

HAROLD - BOOK 4.

EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON*

BOOK IV.

THE HEATHEN ALTAR AND THE SAXON CHURCH.

CHAPTER I.

While Harold sleeps, let us here pause to survey for the first time the greatness of that House to which Sweyn's exile had left him the heir. The fortunes of Godwin had been those which no man not eminently versed in the science of his kind can achieve. Though the fable which some modern historians of great name have repeated and detailed, as to his early condition as the son of a cow-herd, is utterly groundless [99], and he belonged to a house all-powerful at the time of his youth, he was unquestionably the builder of his own greatness. That he should rise so high in the early part of his career was less remarkable than that he should have so long continued the possessor of a power and state in reality more than regal.

But, as has been before implied, Godwin's civil capacities were more prominent than his warlike. And this it is which invests him with that peculiar interest which attracts us to those who knit our modern intelligence with the past. In that dim world before the Norman deluge, we are startled to recognise the gifts that ordinarily distinguish a man of peace in a civilised age.

His father, Wolnoth, had been "Childe" [100] of the South Saxons, or thegn of Sussex, a nephew of Edric Streone, Earl of Mercia, the unprincipled but able minister of Ethelred, who betrayed his master to Canute, by whom, according to most authorities, he was righteously, though not very legally, slain as a reward for the treason.

"I promised," said the Dane king, "to set thy head higher than other men's, and I keep my word." The trunkless head was set on the gates of London.

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Wolnoth had quarrelled with his uncle Brightric, Edric's brother, and before the arrival of Canute, had betaken himself to the piracy of a sea chief, seduced twenty of the king's ships, plundered the southern coasts, burnt the royal navy, and then his history disappears from the chronicles; but immediately afterwards the great Danish army, called Thurkell's Host, invaded the coast, and kept their chief station on the Thames. Their victorious arms soon placed the country almost at their command. The traitor Edric joined them with a power of more than 10,000 men; and it is probable enough that the ships of Wolnoth had before this time melted amicably into the armament of the Danes. If this, which seems the most likely conjecture, be received, Godwin, then a mere youth, would naturally have commenced his career in the cause of Canute; and as the son of a formidable chief of thegn's rank, and even as kinsman to Edric, who, whatever his crimes, must have retained a party it was wise to conciliate, Godwin's favour with Canute, whose policy would lead him to show marked distinction to any able Saxon follower, ceases to be surprising.

The son of Wolnoth accompanied Canute in his military expedition to the Scandinavian continent, and here a signal victory, planned by Godwin and executed solely by himself and the Saxon band under his command, without aid from Canute's Danes, made the most memorable military exploit of his life, and confirmed his rising fortunes.

Edric, though he is said to have been low born, had married the sister of King Ethelred; and as Godwin advanced in fame, Canute did not disdain to bestow his own sister in marriage on the eloquent favourite, who probably kept no small portion of the Saxon population to their allegiance. On the death of this, his first wife, who bore him but one son [101] (who died by accident), he found a second spouse in the same royal house; and the mother of his six living sons and two daughters was the niece of his king, and sister of Sweyn, who subsequently filled the throne of Denmark. After the death of Canute, the Saxon's predilections in favour of the Saxon line became apparent; but it was either his policy or his principles always to defer to the popular will as expressed in the national council; and on the preference given by the Witan to Harold the son of Canute over the heirs of Ethelred, he yielded his own inclinations. The great power of the Danes, and the amicable fusion of their race with the Saxon which had now taken place, are apparent in this decision; for not only did Earl Leofric, of Mercia, though himself a Saxon (as well as the Earl of Northumbria, with the thegns north of the Thames), declare for Harold the Dane, but the citizens of London were of the same party; and Godwin represented little more than the feeling of his own principality of Wessex.

From that time, Godwin, however, became identified with the English cause; and even many who believed him guilty of some share in the murder, or at least the betrayal, of Alfred [102], Edward's brother, sought excuses in the disgust with which Godwin had regarded the

foreign retinue that Alfred had brought with him, as if to owe his throne to Norman swords, rather than to English hearts. Hardicanute, who succeeded Harold, whose memory he abhorred, whose corpse he disinterred and flung into a fen [103], had been chosen by the unanimous council both of English and Danish thegns; and despite Hardicanute's first vehement accusations of Godwin, the Earl still remained throughout that reign as powerful as in the two preceding it. When Hardicanute dropped down dead at a marriage banquet, it was Godwin who placed Edward upon the throne; and that great Earl must either have been conscious of his innocence of the murder of Edward's brother, or assured of his own irresponsible power, when he said to the prince who knelt at his feet, and, fearful of the difficulties in his way, implored the Earl to aid his abdication of the throne and return to Normandy.

"You are the son of Ethelred, grandson of Edgar. Reign, it is your duty; better to live in glory than die in exile. You are of mature years, and having known sorrow and need, can better feel for your people. Rely on me, and there will be none of the difficulties you dread; whom I favour, England favours."

And shortly afterwards, in the national assembly, Godwin won Edward his throne. "Powerful in speech, powerful in bringing over people to what he desired, some yielded to his words, some to bribes." [104] Verily, Godwin was a man to have risen as high, had he lived later!

So Edward reigned, and agreeably, it is said, with previous stipulations, married the daughter of his king-maker. Beautiful as Edith the Queen was in mind and in person, Edward apparently loved her not. She dwelt in his palace, his wife only in name.

Tostig (as we have seen) had married the daughter of Baldwin, Count of Flanders, sister to Matilda, wife to the Norman Duke: and thus the House of Godwin was triply allied to princely lineage—the Danish, the Saxon, the Flemish. And Tostig might have said, as in his heart William the Norman said, "My children shall descend from Charlemagne and Alfred."

Godwin's life, though thus outwardly brilliant, was too incessantly passed in public affairs and politic schemes to allow the worldly man much leisure to watch over the nurture and rearing of the bold spirits of his sons. Githa his wife, the Dane, a woman with a haughty but noble spirit, imperfect education, and some of the wild and lawless blood derived from her race of heathen sea-kings, was more fitted to stir their ambition and inflame their fancies, than curb their tempers and mould their hearts.

We have seen the career of Sweyn; but Sweyn was an angel of light compared to his brother Tostig. He who can be penitent has ever something lofty in his original nature; but Tostig was remorseless as

the tiger, as treacherous and as fierce. With less intellectual capacities than any of his brothers, he had more personal ambition than all put together. A kind of effeminate vanity, not uncommon with daring natures (for the bravest races and the bravest soldiers are usually the vainest; the desire to shine is as visible in the fop as in the hero), made him restless both for command and notoriety. "May I ever be in the mouths of men," was his favourite prayer. Like his maternal ancestry, the Danes, he curled his long hair, and went as a bridegroom to the feast of the ravens.

Two only of that house had studied the Humane Letters, which were no longer disregarded by the princes of the Continent; they were the sweet sister, the eldest of the family, fading fast in her loveless home, and Harold.

But Harold's mind,—in which what we call common sense was carried to genius,—a mind singularly practical and sagacious, like his father's, cared little for theological learning and priestly legend—for all that poesy of religion in which the Woman was wafted from the sorrows of earth.

Godwin himself was no favourite of the Church, and had seen too much of the abuses of the Saxon priesthood, (perhaps, with few exceptions, the most corrupt and illiterate in all Europe, which is saying much,) to instil into his children that reverence for the spiritual authority which existed abroad; and the enlightenment, which in him was experience in life, was in Harold, betimes, the result of study and reflection. The few books of the classical world then within reach of the student opened to the young Saxon views of human duties and human responsibilities utterly distinct from the unmeaning ceremonials and fleshly mortifications in which even the higher theology of that day placed the elements of virtue. He smiled in scorn when some Dane, whose life had been passed in the alternate drunkenness of wine and of blood, thought he had opened the gates of heaven by bequeathing lands gained by a robber's sword, to pamper the lazy sloth of some fifty monks. If those monks had presumed to question his own actions, his disdain would have been mixed with simple wonder that men so besotted in ignorance, and who could not construe the Latin of the very prayers they pattered, should presume to be the judges of educated men. It is possible—for his nature was earnest—that a pure and enlightened clergy, that even a clergy, though defective in life, zealous in duty and cultivated in mind,—such a clergy as Alfred sought to found, and as Lanfranc endeavoured (not without some success) to teach—would have bowed his strong sense to that grand and subtle truth which dwells in spiritual authority. But as it was, he stood aloof from the rude superstition of his age, and early in life made himself the arbiter of his own conscience. Reducing his religion to the simplest elements of our creed, he found rather in the books of Heathen authors than in the lives of the saints, his notions of the larger morality which relates to the citizen and the man. The love of country; the

sense of justice; fortitude in adverse and temperance in prosperous fortune, became portions of his very mind. Unlike his father, he played no actor's part in those qualities which had won him the popular heart. He was gentle and affable; above all, he was fair-dealing and just, not because it was politic to seem, but his nature to be, so.

