

HAROLD - BOOK 10.

EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON*

BOOK XI.

THE NORMAN SCHEMER, AND THE NORWEGIAN SEA-KING.

CHAPTER I.

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

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

Within the palace, if possible, still greater was the agitation; more dread the suspense. Lobbies, halls, corridors, stairs, ante-rooms, were filled with churchmen and thegns. Nor was it alone for news of the King's state that their brows were so knit, that their breath came and went so short. It is not when a great chief is dying, that men compose their minds to deplore a loss. That comes long after, when the worm is at its work, and comparison between the dead and the living often rights the one to wrong the other. But while the breath is struggling, and the eye glazing, life, busy in the bystanders, murmurs, "Who shall be the heir?" And, in this instance, never had suspense been so keenly wrought up into hope and terror. For the news of Duke William's designs had now spread far and near; and awful was the doubt, whether the abhorred Norman should receive his sole sanction to so arrogant a claim from the parting assent of Edward. Although, as we have seen, the crown was not absolutely within the bequests of a dying king, but at the will of the Witan, still, in

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circumstances so unparalleled, the utter failure of all natural heirs, save a boy feeble in mind as body, and half foreign by birth and rearing; the love borne by Edward to the Church; and the sentiments, half of pity half of reverence, with which he was regarded throughout the land;—his dying word would go far to influence the council and select the successor. Some whispering to each other, with pale lips, all the dire predictions then current in men's mouths and breasts; some in moody silence; all lifted eager eyes, as, from time to time, a gloomy Benedictine passed in the direction to or fro the King's chamber.

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

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

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

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

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

The lady looked up through her streaming tears. Edward released his hand, and laid it on her head as in benediction. Then motioning to the abbot of Westminster, he drew from his finger the ring which the palmer had brought to him [217], and murmured scarce audibly:

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

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

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

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

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

Edward signed his head in assent.

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

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

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

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

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

At the cry, and the indescribable movement of the throng, the physician came quick from the lower part of the hall. He made his way abruptly to the bedside, and said chidingly, "Air, give him air." The throng parted, the leach moistened the King's pale lips with the

cordial, but no breath seemed to come forth, no pulse seemed to beat; and while the two prelates knelt before the human body and by the blessed rood, the rest descended the dais, and hastened to depart. Harold only remained; but he had passed from the foot to the head of the bed.

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

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

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

He paused a moment, and thus resumed:

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

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

As if revived but for these tremendous denunciations, while the last

word left his lips the frame collapsed, the eyes set, and the King fell a corpse in the arms of Harold.

But one smile of the sceptic or the world-man was seen on the paling lips of those present: that smile was not on the lips of warriors and men of mail. It distorted the sharpened features of Stigand, the world-man and the miser, as, passing down, and amidst the group, he said, "Tremble ye at the dreams of a sick old man?" [218]

CHAPTER II.

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

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

Alred and Stigand, the two great prelates of the realm, had conducted Harold to the church [219], and up the aisle to the altar, followed by the chiefs of the Witan in their long robes; and the clergy with their abbots and bishops sung the anthems—"Fermetur manus tua," and "Gloria Patri."

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

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

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

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

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

”Peace to His Church and the Christian flock.”

”Interdict of rapacity and injustice.”

”Equity and mercy in his judgments, as God the gracious and just might show mercy to him.”

And deep from the hearts of thousands came the low ”Amen.”

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

As the prayer ceased, came the symbolical rite of anointment. Then pealed the sonorous organ [220], and solemn along the aisles rose the anthem that closed with the chorus which the voice of the multitude swelled, ”May the King live for ever!” Then the crown that had gleamed in the trembling hand of the prelate, rested firm in its splendour on the front of the King. And the sceptre of rule, and the rod of justice, ”to sooth the pious and terrify the bad,” were placed

in the royal hands. And the prayer and the blessings were renewed,— till the close; "Bless, Lord, the courage of this Prince, and prosper the works of his hand. With his horn, as the horn of the rhinoceros, may he blow the waters to the extremities of the earth; and may He who has ascended to the skies be his aid for ever!"

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

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

CHAPTER III.

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

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

"Edith," said the Vala, "thou wilt not bury thy life yet young in the living grave! And, despite all that now severs you—yea, despite Harold's new and loveless ties—still clearer than ever it is written in the heavens, that a day shall come, in which you are to be evermore united. Many of the shapes I have seen, many of the sounds I have heard, in the trance and the dream, fade in the troubled memory of

waking life. But never yet hath grown doubtful or dim the prophecy, that the truth pledged by the grave shall be fulfilled."

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

"There is no sin in the resolves of a fate that rules us in spite of ourselves. Tarry only till the year bring round the birth-day of Harold; for my sayings shall be ripe with the grape, and when the feet of the vineherd are red in the Month of the Vine [221], the Nornas shall knit ye together again!"

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

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

CHAPTER IV.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The weight on thy brow shows the load on thy heart," cried Tostig. "Speak, and be brief."

"Edward is dead."

"Ha? and who reigns?"

"Thy brother is chosen and crowned."

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

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

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

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

At these words, as if stricken by some deadly and inexpressible insult, the Earl recoiled, and stood a moment mute with rage and

amaze. His singular beauty became distorted into the lineaments of a fiend. He stamped with his foot, as he thundered a terrible curse. Then haughtily waving his hand to the bode, in sign of dismissal, he strode to and fro the room in gloomy perturbation.

Judith, like her sister Matilda, a woman fierce and vindictive, continued, by that sharp venom that lies in the tongue of the sex, to incite still more the intense resentment of her lord. Perhaps some female jealousies of Aldyth might contribute to increase her own indignation. But without such frivolous addition to anger, there was cause eno' in this marriage thoroughly to complete the alienation between the King and his brother. It was impossible that one so revengeful as Tostig should not cherish the deepest animosity, not only against the people that had rejected, but the new Earl that had succeeded him. In wedding the sister of this fortunate rival and despoiler, Harold could not, therefore, but gall him in his most sensitive sores of soul. The King, thus, formally approved and sanctioned his ejection, solemnly took part with his foe, robbed him of all legal chance of recovering his dominions, and, in the words of the bode, "shut him out from Northumbria for ever." Nor was this even all. Grant his return to England; grant a reconciliation with Harold; still those abhorred and more fortunate enemies, necessarily made now the most intimate part of the King's family, must be most in his confidence, would curb and chafe and encounter Tostig in every scheme for his personal aggrandisement. His foes, in a word, were in the camp of his brother.

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

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

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

CHAPTER V.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

William turned pale and faint with emotion, and leant for support

against a leafless oak.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then said Fitzosborne, with that philosophy, half grave as became the Scandinavian, half gay as became the Frank: "No man should grieve for what he can help—still less for what he cannot help. For Edward's death, I trow, remedy there is none; but for Harold's treason, yea!

Have you not a noble host of knights and warriors? What want you to destroy the Saxon and seize his realm? What but a bold heart? A great deed once well begun, is half done. Begin, Count of the Normans, and we will complete the rest."

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

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

CHAPTER VI.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, what then?"

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

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

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

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

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

"A great man was Canute, a small man am I: scarce can I keep my Danish dominion from the gripe of the Norwegian, while Canute took Norway

without slash and blow [222]; but great as he was, England cost him hard fighting to win, and sore peril to keep. Wherefore, best for the small man to rule by the light of his own little sense, nor venture to count on the luck of great Canute;—for luck but goes with the great.”

