

HAROLD - BOOK 9.

EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON*

BOOK IX.

THE BONES OF THE DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

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

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

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

Upon the floor, playing with a huge boar-hound of English breed, that seemed but ill to like the play, and every now and then snarled and showed his white teeth, was a young boy, with something of the Duke's

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features, but with an expression more open and less sagacious; and something of the Duke's broad build of chest and shoulder, but without promise of the Duke's stately stature, which was needed to give grace and dignity to a strength otherwise cumbrous and graceless. And indeed, since William's visit to England, his athletic shape had lost much of its youthful symmetry, though not yet deformed by that corpulence which was a disease almost as rare in the Norman as the Spartan.

Nevertheless, what is a defect in the gladiator is often but a beauty in the prince; and the Duke's large proportions filled the eye with a sense both of regal majesty and physical power. His countenance, yet more than his form, showed the work of time; the short dark hair was worn into partial baldness at the temples by the habitual friction of the casque, and the constant indulgence of wily stratagem and ambitious craft had deepened the wrinkles round the plotting eye and the firm mouth: so that it was only by an effort like that of an actor, that his aspect regained the knightly and noble frankness it had once worn. The accomplished prince was no longer, in truth, what the bold warrior had been,—he was greater in state and less in soul. And already, despite all his grand qualities as a ruler, his imperious nature had betrayed signs of what he (whose constitutional sternness the Norman freemen, not without effort, curbed into the limits of justice) might become, if wider scope were afforded to his fiery passions and unsparing will.

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

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

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

"Thou art mistaken, Sire de Graville," said the Duke, with a shrewd and cunning twinkle of his luminous dark eyes. "For thou tellest me that he hath no thought of my pretensions to the English throne,—that

he inclines willingly to thy suggestions to come himself to my court for the hostages,—that, in a word, he is not suspicious.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

agony; to end in a son's misery and perdition.

Even Mallet de Graville frowned at the sight of the sire's infirmity, –even Turolde the dwarf shook his head. At that moment an officer entered, and announced that an English nobleman, apparently in great haste (for his horse had dropped down dead as he dismounted), had arrived at the palace, and craved instant audience of the Duke. William put down the boy, gave the brief order for the stranger's admission, and, punctilious in ceremonial, beckoning De Graville to follow him, passed at once into the next chamber, and seated himself on his chair of state.

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

"From Harold the Earl, greeting to thee, Monseigneur. Most foul and unchristian wrong hath been done the Earl by thy liegeman, Guy, Count of Ponthieu. Sailing hither in two barks from England, with intent to visit thy court, storm and wind drove the Earl's vessels towards the mouth of the Somme [187]; there landing, and without fear, as in no hostile country, he and his train were seized by the Count himself, and cast into prison in the castle of Belrem [188]. A dungeon fit but for malefactors holds, while I speak, the first lord of England, and brother-in-law to its king. Nay, hints of famine, torture, and death itself, have been darkly thrown out by this most disloyal count, whether in earnest, or with the base view of heightening ransom. At length, wearied perhaps by the Earl's firmness and disdain, this traitor of Ponthieu hath permitted me in the Earl's behalf to bear the message of Harold. He came to thee as to a prince and a friend; sufferest thou thy liegeman to detain him as a thief or a foe?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I have him! I have him!" he cried aloud; "not as free guest, but as ransomed captive. I have him—the Earl!—I have him! Go, Mallet, my friend, now seek this sour-looking Englishman; and, hark thee! fill his ear with all the tales thou canst think of as to Guy's cruelty and ire. Enforce all the difficulties that lie in my way towards the Earl's delivery. Great make the danger of the Earl's capture, and vast all the favour of release. Comprehendest thou?"

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

Not till after repeated messages, at first without talk of ransom and in high tone, affected, no doubt, by William to spin out the negotiations, and augment the value of his services, did Guy of Ponthieu consent to release his illustrious captive,—the guerdon, a large sum and un bel manoir [189] on the river Eaulne. But whether that guerdon were the fair ransom fee, or the price for concerted snare, no man now can say, and sharper than ours the wit that forms the more likely guess. These stipulations effected, Guy himself opened the doors of the dungeon; and affecting to treat the whole matter as one of law and right, now happily and fairly settled, was as courteous and debonnaire as he had before been dark and menacing.

He even himself, with a brilliant train, accompanied Harold to the Chateau d'Eu [190], whither William journeyed to give him the meeting; and laughed with a gay grace at the Earl's short and scornful replies to his compliments and excuses. At the gates of this chateau, not famous, in after times, for the good faith of its lords, William himself, laying aside all the pride of etiquette which he had established at his court, came to receive his visitor; and aiding him to dismount embraced him cordially, amidst a loud fanfaron of fifes and trumpets.

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

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

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

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

Conversing easily with Harold, and well watching him while he conversed, the Duke led his guest into a private chamber in the third floor [191] of the castle, and in that chamber were Haco and Wolnoth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Safe!" echoed Harold.

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

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

set foot in these webs of wile.”

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

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

”Life, no; liberty, yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cooks were renowned. And great men were those Norman cooks; and often for some "delicate," more ravishing than wont, gold chain and gem, and even "bel maneir," fell to their guerdon [192]. It was worth being a cook in those days!

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

The banquet was enlivened by the song of the great Taillefer himself, who selected a theme that artfully flattered alike the Norman and the Saxon; viz., the aid given by Rolfganger to Athelstan, and the alliance between the English King and the Norman founder. He dexterously introduced into the song praises of the English, and the value of their friendship; and the Countess significantly applauded each gallant compliment to the land of the famous guest. If Harold was pleased by such poetic courtesies, he was yet more surprised by the high honour in which Duke, baron, and prelate evidently held the Poet: for it was among the worst signs of that sordid spirit, honouring only wealth, which had crept over the original character of the Anglo-Saxon, that the bard or scop, with them, had sunk into great disrepute, and it was even forbidden to ecclesiastics [193] to admit such landless vagrants to their company.

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

The unfavorable impressions made upon his thoughts by Haco's warnings could scarcely fail to yield beneath the prodigal courtesies lavished

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

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

CHAPTER III.