Nevertheless, Harold's character, beautiful and sublime in many respects as it was, had its strong leaven of human imperfection in that very self-dependence which was born of his reason and his pride. In resting so solely on man's perceptions of the right, he lost one attribute of the true hero-faith. We do not mean that word in the religious sense alone, but in the more comprehensive. He did not rely on the Celestial Something pervading all nature, never seen, only felt when duly courted, stronger and lovelier than what eye could behold and mere reason could embrace. Believing, it is true, in God, he lost those fine links that unite God to man's secret heart, and which are woven alike from the simplicity of the child and the wisdom of the poet. To use a modern illustration, his large mind was a "cupola lighted from below."

His bravery, though inflexible as the fiercest sea-king's, when need arose for its exercise, was not his prominent characteristic. He despised the brute valour of Tostig,—his bravery was a necessary part of a firm and balanced manhood—the bravery of Hector, not Achilles. Constitutionally averse to bloodshed, he could seem timid where daring only gratified a wanton vanity, or aimed at a selfish object. On the other hand, if duty demanded daring, no danger could deter, no policy warp him;—he could seem rash; he could even seem merciless. In the what ought to be, he understood a must be.

And it was natural to this peculiar, yet thoroughly English temperament, to be, in action, rather steadfast and patient than quick and ready. Placed in perils familiar to him, nothing could exceed his vigour and address; but if taken unawares, and before his judgment could come to his aid, he was liable to be surprised into error. Large minds are rarely quick, unless they have been corrupted into unnatural vigilance by the necessities of suspicion. But a nature more thoroughly unsuspecting, more frank, trustful, and genuinely loyal than that young Earl's, it was impossible to conceive. All these attributes considered, we have the key to much of Harold's character and conduct in the later events of his fated and tragic life.

But with this temperament, so manly and simple, we are not to suppose that Harold, while rejecting the superstitions of one class, was so far beyond his time as to reject those of another. No son of fortune, no man placing himself and the world in antagonism, can ever escape from some belief in the Invisible. Caesar could ridicule and profane the mystic rites of Roman mythology, but he must still believe in his

fortune, as in a god. And Harold, in his very studies, seeing the freest and boldest minds of antiquity subjected to influences akin to those of his Saxon forefathers, felt less shame in yielding to them, vain as they might be, than in monkish impostures so easily detected. Though hitherto he had rejected all direct appeal to the magic devices of Hilda, the sound of her dark sayings, heard in childhood, still vibrated on his soul as man. Belief in omens, in days lucky or unlucky, in the stars, was universal in every class of the Saxon. Harold had his own fortunate day, the day of his nativity, the 14th of October. All enterprises undertaken on that day had hitherto been successful. He believed in the virtue of that day, as Cromwell believed in his 3d of September. For the rest, we have described him as he was in that part of his career in which he is now presented. Whether altered by fate and circumstances, time will show. As yet, no selfish ambition leagued with the natural desire of youth and intellect for their fair share of fame and power. His patriotism, fed by the example of Greek and Roman worthies, was genuine, pure, and ardent; he could have stood in the pass with Leonidas, or leaped into the gulf with Curtius.

CHAPTER II.

At dawn, Harold woke from uneasy and broken slumbers, and his eyes fell upon the face of Hilda, large, and fair, and unutterably calm, as the face of Egyptian sphinx.

"Have thy dreams been prophetic, son of Godwin?" said the Vala.

"Our Lord forfend," replied the Earl, with unusual devoutness.

"Tell them, and let me read the rede; sense dwells in the voices of the night."

Harold mused, and after a short pause, he said:

"Methinks, Hilda, I can myself explain how those dreams came to haunt me."

Then raising himself on his elbow, he continued, while he fixed his clear penetrating eyes upon his hostess:

"Tell me frankly, Hilda, didst thou not cause some light to shine on yonder knoll, by the mound and stone, within the temple of the Druids?"

But if Harold had suspected himself to be the dupe of some imposture,

the thought vanished when he saw the look of keen interest, even of awe, which Hilda's face instantly assumed.

"Didst thou see a light, son of Godwin, by the altar of Thor, and over the bautastein of the mighty dead? a flame, lambent and livid, like moonbeams collected over snow?"

"So seemed to me the light."

"No human hand ever kindled that flame, which announces the presence of the Dead," said Hilda, with a tremulous voice; "though seldom, uncompelled by the seid and the rune, does the spectre itself warn the eyes of the living."

"What shape, or what shadow of shape, does that spectre assume?"

"It rises in the midst of the flame, pale as the mist on the mountain, and vast as the giants of old; with the saex, and the spear, and the shield, of the sons of Woden.—Thou hast seen the Scin-laeca," continued Hilda, looking full on the face of the Earl.

"If thou deceivest me not," began Harold, doubting still.

"Deceive thee! not to save the crown of the Saxon dare I mock the might of the dead. Knowest thou not—or hath thy vain lore stood in place of the lore of thy fathers—that where a hero of old is buried, his treasures lie in his grave; that over that grave is at times seen at night the flame that thou sawest, and the dead in his image of air? Oft seen in the days that are gone, when the dead and the living had one faith—were one race; now never marked, but for portent, and prophecy, and doom:—glory or woe to the eyes that see! On yon knoll, Aesc (the first-born of Cerdic, that Father-King of the Saxons,) has his grave where the mound rises green, and the stone gleams wan by the altar of Thor. He smote the Britons in their temple, and he fell smiting. They buried him in his arms, and with the treasures his right hand had won. Fate hangs on the house of Cerdic, or the realm of the Saxon, when Woden calls the laeca of his son from the grave."

Hilda, much troubled bent her face over her clasped hands, and, rocking to and fro, muttered some runes unintelligible to the ear of her listener. Then she turned to him, commandingly, and said:

"Thy dreams now, indeed, are oracles, more true than living Vala could charm with the wand and the rune: Unfold them."

Thus adjured, Harold resumed:

"Methought, then, that I was on a broad, level plain, in the noon of day; all was clear to my eye, and glad to my heart. I was alone and went on my way rejoicing. Suddenly the earth opened under my feet,

and I fell deep, fathom-deep;—deep, as if to that central pit, which our heathen sires called Niffelheim—the Home of Vapour—the hell of the dead who die without glory. Stunned by the fall, I lay long, locked as in a dream in the midst of a dream. When I opened my eyes, behold, I was girt round with dead men’s bones; and the bones moved round me, undulating, as the dry leaves that wirble round in the winds of the winter. And from midst of them peered a trunkless skull, and on the skull was a mitre, and from the yawning jaws a voice came hissing, as a serpent’s hiss, ‘Harold, the scorner, thou art ours!’ Then, as from the buzz of an army, came voices multitudinous, ‘Thou art ours!’ I sought to rise, and behold my limbs were bound, and the gyves were fine and frail, as the web of the gossamer, and they weighed on me like chains of iron. And I felt an anguish of soul that no words can speak—an anguish both of horror and shame; and my manhood seemed to ooze from me, and I was weak as a child new born. Then suddenly there rushed forth a freezing wind, as from an air of ice, and the bones from their whirl stood still, and the buzz ceased, and the mitred skull grinned on me still and voiceless; and serpents darted their arrowy tongues from the eyeless sockets. And, lo, before me stood (O Hilda, I see it now!) the form of the spectre that had risen from yonder knoll. With his spear, and saex, and his shield, he stood before me; and his face, though pale as that of one long dead, was stern as the face of a warrior in the van of armed men; he stretched his hand, and he smote his saex on his shield, and the clang sounded hollow; the gyves broke at the clash—I sprang to my feet, and I stood side by side with the phantom, dauntless. Then, suddenly, the mitre on the skull changed to a helm; and where the skull had grinned, trunkless and harmless, stood a shape like War, made incarnate;—a Thing above giants, with its crest to the stars and its form an eclipse between the sun and the day. The earth changed to ocean, and the ocean was blood, and the ocean seemed deep as the seas where the whales sport in the North, but the surge rose not to the knee of that measureless image. And the ravens came round it from all parts of the heaven, and the vultures with the dead eyes and dull scream. And all the bones, before scattered and shapeless, sprung to life and to form, some monks and some warriors; and there was a hoot, and a hiss, and a roar, and the storm of arms. And a broad pennon rose out of the sea of blood, and from the clouds came a pale hand, and it wrote on the pennon, ‘Harold, the Accursed!’ Then said the stern shape by my side, ‘Harold, fearest thou the dead men’s bones?’ and its voice was as a trumpet that gives strength to the craven, and I answering, ‘Niddering, indeed, were Harold, to fear the bones of the dead!’”

”As I spoke, as if hell had burst loose, came a gibber of scorn, and all vanished at once, save the ocean of blood. Slowly came from the north, over the sea, a bird like a raven, save that it was blood-red, like the ocean; and there came from the south, swimming towards me, a lion. And I looked to the spectre; and the pride of war had gone from its face, which was so sad that methought I forgot raven and lion, and wept to see it. Then the spectre took me in its vast arms,

and its breath froze my veins, and it kissed my brow and my lips, and said, gently and fondly, as my mother in some childish sickness, 'Harold, my best beloved, mourn not. Thou hast all which the sons of Woden dreamed in their dreams of Valhalla!' Thus saying, the form receded slowly, slowly, still gazing on me with its sad eyes. I stretched forth my hand to detain it, and in my grasp was a shadowy sceptre. And, lo! round me, as if from the earth, sprang up thegns and chiefs, in their armour; and a board was spread, and a wassail was blithe around me. So my heart felt cheered and light, and in my hand was still the sceptre. And we feasted long and merrily; but over the feast flapped the wings of the blood-red raven, and over the blood-red sea beyond, swam the lion, near and near. And in the heavens there were two stars, one pale and steadfast, the other rushing and luminous; and a shadowy hand pointed from the cloud to the pale star, and a voice said, 'Lo, Harold! the star that shone on thy birth.' And another hand pointed to the luminous star, and another voice said, 'Lo, the star that shone on the birth of the victor.' Then, lo! the bright star grew fiercer and larger; and, rolling on with a hissing sound, as when iron is dipped into water, it rushed over the disc of the mournful planet, and the whole heavens seemed on fire. So methought the dream faded away, and in fading, I heard a full swell of music, as the swell of an anthem in an aisle; a music like that which but once in my life I heard; when I stood on the train of Edward, in the halls of Winchester, the day they crowned him king."