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

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

True Hero of the North, true darling of War and of Song, was Harold Hardrada! At the terrible battle of Stiklestad, at which his brother, St. Olave, had fallen, he was but fifteen years of age, but his body was covered with the wounds of a veteran. Escaping from the field, he lay concealed in the house of a Bonder peasant, remote in deep forests, till his wounds were healed. Thence, chaunting by the way, (for a poet’s soul burned bright in Hardrada,) ”That a day would come when his name would be great in the land he now left,” he went on into Sweden, thence into Russia, and after wild adventures in the East, joined, with the bold troop he had collected around him, that famous body-guard of the Greek emperors [223], called the Vaeringers, and of these he became the chief. Jealousies between himself and the Greek General of the Imperial forces, (whom the Norwegian chronicler calls Gyrger,) ended in Harold’s retirement with his Vaeringers into the Saracen land of Africa. Eighty castles stormed and taken, vast plunder in gold and in jewels, and nobler meed in the song of the Scald and the praise of the brave, attested the prowess of the great Scandinavian. New laurels, blood-stained, new treasures, sword-won, awaited him in Sicily; and thence, rough foretype of the coming crusader, he passed on to Jerusalem. His sword swept before him Moslem and robber. He bathed in Jordan, and knelt at the Holy Cross.

Returned to Constantinople, the desire for his northern home seized Hardrada. There he heard that his nephew Magnus, the illegitimate son of St. Olave, had become King of Norway,—and he himself aspired to a throne. So he gave up his command under Zoe the empress; but, if Scald be believed, Zoe the empress loved the bold chief, whose heart was set on Maria her niece. To detain Hardrada, a charge of mal-appropriation, whether of pay or of booty, was brought against him. He was cast into prison. But when the brave are in danger, the saints send the fair to their help! Moved by a holy dream, a Greek lady lowered ropes from the roof of the tower to the dungeon wherein Hardrada was cast. He escaped from the prison, he aroused his Vaeringers, they flocked round their chief; he went to the house of his lady Maria, bore her off to the galley, put out into the Black Sea, reached Novgorod, (at the friendly court of whose king he had safely lodged his vast spoils,) sailed home to the north: and, after

such feats as became sea-king of old, received half of Norway from Magnus, and on the death of his nephew the whole of that kingdom passed to his sway. A king so wise and so wealthy, so bold and so dread, had never yet been known in the north. And this was the king to whom came Tostig the Earl, with the offer of England's crown.

It was one of the glorious nights of the north, and winter had already begun to melt into early spring, when two men sate under a kind of rustic porch of rough pine-logs, not very unlike those seen now in Switzerland and the Tyrol. This porch was constructed before a private door, to the rear of a long, low, irregular building of wood which enclosed two or more courtyards, and covering an immense space of ground. This private door seemed placed for the purpose of immediate descent to the sea; for the ledge of the rock over which the log-porch spread its rude roof, juttred over the ocean; and from it a rugged stair, cut through the crag, descended to the beach. The shore, with bold, strange, grotesque slab, and peak, and splinter, curved into a large creek; and close under the cliff were moored seven warships, high and tall, with prows and sterns all gorgeous with gilding in the light of the splendid moon. And that rude timber house, which seemed but a chain of barbarian huts linked into one, was a land palace of Hardrada of Norway; but the true halls of his royalty, the true seats of his empire, were the decks of those lofty war-ships.

Through the small lattice-work of the windows of the loghouse, lights blazed; from the roof-top smoke curled; from the hall on the other side of the dwelling, came the din of tumultuous wassail, but the intense stillness of the outer air, hushed in frost, and luminous with stars, contrasted and seemed to rebuke the gross sounds of human revel. And that northern night seemed almost as bright as (but how much more augustly calm, than) the noon of the golden south!

On a table within the ample porch was an immense bowl of birchwood, mounted in silver, and filled with potent drink, and two huge horns, of size suiting the mighty wassailers of the age. The two men seemed to care nought for the stern air of the cold night—true that they were wrapped in furs reft from the Polar bear. But each had hot thoughts within, that gave greater warmth to the veins than the bowl or the bearskin.

They were host and guest; and as if with the restlessness of his thoughts, the host arose from his seat, and passed through the porch and stood on the bleak rock under the light of the moon; and so seen, he seemed scarcely human, but some war-chief of the farthest time,—yea, of a time ere the deluge had shivered those rocks, and left beds on the land for the realm of that icy sea. For Harold Hardrada was in height above all the children of modern men. Five ells of Norway made the height of Harold Hardrada [224]. Nor was this stature accompanied by any of those imperfections in symmetry, nor by that heaviness of

aspect, which generally render any remarkable excess above human stature and strength rather monstrous than commanding. On the contrary, his proportions were just; his appearance noble; and the sole defect that the chronicler remarks in his shape, was "that his hands and feet were large, but these were well made." [225]

His face had all the fair beauty of the Norseman; his hair, parted in locks of gold over a brow that bespoke the daring of the warrior and the genius of the bard, fell in glittering profusion to his shoulders; a short beard and long moustache of the same colour as the hair, carefully trimmed, added to the grand and masculine beauty of the countenance, in which the only blemish was the peculiarity of one eyebrow being somewhat higher than the other [226], which gave something more sinister to his frown, something more arch to his smile. For, quick of impulse, the Poet-Titan smiled and frowned often.

Harold Hardrada stood in the light of the moon, and gazing thoughtfully on the luminous sea. Tostig marked him for some moments where he sate in the porch, and then rose and joined him.

"Why should my words so disturb thee, O King of the Norseman?"

"Is glory, then, a drug that soothes to sleep?" returned the Norwegian.

"I like thine answer," said Tostig, smiling, "and I like still more to watch thine eye gazing on the prows of thy war-ships. Strange indeed it were if thou, who hast been fighting fifteen years for the petty kingdom of Denmark, shouldst hesitate now, when all England lies before thee to seize."

"I hesitate," replied the King, "because he whom Fortune has befriended so long, should beware how he strain her favour too far. Eighteen pitched battles fought I in the Saracen land, and in every one was a victor—never, at home or abroad, have I known shame and defeat. Doth the wind always blow from one point?—and is Fate less unstable than the wind?"

"Now, out on thee, Harold Hardrada," said Tostig the fierce; "the good pilot wins his way through all winds, and the brave heart fastens fate to its flag. All men allow that the North never had warrior like thee; and now, in the mid-day of manhood, wilt thou consent to repose on the mere triumph of youth?"

"Nay," said the King, who, like all true poets, had something of the deep sense of a sage, and was, indeed, regarded as the most prudent as well as the most adventurous chief in the Northland,—"nay, it is not by such words, which my soul seconds too well, that thou canst entrap a ruler of men. Thou must show me the chances of success, as thou

wouldst to a grey-beard. For we should be as old men before we engage, and as youths when we wish to perform.”

Then the traitor succinctly detailed all the weak points in the rule of his brother. A treasury exhausted by the lavish and profitless waste of Edward; a land without castle or bulwark, even at the mouths of the rivers; a people grown inert by long peace, and so accustomed to own lord and king in the northern invaders, that a single successful battle might induce half the population to insist on the Saxon coming to terms with the foe, and yielding, as Ironsides did to Canute, one half of the realm. He enlarged on the terror of the Norsemen that still existed throughout England, and the affinity between the Northumbrians and East Anglians with the race of Hardrada. That affinity would not prevent them from resisting at the first; but grant success, and it would reconcile them to the after sway. And, finally, he aroused Hardrada’s emulation by the spur of the news, that the Count of the Normans would seize the prize if he himself delayed to forestall him.

These various representations, and the remembrance of Canute’s victory, decided Hardrada; and, when Tostig ceased, he stretched his hand towards his slumbering warships, and exclaimed:

”Eno’; you have whetted the beaks of the ravens, and harnessed the steeds of the sea!”

CHAPTER VII.