Side by side, William and Harold entered the fair city of Rouen, and there, a succession of the brilliant pageants and knightly entertainments, (comprising those "rare feats of honour," expanded, with the following age, into the more gorgeous display of joust and tourney,) was designed to dazzle the eyes and captivate the fancy of the Earl. But though Harold won, even by the confession of the chronicles most in favour of the Norman, golden opinions in a court more ready to deride than admire the Saxon,—though not only the "strength of his body," and "the boldness of his spirit," as shown in exhibitions unfamiliar to Saxon warriors, but his "manners," his "eloquence, intellect, and other good qualities," [194] were loftily conspicuous amidst those knightly courtiers, that sublime part of his character, which was found in his simple manhood and intense nationality, kept him unmoved and serene amidst all intended to exercise that fatal spell which Normanised most of those who came within the circle of Norman attraction.

These festivities were relieved by pompous excursions and progresses

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

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

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

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

"Froward child, it is not for thee to woo!" said Matilda, smiling. "Thou heardst her, noble Harold: what is thine answer?"

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

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

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

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

Harold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The archers nodded, and took their post, each at a separate quarter; and deadly indeed seemed the danger of the Earl, for as he moved, though he kept his back guarded by the tree, some parts of his form the shield left exposed, and it would have been impossible, in his quick-shifting movements, for the archers so to aim as to wound, but to spare life; yet the Earl seemed to take no peculiar care to avoid the peril; lifting his bare head fearlessly above the shield, and including in one gaze of his steadfast eye, calmly bright even at the distance, all the shafts of the archers.

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

But William, waiting for the first discharge, and seeing full mark at

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

Before William's loud oath of wrath and surprise left his lips, the five shafts of the remaining archers fell as vainly as their predecessors against the nimble shield.

Then advancing, Harold said, cheerfully: "This is but defence, fair Duke—and little worth were the axe if it could not smite as well as ward. Wherefore, I pray you, place upon yonder broken stone pillar, which seems some relic of Druid heathenness, such helm and shirt of mail as thou deemest most proof against sword and pertuizan, and judge then if our English axe can guard well our English land."

"If thy axe can cleave the helmet I wore at Barent, when the Franks and their King fled before me," said the Duke, grimly, "I shall hold Caesar in fault, not to have invented a weapon so dread."

And striding back into his pavilion, he came forth with the helm and shirt of mail, which was worn stronger and heavier by the Normans, as fighting usually on horseback, than by Dane and Saxon, who, mainly fighting on foot, could not have endured so cumbrous a burthen: and if strong and dour generally with the Norman, judge what solid weight that mighty Duke could endure! With his own hand William placed the mail on the ruined Druid stone, and on the mail the helm.

Harold looked long and gravely at the edge of the axe; it was so richly gilt and damasquined, that the sharpness of its temper could not well have been divined under that holiday glitter. But this axe had come to him from Canute the Great, who himself, unlike the Danes, small and slight [195], had supplied his deficiency of muscle by the finest dexterity and the most perfect weapons. Famous had been that axe in the delicate hand of Canute—how much more tremendous in the ample grasp of Harold! Swinging now in both hands this weapon, with a peculiar and rapid whirl, which gave it an inconceivable impetus, the Earl let fall the crushing blow: at the first stroke, cut right in the centre, rolled the helm; at the second, through all the woven mail (cleft asunder, as if the slightest filigree work of the goldsmith,) shore the blade, and a great fragment of the stone itself came tumbling on the sod.

The Normans stood aghast, and William's face was as pale as the shattered stone. The great Duke felt even his matchless dissimulation fail him; nor, unused to the special practice and craft which the axe required, could he have pretended, despite a physical strength superior even to Harold's, to rival blows that seemed to him more than

mortal.

"Lives there any other man in the wide world whose arm could have wrought that feat?" exclaimed Bruse, the ancestor of the famous Scot.

"Nay," said Harold, simply, "at least thirty thousand such men have I left at home! But this was but the stroke of an idle vanity, and strength becomes tenfold in a good cause."

The Duke heard, and fearful lest he should betray his sense of the latent meaning couched under his guest's words, he hastily muttered forth reluctant compliment and praise; while Fitzosborne, De Bohun, and other chiefs more genuinely knightly, gave way to unrestrained admiration.

Then beckoning De Graville to follow him, the Duke strode off towards the tent of his brother of Bayeux, who, though, except on extraordinary occasions, he did not join in positive conflict, usually accompanied William in his military excursions, both to bless the host, and to advise (for his martial science was considerable) the council of war.

The bishop, who, despite the sanctimony of the Court, and his own stern nature, was (though secretly and decorously) a gallant of great success in other fields than those of Mars [196], sate alone in his pavilion, inditing an epistle to a certain fair dame in Rouen, whom he had unwillingly left to follow his brother. At the entrance of William, whose morals in such matters were pure and rigid, he swept the letter into the chest of relics which always accompanied him, and rose, saying, indifferently:

"A treatise on the authenticity of St. Thomas's little finger! But what ails you? you are disturbed!"

"Odo, Odo, this man baffles me—this man fools me; I make no ground with him. I have spent—heaven knows what I have spent," said the Duke, sighing with penitent parsimony, "in banquets, and ceremonies, and processions; to say nothing of my bel manoir of Yonne, and the sum wrung from my coffers by that greedy Ponthevin. All gone—all wasted—all melted like snow! and the Saxon is as Saxon as if he had seen neither Norman splendour, nor been released from the danger by Norman treasure. But, by the splendour Divine, I were fool indeed if I suffered him to return home. Would thou hadst seen the sorcerer cleave my helmet and mail just now, as easily as if they had been willow twigs. Oh, Odo, Odo, my soul is troubled, and St. Michael forsakes me!"

While William ran on thus distractedly, the prelate lifted his eyes inquiringly to De Graville, who now stood within the tent, and the knight briefly related the recent trial of strength.

"I see nought in this to chafe thee," said Odo; "the man once thine, the stronger the vassal, the more powerful the lord."

"But he is not mine; I have sounded him as far as I dare go. Matilda hath almost openly offered him my fairest child as his wife. Nothing dazzles, nothing moves him. Thinkest thou I care for his strong arm? Tut, no: I chafe at the proud heart that set the arm in motion; the proud meaning his words symbolled out, 'So will English strength guard English land from the Norman—so axe and shield will defy your mail and your shafts.' But let him beware!" growled the Duke, fiercely, "or—"

"May I speak," interrupted De Graville, "and suggest a counsel?"

"Speak out, in God's name!" cried the Duke.

"Then I should say, with submission, that the way to tame a lion is not by gorging him, but daunting. Bold is the lion against open foes; but a lion in the toils loses his nature. Just now, my lord said that Harold should not return to his native land—"

"Nor shall he, but as my sworn man!" exclaimed the Duke.