Harold ceased, and the Vala slowly lifted her head from her bosom, and surveyed him in profound silence, and with a gaze that seemed vacant and meaningless.

"Why dost thou look on me thus, and why art thou so silent?" asked the Earl.

"The cloud is on my sight, and the burthen is on my soul, and I cannot read thy rede," murmured the Vala. "But morn, the ghost-chaser, that waketh life, the action, charms into slumber life, the thought. As the stars pale at the rising of the sun, so fade the lights of the soul when the buds revive in the dews, and the lark sings to the day. In thy dream lies thy future, as the wing of the moth in the web of the changing worm; but, whether for weal or for woe, thou shalt burst through thy mesh, and spread thy plumes in the air. Of myself I know nought. Await the hour when Skulda shall pass into the soul of her servant, and thy fate shall rush from my lips as the rush of the waters from the heart of the cave."

"I am content to abide," said Harold, with his wonted smile, so calm and so lofty; "but I cannot promise thee that I shall heed thy rede, or obey thy warning, when my reason hath awoke, as while I speak it awakens, from the fumes of the fancy and the mists of the night."

CHAPTER III.

Githa, Earl Godwin's wife, sate in her chamber, and her heart was sad. In the room was one of her sons, the one dearer to her than all, Wolnoth, her darling. For the rest of her sons were stalwart and strong of frame, and in their infancy she had known not a mother's fears. But Wolnoth had come into the world before his time, and sharp had been the travail of the mother, and long between life and death the struggle of the newborn babe. And his cradle had been rocked with a trembling knee, and his pillow been bathed with hot tears. Frail had been his childhood—a thing that hung on her care; and now, as the boy grew, blooming and strong, into youth, the mother felt that she had given life twice to her child. Therefore was he more dear to her than the rest; and, therefore, as she gazed upon him now, fair and smiling, and hopeful, she mourned for him more than for Sweyn, the outcast and criminal, on his pilgrimage of woe, to the waters of Jordan, and the tomb of our Lord. For Wolnoth, selected as the hostage for the faith of his house, was to be sent from her arms to the Court of William the Norman. And the youth smiled and was gay, choosing vestment and mantle, and ateghars of gold, that he might be flaunting and brave in the halls of knighthood and the beauty,—the school of the proudest chivalry of the Christian world. Too young, and too thoughtless, to share the wise hate of his elders for the manners and forms of the foreigners, their gaiety and splendour, as his boyhood had seen them, relieving the gloom of the cloister court, and contrasting the spleen and the rudeness of the Saxon temperament, had dazzled his fancy and half Normanised his mind. A proud and happy boy was he, to go as hostage for the faith, and representative of the rank, of his mighty kinsmen; and step into manhood in the eyes of the dames of Rouen.

By Wolnoth's side stood his young sister, Thyra, a mere infant; and her innocent sympathy with her brother's pleasure in gaud and toy saddened Githa yet more.

"O my son!" said the troubled mother, "why, of all my children, have they chosen thee? Harold is wise against danger, and Tostig is fierce against foes, and Gurth is too loving to awake hate in the sternest, and from the mirth of sunny Leofwine sorrow glints aside, as the shaft from the sheen of a shield. But thou, thou, O beloved!—cursed be the king that chose thee, and cruel was the father that forgot the light of the mother's eyes!"

"Tut, mother the dearest," said Wolnoth, pausing from the contemplation of a silk robe, all covered with brodered peacocks, which had been sent him as a gift from his sister the Queen, and wrought with her own fair hands; for a notable needle-woman, despite her sage lere, was the wife of the Saint King, as sorrowful women

mostly are,—”Tut! the bird must leave the nest when the wings are fledged. Harold the eagle, Tostig the kite, Gurth the ring-dove, and Leofwine the stare. See, my wings are the richest of all, mother, and bright is the sun in which thy peacock shall spread his pranked plumes.”

Then, observing that his liveliness provoked no smile from his mother, he approached and said more seriously:

”Bethink thee, mother mine. No other choice was left to king or to father. Harold, and Tostig, and Leofwine, have their lordships and offices. Their posts are fixed, and they stand as the columns of our house. And Gurth is so young, and so Saxish and so the shadow of Harold, that his hate to the Norman is a by-word already among our youths; for hate is the more marked in a temper of love, as the blue of this border seems black against the white of the woof. But I;—the good King knows that I shall be welcome, for the Norman knights love Wolnoth, and I have spent hours by the knees of Montgommeri and Grantmesnil, listening to the feats of Rolf-ganger, and playing with their gold chains of knighthood. And the stout Count himself shall knight me, and I shall come back with the spurs of gold which thy ancestors, the brave Kings of Norway and Daneland, wore ere knighthood was known. Come, kiss me, my mother, and come see the brave falcons Harold has sent me:—true Welch!”

Githa rested her face on her son’s shoulder, and her tears blinded her. The door opened gently, and Harold entered; and with the Earl, a pale dark-haired boy, Haco; the son of Sweyn.

But Githa, absorbed in her darling Wolnoth, scarce saw the grandchild reared afar from her knees, and hurried at once to Harold. In his presence she felt comfort and safety; for Wolnoth leant on her heart, and her heart leant on Harold.

”O son, son!” she cried, ”firmest of hand, surest of faith, and wisest of brain, in the house of Godwin, tell me that he yonder, he thy young brother, risks no danger in the halls of the Normans!”

”Not more than in these, mother,” answered Harold, soothing her, with caressing lip and gentle tone. ”Fierce and ruthless, men say, is William the Duke against foes with their swords in their hands, but debonnair and mild to the gentle [105], frank host and kind lord. And these Normans have a code of their own, more grave than all morals, more binding than even their fanatic religion. Thou knowest it well, mother, for it comes from thy race of the North, and this code of honour, they call it, makes Wolnoth’s head as sacred as the relics of a saint set in zimmes. Ask only, my brother, when thou comest in sight of the Norman Duke, ask only ’the kiss of peace,’ and, that kiss on thy brow, thou wilt sleep more safe than if all the banners of England waved over thy couch.” [106]

"But how long shall the exile be?" asked Githa, comforted. Harold's brow fell.

"Mother, not even to cheer thee will I deceive. The time of the hostageship rests with the King and the Duke. As long as the one affects fear from the race of Godwin, as long as the other feigns care for such priests or such knights as were not banished from the realm, being not courtiers, but scattered wide and far in convent and homestead, so long will Wolnoth and Haco be guests in the Norman halls."

Githa wrung her hands.

"But comfort, my mother; Wolnoth is young, his eye is keen, and his spirit prompt and quick. He will mark these Norman captains, he will learn their strength and their weakness, their manner of war, and he will come back, not as Edward the King came, a lover of things un-Saxon, but able to warn and to guide us against the plots of the camp-court, which threatens more, year by year, the peace of the world. And he will see there arts we may worthily borrow: not the cut of a tunic, and the fold of a gonna, but the arts of men who found states and build nations. William the Duke is splendid and wise; merchants tell us how crafts thrive under his iron hand, and war-men say that his forts are constructed with skill and his battle-schemes planned as the mason plans key-stone and arch, with weight portioned out to the prop, and the force of the hand made tenfold by the science of the brain. So that the boy will return to us a man round and complete, a teacher of greybeards, and the sage of his kin; fit for earldom and rule, fit for glory and England. Grieve not, daughter of the Dane kings, that thy son, the best loved, hath nobler school and wider field than his brothers."

This appeal touched the proud heart of the niece of Canute the Great, and she almost forgot the grief of her love in the hope of her ambition.

She dried her tears and smiled upon Wolnoth, and already, in the dreams of a mother's vanity, saw him great as Godwin in council, and prosperous as Harold in the field. Nor, half Norman as he was, did the young man seem insensible of the manly and elevated patriotism of his brother's hinted lessons, though he felt they implied reproof. He came to the Earl, whose arm was round his mother, and said with a frank heartiness not usual to a nature somewhat frivolous and irresolute:

"Harold, thy tongue could kindle stones into men, and warm those men into Saxons. Thy Wolnoth shall not hang his head with shame when he comes back to our merrie land with shaven locks and spurs of gold. For if thou doubttest his race from his look, thou shalt put thy right

hand on his heart, and feel England beat there in every pulse.”

”Brave words, and well spoken,” cried the Earl, and he placed his hand on the boy’s head as in benison.