Meanwhile, King Harold of England had made himself dear to his people, and been true to the fame he had won as Harold the Earl. From the moment of his accession, ”he showed himself pious, humble, and affable [227], and omitted no occasions to show any token of bounteous liberality, gentleness, and courteous behaviour.”—”The grievous customs, also, and taxes which his predecessors had raised, he either abolished or diminished; the ordinary wages of his servants and men-of-war he increased, and further showed himself very well bent to all virtue and goodness.” [228]

Extracting the pith from these eulogies, it is clear that, as wise statesman no less than as good king, Harold sought to strengthen himself in the three great elements of regal power;—Conciliation of the Church, which had been opposed to his father; The popular affection, on which his sole claim to the crown reposed; And the military force of the land, which had been neglected in the reign of his peaceful predecessor.

To the young Atheling he accorded a respect not before paid to him; and, while investing the descendant of the ancient line with princely state, and endowing him with large domains, his soul, too great for jealousy, sought to give more substantial power to his own most legitimate rival, by tender care and noble counsels,—by efforts to raise a character feeble by nature, and denationalised by foreign rearing. In the same broad and generous policy, Harold encouraged all the merchants from other countries who had settled in England, nor were even such Normans as had escaped the general sentence of banishment on Godwin's return, disturbed in their possessions. "In brief," saith the Anglo-Norman chronicler [229], "no man was more prudent in the land, more valiant in arms, in the law more sagacious, in all probity more accomplished:" and "Ever active," says more mournfully the Saxon writer, "for the good of his country, he spared himself no fatigue by land or by sea." [230] From this time, Harold's private life ceased. Love and its charms were no more. The glow of romance had vanished. He was not one man; he was the state, the representative, the incarnation of Saxon England: his sway and the Saxon freedom, to live or fall together!

The soul really grand is only tested in its errors. As we know the true might of the intellect by the rich resources and patient strength with which it redeems a failure, so do we prove the elevation of the soul by its courageous return into light, its instinctive rebound into higher air, after some error that has darkened its vision and soiled its plumes. A spirit less noble and pure than Harold's, once entering on the dismal world of enchanted superstition, had habituated itself to that nether atmosphere; once misled from hardy truth and healthful reason, it had plunged deeper and deeper into the maze. But, unlike his contemporary, Macbeth, the Man escaped from the lures of the Fiend. Not as Hecate in hell, but as Dian in heaven, did he confront the pale Goddess of Night. Before that hour in which he had deserted the human judgment for the ghostly delusion; before that day in which the brave heart, in its sudden desertion, had humbled his pride—the man, in his nature, was more strong than the god. Now, purified by the flame that had scorched, and more nerved from the fall that had stunned,—that great soul rose sublime through the wrecks of the Past, serene through the clouds of the Future, centering in its solitude the destinies of Mankind, and strong with instinctive Eternity amidst all the terrors of Time.

King Harold came from York, whither he had gone to cement the new power of Morcar, in Northumbria, and personally to confirm the allegiance of the Anglo-Danes:—King Harold came from York, and in the halls of Westminster he found a monk who awaited him with the messages of William the Norman.

Bare-footed, and serge-garbed, the Norman envoy strode to the Saxon's chair of state. His form was worn with mortification and fast, and his face was hueless and livid, with the perpetual struggle between

zeal and flesh.

"Thus saith William, Count of the Normans," began Hugues Maigrot, the monk.

"With grief and amaze hath he heard that you, O Harold, his sworn liege-man, have, contrary to oath and to fealty, assumed the crown that belongs to himself. But, confiding in thy conscience, and forgiving a moment's weakness, he summons thee, mildly and brother-like, to fulfil thy vow. Send thy sister, that he may give her in marriage to one of his Quens. Give him up the stronghold of Dover; march to thy coast with thine armies to aid him,—thy liege lord,—and secure him the heritage of Edward his cousin. And thou shalt reign at his right-hand, his daughter thy bride, Northumbria thy fief, and the saints thy protectors."

The King's lip was firm, though pale, as he answered:

"My young sister, alas! is no more: seven nights after I ascended the throne, she died: her dust in the grave is all I could send to the arms of the bridegroom. I cannot wed the child of thy Count: the wife of Harold sits beside him." And he pointed to the proud beauty of Aldyth, enthroned under the drapery of gold. "For the vow that I took, I deny it not. But from a vow of compulsion, menaced with unworthy captivity, extorted from my lips by the very need of the land whose freedom had been bound in my chains—from a vow so compelled, Church and conscience absolve me. If the vow of a maiden on whom to bestow but her hand, when unknown to her parents, is judged invalid by the Church, how much more invalid the oath that would bestow on a stranger the fates of a nation [231], against its knowledge, and unconsulting its laws! This royalty of England hath ever rested on the will of the people, declared through its chiefs in their solemn assembly. They alone who could bestow it, have bestowed it on me:—I have no power to resign it to another—and were I in my grave, the trust of the crown would not pass to the Norman, but return to the Saxon people."

"Is this, then, thy answer, unhappy son?" said the monk, with a sullen and gloomy aspect.

"Such is my answer."

"Then, sorrowing for thee, I utter the words of William. 'With sword and with mail will he come to punish the perjurer: and by the aid of St. Michael, archangel of war, he will conquer his own.' Amen."

"By sea and by land, with sword and with mail, will we meet the invader," answered the King, with a flashing eye. "Thou hast said:—so depart."

The monk turned and withdrew.

"Let the priest's insolence chafe thee not, sweet lord," said Aldyth. "For the vow which thou mightest take as subject, what matters it now thou art king?"

Harold made no answer to Aldyth, but turned to his Chamberlain, who stood behind his throne chair.

"Are my brothers without?"

"They are: and my lord the King's chosen council."

"Admit them: pardon, Aldyth; affairs fit only for men claim me now."

The Lady of England took the hint, and rose.

"But the even-mete will summon thee soon," said she. Harold, who had already descended from his chair of state, and was bending over a casket of papers on the table, replied:

"There is food here till the morrow; wait me not." Aldyth sighed, and withdrew at the one door, while the thegns most in Harold's confidence entered at the other. But, once surrounded by her maidens, Aldyth forgot all, save that she was again a queen,—forgot all, even to the earlier and less gorgeous diadem which her lord's hand had shattered on the brows of the son of Pendragon.

Leofwine, still gay and blithe-hearted, entered first: Gurth followed, then Haco, then some half-score of the greater thegns.

They seated themselves at the table, and Gurth spoke first:

"Tostig has been with Count William."

"I know it," said Harold.

"It is rumoured that he has passed to our uncle Sweyn."

"I foresaw it," said the King.

"And that Sweyn will aid him to reconquer England for the Dane."

"My bode reached Sweyn, with letters from Githa, before Tostig; my bode has returned this day. Sweyn has dismissed Tostig; Sweyn will send fifty ships, armed with picked men, to the aid of England."

"Brother," cried Leofwine, admiringly, "thou providest against danger ere we but surmise it."

"Tostig," continued the King, unheeding the compliment, "will be the first assailant: him we must meet. His fast friend is Malcolm of Scotland: him we must secure. Go thou, Leofwine, with these letters to Malcolm.—The next fear is from the Welch. Go thou, Edwin of Mercia, to the princes of Wales. On thy way, strengthen the forts and deepen the dykes of the marches. These tablets hold thy instructions. The Norman, as doubtless ye know, my thegns, hath sent to demand our crown, and hath announced the coming of his war. With the dawn I depart to our port at Sandwich [232], to muster our fleets. Thou with me, Gurth."

"These preparations need much treasure," said an old thegn, "and thou hast lessened the taxes at the hour of need."

"Not yet is it the hour of need. When it comes, our people will the more readily meet it with their gold as with their iron. There was great wealth in the House of Godwin; that wealth mans the ships of England. What hast thou there, Haco?"

"Thy new-issued coin: it hath on its reverse the word PEACE." [233]

Who ever saw one of those coins of the Last Saxon King, the bold simple head on the one side, that single word "Peace" on the other, and did not feel awed and touched! What pathos in that word compared with the fate which it failed to propitiate!