"And if you now put to him that choice, think you it will favour your views? Will he not reject your proffers, and with hot scorn?"

"Scorn! darest thou that word to me?" cried the Duke. "Scorn! have I no headsman whose axe is as sharp as Harold's? and the neck of a captive is not sheathed in my Norman mail."

"Pardon, pardon, my liege," said Mallet, with spirit; but to save my chief from a hasty action that might bring long remorse, I spoke thus boldly. Give the Earl at least fair warning:—a prison, or fealty to thee, that is the choice before him!—let him know it; let him see that thy dungeons are dark, and thy walls impassable. Threaten not his life—brave men care not for that!—threaten thyself nought, but let others work upon him with fear of his freedom. I know well these Saxish men; I know well Harold; freedom is their passion, they are cowards when threatened with the doom of four walls." [197]

"I conceive thee, wise son," exclaimed Odo.

"Ha!" said the Duke, slowly; "and yet it was to prevent such suspicion that I took care, after the first meeting, to separate him from Haco and Wolnoth, for they must have learned much in Norman gossip, ill to repeat to the Saxon."

"Wolnoth is almost wholly Norman," said the bishop, smiling; "Wolnoth is bound par-amours, to a certain fair Norman dame; and, I trow well,

prefers her charms here to the thought of his return. But Haco, as thou knowest, is sullen and watchful."

"So much the better companion for Harold now," said De Graville.

"I am fated ever to plot and to scheme!" said the Duke, groaning, as if he had been the simplest of men; "but, nathless, I love the stout Earl, and I mean all for his own good,—that is, compatibly with my rights and claims to the heritage of Edward my cousin."

"Of course," said the bishop.

CHAPTER IV.

The snares now spread for Harold were in pursuance of the policy thus resolved on. The camp soon afterwards broke up, and the troops took their way to Bayeux. William, without greatly altering his manner towards the Earl, evaded markedly (or as markedly replied not to) Harold's plain declarations, that his presence was required in England, and that he could no longer defer his departure; while, under pretence of being busied with affairs, he absented himself much from the Earl's company, or refrained from seeing him alone, and suffered Mallet de Graville, and Odo the bishop, to supply his place with Harold. The Earl's suspicions now became thoroughly aroused, and these were fed both by the hints, kindly meant, of De Graville, and the less covert discourse of the prelate: while Mallet let drop, as in gossiping illustration of William's fierce and vindictive nature, many anecdotes of that cruelty which really stained the Norman's character, Odo, more bluntly, appeared to take it for granted that Harold's sojourn in the land would be long.

"You will have time," said he, one day, as they rode together, "to assist me, I trust, in learning the language of our forefathers. Danish is still spoken much at Bayeux, the sole place in Neustria [198] where the old tongue and customs still linger; and it would serve my pastoral ministry to receive your lessons; in a year or so I might hope so to profit by them as to discourse freely with the less Frankish part of my flock."

"Surely, Lord Bishop, you jest," said Harold, seriously; "you know well that within a week, at farthest, I must sail back for England with my young kinsmen."

The prelate laughed.

"I advise you, dear count and son, to be cautious how you speak so

plainly to William. I perceive that you have already ruffled him by such indiscreet remarks; and you must have seen eno' of the Duke to know that, when his ire is up, his answers are short but his arms are long."

"You most grievously wrong Duke William," cried Harold, indignantly, "to suppose, merely in that playful humor, for which ye Normans are famous, that he could lay force on his confiding guest?"

"No, not a confiding guest,—a ransomed captive. Surely my brother will deem that he has purchased of Count Guy his rights over his illustrious prisoner. But courage! The Norman Court is not the Ponthevin dungeon; and your chains, at least, are roses."

The reply of wrath and defiance that rose to Harold's lip, was checked by a sign from De Graville, who raised his finger to his lip with a face expressive of caution and alarm; and, some little time after, as they halted to water their horses, De Graville came up to him and said in a low voice, and in Saxon:

"Beware how you speak too frankly to Odo. What is said to him is said to William; and the Duke, at times, so acts on the spur of the moment that—But let me not wrong him, or needlessly alarm you."

"Sire de Graville," said Harold, "this is not the first time that the Prelate of Bayeux hath hinted at compulsion, nor that you (no doubt kindly) have warned me of purpose hostile or fraudulent. As plain man to plain man, I ask you, on your knightly honour, to tell me if you know aught to make you believe that William the Duke will, under any pretext, detain me here a captive?"

Now, though Mallet de Graville had lent himself to the service of an ignoble craft, he justified it by a better reason than complaisance to his lords; for, knowing William well, his hasty ire, and his relentless ambition, he was really alarmed for Harold's safety. And, as the reader may have noted, in suggesting that policy of intimidation, the knight had designed to give the Earl at least the benefit of forewarning. So, thus adjured, De Graville replied sincerely:

"Earl Harold, on my honour as your brother in knighthood I answer your plain question. I have cause to believe and to know that William will not suffer you to depart, unless fully satisfied on certain points, which he himself will, doubtless, ere long make clear to you."

"And if I insist on my departure, not so satisfying him?"

"Every castle on our road hath a dungeon as deep as Count Guy's; but where another William to deliver you from William?"

"Over yon seas, a prince mightier than William, and men as resolute, at least, as your Normans."

"Cher et puissant, my Lord Earl," answered De Grville, "these are brave words, but of no weight in the ear of a schemer so deep as the Duke. Think you really, that King Edward—pardon my bluntness—would rouse himself from his apathy, to do more in your behalf than he has done in your kinsmen's—remonstrate and preach?—Are you even sure that on the representation of a man he hath so loved as William, he will not be content to rid his throne of so formidable a subject? You speak of the English people; doubtless you are popular and beloved, but it is the habit of no people, least of all your own, to stir actively and in concert, without leaders. The Duke knows the factions of England as well as you do. Remember how closely he is connected with Tostig, your ambitious brother. Have you no fear that Tostig himself, earl of the most warlike part of the kingdom, will not only do his best to check the popular feeling in your favour, but foment every intrigue to detain you here, and leave himself the first noble in the land? As for other leaders, save Gurth (who is but your own vice earl), who is there that will not rejoice at the absence of Harold? You have made foes of the only family that approaches the power of your own—the heirs of Leofric and Algar.—Your strong hand removed from the reins of the empire, tumults and dissensions ere long will break forth that will distract men's minds from an absent captive, and centre them on the safety of their own hearths, or the advancement of their own interests. You see that I know something of the state of your native land; but deem not my own observation, though not idle, sufficed to bestow that knowledge. I learn it more from William's discourses; William, who from Flanders, from Boulogne, from England itself, by a thousand channels, hears all that passes between the cliffs of Dover and the marches of Scotland."