Till then, Haco had stood apart, conversing with the infant Thyra, whom his dark, mournful face awed and yet touched, for she nestled close to him, and put her little hand in his; but now, inspired no less than his cousin by Harold’s noble speech, he came proudly forward by Wolnoth’s side, and said:

”I, too, am English, and I have the name of Englishman to redeem.”

Ere Harold could reply, Githa exclaimed:

”Leave there thy right hand on my child’s head, and say, simply: ’By my troth and my plight, if the Duke detain Wolnoth, son of Githa, against just plea, and King’s assent to his return, I, Harold, will, failing letter and nuncius, cross the seas, to restore the child to the mother.’” [107] Harold hesitated.

A sharp cry of reproach that went to his heart broke from Githa’s lips.

”Ah! cold and self-heeding, wilt thou send him to bear a peril from which thou shrinkest thyself?”

”By my troth and my plight, then,” said the Earl, ”if, fair time elapsed, peace in England, without plea of justice, and against my king’s fiat, Duke William of Normandy detain the hostages;—thy son and this dear boy, more sacred and more dear to me for his father’s woes,—I will cross the seas, to restore the child to the mother, the fatherless to his fatherland. So help me, all-seeing One, Amen and Amen!”

CHAPTER IV.

We have seen, in an earlier part of this record, that Harold possessed, amongst his numerous and more stately possessions, a house, not far from the old Roman dwelling-place of Hilda. And in this residence he now (save when with the King) made his chief abode. He gave as the reasons for his selection, the charm it took, in his eyes, from that signal mark of affection which his ceorls had rendered him, in purchasing the house and tilling the ground in his absence; and more especially the convenience of its vicinity to the new palace at Westminster; for, by Edward’s special desire, while the other brothers

repaired to their different domains, Harold remained near his royal person. To use the words of the great Norwegian chronicler, "Harold was always with the Court itself, and nearest to the King in all service."

"The King loved him very much, and kept him as his own son, for he had no children." This attendance on Edward was naturally most close at the restoration to power of the Earl's family. For Harold, mild and conciliating, was, like Alred, a great peacemaker, and Edward had never cause to complain of him, as he believed he had of the rest of that haughty house. But the true spell which made dear to Harold the rude building of timber, with its doors open all day to his lithsmen, when with a light heart he escaped from the halls of Westminster, was the fair face of Edith his neighbour. The impression which this young girl had made upon Harold seemed to partake of the strength of a fatality. For Harold had loved her before the marvellous beauty of her womanhood began; and, occupied from his earliest youth in grave and earnest affairs, his heart had never been frittered away on the mean and frivolous affections of the idle. Now, in that comparative leisure of his stormy life, he was naturally most open to the influence of a charm more potent than all the glamour of Hilda.

The autumn sun shone through the golden glades of the forest-land, when Edith sate alone on the knoll that faced forestland and road, and watched afar.

And the birds sung cheerily; but that was not the sound for which Edith listened: and the squirrel darted from tree to tree on the sward beyond; but not to see the games of the squirrel sat Edith by the grave of the Teuton. By-and-by, came the cry of the dogs, and the tall gre-hound [108] of Wales emerged from the bosky dells. Then Edith's heart heaved, and her eyes brightened. And now, with his hawk on his wrist, and his spear [109] in his hand, came, through the yellowing boughs, Harold the Earl.

And well may ye ween, that his heart beat as loud and his eye shone as bright as Edith's, when he saw who had watched for his footsteps on the sepulchral knoll; Love, forgetful of the presence of Death;—so has it ever been, so ever shall it be! He hastened his stride, and bounded up the gentle hillock, and his dogs, with a joyous bark, came round the knees of Edith. Then Harold shook the bird from his wrist, and it fell, with its light wing, on the altar-stone of Thor.

"Thou art late, but thou art welcome, Harold my kinsman," said Edith, simply, as she bent her face over the hounds, whose gaunt heads she caressed.

"Call me not kinsman," said Harold, shrinking, and with a dark cloud on his broad brow.

"And why, Harold?"

"Oh, Edith, why?" murmured Harold; and his thought added, "she knows not, poor child, that in that mockery of kinship the Church sets its ban on our bridals."

He turned, and chid his dogs fiercely as they gambolled in rough glee round their fair friend.

The hounds crouched at the feet of Edith; and Edith looked in mild wonder at the troubled face of the Earl.

"Thine eyes rebuke me, Edith, more than my words the hounds!" said Harold, gently. "But there is quick blood in my veins; and the mind must be calm when it would control the humour. Calm was my mind, sweet Edith, in the old time, when thou wert an infant on my knee, and wreathing, with these rude hands, flower-chains for thy neck like the swan's down, I said, 'The flowers fade, but the chain lasts when love weaves it.'"

Edith again bent her face over the crouching hounds. Harold gazed on her with mournful fondness; and the bird still sung and the squirrel swung himself again from bough to bough. Edith spoke first:

"My godmother, thy sister, hath sent for me, Harold, and I am to go to the Court to-morrow. Shalt thou be there?"

"Surely," said Harold, in an anxious voice, "surely, I will be there! So my sister hath sent for thee: wittest thou wherefore?"

Edith grew very pale, and her tone trembled as she answered:

"Well-a-day, yes."

"It is as I feared, then!" exclaimed Harold, in great agitation; "and my sister, whom these monks have demented, leagues herself with the King against the law of the wide welkin and the grand religion of the human heart. Oh!" continued the Earl, kindling into an enthusiasm, rare to his even moods, but wrung as much from his broad sense as from his strong affection, "when I compare the Saxon of our land and day, all enervated and decrepit by priestly superstition, with his forefathers in the first Christian era, yielding to the religion they adopted in its simple truths, but not to that rot of social happiness and free manhood which this cold and lifeless monarchism—making virtue the absence of human ties—spreads around—which the great Bede [110], though himself a monk, vainly but bitterly denounced;—yea, verily, when I see the Saxon already the theowe of the priest, I shudder to ask how long he will be folk-free of the tyrant."

He paused, breathed hard, and seizing, almost sternly, the girl's

trembling arm, he resumed between his set teeth: "So they would have thee be a nun?—Thou wilt not,—thou durst not,—thy heart would perjure thy vows!"

"Ah, Harold!" answered Edith, moved out of all bashfulness by his emotion and her own terror of the convent, and answering, if with the love of a woman, still with all the unconsciousness of a child: "Better, oh better the grate of the body than that of the heart!—In the grave I could still live for those I love; behind the Grate, love itself must be dead. Yes, thou pitiest me, Harold; thy sister, the Queen, is gentle and kind; I will fling myself at her feet, and say: 'Youth is fond, and the world is fair: let me live my youth, and bless God in the world that he saw was good!'"

"My own, own dear Edith!" exclaimed Harold, overjoyed. "Say this. Be firm: they cannot and they dare not force thee! The law cannot wrench thee against thy will from the ward of thy guardian Hilda; and, where the law is, there Harold at least is strong,—and there at least our kinship, if my bane, is thy blessing."

"Why, Harold, sayest thou that our kinship is thy bane? It is so sweet to me to whisper to myself, 'Harold is of thy kith, though distant; and it is natural to thee to have pride in his fame, and joy in his presence!' Why is that sweetness to me, to thee so bitter?"

"Because," answered Harold, dropping the hand he had clasped, and folding his arms in deep dejection, "because but for that I should say: 'Edith, I love thee more than a brother: Edith, be Harold's wife!' And were I to say it, and were we to wed, all the priests of the Saxons would lift up their hands in horror, and curse our nuptials, and I should be the bann'd of that spectre the Church; and my house would shake to its foundations; and my father, and my brothers, and the thegns and the proceres, and the abbots and prelates, whose aid makes our force, would gather round me with threats and with prayers, that I might put thee aside. And mighty as I am now, so mighty once was Sweyn my brother; and outlaw as Sweyn is now, might Harold be; and outlaw if Harold were, what breast so broad as his could fill up the gap left in the defence of England? And the passions that I curb, as a rider his steed, might break their rein; and, strong in justice, and child of Nature, I might come, with banner and mail, against Church, and House, and Fatherland; and the blood of my countrymen might be poured like water: and, therefore, slave to the lying thralldom he despises, Harold dares not say to the maid of his love, 'Give me thy right hand, and be my bride!'"

Edith had listened in bewilderment and despair, her eyes fixed on his, and her face locked and rigid, as if turned to stone. But when he had ceased, and, moving some steps away, turned aside his manly countenance, that Edith might not perceive its anguish, the noble and sublime spirit of that sex which ever, when lowliest, most comprehends

the lofty, rose superior both to love and to grief; and rising, she advanced, and placing her slight hand on his stalwart shoulder, she said, half in pity, half in reverence: "Never before, O Harold, did I feel so proud of thee: for Edith could not love thee as she doth, and will till the grave clasp her, if thou didst not love England more than Edith. Harold, till this hour I was a child, and I knew not my own heart: I look now into that heart, and I see that I am woman. Harold, of the cloister I have now no fear: and all life does not shrink—no, it enlarges, and it soars into one desire—to be worthy to pray for thee!"

"Maid, maid!" exclaimed Harold, abruptly, and pale as the dead, "do not say thou hast no fear of the cloister. I adjure, I command thee, build not up between us that dismal everlasting wall. While thou art free Hope yet survives—a phantom, haply but Hope still."

