. The distance is thirty miles," he went on as the monk left the room. "It is not yet six o'clock, and though our palfreys are not accustomed to travel at rapid speed, you will be there this afternoon in time to have audience with the duke."

The lads returned their warm thanks to the prior. "We would gladly tell you the purport of our mission," Beorn said, "but we are only the bearers of news, and the duke might be displeased did he know that we had confided to any before it reached his own ear."

"I wish not to learn it, my son. It is sufficient for me that you have a mission to our duke, and that I am possibly furthering his interest by aiding you to reach him. But, in sooth, I am more moved by the desire to aid two stranger youths, whom the sea and man alike seem to have treated hardly. Is it long since you left England?"

"We have well-nigh lost account of time, father, so much has taken place in a few days. 'Tis but a week since we were sailing along the English coast with a large company in three ships, when a sudden tempest arose, carried away our sail, blew us off the shore, and then increasing in fury drove us before it until we were wrecked on the coast of Ponthieu, near St. Valery. Since then we have been prisoners, have escaped, and have journeyed here on foot."

"Truly a bad week's work for you," the prior said. "Were all your ships wrecked?"

"No; our two consorts, being lighter and more easily rowed, regained the land when we were blown off it."

"Conrad of Ponthieu is an evil man," the prior said. "Had you come ashore twenty miles farther south you would have been beyond his jurisdiction. I fear that all the seacoast people view the goods obtained from vessels cast ashore as a lawful prey, but your company would assuredly have received fair hospitality if cast on the shores of Normandy itself. But now methinks I hear the patter of the palfreys' hoofs. Farewell, my sons, and may God who has protected you through these dangers give you his blessing."

The lads knelt before him as he placed his hands on their heads and gave them his benediction. As they rose brother Gregory entered to say that the horses were ready, and with renewed thanks to the prior they followed him to the courtyard, mounted, and rode off with the lay-brother, glad indeed to find their journey on foot thus abridged. Impatient as they were to reach Rouen, the gentle pace at which the palfreys ambled along fretted them very much. Brother Philip kept up a constant string of talk on the monastery, its estates, the kindness of the prior, the strictness of the subprior, and other matters of great interest to himself, but of none to the boys, whose thoughts were with Harold, chained and in prison. The palfreys, however, made very fair progress, and it was but three o'clock when they rode into the streets of Rouen, whose size and grandeur would at any other time have impressed them much, for it was an incomparably finer city than London.

"That is the duke's palace," brother Philip said, as they approached a stately building. "I will put up the horses at the convent at the farther corner of this square, and will then go with you to the palace, as I have orders to tell any officer who may make a difficulty about you entering, that I am bid by the prior of Forges to say that you are here on urgent business with the duke, and to pray that you may have immediate audience with him."

In those days great men were easy accessible, and one of the ushers, on receiving the message from the prior, at once led the boys to an apartment in which the duke was sitting. He looked up in some surprise on seeing the two lads standing bareheaded at the door, while the usher repeated the message he had received.

"Advance," he said. "What is this business of which the prior of Forges has sent me word?"

The two boys advanced and knelt before the duke. He was a man of about the same age as Harold, with dark hair and complexion, less tall than the earl, but of a powerful figure, and a stern, resolute face. The boys had discussed among themselves which should be the speaker. Wulf had desired that Beorn, being the elder, should deliver the message, but Beorn insisted that as Wulf himself had received it from Harold, it was he who should be the one to deliver it to the duke.

"My Lord Duke," Wulf said, "we are Saxons, pages of Earl Harold, and we bring you by his orders the news that the vessel in which he was sailing along his coast had been blown off by a tempest and cast on the shore of Ponthieu, near St. Valery, and that he and his companions have been villainously ill-treated by Conrad, Count of Ponthieu, who has seized them and cast them into dungeons in his fortress of Beaurain, Harold and his companions being fettered like malefactors."

The duke was astounded at the news. No greater piece of good fortune could have befallen him, for he had it in his power to lay his great rival under an obligation to him, to show himself a generous prince, and at the same time to obtain substantial benefits. He rose at once to his feet.

"By the Host," he exclaimed, "but this is foul treatment indeed of the noble earl, and brings disgrace alike upon the Count of Ponthieu and upon me, his liege lord. This wrong shall be remedied, and speedily. You shall see that I waste no moment in rescuing your lord from this unmannerly count." He struck his hand on the table, and an attendant entered, "Pray the knights Fitz-Osberne and Warren to come hither at once. And how is it, boys," he went on, as the attendant hurried away, "that you were enabled to bear this message to me?"

"While Harold and his thanes were cast into prison," Wulf said, "the count kept us to wait upon him; not for our services, but that he might flout and ill-treat us. We obtained possession of a rope, and let ourselves down at night from the battlements, and made our way on foot as far as Forges,

where the good prior, learning from us that we had a message of importance to you, though nothing of its import, sent us forward on palfreys, so that no time might be lost."

"When did you leave Beaurain?"

"It will be three days come midnight," Wulf said.

"And how did you live by the way?"