Harold paused long before he replied, for his mind was now thoroughly awakened to his danger; and, while recognising the wisdom and intimate acquaintance of affairs with which De Grville spoke, he was also rapidly revolving the best course for himself to pursue in such extremes. At length he said:

"I pass by your remarks on the state of England, with but one comment. You underrate Gurth, my brother, when you speak of him but as the vice earl of Harold. You underrate one, who needs but an object, to excel, in arms and in council, my father Godwin himself.—That object a brother's wrongs would create from a brother's love, and three hundred ships would sail up the Seine to demand your captive, manned by warriors as hardy as those who wrested Neustria from King Charles."

"Granted," said De Grville. "But William, who could cut off the hands and feet of his own subjects for an idle jest on his birth, could as easily put out the eyes of a captive foe. And of what worth are the ablest brain, and the stoutest arm, when the man is dependent

on another for very sight!"

Harold involuntarily shuddered, but recovering himself on the instant, he replied, with a smile:

"Thou makest thy Duke a butcher more fell than his ancestor Rolfanger. But thou saidst he needed but to be satisfied on certain points. What are they?"

"Ah, that thou must divine, or he unfold. But see, William himself approaches you."

And here the Duke, who had been till then in the rear, spurred up with courteous excuses to Harold for his long defection from his side; and, as they resumed their way, talked with all his former frankness and gaiety.

"By the way, dear brother in arms," said he, "I have provided thee this evening with comrades more welcome, I fear, than myself—Haco and Wolnoth. That last is a youth whom I love dearly: the first is unsocial eno', and methinks would make a better hermit than soldier. But, by St. Valery, I forgot to tell thee that an envoy from Flanders to-day, amongst other news, brought me some, that may interest thee. There is a strong commotion in thy brother Tostig's Northumbrian earldom, and the rumour runs that his fierce vassals will drive him forth and select some other lord: talk was of the sons of Algar—so I think ye called the stout dead Earl. This looks grave, for my dear cousin Edward's health is failing fast. May the saints spare him long from their rest!"

"These are indeed ill tidings," said the Earl; "and I trust that they suffice to plead at once my excuse for urging any immediate departure. Grateful I am for thy most gracious hostship, and thy just and generous intercession with thy liegeman" (Harold dwelt emphatically on the last word), "for my release from a capture disgraceful to all Christendom. The ransom so nobly paid for me I will not insult thee, dear my lord, by affecting to repay; but such gifts as our cheapmen hold most rare, perchance thy lady and thy fair children will deign to receive at my hands. Of these hereafter. Now may I ask but a vessel from thy nearest port."

"We will talk of this, dear guest and brother knight, on some later occasion. Lo, yon castle—ye have no such in England. See its vawmures and fosses!"

"A noble pile," answered Harold. "But pardon me that I press for—"

"Ye have no such strongholds, I say, in England?" interrupted the Duke petulantly.

"Nay," replied the Englishman, "we have two strongholds far larger than that—Salisbury Plain and Newmarket Heath! [199]—strongholds that will contain fifty thousand men who need no walls but their shields. Count William, England's ramparts are her men, and her strongest castles are her widest plains."

"Ah!" said the Duke, biting his lip, "ah, so be it—but to return:—in that castle, mark it well, the Dukes of Normandy hold their prisoners of state;" and then he added with a laugh; "but we hold you, noble captive, in a prison more strong—our love and our heart."

As he spoke, he turned his eye full upon Harold, and the gaze of the two encountered: that of the Duke was brilliant, but stern and sinister; that of Harold, steadfast and reproachful. As if by a spell, the eye of each rested long on that of the other—as the eyes of two lords of the forest, ere the rush and the spring.

William was the first to withdraw his gaze, and as he did so, his lip quivered and his brow knit. Then waving his hand for some of the lords behind to join him and the Earl, he spurred his steed, and all further private conversation was suspended. The train pulled not bridle before they reached a monastery, at which they rested for the night.

CHAPTER V.

On entering the chamber set apart for him in the convent, Harold found Haco and Wolnoth already awaiting him; and a wound he had received in the last skirmish against the Bretons, having broken out afresh on the road, allowed him an excuse to spend the rest of the evening alone with his kinsmen.

On conversing with them—now at length, and unrestrainedly—Harold saw everything to increase his alarm; for even Wolnoth, when closely pressed, could not but give evidence of the unscrupulous astuteness with which, despite all the boasted honour of chivalry, the Duke's character was stained. For, indeed in his excuse, it must be said, that from the age of eight, exposed to the snares of his own kinsmen, and more often saved by craft than by strength, William had been taught betimes to justify dissimulation, and confound wisdom with guile. Harold now bitterly recalled the parting words of Edward, and recognised their justice, though as yet he did not see all that they portended. Fevered and disquieted yet more by the news from England, and conscious that not only the power of his House and the foundations of his aspiring hopes, but the very weal and safety of the land, were daily imperilled by his continued absence, a vague and unspeakable

terror for the first time in his life preyed on his bold heart—a terror like that of superstition, for, like superstition, it was of the Unknown; there was everything to shun, yet no substance to grapple with. He who could have smiled at the brief pangs of death, shrunk from the thought of the perpetual prison; he, whose spirit rose elastic to every storm of life, and exulted in the air of action, stood appalled at the fear of blindness;—blindness in the midst of a career so grand;—blindness in the midst of his pathway to a throne;—blindness, that curse which palsies the strong and enslaves the free, and leaves the whole man defenceless;—defenceless in an Age of Iron.

What, too, were those mysterious points on which he was to satisfy the Duke? He sounded his young kinsmen; but Wolnoth evidently knew nothing; Haco's eye showed intelligence, but by his looks and gestures he seemed to signify that what he knew he would only disclose to Harold.

Fatigued, not more with his emotions than with that exertion to conceal them so peculiar to the English character (proud virtue of manhood so little appreciated, and so rarely understood!) he at length kissed Wolnoth, and dismissed him, yawning, to his rest. Haco, lingering, closed the door, and looked long and mournfully at the Earl.