"As thou wilt I will," said Edith, humbly: "order my fate so as pleases thee the best."

Then, not daring to trust herself longer, for she felt the tears rushing to her eyes, she turned away hastily, and left him alone beside the altar-stone and the tomb.

CHAPTER V.

The next day, as Harold was entering the palace of Westminster, with intent to seek the King's lady, his father met him in one of the corridors, and, taking him gravely by the hand said:

"My son, I have much on my mind regarding thee and our House; come with me."

"Nay," said the Earl, "by your leave let it be later. For I have it on hand to see my sister, ere confessor, or monk, or schoolman, claim her hours!"

"Not so, Harold," said the Earl, briefly. "My daughter is now in her oratory, and we shall have time enow to treat of things mundane ere she is free to receive thee, and to preach to thee of things ghostly, the last miracle at St. Alban's, or the last dream of the King, who would be a great man and a stirring, if as restless when awake as he is in his sleep. Come."

Harold, in that filial obedience which belonged, as of course, to his antique cast of character, made no farther effort to escape, but with a sigh followed Godwin into one of the contiguous chambers.

"Harold," then said Earl Godwin, after closing the door carefully, "thou must not let the King keep thee longer in dalliance and idleness: thine earldom needs thee without delay. Thou knowest that these East Angles, as we Saxons still call them, are in truth mostly Danes and Norsemen; people jealous and fierce, and free, and more akin to the Normans than to the Saxons. My whole power in England hath been founded, not less on my common birth with the freefolk of Wessex—Saxons like myself, and therefore easy for me, a Saxon, to conciliate and control—than on the hold I have ever sought to establish, whether by arms or by arts, over the Danes in the realm. And I tell and I warn thee, Harold, as the natural heir of my greatness, that he who cannot command the stout hearts of the Anglo-Danes, will never maintain the race of Godwin in the post they have won in the vanguard of Saxon England."

"This I wot well, my father," answered Harold; "and I see with joy, that while those descendants of heroes and freemen are blended indissolubly with the meeker Saxon, their freer laws and hardier manners are gradually supplanting, or rather regenerating, our own."

Godwin smiled approvingly on his son, and then his brow becoming serious, and the dark pupil of his blue eye dilating, he resumed:

"This is well, my son; and hast thou thought also, that while thou art loitering in these galleries, amidst the ghosts of men in monk cowls, Siward is shadowing our House with his glory, and all north the Humber rings with his name? Hast thou thought that all Mercia is in the hands of Leofric our rival, and that Algar his son, who ruled Wessex in my absence, left there a name so beloved, that had I stayed a year longer, the cry had been 'Algar', not 'Godwin'?—for so is the multitude ever! Now aid me, Harold, for my soul is troubled, and I cannot work alone; and though I say naught to others, my heart received a death-blow when tears fell from its blood-springs on the brow of Sweyn, my first-born." The old man paused, and his lip quivered.

"Thou, thou alone, Harold, noble boy, thou alone didst stand by his side in the hall; alone, alone, and I blessed thee in that hour over all the rest of my sons. Well, well! now to earth again. Aid me, Harold. I open to thee my web: complete the woof when this hand is cold. The new tree that stands alone in the plain is soon nipped by the winter; fenced round with the forest, its youth takes shelter from its fellows [111]. So is it with a house newly founded; it must win strength from the allies that it sets round its slender stein. What had been Godwin, son of Wolnoth, had he not married into the kingly house of great Canute? It is this that gives my sons now the right to the loyal love of the Danes. The throne passed from Canute and his race, and the Saxons again had their hour; and I gave, as Jephtha gave his daughter, my blooming Edith, to the cold bed of the Saxon King.

Had sons sprung from that union, the grandson of Godwin, royal alike from Saxon and Dane, would reign on the throne of the isle. Fate ordered otherwise, and the spider must weave web anew. Thy brother, Tostig, has added more splendour than solid strength of our line, in his marriage with the daughter of Baldwin the Count. The foreigner helps us little in England. Thou, O Harold, must bring new props to the House. I would rather see thee wed to the child of one of our great rivals than to the daughter of kaisar, or outland king. Siward hath no daughter undisposed of. Algar, son of Leofric, hath a daughter fair as the fairest; make her thy bride that Algar may cease to be a foe. This alliance will render Mercia, in truth, subject to our principalities, since the stronger must quell the weaker. It doth more. Algar himself has married into the royalty of Wales [112]. Thou wilt win all those fierce tribes to thy side. Their forces will gain thee the marches, now held so feebly under Rolf the Norman, and in case of brief reverse, or sharp danger, their mountains will give refuge from all foes. This day, greeting Algar, he told me he meditated bestowing his daughter on Gryffyth, the rebel under-King of North Wales. Therefore," continued the old Earl, with a smile, "thou must speak in time, and win and woo in the same breath. No hard task, methinks, for Harold of the golden tongue."

"Sir, and father," replied the young Earl, whom the long speech addressed to him had prepared for its close, and whose habitual self-control saved him from disclosing his emotion, "I thank you duteously, for your care for my future, and hope to profit by your wisdom. I will ask the King's leave to go to my East Anglians, and hold there a folkmoth, administer justice, redress grievances, and make thegn and ceorl content with Harold, their Earl. But vain is peace in the realm, if there is strife in the house. And Aldyth, the daughter of Algar, cannot be house-wife to me."

"Why?" asked the old Earl, calmly, and surveying his son's face with those eyes so clear yet so unfathomable.

"Because, though I grant her fair, she pleases not my fancy, nor would give warmth to my hearth. Because, as thou knowest well, Algar and I have ever been opposed, both in camp and in council; and I am not the man who can sell my love, though I may stifle my anger. Earl Harold needs no bride to bring spearmen to his back at his need; and his lordships he will guard with the shield of a man, not the spindle of a woman."

"Said in spite and in error," replied the old Earl, coolly. "Small pain had it given thee to forgive Algar old quarrels, and clasp his hand as a father-in-law—if thou hadst had for his daughter what the great are forbidden to regard save as a folly."

"Is love a folly, my father?"

"Surely, yes," said the Earl, with some sadness—"surely, yes, for those who know that life is made up of business and care, spun out in long years, nor counted by the joys of an hour. Surely, yes; thinkest thou that I loved my first wife, the proud sister of Canute, or that Edith, thy sister, loved Edward, when he placed the crown on her head?"

"My father, in Edith, my sister, our House has sacrificed enow to selfish power."

"I grant it, to selfish power," answered the eloquent old man, "but not enow for England's safety. Look to it, Harold; thy years, and thy fame, and thy state, place thee free from my control as a father, but not till thou sleepest in thy cerements art thou free from that father—thy land! Ponder it in thine own wise mind—wiser already than that which speaks to it under the hood of grey hairs. Ponder it, and ask thyself if thy power, when I am dead, is not necessary to the weal of England? and if aught that thy schemes can suggest would so strengthen that power, as to find in the heart of the kingdom a host of friends like the Mercians;—or if there could be a trouble and a bar to thy greatness, a wall in thy path, or a thorn in thy side, like the hate or the jealousy of Algar, the son of Leofric?"

Thus addressed, Harold's face, before serene and calm, grew overcast; and he felt the force of his father's words when appealing to his reason—not to his affections. The old man saw the advantage he had gained, and prudently forbore to press it. Rising, he drew round him his sweeping gonna lined with furs, and only when he reached the door, he added:

"The old see afar; they stand on the height of experience, as a warder on the crown of a tower; and I tell thee, Harold, that if thou let slip this golden occasion, years hence—long and many—thou wilt rue the loss of the hour. And that, unless Mercia, as the centre of the kingdom, be reconciled to thy power, thou wilt stand high indeed—but on the shelf of a precipice. And if, as I suspect, thou lovest some other who now clouds thy perception, and will then check thy ambition, thou wilt break her heart with thy desertion, or gnaw thine own with regret. For love dies in possession—ambition has no fruition, and so lives forever."

"That ambition is not mine, my father," exclaimed Harold, earnestly; "I have not thy love of power, glorious in thee, even in its extremes. I have not thy—"

"Seventy years!" interrupted the old man, concluding the sentence. "At seventy all men who have been great will speak as I do; yet all will have known love. Thou not ambitious, Harold? Thou knowest not thyself, nor knowest thou yet what ambition is. That which I see far before me as thy natural prize, I dare not, or I will not say. When

time sets that prize within reach of thy spear's point, say then, 'I am not ambitious!' Ponder and decide."

And Harold pondered long, and decided not as Godwin could have wished. For he had not the seventy years of his father, and the prize lay yet in the womb of the mountains; though the dwarf and the gnome were already fashioning the ore to the shape of a crown.

CHAPTER VI.

While Harold mused over his father's words, Edith, seated on a low stool beside the Lady of England, listened with earnest but mournful reverence to her royal namesake.

The Queen's [113] closet opened like the King's on one hand to an oratory, on the other to a spacious ante-room; the lower part of the walls was covered with arras, leaving space for a niche that contained an image of the Virgin. Near the doorway to the oratory, was the stoupe or aspersorium for holy-water; and in various cists and crypts, in either room, were caskets containing the relics of saints. The purple light from the stained glass of a high narrow window, shaped in the Saxon arch, streamed rich and full over the Queen's bended head like a glory, and tinged her pale cheek, as with a maiden blush; and she might have furnished a sweet model for early artist, in his dreams of St. Mary the Mother, not when, young and blest, she held the divine infant in her arms, but when sorrow had reached even the immaculate bosom, and the stone had been rolled over the Holy Sepulchre. For beautiful the face still was, and mild beyond all words; but, beyond all words also, sad in its tender resignation.