"Peace," said Harold: "to all that doth not render peace, slavery. Yea, may I live to leave peace to our children! Now, peace only rests on our preparation for war. You, Morcar, will return with all speed to York, and look well to the mouth of the Humber."

Then, turning to each of the thegns successively he gave to each his post and his duty; and that done, converse grew more general. The many things needful that had been long rotting in neglect under the Monk-king, and now sprung up, craving instant reform, occupied them long and anxiously. But cheered and inspirited by the vigour and foresight of Harold, whose earlier slowness of character seemed winged by the occasion into rapid decision (as is not uncommon with the Englishman), all difficulties seemed light, and hope and courage were in every breast.

CHAPTER VIII.

Back went Hugues Maigrot, the monk, to William, and told the reply of Harold to the Duke, in the presence of Lanfranc. William himself heard it in gloomy silence, for Fitzosborne as yet had been wholly

unsuccessful in stirring up the Norman barons to an expedition so hazardous, in a cause so doubtful; and though prepared for the defiance of Harold, the Duke was not prepared with the means to enforce his threats and make good his claim.

So great was his abstraction, that he suffered the Lombard to dismiss the monk without a word spoken by him; and he was first startled from his reverie by Lanfranc's pale hand on his vast shoulder, and Lanfranc's low voice in his dreamy ear:

"Up! Hero of Europe: for thy cause is won! Up! and write with thy bold characters, bold as if graved with the point of the sword, my credentials to Rome. Let me depart ere the sun sets: and as I go, look on the sinking orb, and behold the sun of the Saxon that sets evermore on England!"

Then briefly, that ablest statesman of the age, (and forgive him, despite our modern lights, we must; for, sincere son of the Church, he regarded the violated oath of Harold as entailing the legitimate forfeiture of his realm, and, ignorant of true political freedom, looked upon Church and Learning as the only civilisers of men,) then, briefly, Lanfranc detailed to the listening Norman the outline of the arguments by which he intended to move the Pontifical court to the Norman side; and enlarged upon the vast accession throughout all Europe which the solemn sanction of the Church would bring to his strength. William's reawaking and ready intellect soon seized upon the importance of the object pressed upon him. He interrupted the Lombard, drew pen and parchment towards him, and wrote rapidly. Horses were harnessed, horsemen equipped in haste, and with no unfitting retinue Lanfranc departed on the mission, the most important in its consequences that ever passed from potentate to pontiff. [234] Rebraced to its purpose by Lanfranc's cheering assurances, the resolute, indomitable soul of William now applied itself, night and day, to the difficult task of rousing his haughty vavasours. Yet weeks passed before he could even meet a select council composed of his own kinsmen and most trusted lords. These, however, privately won over, promised to serve him "with body and goods." But one and all they told him, he must gain the consent of the whole principality in a general council. That council was convened: thither came not only lords and knights, but merchants and traders,—all the rising middle class of a thriving state.

The Duke bared his wrongs, his claims, and his schemes. The assembly would not or did not discuss the matter in his presence, they would not be awed by its influence; and William retired from the hall. Various were the opinions, stormy the debate; and so great the disorder grew, that Fitzosborne, rising in the midst, exclaimed:

"Why this dispute?—why this unduteous discord? Is not William your lord? Hath he not need of you? Fail him now—and, you know him well

—by G— he will remember it! Aid him—and you know him well—large are his rewards to service and love!”

Up rose at once baron and merchant; and when at last their spokesman was chosen, that spokesman said: “William is our lord; is it not enough to pay to our lord his dues? No aid do we owe beyond the seas! Sore harassed and taxed are we already by his wars! Let him fail in this strange and unparalleled hazard, and our land is undone!”

Loud applause followed this speech; the majority of the council were against the Duke.

“Then,” said Fitzosborne, craftily, “I, who know the means of each man present, will, with your leave, represent your necessities to your Count, and make such modest offer of assistance as may please ye, yet not chafe your liege.”

Into the trap of this proposal the opponents fell; and Fitzosborne, at the head of the body, returned to William. The Lord of Breteuil approached the dais, on which William sate alone, his great sword in his hand, and thus spoke:

“My liege, I may well say that never prince has people more leal than yours, nor that have more proved their faith and love by the burdens they have borne and the monies they have granted.”

An universal murmur of applause followed these words. “Good! good!” almost shouted the merchants especially. William’s brows met, and he looked very terrible. The Lord of Breteuil gracefully waved his hand, and resumed:

“Yea, my liege, much have they borne for your glory and need; much more will they bear.”

The faces of the audience fell.

“Their service does not compel them to aid you beyond the seas.”

The faces of the audience brightened.

“But now they will aid you, in the land of the Saxon as in that of the Frank.”

“How?” cried a stray voice or two.

“Hush, O gentils amys. Forward, then, O my liege, and spare them in nought. He who has hitherto supplied you with two good mounted soldiers, will now grant you four; and he who—”

"No, no, no!" roared two-thirds of the assembly; "we charged you with no such answer; we said not that, nor that shall it be!"

Out stepped a baron.

"Within this country, to defend it, we will serve our Count; but to aid him to conquer another man's country, no!"

Out stepped a knight.

"If once we rendered this double service, beyond seas as at home, it would be held a right and a custom hereafter; and we should be as mercenary soldiers, not free-born Normans."

Out stepped a merchant.

"And we and our children would be burdened for ever to feed one man's ambition, whenever he saw a king to dethrone, or a realm to seize."

And then cried a general chorus:

"'t shall not be—it shall not!"

The assembly broke at once into knots of tens, twenties, thirties, gesticulating and speaking aloud, like freemen in anger. And ere William, with all his prompt dissimulation, could do more than smother his rage, and sit griping his sword hilt, and setting his teeth, the assembly dispersed.

Such were the free souls of the Normans under the greatest of their chiefs; and had those souls been less free, England had not been enslaved in one age, to become free again, God grant, to the end of time!

CHAPTER IX.

Through the blue skies over England there rushed the bright stranger—a meteor, a comet, a fiery star! "such as no man before ever saw;" it appeared on the 8th, before the kalends of May; seven nights did it shine [235], and the faces of sleepless men were pale under the angry glare.

The river of Thames rushed blood-red in the beam, the winds at play on the broad waves of the Humber, broke the surge of the billows into sparkles of fire. With three streamers, sharp and long as the sting of a dragon, the foreboder of wrath rushed through the hosts of the

stars. On every ruinous fort, by sea-coast and march, the warder crossed his breast to behold it; on hill and in thoroughfare, crowds nightly assembled to gaze on the terrible star. Muttering hymns, monks huddled together round the altars, as if to exorcise the land of a demon. The gravestone of the Saxon father-chief was lit up, as with the coil of the lightning; and the Morthwyrtha looked from the mound, and saw in her visions of awe the Valkyrs in the train of the fiery star.

On the roof of his palace stood Harold the King, and with folded arms he looked on the Rider of Night. And up the stairs of the turret came the soft steps of Haco, and stealing near to the King, he said:

"Arm in haste, for the bodes have come breathless to tell thee that Tostig, thy brother, with pirate and war-ship, is wasting thy shores and slaughtering thy people!"

CHAPTER X.

Tostig, with the ships he had gained both from Norman and Norwegian, recruited by Flemish adventurers, fled fast from the banners of Harold. After plundering the Isle of Wight, and the Hampshire coasts, he sailed up the Humber, where his vain heart had counted on friends yet left him in his ancient earldom; but Harold's soul of vigour was everywhere. Morcar, prepared by the King's bodes, encountered and chased the traitor, and, deserted by most of his ships, with but twelve small craft Tostig gained the shores of Scotland. There, again forestalled by the Saxon King, he failed in succour from Malcolm, and retreating to the Orkneys, waited the fleets of Hardrada.