"Noble kinsman," said the young son of Sweyn, "I foresaw from the first, that as our fate will be thine;—only round thee will be wall and fosse; unless, indeed, thou wilt lay aside thine own nature—it will give thee no armour here—and assume that which—"

"Ho!" interrupted the Earl, shaking with repressed passion, "I see already all the foul fraud and treason to guest and noble that surround me! But if the Duke dare such shame he shall do so in the eyes of day. I will hail the first boat I see on his river, or his sea-coast; and woe to those who lay hand on this arm to detain me!"

Haco lifted his ominous eyes to Harold's; and there was something in their cold and unimpassioned expression which seemed to repel all enthusiasm, and to deaden all courage.

"Harold," said he, "if but for one such moment thou obeyest the impulses of thy manly pride, or thy just resentment, thou art lost for ever; one show of violence, one word of affront, and thou givest the Duke the excuse he thirsts for. Escape! It is impossible. For the last five years, I have pondered night and day the means of flight; for I deem that my hostageship, by right, is long since over; and no means have I seen or found. Spies dog my every step, as spies, no doubt, dog thine."

"Ha! it is true," said Harold; "never once have I wandered three paces from the camp or the troop, but, under some pretext, I have been

followed by knight or courtier. God and our Lady help me, if but for England's sake! But what counsellest thou? Boy, teach me; thou hast been reared in this air of wile—to me it is strange, and I am as a wild beast encompassed by a circle of fire.”

”Then,” answered Haco, ”meet craft by craft, smile by smile. Feel that thou art under compulsion, and act,—as the Church itself pardons men for acting, so compelled.”

Harold started, and the blush spread red over his cheeks.

Haco continued.

”Once in prison, and thou art lost evermore to the sight of men. William would not then dare to release thee—unless, indeed, he first rendered thee powerless to avenge. Though I will not malign him, and say that he himself is capable of secret murder, yet he has ever those about him who are. He drops in his wrath some hasty word; it is seized by ready and ruthless tools. The great Count of Bretagne was in his way; William feared him as he fears thee; and in his own court, and amongst his own men, the great Count of Bretagne died by poison. For thy doom, open or secret, William, however, could find ample excuse.”

”How, boy? What charge can the Norman bring against a free Englishman?”

”His kinsman Alfred,” answered Haco, ”was blinded, tortured, and murdered. And in the court of Rouen, they say these deeds were done by Godwin, thy father. The Normans who escorted Alfred were decimated in cold blood; again, they say Godwin thy father slaughtered them.”

”It is hell's own lie!” cried Harold, ”and so have I proved already to the Duke.”

”Proved? No! The lamb does not prove the cause which is prejudged by the wolf. Often and often have I heard the Normans speak of those deeds, and cry that vengeance yet shall await them. It is but to renew the old accusation, to say Godwin's sudden death was God's proof of his crime, and even Edward himself would forgive the Duke for thy bloody death. But grant the best; grant that the more lenient doom were but the prison; grant that Edward and the English invaded Normandy to enforce thy freedom; knowest thou what William hath ere now done with hostages? He hath put them in the van of his army, and seared out their eyes in the sight of both hosts. Deemest thou he would be more gentle to us and to thee? Such are thy dangers. Be bold and frank,—and thou canst not escape them; be wary and wise, promise and feign,—and they are baffled: cover thy lion heart with the fox's hide until thou art free from the toils.”

"Leave me, leave me," said Harold, hastily. "Yet, hold. Thou didst seem to understand me when I hinted of—in a word, what is the object William would gain from me?"

Haco looked around; again went to the door—again opened and closed it—approached, and whispered, "The crown of England!"

The Earl bounded as if shot to the heart; then, again he cried: "Leave me. I must be alone—alone now. Go! go!"

CHAPTER VI.

Only in solitude could that strong man give way to his emotions; and at first they rushed forth so confused and stormy, so hurtling one the other, that hours elapsed before he could serenely face the terrible crisis of his position.

The great historian of Italy has said, that whenever the simple and truthful German came amongst the plotting and artful Italians and experienced their duplicity and craft, he straightway became more false and subtle than the Italians themselves: to his own countrymen, indeed, he continued to retain his characteristic sincerity and good faith; but, once duped and tricked by the southern schemers, as if with a fierce scorn, he rejected truth with the truthless; he exulted in mastering them in their own wily statesmanship; and if reproached for insincerity, retorted with naive wonder, "Ye Italians, and complain of insincerity! How otherwise can one deal with you—how be safe amongst you?"

Somewhat of this revolution of all the natural elements of his character took place in Harold's mind that stormy and solitary night. In the transport of his indignation, he resolved not doltishly to be thus outwitted to his ruin. The perfidious host had deprived himself of that privilege of Truth,—the large and heavenly security of man;—it was but a struggle of wit against wit, snare against snare. The state and law of warfare had started up in the lap of fraudulent peace; and ambush must be met by ambush, plot by plot.

Such was the nature of the self-excuses by which the Saxon defended his resolves, and they appeared to him more sanctioned by the stake which depended on success—a stake which his undying patriotism allowed to be far more vast than his individual ambition. Nothing was more clear than that if he were detained in a Norman prison, at the time of King Edward's death, the sole obstacle to William's design on the English throne would be removed. In the interim, the Duke's intrigues would again surround the infirm King with Norman influences;

and in the absence both of any legitimate heir to the throne capable of commanding the trust of the people, and of his own preponderating ascendancy both in the Witan and the armed militia of the nation, what could arrest the designs of the grasping Duke? Thus his own liberty was indissolubly connected with that of his country; and for that great end, the safety of England, all means grew holy.

When the next morning he joined the cavalcade, it was only by his extreme paleness that the struggle and agony of the past night could be traced, and he answered with correspondent cheerfulness William's cordial greetings.