And thus said the Queen to her godchild:

"Why dost thou hesitate and turn away? Thinkest thou, poor child, in thine ignorance of life, that the world ever can give thee a bliss greater than the calm of the cloister? Pause, and ask thyself, young as thou art, if all the true happiness thou hast known, is not bounded to hope. As long as thou hopest, thou art happy."

Edith sighed deeply, and moved her young head in involuntary acquiescence.

"And what is life to the nun, but hope. In that hope, she knows not the present, she lives in the future; she hears ever singing the chorus of the angels, as St. Dunstan heard them sing at the birth of Edgar [114]. That hope unfolds to her the heilighthum of the future. On earth her body, in heaven her soul!"

"And her heart, O Lady of England?" cried Edith, with a sharp pang.

The Queen paused a moment, and laid her pale hand kindly on Edith's bosom.

"Not beating, child, as thine does now, with vain thoughts, and worldly desires; but calm, calm as mine. It is in our power," resumed the Queen, after a second pause, "it is in our power to make the life within us all soul; so that the heart is not, or is felt not; so that grief and joy have no power over us; so that we look tranquil on the stormy earth, as yon image of the Virgin, whom we make our example, looks from the silent niche. Listen, my godchild and darling."

"I have known human state, and human debasement. In these halls I woke Lady of England, and, ere sunset, my lord banished me, without one mark of honour, without one word of comfort, to the convent of Wherwell;—my father, my mother, my kin, all in exile; and my tears falling fast for them, but not on a husband's bosom."

"Ah then, noble Edith," said the girl, colouring with anger at the remembered wrong for her Queen, "ah then, surely, at least, thy heart made itself heard."

"Heard, yea verily," said the Queen, looking up, and pressing her hands; "heard, but the soul rebuked it. And the soul said, 'Blessed are they that mourn;' and I rejoiced at the new trial which brought me nearer to Him who chastens those He loves."

"But thy banished kin—the valiant, the wise; they who placed thy lord on the throne?"

"Was it no comfort," answered the Queen simply, "to think that in the House of God my prayers for them would be more accepted than in the halls of kings? Yes, my child, I have known the world's honour, and the world's disgrace, and I have schooled my heart to be calm in both."

"Ah, thou art above human strength, Queen and Saint," exclaimed Edith; "and I have heard it said of thee, that as thou art now, thou wert from thine earliest years [115]; ever the sweet, the calm, the holy—ever less on earth than in heaven."

Something there was in the Queen's eyes, as she raised them towards Edith at this burst of enthusiasm, that gave for a moment, to a face otherwise so dissimilar, the likeness to her father; something, in that large pupil, of the impenetrable unrevealing depth of a nature close and secret in self-control. And a more acute observer than Edith might long have been perplexed and haunted with that look, wondering if, indeed, under the divine and spiritual composure, lurked

the mystery of human passion.

"My child," said the Queen, with the faintest smile upon her lips, and drawing Edith towards her, "there are moments when all that breathe the breath of life feel, or have felt, alike. In my vain youth I read, I mused, I pondered, but over worldly lore. And what men called the sanctity of virtue, was perhaps but the silence of thought. Now I have put aside those early and childish dreams and shadows, remembering them not, save (here the smile grew more pronounced) to puzzle some poor schoolboy with the knots and riddles of the sharp grammarian [116]. But not to speak of my self have I sent for thee. Edith, again and again, solemnly and sincerely, I pray thee to obey the wish of my lord the King. And now, while yet in all the bloom of thought, as of youth, while thou hast no memory save the child's, enter on the Realm of Peace."

"I cannot, I dare not, I cannot—ah, ask me not," said poor Edith, covering her face with her hands.

Those hands the Queen gently withdrew; and looking steadfastly in the changeful and half-averted face, she said mournfully, "Is it so, my godchild? and is thy heart set on the hopes of earth—thy dreams on the love of man?"

"Nay," answered Edith, equivocating; "but I have promised not to take the veil."

"Promised to Hilda?"

"Hilda," exclaimed Edith readily, "would never consent to it. Thou knowest her strong nature, her distaste to—to—"

"The laws of our holy Church—I do; and for that reason it is, mainly, that I join with the King in seeking to abstract thee from her influence. But it is not Hilda that thou hast promised?"

Edith hung her head.

"Is it to woman or to man?"

Before Edith could answer the door from the ante-room opened gently, but without the usual ceremony, and Harold entered. His quick quiet eye embraced both forms, and curbed Edith's young impulse, which made her start from her seat, and advance joyously towards him as a protector.

"Fair day to thee, my sister," said the Earl, advancing; and pardon, if I break thus rudely on thy leisure; for few are the moments when beggar and Benedictine leave thee free to receive thy brother."

"Dost thou reproach me, Harold?"

"No, Heaven forbid!" replied the Earl, cordially, and with a look at once of pity and admiration; "for thou art one of the few, in this court of simulators, sincere and true; and it pleases thee to serve the Divine Power in thy way, as it pleases me to serve Him in mine."

"Thine, Harold?" said the Queen, shaking her head, but with a look of some human pride and fondness in her fair face.

"Mine; as I learned it from thee when I was thy pupil, Edith; when to those studies in which thou didst precede me, thou first didst lure me from sport and pastime; and from thee I learned to glow over the deeds of Greek and Roman, and say, 'They lived and died as men; like them may I live and die!'"

"Oh, true—too true!" said the Queen, with a sigh; "and I am to blame grievously that I did so pervert to earth a mind that might otherwise have learned holier examples;—nay, smile not with that haughty lip, my brother; for believe me—yea, believe me—there is more true valour in the life of one patient martyr than in the victories of Caesar, or even the defeat of Brutus."

"It may be so," replied the Earl, "but out of the same oak we carve the spear and the cross; and those not worthy to hold the one, may yet not guiltily wield the other. Each to his path of life—and mine is chosen." Then, changing his voice, with some abruptness, he said, "But what hast thou been saying to thy fair godchild, that her cheek is pale, and her eyelids seem so heavy? Edith, Edith, my sister, beware how thou shapest the lot of the martyr without the peace of the saint. Had Algive the nun been wedded to Sweyn our brother, Sweyn were not wending, barefooted and forlorn, to lay the wrecks of desolated life at the Holy Tomb."

"Harold, Harold!" faltered the Queen, much struck with his words.

"But," the Earl continued—and something of the pathos which belongs to deep emotion vibrated in the eloquent voice, accustomed to command and persuade—"we strip not the green leaves for our yulehearth—we gather them up when dry and sere. Leave youth on the bough—let the bird sing to it—let it play free in the airs of heaven. Smoke comes from the branch which, cut in the sap, is cast upon the fire, and regret from the heart which is severed from the world while the world is in its May."

The Queen paced slowly, but in evident agitation, to and fro the room, and her hands clasped convulsively the rosary round her neck; then, after a pause of thought, she motioned to Edith and, pointing to the oratory, said with forced composure, "Enter there, and there kneel; commune with thyself, and be still. Ask for a sign from above—pray

for the grace within. Go; I would speak alone with Harold."

Edith crossed her arms on her bosom meekly, and passed into the oratory. The Queen watched her for a few moments tenderly, as the slight, child-like form bent before the sacred symbol. Then she closed the door gently, and coming with a quick step to Harold, said, in a low but clear voice, "Dost thou love the maiden?"

"Sister," answered the Earl sadly, "I love her as a man should love woman—more than my life, but less than the ends life lives for."

"Oh, world, world, world!" cried the Queen, passionately, "not even to thine own objects art thou true. O world! O world! thou desirest happiness below, and at every turn, with every vanity, thou tramplest happiness under foot! Yes, yes; they said to me, 'For the sake of our greatness, thou shalt wed King Edward.' And I live in the eyes that loathe me—and—and—" The Queen, as if conscience-stricken, paused aghast, kissed devoutly the relic suspended to her rosary, and continued, with such calmness that it seemed as if two women were blent in one, so startling was the contrast. "And I have had my reward, but not from the world! Even so, Harold the Earl, and Earl's son, thou lovest yon fair child, and she thee; and ye might be happy, if happiness were earth's end; but, though high-born, and of fair temporal possessions, she brings thee not lands broad enough for her dowry, nor troops of kindred to swell thy lithsmen, and she is not a markstone in thy march to ambition; and so thou lovest her as man loves woman—less than the ends life lives for!"

"Sister," said Harold, "thou speakest as I love to hear thee speak—as my bright-eyed, rose-lipped sister spoke in the days of old; thou speakest as a woman with warm heart, and not as the mummy in the stiff ceremonies of priestly form; and if thou art with me, and thou wilt give me countenance, I will marry thy godchild, and save her alike from the dire superstitions of Hilda, and the grave of the abhorrent convent."

"But my father—my father!" cried the Queen, "who ever bended that soul of steel?"