And now Harold, thus at freedom for defence against a foe more formidable and less unnatural, hastened to make secure both the sea and the coast against William the Norman. "So great a ship force, so great a land force, no king in the land had before." All the summer, his fleets swept the channel; his forces "lay everywhere by the sea."

But alas! now came the time when the improvident waste of Edward began to be felt. Provisions and pay for the armaments failed [236]. On the defective resources at Harold's disposal, no modern historian hath sufficiently dwelt. The last Saxon king, the chosen of the people, had not those levies, and could impose not those burdens which made his successors mighty in war; and men began now to think that, after all, there was no fear of this Norman invasion. The summer was gone; the autumn was come; was it likely that William would dare to trust himself in an enemy's country as the winter drew near? The Saxons—unlike their fiercer kindred of Scandinavia, had no pleasure in war;—

they fought well in front of a foe, but they loathed the tedious preparations and costly sacrifices which prudence demanded for self-defence. They now revolted from a strain upon their energies, of the necessity of which they were not convinced! Joyous at the temporary defeat of Tostig, men said, "Marry, a joke indeed, that the Norman will put his shaven head into the hornets' nest! Let him come, if he dare!"

Still, with desperate effort, and at much risk of popularity, Harold held together a force sufficient to repel any single invader. From the time of his accession his sleepless vigilance had kept watch on the Norman, and his spies brought him news of all that passed.

And now what had passed in the councils of William? The abrupt disappointment which the Grand Assembly had occasioned him did not last very long. Made aware that he could not trust to the spirit of an assembly, William now artfully summoned merchant, and knight, and baron, one by one. Submitted to the eloquence, the promises, the craft, of that master intellect, and to the awe of that imposing presence; unassisted by the courage which inferiors take from numbers, one by one yielded to the will of the Count, and subscribed his quota for monies, for ships, and for men. And while this went on, Lanfranc was at work in the Vatican. At that time the Archdeacon of the Roman Church was the famous Hildebrand. This extraordinary man, fit fellow-spirit to Lanfranc, nursed one darling project, the success of which indeed founded the true temporal power of the Roman pontiffs. It was no less than that of converting the mere religious ascendancy of the Holy See into the actual sovereignty over the states of Christendom. The most immediate agents of this gigantic scheme were the Normans, who had conquered Naples by the arm of the adventurer Robert Guiscard, and under the gonfanon of St. Peter. Most of the new Norman countships and dukedoms thus created in Italy had declared themselves fiefs of the Church; and the successor of the Apostle might well hope, by aid of the Norman priest-knights, to extend his sovereignty over Italy, and then dictate to the kings beyond the Alps.

The aid of Hildebrand in behalf of William's claims was obtained at once by Lanfranc. The profound Archdeacon of Rome saw at a glance the immense power that would accrue to the Church by the mere act of arrogating to itself the disposition of crowns, subjecting rival princes to abide by its decision, and fixing the men of its choice on the thrones of the North. Despite all its slavish superstition, the Saxon Church was obnoxious to Rome. Even the pious Edward had offended, by withholding the old levy of Peter Pence; and simony, a crime peculiarly reprobated by the pontiff, was notorious in England. Therefore there was much to aid Hildebrand in the Assembly of the Cardinals, when he brought before them the oath of Harold, the violation of the sacred relics, and demanded that the pious Normans, true friends to the Roman Church, should be permitted to Christianise the barbarous Saxons [237], and William he nominated as heir to a

throne promised to him by Edward, and forfeited by the perjury of Harold. Nevertheless, to the honour of that assembly, and of man, there was a holy opposition to this wholesale barter of human rights—this sanction of an armed onslaught on a Christian people. "It is infamous," said the good, "to authorise homicide." But Hildebrand was all-powerful, and prevailed.

William was at high feast with his barons when Lanfranc dismounted at his gates and entered his hall.

"Hail to thee, King of England!" he said. "I bring the bull that excommunicates Harold and his adherents; I bring to thee the gift of the Roman Church, the land and royalty of England. I bring to thee the gonfanon hallowed by the heir of the Apostle, and the very ring that contains the precious relic of the Apostle himself! Now who will shrink from thy side? Publish thy ban, not in Normandy alone, but in every region and realm where the Church is honoured. This is the first war of the Cross."

Then indeed was it seen—that might of the Church! Soon as were made known the sanction and gifts of the Pope, all the continent stirred as to the blast of the trump in the Crusade, of which that war was the herald. From Maine and from Anjou, from Poitou and Bretagne, from France and from Flanders, from Aquitaine and Burgundy, flashed the spear, galloped the steed. The robber-chiefs from the castles now grey on the Rhine; the hunters and bandits from the roots of the Alps; baron and knight, varlet and vagrant,—all came to the flag of the Church,—to the pillage of England. For side by side with the Pope's holy bull was the martial ban:—"Good pay and broad lands to every one who will serve Count William with spear, and with sword, and with cross-bow." And the Duke said to Fitzosborne, as he parcelled out the fair fields of England into Norman fiefs:

"Harold hath not the strength of mind to promise the least of those things that belong to me. But I have the right to promise that which is mine, and also that which belongs to him. He must be the victor who can give away both his own and what belongs to his foe." [238]

All on the continent of Europe regarded England's king as accused—William's enterprise as holy; and mothers who had turned pale when their sons went forth to the boar-chase, sent their darlings to enter their names, for the weal of their souls, in the swollen muster-roll of William the Norman. Every port now in Neustria was busy with terrible life; in every wood was heard the axe felling logs for the ships; from every anvil flew the sparks from the hammer, as iron took shape into helmet and sword. All things seemed to favour the Church's chosen one. Conan, Count of Bretagne, sent to claim the Duchy of Normandy, as legitimate heir. A few days afterwards, Conan died, poisoned (as had died his father before him) by the mouth of his horn and the web of his gloves. And the new Count of Bretagne sent his

sons to take part against Harold.

All the armament mustered at the roadstead of St. Valery, at the mouth of the Somme. But the winds were long hostile, and the rains fell in torrents.

CHAPTER XI.

And now, while war thus hungered for England at the mouth of the Somme, the last and most renowned of the sea-kings, Harold Hardrada, entered his galley, the tallest and strongest of a fleet of three hundred sail, that peopled the seas round Solundir. And a man named Gyrdir, on board the King's ship, dreamed a dream [239]. He saw a great witch-wife standing on an isle of the Sulen, with a fork in one hand and a trough in the other [240]. He saw her pass over the whole fleet;—by each of the three hundred ships he saw her; and a fowl sat on the stern of each ship, and that fowl was a raven; and he heard the witch-wife sing this song:

”From the East I allure him,
At the West I secure him;
In the feast I foresee
Rare the relics for me;
Red the drink, white the bones.

The ravens sit greeding,
And watching, and heeding;
Thoro' wind, over water,
Comes scent of the slaughter,
And ravens sit greeding
Their share of the bones.

Thoro' wind, thoro' weather,
We're sailing together;
I sail with the ravens;
I watch with the ravens;
I snatch from the ravens
My share of the bones.”

There was also a man called Thord [241], in a ship that lay near the King's; and he too dreamed a dream. He saw the fleet nearing land, and that land was England. And on the land was a battle-array two-fold, and many banners were flapping on both sides. And before the army of the landfolk was riding a huge witch-wife upon a wolf; the wolf had a man's carcass in his mouth, and the blood was dripping and dropping from his jaws; and when the wolf had eaten up that carcass,

the witch-wife threw another into his jaws; and so, one after another; and the wolf crunched and swallowed them all. And the witch-wife sang this song:

”The green waving fields
Are hidden behind
The flash of the shields,
And the rush of the banners
That toss in the wind.

But Skade’s eagle eyes
Pierce the wall of the steel,
And behold from the skies
What the earth would conceal;
O’er the rush of the banners
She poises her wing,
And marks with a shadow
The brow of the King.