As they rode together—still accompanied by several knights, and the discourse was thus general, the features of the country suggested the theme of the talk. For, now in the heart of Normandy, but in rural districts remote from the great towns, nothing could be more waste and neglected than the face of the land. Miserable and sordid to the last degree were the huts of the serfs; and when these last met them on their way, half naked and hunger-worn, there was a wild gleam of hate and discontent in their eyes, as they louted low to the Norman riders, and heard the bitter and scornful taunts with which they were addressed; for the Norman and the Frank had more than indifference for the peasants of their land; they literally both despised and abhorred them, as of different race from the conquerors. The Norman settlement especially was so recent in the land, that none of that amalgamation between class and class which centuries had created in England, existed there; though in England the theowe was wholly a slave, and the ceorl in a political servitude to his lord, yet public opinion, more mild than law, preserved the thralldom from wanton aggravation; and slavery was felt to be wrong and unchristian. The Saxon Church—not the less, perhaps, for its very ignorance—sympathised more with the subject population and was more associated with it, than the comparatively learned and haughty ecclesiastics of the continent, who held aloof from the unpolished vulgar. The Saxon Church invariably set the example of freeing the theowe and emancipating the ceorl, and taught that such acts were to the salvation of the soul. The rude and homely manner in which the greater part of the Saxon thegns lived—dependent solely for their subsistence on their herds and agricultural produce, and therefore on the labour of their peasants—not only made the distinctions of rank less harsh and visible, but rendered it the interest of the lords to feed and clothe well their dependents. All our records of the customs of the Saxons prove the ample sustenance given to the poor, and a general care of their lives and rights, which, compared with the Frank laws, may be called enlightened and humane. And above all, the lowest serf ever had the great hope both of freedom and of promotion; but the beast of the field was holier in the eyes of the Norman, than the wretched villein [200]. We have likened the Norman to the Spartan, and, most of all, he was like him in his scorn of the helot.

Thus embruted and degraded, deriving little from religion itself, except its terrors, the general habits of the peasants on the continent of France were against the very basis of Christianity—marriage. They lived together for the most part without that tie, and hence the common name, with which they were called by their masters, lay and clerical, was the coarsest word contempt can apply to the sons of women.

”The hounds glare at us,” said Odo, as a drove of these miserable serfs passed along. ”They need ever the lash to teach them to know the master. Are they thus mutinous and surly in England, Lord Harold?”

”No: but there our meanest theowes are not seen so clad, nor housed in such hovels,” said the Earl.

”And is it really true that a villein with you can rise to be a noble?”

”Of at least yearly occurrence. Perhaps the forefathers of one-fourth of our Anglo-Saxon thegns held the plough, or followed some craft mechanical.”

Duke William politicly checked Odo’s answer, and said mildly:

”Every land its own laws: and by them alone should it be governed by a virtuous and wise ruler. But, noble Harold, I grieve that you should thus note the sore point in my realm. I grant that the condition of the peasants and the culture of the land need reform. But in my childhood, there was a fierce outbreak of rebellion among the villeins, needing bloody example to check, and the memories of wrath between lord and villein must sleep before we can do justice between them, as please St. Peter, and by Lanfranc’s aid, we hope to do. Meanwhile, one great portion of our villeinage in our larger towns we have much mitigated. For trade and commerce are the strength of rising states; and if our fields are barren our streets are prosperous.”

Harold bowed, and rode musingly on. That civilisation he had so much admired bounded itself to the noble class, and, at farthest, to the circle of the Duke’s commercial policy. Beyond it, on the outskirts of humanity, lay the mass of the people. And here, no comparison in favour of the latter could be found between English and Norman civilisation.

The towers of Bayeux rose dim in the distance, when William proposed a halt in a pleasant spot by the side of a small stream, overshadowed by oak and beech. A tent for himself and Harold was pitched in haste, and after an abstemious refreshment, the Duke, taking Harold’s arm, led him away from the train along the margin of the murmuring stream.

They were soon in a remote, pastoral, primitive spot, a spot like those which the old menestrels loved to describe, and in which some pious hermit might, pleased, have fixed his solitary home.

Halting where a mossy bank juttet over the water, William motioned to his companion to seat himself, and reclining at his side, abstractedly took the pebbles from the margin and dropped them into the stream. They fell to the botton with a hollow sound; the circle they made on the surface widened, and was lost; and the wave rushed and murmured on, disdainful.

"Harold," said the Duke at last, "thou hast thought, I fear, that I have trifled with thy impatience to return. But there is on my mind a matter of great moment to thee and to me, and it must out, before thou canst depart. On this very spot where we now sit, sate in early youth, Edward thy King, and William thy host. Soothed by the loneliness of the place, and the music of the bell from the church tower, rising pale through yonder glade, Edward spoke of his desire for the monastic life, and of his content with his exile in the Norman land. Few then were the hopes that he should ever attain the throne of Alfred. I, more martial, and ardent for him as myself, combated the thought of the convent, and promised, that, if ever occasion meet arrived, and he needed the Norman help, I would, with arm and heart, do a chief's best to win him his lawful crown. Heedest thou me, dear Harold?"

"Ay, my host, with heart as with ear."

"And Edward then, pressing my hand as I now press thine, while answering gratefully, promised, that if he did, contrary to all human foresight, gain his heritage, he, in case I survived him, would bequeath that heritage to me. Thy hand withdraws itself from mine."

"But from surprise: Duke William, proceed."

"Now," resumed William, "when thy kinsmen were sent to me as hostages for the most powerful House in England—the only one that could thwart the desire of my cousin—I naturally deemed this a corroboration of his promise, and an earnest of his continued designs; and in this I was reassured by the prelate, Robert, Archbishop of Canterbury, who knew the most secret conscience of your King. Wherefore my pertinacity in retaining those hostages; wherefore my disregard to Edward's mere remonstrances, which I not unnaturally conceived to be but his meek confessions to the urgent demands of thyself and House. Since then, Fortune or Providence hath favoured the promise of the King, and my just expectations founded thereon. For one moment, it seemed indeed, that Edward regretted or reconsidered the pledge of our youth. He sent for his kinsman, the Atheling, natural heir to the throne. But the poor prince died. The son, a mere child, if I am

rightly informed, the laws of thy land will set aside, should Edward die ere the child grown a man; and, moreover, I am assured, that the young Edgar hath no power of mind or intellect to wield so weighty a sceptre as that of England. Your King, also, even since your absence, hath had severe visitings of sickness, and ere another year his new Abbey may hold his tomb.”