"It is not my father I fear; it is thee and thy monks. Forgettest thou that Edith and I are within the six banned degrees of the Church?"

"True, most true," said the Queen, with a look of great terror; "I had forgotten. Avaunt, the very thought! Pray—fast—banish it—my poor, poor brother!" and she kissed his brow.

"So, there fades the woman, and the mummy speaks again!" said Harold, bitterly. "Be it so: I bow to my doom. Well, there may be a time when Nature on the throne of England shall prevail over Priestcraft;

and, in guerdon for all my services, I will then ask a King who hath blood in his veins to win me the Pope's pardon and benison. Leave me that hope, my sister, and leave thy godchild on the shores of the living world."

The Queen made no answer, and Harold, auguring ill from her silence, moved on and opened the door of the oratory. But the image that there met him, that figure still kneeling, those eyes, so earnest in the tears that streamed from them fast and unheeded, fixed on the holy rood—awed his step and checked his voice. Nor till the girl had risen, did he break silence; then he said, gently, "My sister will press thee no more, Edith—"

"I say not that!" exclaimed the Queen.

"Or if she doth, remember thy plighted promise under the wide cope of blue heaven, the old nor least holy temple of our common Father."

With these words he left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Harold passed into the Queen's ante-chamber. Here the attendance was small and select compared with the crowds which we shall see presently in the ante-room to the King's closet; for here came chiefly the more learned ecclesiastics, attracted instinctively by the Queen's own mental culture, and few indeed were they at that day (perhaps the most illiterate known in England since the death of Alfred [117]); and here came not the tribe of impostors, and the relic-venders, whom the infantine simplicity and lavish waste of the Confessor attracted. Some four or five priests and monks, some lonely widow, some orphan child, humble worth, or protected sorrow, made the noiseless levee of the sweet, sad Queen.

The groups turned, with patient eyes, towards the Earl as he emerged from that chamber, which it was rare indeed to quit unconsoled, and marvelled at the flush in his cheek; and the disquiet on his brow; but Harold was dear to the clients of his sister; for, despite his supposed indifference to the mere priestly virtues (if virtues we call them) of the decrepit time, his intellect was respected by yon learned ecclesiastics; and his character, as the foe of all injustice, and the fosterer of all that were desolate, was known to yon pale-eyed widow and yon trembling orphan.

In the atmosphere of that quiet assembly, the Earl seemed to recover his kindly temperament, and he paused to address a friendly or a

soothing word to each; so that when he vanished, the hearts there felt more light; and the silence hushed before his entrance, was broken by many whispers in praise of the good Earl.

Descending a staircase without the walls—as even in royal halls the principal staircases were then—Harold gained a wide court, in which loitered several house-carles [118] and attendants, whether of the King or the visitors; and, reaching the entrance of the palace, took his way towards the King's rooms, which lay near, and round, what is now called "The Painted Chamber;" then used as a bedroom by Edward on state occasions.

And now he entered the ante-chamber of his royal brother-in-law. Crowded it was, but rather seemed it the hall of a convent than the ante-room of a king. Monks, pilgrims, priests, met his eye in every nook; and not there did the Earl pause to practise the arts of popular favour. Passing erect through the midst, he beckoned forth the officer, in attendance at the extreme end, who, after an interchange of whispers, ushered him into the royal presence. The monks and the priests, gazing towards the door which had closed on his stately form, said to each other:

"The King's Norman favourites at least honoured the Church."

"That is true," said an abbot; "and an it were not for two things, I should love the Norman better than the Saxon."

"What are they, my father?" asked an aspiring young monk.

"Inprinis," quoth the abbot, proud of the one Latin word he thought he knew, but, that, as we see, was an error; "they cannot speak so as to be understood, and I fear me much they incline to mere carnal learning."

Here there was a sanctified groan:

"Count William himself spoke to me in Latin!" continued the abbot, raising his eyebrows.

"Did he?—Wonderful!" exclaimed several voices. "And what did you answer, holy father?"

"Marry," said the abbot solemnly, "I replied, Inprinis."

"Good!" said the young monk, with a look of profound admiration.

"Whereat the good Count looked puzzled—as I meant him to be:—a heinous fault, and one intolerant to the clergy, that love of profane tongues! And the next thing against your Norman is (added the abbot, with a sly wink), that he is a close man, who loves not his stoup;

now, I say, that a priest never has more hold over a sinner than when he makes the sinner open his heart to him."

"That's clear!" said a fat priest, with a lubricate and shining nose.

"And how," pursued the abbot triumphantly, "can a sinner open his heavy heart until you have given him something to lighten it? Oh, many and many a wretched man have I comforted spiritually over a flagon of stout ale; and many a good legacy to the Church hath come out of a friendly wassail between watchful shepherd and strayed sheep! But what hast thou there?" resumed the abbot, turning to a man, clad in the lay garb of a burgess of London, who had just entered the room, followed by a youth, bearing what seemed a coffer, covered with a fine linen cloth.

"Holy father!" said the burgess, wiping his forehead, "it is a treasure so great, that I trow Hugoline, the King's treasurer, will scowl at me for a year to come, for he likes to keep his own grip on the King's gold."

At this indiscreet observation, the abbot, the monks, and all the priestly bystanders looked grim and gloomy, for each had his own special design upon the peace of poor Hugoline, the treasurer, and liked not to see him the prey of a layman.

"Inprinis!" quoth the abbot, puffing out the word with great scorn; "thinkest thou, son of Mammon, that our good King sets his pious heart on gew-gaw, and gems, and such vanities? Thou shouldst take the goods to Count Baldwin of Flanders; or Tostig, the proud Earl's proud son."

"Marry!" said the cheapman, with a smile; "my treasure will find small price with Baldwin the scoffer, and Tostig the vain! Nor need ye look at me so sternly, my fathers; but rather vie with each other who shall win this wonder of wonders for his own convent; know, in a word, that it is the right thumb of St. Jude, which a worthy man bought at Rome for me, for 3000 lb. weight of silver; and I ask but 500 lb. over the purchase for my pains and my fee." [119]

"Humph!" said the abbot.

"Humph!" said the aspiring young monk; the rest gathered wistfully round the linen cloth.

A fiery exclamation of wrath and disdain was here heard; and all turning, saw a tall, fierce-looking thegn, who had found his way into that group, like a hawk in a rookery.

"Dost thou tell me, knave," quoth the thegn, in a dialect that bespoke him a Dane by origin, with the broad burr still retained in the north; "Dost thou tell me that the King will waste his gold on such

fooleries, while the fort built by Canute at the flood of the Humber is all fallen into ruin, without a man in steel jacket to keep watch on the war fleets of Swede and Norwegian?"

"Worshipful minister," replied the cheapman, with some slight irony in his tone, "these reverend fathers will tell thee that the thumb of St. Jude is far better aid against Swede and Norwegian than forts of stone and jackets of steel; nathless, if thou wantest jackets of steel, I have some to sell at a fair price, of the last fashion, and helms with long nose-pieces, as are worn by the Normans."

"The thumb of a withered old saint," cried the Dane, not heeding the last words, "more defence at the mouth of the Humber than crenellated castles and mailed men!"

"Surely, naught son," said the abbot, looking shocked, and taking part with the cheapman. "Dost thou not remember that, in the pious and famous council of 1014, it was decreed to put aside all weapons of flesh against thy heathen countrymen, and depend alone on St. Michael to fight for us? Thinkest thou that the saint would ever suffer his holy thumb to fall into the hands of the Gentiles?—never! Go to, thou art not fit to have conduct of the King's wars. Go to, and repent, my son, or the King shall hear of it."

"Ah, wolf in sheep's clothing!" muttered the Dane, turning on his heel; "if thy monastery were but built on the other side the Humber!"

The cheapman heard him, and smiled. While such the scene in the ante-room, we follow Harold into the King's presence.

On entering, he found there a man in the prime of life, and though richly clad in embroidered gonna, and with gilt ateghar at his side, still with the loose robe, the long moustache, and the skin of the throat and right hand punctured with characters and devices, which proved his adherence to the fashions of the Saxon [120]. And Harold's eye sparkled, for in this guest he recognized the father of Aldyth, Earl Algar, son of Leofric. The two nobles exchanged grave salutations, and each eyed the other wistfully.

The contrast between the two was striking. The Danish race were men generally of larger frame and grander mould than the Saxon [121]; and though in all else, as to exterior, Harold was eminently Saxon, yet, in common with his brothers, he took from the mother's side the lofty air and iron frame of the old kings of the sea. But Algar, below the middle height, though well set, was slight in comparison with Harold. His strength was that which men often take rather from the nerve than the muscle; a strength that belongs to quick tempers and restless energies. His light blue eye, singularly vivid and glittering; his quivering lip, the veins swelling at each emotion on the fair white temples; the long yellow hair, bright as gold, and resisting, in its

easy curls, all attempts to curb it into the smooth flow most in fashion; the nervous movements of the gesture; the somewhat sharp and hasty tones of the voice; all opposed, as much as if the two men were of different races, the steady, deep eye of Harold, his composed mien, sweet and majestic, his decorous locks parted on the king-like front, with their large single curl where they touched the shoulder. Intelligence and will were apparent in both the men; but the intelligence of one was acute and rapid, that of the other profound and steadfast; the will of one broke in flashes of lightning, that of the other was calm as the summer sun at noon.