And, in bode of his doom,
Jaw of Wolf, be the tomb
Of the bones and the flesh,
Gore-bedabbled and fresh,
That cranch and that drip
Under fang and from lip.
As I ride in the van
Of the feasters on man,
With the King!

Grim wolf, sate my maw,
Full enow shall there be.
Hairy jaw, hungry maw,
Both for ye and for me!

Meaner food be the feast
Of the fowl and the beast;
But the witch, for her share,
Takes the best of the fare
And the witch shall be fed
With the king of the dead,
When she rides in the van
Of the slayers of man,
With the King.”

And King Harold dreamed a dream. And he saw before him his brother, St. Olave. And the dead, to the Scald-King sang this song:

”Bold as thou in the fight,
Blithe as thou in the hall,
Shone the noon of my might,

Ere the night of my fall!

How humble is death,
And how haughty is life;
And how fleeting the breath
Between slumber and strife!

All the earth is too narrow,
O life, for thy tread!
Two strides o'er the barrow
Can measure the dead.

Yet mighty that space is
Which seemeth so small;
The realm of all races,
With room for them all!"

But Harold Hardrada scorned witch-wife and dream; and his fleets sailed on. Tostig joined him off the Orkney Isles, and this great armament soon came in sight of the shores of England. They landed at Cleveland [242], and at the dread of the terrible Norsemen, the coastmen fled or submitted. With booty and plunder they sailed on to Scarborough, but there the townsfolk were brave, and the walls were strong.

The Norsemen ascended a hill above the town, lit a huge pile of wood, and tossed the burning piles down on the roofs. House after house caught the flame, and through the glare and the crash rushed the men of Hardrada. Great was the slaughter, and ample the plunder; and the town, awed and depeopled, submitted to flame and to sword.

Then the fleet sailed up the Humber and Ouse, and landed at Richall, not far from York; but Morcar, the Earl of Northumbria, came out with all his forces,—all the stout men and tall of the great race of the Anglo-Dane.

Then Hardrada advanced his flag, called Land-Eyda, the "Ravager of the World," [243] and, chaunting a war-stave,—led his men to the onslaught.

The battle was fierce, but short. The English troops were defeated, they fled into York; and the Ravager of the World was borne in triumph to the gates of the town. An exiled chief, however tyrannous and hateful, hath ever some friends among the desperate and lawless; and success ever finds allies among the weak and the craven,—so many Northumbrians now came to the side of Tostig. Dissension and mutiny broke out amidst the garrison within; Morcar, unable to control the townsfolk, was driven forth with those still true to their country and King, and York agreed to open its gates to the conquering invader.

At the news of this foe on the north side of the land, King Harold was compelled to withdraw all the forces at watch in the south against the tardy invasion of William. It was the middle of September; eight months had elapsed since the Norman had launched forth his vaunting threat. Would he now dare to come?—Come or not, that foe was afar, and this was in the heart of the country!

Now, York having thus capitulated, all the land round was humbled and awed; and Hardrada and Tostig were blithe and gay; and many days, thought they, must pass ere Harold the King can come from the south to the north. The camp of the Norsemen was at Standford Bridge, and that day it was settled that they should formally enter York. Their ships lay in the river beyond; a large portion of the armament was with the ships. The day was warm, and the men with Hardrada had laid aside their heavy mail and were "making merry," talking of the plunder of York, jeering at Saxon valour, and gloating over thoughts of the Saxon maids, whom Saxon men had failed to protect,—when suddenly between them and the town rose and rolled a great cloud of dust. High it rose, and fast it rolled, and from the heart of the cloud shone the spear and the shield.

"What army comes yonder?" said Harold Hardrada.

"Surely," answered Tostig, "it comes from the town that we are to enter as conquerors, and can be but the friendly Northumbrians who have deserted Morcar for me."

Nearer and nearer came the force, and the shine of the arms was like the glancing of ice.

"Advance the World-Ravager!" cried Harold Hardrada, "draw up, and to arms!"

Then, picking out three of his briskest youths, he despatched them to the force on the river with orders to come up quick to the aid. For already, through the cloud and amidst the spears, was seen the flag of the English King. On the previous night King Harold had entered York, unknown to the invaders—appeased the mutiny—cheered the townsfolk; and now came like a thunderbolt borne by the winds, to clear the air of England from the clouds of the North.

Both armaments drew up in haste, and Hardrada formed his array in the form of a circle,—the line long but not deep, the wings curving round till they met [244], shield to shield. Those who stood in the first rank set their spear shafts on the ground, the points level with the breast of a horseman; those in the second, with spears yet lower, level with the breast of a horse; thus forming a double palisade against the charge of cavalry. In the centre of this circle was placed the Ravager of the World, and round it a rampart of shields. Behind that rampart was the accustomed post at the onset of battle for

the King and his body-guard. But Tostig was in front, with his own Northumbrian lion banner, and his chosen men.

While this army was thus being formed, the English King was marshalling his force in the far more formidable tactics, which his military science had perfected from the warfare of the Danes. That form of battalion, invincible hitherto under his leadership, was in the manner of a wedge or triangle. So that, in attack, the men marched on the foe presenting the smallest possible surface to the missiles, and in defence, all three lines faced the assailants. King Harold cast his eye over the closing lines, and then, turning to Gurth, who rode by his side, said:

"Take one man from yon hostile army, and with what joy should we charge on the Northmen!"

"I conceive thee," answered Gurth, mournfully, "and the same thought of that one man makes my arm feel palsied."

The King mused, and drew down the nasal bar of his helmet.

"Thegns," said he suddenly, to the score of riders who grouped round him, "follow." And shaking the rein of his horse, King Harold rode straight to that part of the hostile front from which rose, above the spears, the Northumbrian banner of Tostig. Wondering, but mute, the twenty thegns followed him. Before the grim array, and hard by Tostig's banner, the King checked his steed and cried:

"Is Tostig, the son of Godwin and Githa, by the flag of the Northumbrian earldom?"

With his helmet raised, and his Norwegian mantle flowing over his mail, Earl Tostig rode forth at that voice, and came up to the speaker. [245]

"What wouldst thou with me, daring foe?"

The Saxon horseman paused, and his deep voice trembled tenderly, as he answered slowly:

"Thy brother, King Harold, sends to salute thee. Let not the sons from the same womb wage unnatural war in the soil of their fathers."

"What will Harold the King give to his brother?" answered Tostig, "Northumbria already he hath bestowed on the son of his house's foe."

The Saxon hesitated, and a rider by his side took up the word.

"If the Northumbrians will receive thee again, Northumbria shalt thou have, and the King will bestow his late earldom of Wessex on Morcar;

if the Northumbrians reject thee, thou shalt have all the lordships which King Harold hath promised to Gurth."

"This is well," answered Tostig; and he seemed to pause as in doubt;—when, made aware of this parley, King Harold Hardrada, on his coal-black steed, with his helm all shining with gold, rode from the lines, and came into hearing.

"Ha!" said Tostig, then turning round, as the giant form of the Norse King threw its vast shadow over the ground.

"And if I take the offer, what will Harold son of Godwin give to my friend and ally Hardrada of Norway?"

The Saxon rider reared his head at these words, and gazed on the large front of Hardrada, as he answered, loud and distinct:

"Seven feet of land for a grave, or, seeing that he is taller than other men, as much more as his corse may demand!"

"Then go back, and tell Harold my brother to get ready for battle; for never shall the Scalds and the warriors of Norway say that Tostig lured their king in his cause, to betray him to his foe. Here did he come, and here came I, to win as the brave win, or die as the brave die!"

A rider of younger and slighter form than the rest, here whispered the Saxon King:

"Delay no more, or thy men's hearts will fear treason."

"The tie is rent from my heart, O Haco," answered the King, "and the heart flies back to our England."