"We took a piece of bread with us, and once obtained food at a shepherd's hut, and this morning we were well entertained at the convent of Forges."

"You have proved yourselves good and trusty messengers," the duke said. "Would I were always as well served. As you are the earl's pages you are of course of gentle blood?"

"We are both his wards, my lord, and shall be thanes when we come of age."

"And how is it that you, young sir, who seem to be younger than your companion, are the spokesman?"

"It happened thus," Wulf said modestly. "Some fishermen came up just after we had gained the shore with the loss of many of our company. I marked that one of them started on seeing Earl Harold, and whispered to a companion, and feeling sure that he had recognized my lord, I told the earl of it as we walked towards St. Valery. He then charged me if he was taken prisoner by the count to endeavour to bear the news to you, and to give the same orders to my comrade Beorn, saying it was likely that we might not be so strictly watched as the men of the company, and might therefore succeed in slipping away, as indeed turned out to be the case. I was desirous that Beorn should tell you the tale, being older and more accustomed to the speech of the court than I was, but he held that the message, being first given to me, it was I who should deliver it."

"He judged rightly," the duke said, "and deserves credit for thus standing aside."

At this moment two knights entered. "Fitz-Osberne, Warren," the duke said, "a foul wrong has been done by Conrad of Ponthieu to Earl Harold of Wessex, the foremost of Englishmen next to the king himself, who has, with a company of his thanes, been cast ashore near St. Valery. Instead of receiving honourable treatment, as was his due, he has been most foully seized, chained, and with his friends thrown into prison by the count, who has sent no intimation of what has taken place to me, his lord, and had it not been for these two brave and faithful youths, who effected their escape over the battlements of Beaurain in order to bring me the news, the earl might have lingered in shameful captivity. I pray you take horse at once, with twenty chosen spears, and ride at the top of your speed to Beaurain. There express in fitting terms to Conrad my indignation at his foul treatment of one who should have been received as a most honoured guest. Say that the earl and his company must at once be released, and be accorded the treatment due not only to themselves, but to them as my guests, and bid the count mount with them and ride to my fortress of Eu, to which I myself will at once journey to receive them. Tell Conrad that I will account to him for any fair ransom he may claim, and if he demur to obey my orders warn him that the whole force of Normandy shall at once be set on foot against him. After having been for two years my prisoner, methinks he will not care to run the risk of again being shut up within my walls."

"We will use all haste," Fitz-Osberne said. "Conrad's conduct is a disgrace to every Norman noble, for all Europe will cry shame when the news of the earl's treatment gets abroad. That Conrad should hold him to ransom is only in accordance with his strict rights, but that he should imprison and chain him is, by the saints, almost beyond belief."

As soon as the knights had left, the duke sent for his chamberlain, and ordered him to conduct Beorn and Wulf to an apartment and to see that they were at once furnished with garments befitting young nobles, together with a purse of money for their immediate wants. Then taking a long and heavy gold chain from his neck he placed it on the table, and with a blow with his dagger cut it in sunder, and handed half to each of the lads.

"Take this," he said, "in token of my thanks for having brought me this news, and remember, that if at any time you should have a boon to ask that it is within my power to grant, I swear to you

upon my ducal honour that it shall be yours. Never have I received more joyful news than that the great Earl of Wessex will shortly be my guest."

The lads bowed deeply, and then followed the chamberlain from the apartment.

"Well, what think you of it, Beorn?" Wulf said, when they found themselves alone in a handsome chamber.

"So far as rescuing Harold from the power of the Count of Ponthieu we have surely succeeded even beyond our hopes. As to the rest, I know not. As you were speaking I marked the satisfaction and joy on the duke's face, and I said to myself that it was greater than need have been caused by the thought that Earl Harold was to be his guest."

"So I thought myself, Beorn. There can be no doubt that, as he said, he deemed it the best news he had ever received, and I fear greatly that Harold will but exchange one captivity for another. It will doubtless be a more pleasant one, but methinks Harold will find himself as much a prisoner, although treated as an honoured guest by William, as he was while lying in the dungeon of Conrad. It is a bad business, and I greatly fear indeed that Harold will long rue the unfortunate scheme of hunting along the coast that has brought him to this pass."

In a short time an attendant arrived with ewers, water, and four suits of handsome garments, belts embroidered with gold thread, and daggers, together with two plumed caps and purses, each containing ten gold pieces; he informed them that two horses had been provided for their use, and that they were to take their meals with the duke's household, and to consider themselves in all respects as his guests.

"We look finer birds than we did when we rode in with brother Philip," Beorn laughed when they had attired themselves in their new garments. "The more sober of these suits are a good deal gayer than those we wore at home even at court ceremonies."

"King Edward objects to show," Wulf said, "and his own pages are so sober in their attire that the earl likes not that we should outshine them, and we usually cut a poor figure beside those of William of London and the other Normans of his court."