William here paused; again dropped the pebbles into the stream, and glanced furtively on the unrevealing face of the Earl. He resumed:

”Thy brother Tostig, as so nearly allied to my House, would, I am advised, back my claims; and wert thou absent from England, Tostig, I conceive, would be in thy place as the head of the great party of Godwin. But to prove how little I care for thy brother’s aid compared with thine, and how implicitly I count on thee, I have openly told thee what a wilier plotter would have concealed—viz., the danger to which thy brother is menaced in his own earldom. To the point, then, I pass at once. I might, as my ransomed captive, detain thee here, until, without thee, I had won my English throne, and I know that thou alone couldst obstruct my just claims, or interfere with the King’s will, by which that appanage will be left to me. Nevertheless, I unbosom myself to thee, and would owe my crown solely to thine aid. I pass on to treat with thee, dear Harold, not as lord with vassal, but as prince with prince. On thy part, thou shalt hold for me the castle of Dover, to yield to my fleet when the hour comes; thou shalt aid me in peace, and through thy National Witan, to succeed to Edward, by whose laws I will reign in all things conformably with the English rites, habits, and decrees. A stronger king to guard England from the Dane, and a more practised head to improve her prosperity, I am vain eno’ to say thou wilt not find in Christendom. On my part, I offer to thee my fairest daughter, Adeliza, to whom thou shalt be straightway betrothed: thine own young unwedded sister, Thyra, thou shalt give to one of my greatest barons: all the lands, dignities, and possessions thou holdest now, thou shalt still retain; and if, as I suspect, thy brother Tostig cannot keep his vast principality north the Humber, it shall pass to thee. Whatever else thou canst demand in guarantee of my love and gratitude, or so to confirm thy power that thou shalt rule over thy countships as free and as powerful as the great Counts of Provence or Anjou reign in France over theirs, subject only to the mere form of holding in fief to the Suzerain, as I, stormy subject, hold Normandy under Philip of France,—shall be given to thee. In truth, there will be two kings in England, though in name but one. And far from losing by the death of Edward, thou shalt gain by the subjection of every meaner rival, and the cordial love of thy grateful William.—Splendour of God, Earl, thou keepest me long for thine answer!”

”What thou offerest,” said the Earl, fortifying himself with the resolution of the previous night, and compressing his lips, livid with rage, ”is beyond my deserts, and all that the greatest chief under

royalty could desire. But England is not Edward's to leave, nor mine to give: its throne rests with the Witan."

"And the Witan rests with thee," exclaimed William sharply. "I ask but for possibilities, man; I ask but all thine influence on my behalf; and if it be less than I deem, mine is the loss. What dost thou resign? I will not presume to menace thee; but thou wouldst indeed despise my folly, if now, knowing my designs, I let thee forth—not to aid, but betray them. I know thou lovest England, so do I. Thou deemest me a foreigner; true, but the Norman and Dane are of precisely the same origin. Thou, of the race of Canute, knowest how popular was the reign of that King. Why should William's be less so? Canute had no right whatsoever, save that of the sword. My right will be kinship to Edward—Edward's wish in my favour—the consent through thee of the Witan—the absence of all other worthy heir—my wife's clear descent from Alfred, which, in my children, restore the Saxon line, through its purest and noblest ancestry, to the throne. Think over all this, and then wilt thou tell me that I merit not this crown?" Harold yet paused, and the fiery Duke resumed:

"Are the terms I give not tempting eno' to my captive—to the son of the great Godwin, who, no doubt falsely, but still by the popular voice of all Europe, had power of life and death over my cousin Alfred and my Norman knights? or dost thou thyself covet the English crown; and is it to a rival that I have opened my heart?"

"Nay," said Harold in the crowning effort of his new and fatal lesson in simulation. "Thou hast convinced me, Duke William: let it be as thou sayest."

The Duke gave way to his joy by a loud exclamation, and then recapitulated the articles of the engagement, to which Harold simply bowed his head. Amicably then the Duke embraced the Earl, and the two returned towards the tent.

While the steeds were brought forth, William took the opportunity to draw Odo apart; and, after a short whispered conference, the prelate hastened to his barb, and spurred fast to Bayeux in advance of the party. All that day, and all that night, and all the next morn till noon, courtiers and riders went abroad, north and south, east and west, to all the more famous abbeyes and churches in Normandy, and holy and awful was the spoil with which they returned for the ceremony of the next day.

CHAPTER VII.

The stately mirth of the evening banquet seemed to Harold as the malign revel of some demoniac orgy. He thought he read in every face the exultation over the sale of England. Every light laugh in the proverbial ease of the social Normans rang on his ear like the joy of a ghastly Sabbat. All his senses preternaturally sharpened to that magnetic keenness in which we less hear and see than conceive and divine, the lowest murmur William breathed in the ear of Odo boomed clear to his own; the slightest interchange of glance between some dark-browed priest and large-breasted warrior, flashed upon his vision. The irritation of his recent and neglected wound combined with his mental excitement to quicken, yet to confuse, his faculties. Body and soul were fevered. He floated, as it were, between a delirium and a dream.

Late in the evening he was led into the chamber where the Duchess sat alone with Adeliza and her second son William—a boy who had the red hair and florid hues of the ancestral Dane, but was not without a certain bold and strange kind of beauty, and who, even in childhood, all covered with broidery and gems, betrayed the passion for that extravagant and fantastic foppery for which William the Red King, to the scandal of Church and pulpit, exchanged the decorous pomp of his father's generation. A formal presentation of Harold to the little maid was followed by a brief ceremony of words, which conveyed what to the scornful sense of the Earl seemed the mockery of betrothal between infant and bearded man. Glozing congratulations buzzed around him; then there was a flash of lights on his dizzy eyes, he found himself moving through a corridor between Odo and William. He was in his room hung with arras and strewed with rushes; before him in niches, various images of the Virgin, the Archangel Michael, St. Stephen, St. Peter, St. John, St. Valery; and from the bells in the monastic edifice hard by tolled the third watch [201] of the night—the narrow casement was out of reach, high in the massive wall, and the starlight was darkened by the great church tower. Harold longed for air. All his earldom had he given at that moment, to feel the cold blast of his native skies moaning round his Saxon wolds. He opened his door, and looked forth. A lanthorn swung on high from the groined roof of the corridor. By the lanthorn stood a tall sentry in arms, and its gleam fell red upon an iron grate that jealously closed the egress. The Earl closed the door, and sat down on his bed, covering his face with his clenched hand. The veins throbbled in every pulse, his own touch seemed to him like fire. The prophecies of Hilda on the fatal night by the bautastein, which had decided him to reject the prayer of Gurth, the fears of Edith, and the cautions of Edward, came back to him, dark, haunting, and overmasteringly. They rose between him and his sober sense, whenever he sought to re-collect his thoughts, now to madden him with the sense of his folly in belief, now to divert his

mind from the perilous present to the triumphant future they foretold; and of all the varying chaunts of the Vala, ever two lines seemed to burn into his memory, and to knell upon his ear, as if they contained the counsel they ordained him to pursue:

"GUILLE BY GUILLE OPPOSE, and never
Crown and brow shall Force dissever!"