He waved his hand, turned his steed, and rode off. The eye of Hardrada followed the horseman.

"And who," he asked calmly, "is that man who spoke so well?" [246]

"King Harold!" answered Tostig, briefly.

"How!" cried the Norseman, reddening, "how was not that made known to me before? Never should he have gone back,—never told hereafter the doom of this day!"

With all his ferocity, his envy, his grudge to Harold, and his treason to England, some rude notions of honour still lay confused in the breast of the Saxon; and he answered stoutly:

"Imprudent was Harold's coming, and great his danger; but he came to offer me peace and dominion. Had I betrayed him, I had not been his foe, but his murderer!"

The Norse King smiled approvingly, and, turning to his chiefs, said drily:

"That man was shorter than some of us, but he rode firm in his stirrups."

And then this extraordinary person, who united in himself all the types of an age that vanished for ever in his grave, and who is the more interesting, as in him we see the race from which the Norman sprang, began, in the rich full voice that pealed deep as an organ, to chaunt his impromptu war-song. He halted in the midst, and with great composure said:

"That verse is but ill-tuned: I must try a better." [247]

He passed his hand over his brow, mused an instant, and then, with his fair face all illumined, he burst forth as inspired.

This time, air, rhythm, words, all so chimed in with his own enthusiasm and that of his men, that the effect was inexpressible. It was, indeed, like the charm of those runes which are said to have maddened the Berserker with the frenzy of war.

Meanwhile the Saxon phalanx came on, slow and firm, and in a few minutes the battle began. It commenced first with the charge of the English cavalry (never numerous), led by Leofwine and Haco, but the double palisade of the Norman spears formed an impassable barrier; and the horsemen, recoiling from the frieze, rode round the iron circle without other damage than the spear and javelin could effect. Meanwhile, King Harold, who had dismounted, marched, as was his wont, with the body of footmen. He kept his post in the hollow of the triangular wedge; whence he could best issue his orders. Avoiding the side over which Tostig presided, he halted his array in full centre of the enemy, where the Ravager of the World, streaming high above the inner rampart of shields, showed the presence of the giant Hardrada.

The air was now literally darkened with the flights of arrows and spears; and in a war of missives, the Saxons were less skilled than the Norsemen. Still King Harold restrained the ardour of his men, who, sore harassed by the darts, yearned to close on the foe. He himself, standing on a little eminence, more exposed than his meanest soldier, deliberately eyed the sallies of the horse, and watched the moment he foresaw, when, encouraged by his own suspense and the feeble attacks of the cavalry, the Norsemen would lift their spears from the ground, and advance themselves to the assault. That moment came; unable to withhold their own fiery zeal, stimulated by the tromp and

the clash, and the war hymns of their King, and his choral Scalds, the Norsemen broke ground and came on.

"To your axes, and charge!" cried Harold; and passing at once from the centre to the front, he led on the array. The impetus of that artful phalanx was tremendous; it pierced through the ring of the Norwegians; it clove into the rampart of shields; and King Harold's battle-axe was the first that shivered that wall of steel; his step the first that strode into the innermost circle that guarded the Ravager of the World.

Then forth, from under the shade of that great flag, came, himself also on foot, Harold Hardrada: shouting and chaunting, he leapt with long strides into the thick of the onslaught. He had flung away his shield, and swaying with both hands his enormous sword, he hewed down man after man till space grew clear before him; and the English, recoiling in awe before an image of height and strength that seemed superhuman, left but one form standing firm, and in front, to oppose his way.

At that moment the whole strife seemed not to belong to an age comparatively modern, it took a character of remotest eld; and Thor and Odin seemed to have returned to the earth. Behind this towering and Titan warrior, their wild hair streaming long under their helmets, came his Scalds, all singing their hymns, drunk with the madness of battle. And the Ravager of the World tossed and flapped as it followed, so that the vast raven depicted on its folds seemed horrid with life. And calm and alone, his eye watchful, his axe lifted, his foot ready for rush or for spring—but firm as an oak against flight—stood the Last of the Saxon Kings.

Down bounded Hardrada, and down shore his sword; King Harold's shield was cloven in two, and the force of the blow brought himself to his knee. But, as swift as the flash of that sword, he sprang to his feet; and while Hardrada still bowed his head, not recovered from the force of his blow, the axe of the Saxon came so full on his helmet, that the giant reeled, dropped his sword, and staggered back; his Scalds and his chiefs rushed around him. That gallant stand of King Harold saved his English from flight; and now, as they saw him almost lost in the throng, yet still cleaving his way—on, on—to the raven standard, they rallied with one heart, and shouting forth, "Out, out! Holy Crosse!" forced their way to his side, and the fight now waged hot and equal, hand to hand. Meanwhile Hardrada, borne a little apart, and relieved from his dented helmet, recovered the shock of the weightiest blow that had ever dimmed his eye and numbed his hand. Tossing the helmet on the ground, his bright locks glittering like sun-beams, he rushed back to the melee. Again helm and mail went down before him; again through the crowd he saw the arm that had smitten him; again he sprang forwards to finish the war with a blow,—when a shaft from some distant bow pierced the throat which the casque now

left bare; a sound like the wail of a death-song murmured brokenly from his lips, which then gushed out with blood, and tossing up his arms wildly, he fell to the ground, a corpse. At that sight, a yell of such terror, and woe, and wrath all commingled, broke from the Norsemen, that it hushed the very war for the moment!

"On!" cried the Saxon King; "let our earth take its spoiler! On to the standard, and the day is our own!"

"On to the standard!" cried Haco, who, his horse slain under him, all bloody with wounds not his own, now came to the King's side. Grim and tall rose the standard, and the streamer shrieked and flapped in the wind as if the raven had voice, when, right before Harold, right between him and the banner, stood Tostig his brother, known by the splendour of his mail, the gold work on his mantle—known by the fierce laugh, and the defying voice.

"What matters!" cried Haco; "strike, O King, for thy crown!"

Harold's hand gripped Haco's arm convulsively; he lowered his axe, turned round, and passed shudderingly away.

Both armies now paused from the attack; for both were thrown into great disorder, and each gladly gave respite to the other, to re-form its own shattered array.

The Norsemen were not the soldiers to yield because their leader was slain—rather the more resolute to fight, since revenge was now added to valour; yet, but for the daring and promptness with which Tostig had cut his way to the standard, the day had been already decided.

During the pause, Harold summoning Gurth, said to him in great emotion, "For the sake of Nature, for the love of God, go, O Gurth,—go to Tostig; urge him, now Hardrada is dead, urge him to peace. All that we can proffer with honour, proffer—quarter and free retreat to every Norseman [248]. Oh, save me, save us, from a brother's blood!"

Gurth lifted his helmet, and kissed the mailed hand that grasped his own.

"I go," said he. And so, bareheaded, and with a single trumpeter, he went to the hostile lines.

Harold awaited him in great agitation; nor could any man have guessed what bitter and awful thoughts lay in that heart, from which, in the way to power, tie after tie had been wrenched away. He did not wait long; and even before Gurth rejoined him, he knew by an unanimous shout of fury, to which the clash of countless shields chimed in, that the mission had been in vain.

Tostig had refused to hear Gurth, save in presence of the Norwegian chiefs; and when the message had been delivered, they all cried, "We would rather fall one across the corpse of the other [249], than leave a field in which our King was slain."

"Ye hear them," said Tostig; "as they speak, speak I"

"Not mine this guilt, too, O God!" said Harold, solemnly lifting his hand on high. "Now, then, to duty."