"Thou art welcome, Harold," said the King, with less than his usual listlessness, and with a look of relief as the Earl approached him.

"Our good Algar comes to us with a suit well worthy consideration, though pressed somewhat hotly, and evincing too great a desire for goods worldly; contrasting in this his most laudable father our well-beloved Leofric, who spends his substance in endowing monasteries and dispensing alms; wherefore he shall receive a hundred-fold in the treasure-house above."

"A good interest, doubtless, my lord the King," said Algar; quickly, "but one that is not paid to his heirs; and the more need, if my father (whom I blame not for doing as he lists with his own) gives all he hath to the monks—the more need, I say, to take care that his son shall be enabled to follow his example. As it is, most noble King, I fear me that Algar, son of Leofric, will have nothing to give. In brief, Earl Harold," continued Algar, turning to his fellow-thegn—"in brief, thus stands the matter. When our lord the King was first graciously pleased to consent to rule in England, the two chiefs who most assured his throne were thy father and mine: often foes, they laid aside feud and jealousy for the sake of the Saxon line. Now, since then, thy father hath strung earldom to earldom, like links in a coat-mail. And, save Northumbria and Mercia; well-nigh all England falls to him and his sons: whereas my father remains what he was, and my father's son stands landless and penceless. In thine absence the King was graciously pleased to bestow on me thy father's earldom; men say that I ruled it well. Thy father returns, and though" (here Algar's eyes shot fire, and his hand involuntarily rested on his ateghar) "I could have held it, methinks, by the strong hand, I gave it up at my father's prayer and the King's hest, with a free heart. Now, therefore, I come to my lord, and I ask, 'What lands and what lordships canst thou spare in broad England to Algar, once Earl of Wessex, and son to the Leofric whose hand smoothed the way to thy throne?' My lord the King is pleased to preach to me contempt of the world; thou dost not despise the world, Earl of the East Angles,—what sayest thou to the heir of Leofric?"

"That thy suit is just," answered Harold, calmly, "but urged with small reverence."

Earl Algar bounded like a stag that the arrow hath startled.

"It becomes thee, who hast backed thy suits with warships and mail, to talk of reverence, and rebuke one whose fathers reigned over earldoms [122], when thine were, no doubt, ceorls at the plough. But for Edric Streone, the traitor and low-born, what had been Wolnoth, thy grandsire?"

So rude and home an assault in the presence of the King, who, though personally he loved Harold in his lukewarm way, yet, like all weak men, was not displeased to see the strong split their strength against each other, brought the blood into Harold's cheek; but he answered calmly:

"We live in a land, son of Leofric, in which birth, though not disesteemed, gives of itself no power in council or camp. We belong to a land where men are valued for what they are, not for what their dead ancestors might have been. So has it been for ages in Saxon England, where my fathers, through Godwin, as thou sayest, might have been ceorls; and so, I have heard, it is in the land of the martial Danes, where my fathers, through Githa, reigned on the thrones of the North."

"Thou dost well," said Algar, gnawing his lip, "to shelter thyself on the spindle side, but we Saxons of pure descent think little of your kings of the North, pirates and idolaters, and eaters of horseflesh; but enjoy what thou hast, and let Algar have his clue."

"It is for the King, not his servant, to answer the prayer of Algar," said Harold, withdrawing to the farther end of the room.

Algar's eye followed him, and observing that the King was fast sinking into one of the fits of religious reverie in which he sought to be inspired with a decision, whenever his mind was perplexed, he moved with a light step to Harold, put his band on his shoulder, and whispered:

"We do ill to quarrel with each other—I repent me of hot words—enough. Thy father is a wise man, and sees far—thy father would have us friends. Be it so. Hearken my daughter Aldyth is esteemed not the least fair of the maidens in England; I will give her to thee as thy wife, and as thy morgen gift, thou shalt will for me from the King the earldom forfeited by thy brother Sweyn, now parcelled out amongst sub-earls and thegns—easy enow to control. By the shrine of St. Alban, dost thou hesitate, man?"

"No, not an instant," said Harold, stung to the quick. "Not, couldst thou offer me all Mercia as her dower, would I wed the daughter of Algar; and bend my knee, as a son to a wife's father, to the man who

despises my lineage, while he truckles to my power.”

Algar’s face grew convulsed with rage; but without saying a word to the Earl he strode back to Edward, who now with vacant eyes looked up from the rosary over which he had been bending, and said abruptly:

”My lord the King, I have spoken as I think it becomes a man who knows his own claims, and believes in the gratitude of princes. Three days will I tarry in London for your gracious answer; on the fourth I depart. May the saints guard your throne, and bring around it its best defence, the thegn-born satraps whose fathers fought with Alfred and Athelstan. All went well with merrie England till the hoof of the Dane King broke the soil, and mushrooms sprung up where the oak-trees fell.”

When the son of Leofric had left the chamber, the King rose wearily and said in Norman French, to which language he always yearningly returned when with those who could speak it:

”Beau frere and bien aime, in what trifles must a king pass his life! And, all this while, matters grave and urgent demand me. Know that Eadmer, the cheapman, waits without, and hath brought me, dear and good man, the thumb of St. Jude! What thought of delight! And this unmannerly son of strife, with his jay’s voice and wolf’s eyes, screaming at me for earldoms!—oh the folly of man! Naught, naught, very naught!”

”Sir and King,” said Harold; ”it ill becomes me to arraign your pious desires, but these relics are of vast cost; our coasts are ill defended, and the Dane yet lays claim to your kingdom. Three thousand pounds of silver and more does it need to repair even the old wall of London and Southweorc.”

”Three thousand pounds!” cried the King; ”thou art mad, Harold! I have scarce twice that sum in the treasury; and besides the thumb of St. Jude, I daily expect the tooth of St. Remigius—the tooth of St. Remigius!”

Harold sighed. ”Vex not yourself, my lord, I will see to the defences of London. For, thanks to your grace, my revenues are large, while my wants are simple. I seek you now to pray your leave to visit my earldom. My lithsmen murmur at my absence, and grievances, many and sore, have arisen in my exile.”

The King stared in terror; and his look was that of a child when about to be left in the dark.

”Nay, nay; I cannot spare thee, beau frere. Thou curbest all these stiff thegns—thou leavest me time for the devout; moreover, thy father, thy father, I will not be left to thy father! I love him

not!"

"My father," said Harold, mournfully, "returns to his own earldom; and of all our House you will have but the mild face of your queen by your side!"

The King's lip writhed at that hinted rebuke, or implied consolation.

"Edith the Queen," he said, after a slight pause, "is pious and good; and she hath never gainsaid my will, and she hath set before her as a model the chaste Susannah, as I, unworthy man, from youth upward, have walked in the pure steps of Joseph [123]. But," added the King, with a touch of human feeling in his voice, "canst thou not conceive, Harold, thou who art a warrior, what it would be to see ever before thee the face of thy deadliest foe—the one against whom all thy struggles of life and death had turned into memories of hyssop and gall?"

"My sister!" exclaimed Harold, in indignant amaze, "My sister thy deadliest foe! She who never once murmured at neglect, disgrace—she whose youth hath been consumed in prayers for thee and thy realm—my sister! O King, I dream?"

"Thou dreamest not, carnal man," said the King, peevishly. "Dreams are the gifts of the saints, and are not granted to such as thou! Dost thou think that, in the prune of my manhood, I could have youth and beauty forced on my sight, and hear man's law and man's voice say, 'They are thine, and thine only,' and not feel that war was brought to my hearth, and a snare set on my bed, and that the fiend had set watch on my soul? Verily, I tell thee, man of battle, that thou hast known no strife as awful as mine, and achieved no victory as hard and as holy. And now, when my beard is silver, and the Adam of old is expelled at the precincts of death; now, thinkest thou, that I can be reminded of the strife and temptation of yore, without bitterness and shame; when days were spent in fasting, and nights in fierce prayer; and in the face of woman I saw the devices of Satan?"

Edward coloured as he spoke, and his voice trembled with the accents of what seemed hate. Harold gazed on him mutely, and felt that at last he had won the secret that had ever perplexed him, and that in seeking to be above the humanity of love, the would-be saint had indeed turned love into the hues of hate—a thought of anguish, and a memory of pain.

The King recovered himself in a few moments, and said, with some dignity, "But God and his saints alone should know the secrets of the household. What I have said was wrung from me. Bury it in thy heart. Leave me, then, Harold, sith so it must be. Put thine earldom in order, attend to the monasteries and the poor, and return soon. As for Algar, what sayest thou?"

"I fear me," answered the large-souled Harold, with a victorious effort of justice over resentment, "that if you reject his suit you will drive him into some perilous extremes. Despite his rash and proud spirit, he is brave against foes, and beloved by the ceorls, who oft like best the frank and hasty spirit. Wherefore some power and lordship it were wise to give, without dispossessing others, and not more wise than due, for his father served you well."

"And hath endowed more houses of God than any earl in the kingdom. But Algar is no Leofric. We will consider your words and heed them. Bless you, beau frere! and send in the cheapman. The thumb of St. Jude! What a gift to my new church of St. Peter! The thumb of St. Jude! Non nobis gloria! Sancta Maria! The thumb of St. Jude!"