So there he sat, locked and rigid, not reclining, not disrobing, till in that posture a haggard, troubled, fitful sleep came over him; nor did he wake till the hour of prime [202], when ringing bells and tramping feet, and the hum of prayer from the neighbouring chapel, roused him into waking yet more troubled, and well-nigh as dreamy. But now Godrith and Haco entered the room, and the former inquired with some surprise in his tone, if he had arranged with the Duke to depart that day; "For," said he, "the Duke's hors-thegn has just been with me, to say that the Duke himself, and a stately retinue, are to accompany you this evening towards Harfleur, where a ship will be in readiness for our transport; and I know that the chamberlain (a courteous and pleasant man) is going round to my fellow-thegns in your train, with gifts of hawks, and chains, and brodered palls."

"It is so," said Haco, in answer to Harold's brightening and appealing eye.

"Go then, at once, Godrith," exclaimed the Earl, bounding to his feet, "have all in order to part at the first break of the trump. Never, I ween, did trump sound so cheerily as the blast that shall announce our return to England. Haste-haste!"

As Godrith, pleased in the Earl's pleasure, though himself already much fascinated by the honours he had received and the splendor he had witnessed, withdrew, Haco said, "Thou has taken my counsel, noble kinsman?"

"Question me not, Haco! Out of my memory, all that hath passed here!"

"Not yet," said Haco, with that gloomy and intense seriousness of voice and aspect, which was so at variance with his years, and which impressed all he said with an indescribable authority. "Not yet; for even while the chamberlain went his round with the parting gifts, I, standing in the angle of the wall in the yard, heard the Duke's deep whisper to Roger Bigod, who has the guard of the keape, 'Have the men all armed at noon in the passage below the council-hall, to mount at the stamp of my foot: and if then I give thee a prisoner-wonder not, but lodge him-' The Duke paused; and Bigod said, 'Where, my liege?' And the Duke answered fiercely, 'Where? why, where but in the Tour noir?-where but in the cell in which Malvoisin rotted out his last hour?' Not yet, then, let the memory of Norman wile pass away; let the lip guard the freedom still."

All the bright native soul that before Haco spoke had dawned gradually back on the Earl's fair face, now closed itself up, as the leaves of a poisoned flower; and the pupil of the eye receding, left to the orb that secret and strange expression which had baffled all readers of the heart in the look of his impenetrable father.

"Guile by guile oppose!" he muttered vaguely; then started, clenched his hand, and smiled.

In a few moments, more than the usual levee of Norman nobles thronged into the room; and what with the wonted order of the morning, in the repast, the church service of tierce, and a ceremonial visit to Matilda, who confirmed the intelligence that all was in preparation for his departure, and charged him with gifts of her own needlework to his sister the Queen, and various messages of gracious nature, the time waxed late into noon without his having yet seen either William or Odo.

He was still with Matilda, when the Lords Fitzosborne and Raoul de Tancarville entered in full robes of state, and with countenances unusually composed and grave, and prayed the Earl to accompany them into the Duke's presence.

Harold obeyed in silence, not unprepared for covert danger, by the formality of the counts, as by the warnings of Haco; but, indeed, undivining the solemnity of the appointed snare. On entering the lofty hall, he beheld William seated in state; his sword of office in his hand, his ducal robe on his imposing form, and with that peculiarly erect air of the head which he assumed upon all ceremonial occasions [203]. Behind him stood Odo of Bayeux, in aube and gallium; some score of the Duke's greatest vassals; and at a little distance from the throne chair, was what seemed a table; or vast chest, covered all over with cloth of gold.

Small time for wonder or self-collection did the Duke give the Saxon.

"Approach, Harold," said he, in the full tones of that voice, so singularly effective in command; "approach, and without fear, as without regret. Before the members of this noble assembly—all witnesses of thy faith, and all guarantees of mine—I summon thee to confirm by oath the promises thou mad'st me yesterday; namely, to aid me to obtain the kingdom of England on the death of King Edward, my cousin; to marry my daughter Adeliza; and to send thy sister hither, that I may wed her, as we agreed, to one of my worthiest and prowtest counts. Advance thou, Odo, my brother, and repeat to the noble Earl the Norman form by which he will take the oath."

Then Odo stood forth by that mysterious receptacle covered with the cloth of gold, and said briefly, "Thou wilt swear, as far as is in thy

power, to fulfil thy agreement with William, Duke of the Normans, if thou live, and God aid thee; and in witness of that oath thou wilt lay thy hand upon the reliquaire," pointing to a small box that lay on the cloth of gold.

All this was so sudden—all flashed so rapidly upon the Earl, whose natural intellect, however great, was, as we have often seen, more deliberate than prompt—so thoroughly was the bold heart, which no siege could have sapped, taken by surprise and guile—so paramount through all the whirl and tumult of his mind, rose the thought of England irrevocably lost, if he who alone could save her was in the Norman dungeons—so darkly did all Haco's fears, and his own just suspicions, quell and master him, that mechanically, dizzily, dreamily, he laid his hand on the reliquaire, and repeated, with automaton lips:

"If I live, and if God aid me to it!"

Then all the assembly repeated solemnly:

"God aid him!"

And suddenly, at a sign from William, Odo and Raoul de Tancarville raised the gold cloth, and the Duke's voice bade Harold look below.

As when man descends from the gilded sepulchre to the loathsome charnel, so at the lifting of that cloth, all the dread ghastliness of Death was revealed. There, from abbey and from church, from cyst and from shrine, had been collected all the relics of human nothingness in which superstition adored the mementos of saints divine; there lay, pell mell and huddled, skeleton and mummy—the dry dark skin, the white gleaming bones of the dead, mockingly cased in gold, and decked with rubies; there, grim fingers protruded through the hideous chaos, and pointed towards the living man ensnared; there, the skull grinned scoff under the holy mitre;—and suddenly rushed back, luminous and searing upon Harold's memory, the dream long forgotten, or but dimly remembered in the healthful business of life—the gibe and the wirble of the dead men's bones.

"At that sight," say the Norman chronicles, "the Earl shuddered and trembled."

"Awful, indeed, thine oath, and natural thine emotion," said the Duke; "for in that cyst are all those relics which religion deems the holiest in our land. The dead have heard thine oath, and the saints even now record it in the halls of heaven! Cover again the holy bones!"