By this time the Norwegian reinforcements had arrived from the ships, and this for a short time rendered the conflict, that immediately ensued, uncertain and critical. But Harold's generalship was now as consummate as his valour had been daring. He kept his men true to their irrefragable line. Even if fragments splintered off, each fragment threw itself into the form of the resistless wedge. One Norwegian, standing on the bridge of Stanford, long guarded that pass; and no less than forty Saxons are said to have perished by his arm. To him the English King sent a generous pledge, not only of safety for the life, but honour for the valour. The viking refused to surrender, and fell at last by a javelin from the hand of Haco. As if in him had been embodied the unyielding war-god of the Norsemen, in that death died the last hope of the vikings. They fell literally where they stood; many, from sheer exhaustion and the weight of their mail, died without a blow [250]. And in the shades of nightfall, Harold stood amidst the shattered rampart of shields, his foot on the corpse of the standard-bearer, his hand on the Ravager of the World.

"Thy brother's corpse is borne yonder," said Haco in the ear of the King, as wiping the blood from his sword, he plunged it back into the sheath.

CHAPTER XII.

Young Olave, the son of Hardrada, had happily escaped the slaughter. A strong detachment of the Norwegians had still remained with the vessels, and amongst them some prudent old chiefs, who foreseeing the probable results of the day, and knowing that Hardrada would never quit, save as a conqueror or a corpse, the field on which he had planted the Ravager of the World, had detained the prince almost by force from sharing the fate of his father. But ere those vessels could put out to sea, the vigorous measures of the Saxon King had already intercepted the retreat of the vessels. And then, ranging their shields as a wall round their masts, the bold vikings at least determined to die as men. But with the morning came King Harold himself to the banks of the river, and behind him, with trailed

lances, a solemn procession that bore the body of the Scald King. They halted on the margin, and a boat was launched towards the Norwegian fleet, bearing a monk, who demanded the chief, to send a deputation, headed by the young Prince himself, to receive the corpse of their King, and hear the proposals of the Saxon.

The vikings, who had anticipated no preliminaries to the massacre they awaited, did not hesitate to accept these overtures. Twelve of the most famous chiefs still surviving, and Olave himself, entered the boat; and, standing between his brothers, Leofwine and Gurth, Harold thus accosted them:

"Your King invaded a people that had given him no offence; he has paid the forfeit—we war not with the dead! Give to his remains the honours due to the brave. Without ransom or condition, we yield to you what can no longer harm us. And for thee, young Prince," continued the King, with a tone of pity in his voice, as he contemplated the stately boyhood, and proud, but deep grief in the face of Olave; "for thee, wilt thou not live to learn that the wars of Odin are treason to the Faith of the Cross? We have conquered—we dare not butcher. Take such ships as ye need for those that survive. Three-and-twenty I offer for your transport. Return to your native shores, and guard them as we have guarded ours. Are ye contented?" Amongst those chiefs was a stern priest—the Bishop of the Orcades—he advanced and bent his knee to the King.

"O Lord of England," said he, "yesterday thou didst conquer the form—to-day, the soul. And never more may generous Norsemen invade the coast of him who honours the dead and spares the living."

"Amen!" cried the chiefs, and they all knelt to Harold. The young Prince stood a moment irresolute, for his dead father was on the bier before him, and revenge was yet a virtue in the heart of a sea-king. But lifting his eyes to Harold's, the mild and gentle majesty of the Saxon's brow was irresistible in its benign command; and stretching his right hand to the King, he raised on high the other, and said aloud, "Faith and friendship with thee and England evermore."

Then all the chiefs rising, they gathered round the bier, but no hand, in the sight of the conquering foe, lifted the cloth of gold that covered the corpse of the famous King. The bearers of the bier moved on slowly towards the boat; the Norwegians followed with measured funereal steps. And not till the bier was placed on board the royal galley was there heard the wail of woe; but then it came, loud, and deep, and dismal, and was followed by a burst of wild song from a surviving Scald.

The Norwegian preparations for departure were soon made, and the ships vouchsafed to their convoy raised anchor, and sailed down the stream. Harold's eye watched the ships from the river banks.

"And there," said he, at last, "there glide the last sails that shall ever bear the devastating raven to the shores of England."

Truly, in that field had been the most signal defeat those warriors, hitherto almost invincible, had known. On that bier lay the last son of Berserker and sea-king; and be it, O Harold, remembered in thine honour, that not by the Norman, but by thee, true-hearted Saxon, was trampled on the English soil the Ravager of the World! [251]

"So be it," said Haco, "and so, methinks, will it be. But forget not the descendant of the Norsemen, the Count of Rouen!"

Harold started, and turned to his chiefs. "Sound trumpet, and fall in. To York we march. There re-settle the earldom, collect the spoil, and then back, my men, to the southern shores. Yet first kneel thou, Haco, son of my brother Sweyn: thy deeds were done in the light of Heaven, in the sight of warriors in the open field; so should thine honours find thee! Not with the vain fripperies of Norman knighthood do I deck thee, but make thee one of the elder brotherhood of Minister and Miles. I gird round thy loins mine own baldric of pure silver; I place in thy hand mine own sword of plain steel; and bid thee rise to take place in council and camps amongst the Proceres of England,—Earl of Hertford and Essex. Boy," whispered the King, as he bent over the pale cheek of his nephew, "thank not me. From me the thanks should come. On the day that saw Tostig's crime and his death, thou didst purify the name of my brother Sweyn! On to our city of York!"

High banquet was held in York; and, according to the customs of the Saxon monarchs, the King could not absent himself from the Victory Feast of his thegns. He sate at the head of the board, between his brothers. Morcar, whose departure from the city had deprived him of a share in the battle, had arrived that day with his brother Edwin, whom he had gone to summon to his aid. And though the young Earls envied the fame they had not shared, the envy was noble.

Gay and boisterous was the wassail; and lively song, long neglected in England, woke, as it wakes ever, at the breath of Joy and Fame. As if in the days of Alfred, the harp passed from hand to hand; martial and rough the strain beneath the touch of the Anglo-Dane, more refined and thoughtful the lay when it chimed to the voice of the Anglo-Saxon. But the memory of Tostig—all guilty though he was—a brother slain in war with a brother, lay heavy on Harold's soul. Still, so had he schooled and trained himself to live but for England—know no joy and no woe not hers—that by degrees and strong efforts he shook off his gloom. And music, and song, and wine, and blazing lights, and the proud sight of those long lines of valiant men, whose hearts had beat and whose hands had triumphed in the same cause, all aided to link his senses with the gladness of the hour.

And now, as night advanced, Leofwine, who was ever a favourite in the banquet, as Gurth in the council, rose to propose the drink-hael, which carries the most characteristic of our modern social customs to an antiquity so remote, and the roar was hushed at the sight of the young Earl's winsome face. With due decorum, he uncovered his head [252], composed his countenance, and began:

"Craving forgiveness of my lord the King, and this noble assembly," said Leofwine, "in which are so many from whom what I intend to propose would come with better grace, I would remind you that William, Count of the Normans, meditates a pleasure excursion, of the same nature as our late visitor, Harold Hardrada's."

A scornful laugh ran through the hall.

"And as we English are hospitable folk, and give any man, who asks, meat and board for one night, so one day's welcome, methinks, will be all that the Count of the Normans will need at our English hands."

Flushed with the joyous insolence of wine, the wassailers roared applause.

"Wherefore, this drink-hael to William of Rouen! And, to borrow a saying now in every man's lips, and which, I think, our good scops will take care that our children's children shall learn by heart,—since he covets our Saxon soil, 'seven feet of land' in frank pledge to him for ever!"

"Drink-hael to William the Norman!" shouted the revellers; and each man, with mocking formality, took off his cap, kissed his hand, and bowed [253]. "Drink-hael to William the Norman!" and the shout rolled from floor to roof—when, in the midst of the uproar, a man all bedabbled with dust and mire, rushed into the hall, rushed through the rows of the banqueters, rushed to the throne-chair of Harold, and cried aloud, "William the Norman is encamped on the shores of Sussex; and with the mightiest armament ever yet seen in England, is ravaging the land far and near!"