In a short time the chamberlain came in and informed them that supper was served, and conducted them to the hall, where he presented them to the duke's gentlemen and pages as William's guests, and wards and pages of the Earl of Wessex. The news of Harold's shipwreck and imprisonment travelled quickly, for orders had already been issued for the court to prepare to start early the next morning to accompany the duke to Eu, in order to receive with due honour William's guest and friend, Harold of England; and while the meal went on many questions were asked as to the shipwreck and prisonment of the earl, and the liveliest indignation was expressed at the conduct of Conrad of Ponthieu.

"Truly all Normans will be reckoned churls," one of the gentlemen exclaimed indignantly. "The fame of Harold's bravery, wisdom, and courtesy to all men is known in every court in Europe, and that the duke's vassal should have dared to imprison and chain him will excite universal indignation. Why, the rudest of our own Norse ancestors would not have so foully treated one so noble whom fate had cast into his hands. Had we been at war with England it would be shameful, but being at peace there are no words that can fitly describe the outrage."

When the meal was over, one of the duke's pages who was about the same age as Beorn asked him what they were going to do with themselves.

"If you have nothing better," he said, "will you ride with me to my father's castle, it is but five miles away? My name is De Burg. I can promise you a hearty welcome. My father was one of the knights who accompanied the duke when he paid his visit to England some fifteen years ago, and he liked the country much, and has ever since spoken of the princely hospitality with which they were received by your king. He did not meet Earl Harold then."

"No, the earl with his father and brothers was away in exile," Wulf said rather shortly, for that visit had been a most unpleasant one to Englishmen. It had happened when the Norman influence

was altogether in the ascendant. The king was filling the chief places at court and in the church with Normans, had bestowed wide domains upon them, and their castles were everywhere rising to dominate the land. Englishmen then regarded with hostility this visit of the young Norman duke with his great train of knights, and although at the return of Godwin and his sons the greater portion of the intruders had been driven out, their influence still remained at court, and it was even said that Edward had promised the duke that he should be his successor.

It was true that Englishmen laughed at the promise. The King of England was chosen by the nation, and Edward had no shadow of right to bequeath the throne even to one of his sons much less to a foreign prince, who, although related to himself by marriage, had no drop of English blood in his veins. Still, that the promise should ever have been made rankled in the minds of the English people, the more so as the power of Normandy increased, and the ambition as well as the valour of its duke became more and more manifest According to English law the promise was but an empty breath, absolutely without effect or value. According to Norman law it constituted a powerful claim, and Duke William was assuredly not a man to let such a claim drop unpressed.

Wulf had heard all this again and again, and the prior of Bramber had explained it to him in all its bearings, showing him that little as Englishmen might think of the promise given by Edward so long ago, it would be likely to bring grievous trouble on the land at his death. He might perhaps have said more in reference to William's visit had not Beorn at once accepted the invitation to ride with young De Burg to his father's castle.

CHAPTER VI. – RELEASE OF THE EARL

In a few minutes the three horses were brought out. Wulf and Beorn were much pleased with the animals that had been placed at their service. They were powerful horses, which could carry a knight in his full armour with ease, and seemed full of spirit and fire. They were handsomely caparisoned, and the lads felt as they sprang on to their backs that they had never been so well mounted before.

"You would have made the journey more quickly and easily if you had had these horses three days ago," young De Burg laughed.

"Yes, indeed. There would have been no occasion to hide in the woods then. With our light weight on their backs they would have made nothing of the journey."

"You must not expect to see a castle," De Burg said presently, "though I call it one. In his early days the duke set himself to destroy the great majority of castles throughout Normandy, for as you know he had no little trouble with his nobles, and held that while the strength of these fortresses disposes men to engage either in civil war or in private feuds with each other, they were of no avail against the enemies of the country. My father, who is just the age of the duke, was his loyal follower from the first, and of his free will levelled his walls as did many others of the duke's friends, in the first place because it gave the duke pleasure, and in the second because, had only the castles of those opposed to the duke been destroyed, there would have been such jealousy and animosity on the part of their owners that matters would never have quieted down in the country. Thus it is that throughout the land you will find but few castles remaining. The nobles felt it strange at first to be thus dwelling in houses undefended against attack, but they soon learnt that it was far more convenient than to be shut up within massive walls, and the present dwellings are much larger and more comfortable than those of former days. The duke said rightly that the abolition of fortresses well-nigh doubled his fighting power, for that so many men were required to garrison them as to greatly diminish the number their lords could take with them into the field. You do not have castles in England, do you?"

"No, we live in open houses, and hold that it is far better and more pleasant to do so. There is no fighting between neighbours with us. The great earls may quarrel and lead their forces into the field, or may gather them against Danish and Norwegian pirates, but except on these occasions, which are rare, all dwell peaceably in their homes."

The horses were fresh, and the five miles quickly passed over.

"There is the house," De Burg said, pointing to a large building standing on an eminence. It was castellated in form, and much of the old building had been incorporated with the additions, but the outer wall had been pulled down and the moat filled up. Broad casements had replaced the narrow loopholes, and though the flag of the De Burgs still waved over the keep, which stood a little apart from the rest, the family no longer dwelt in it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.