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BOOK III.

THE HOUSE OF GODWIN.

CHAPTER I.

And all went to the desire of Duke William the Norman. With one hand he curbed his proud vassals, and drove back his fierce foes. With the other, he led to the altar Matilda, the maid of Flanders; and all happened as Lanfranc had foretold. William's most formidable enemy, the King of France, ceased to conspire against his new kinsman; and the neighbouring princes said, "The Bastard hath become one of us since he placed by his side the descendant of Charlemagne." And Mauger, Archbishop of Rouen, excommunicated the Duke and his bride, and the ban fell idle; for Lanfranc sent from Rome the Pope's dispensation and blessing [69], conditionally only that bride and bridegroom founded each a church. And Mauger was summoned before the synod, and accused of unclerical crimes; and they deposed him from his state, and took from him abbacies and sees. And England every day waxed more and more Norman; and Edward grew more feeble and infirm, and there seemed not a barrier between the Norman Duke and the English throne, when suddenly the wind blew in the halls of heaven, and filled the sails of Harold the Earl.

And his ships came to the mouth of the Severn. And the people of Somerset and Devon, a mixed and mainly a Celtic race, who bore small love to the Saxons, drew together against him, and he put them to flight. [70]

Meanwhile, Godwin and his sons Sweyn, Tostig, and Gurth, who had taken refuge in that very

Flanders from which William the Duke had won his bride,—(for Tostig had wed, previously, the sister of Matilda, the rose of Flanders; and Count Baldwin had, for his sons-in-law, both Tostig and William,)—meanwhile, I say, these, not holpen by the Count Baldwin, but helping themselves, lay at Bruges, ready to join Harold the Earl. And Edward, advised of this from the anxious Norman, caused forty ships [71] to be equipped, and put them under command of Rolf, Earl of Hereford. The ships lay at Sandwich in wait for Godwin. But the old Earl got from them, and landed quietly on the southern coast. And the fort of Hastings opened to his coming with a shout from its armed men.

All the boatmen, all the mariners, far and near, thronged to him, with sail and with shield, with sword and with oar. All Kent (the foster-mother of the Saxons) sent forth the cry, "Life or death with Earl Godwin." [72] Fast over the length and breadth of the land, went the bodes [73] and riders of the Earl; and hosts, with one voice, answered the cry of the children of Horsa, "Life or death with Earl Godwin." And the ships of King Edward, in dismay, turned flag and prow to London, and the fleet of Harold sailed on. So the old Earl met his young son on the deck of a war-ship, that had once borne the Raven of the Dane.

Swelled and gathering sailed the armament of the English men. Slow up the Thames it sailed, and on either shore marched tumultuous the swarming multitudes. And King Edward sent after more help, but it came up very late. So the fleet of the Earl nearly faced the Juliet Keape of London, and abode at Southwark till the flood-tide came up. When he had mustered his host, then came the flood tide. [74]

CHAPTER II.

King Edward sate, not on his throne, but on a chair of state, in the presence-chamber of his palace of Westminster. His diadem, with the three zimmes shaped into a triple trefoil [75] on his brow, his sceptre in his right hand. His royal robe, tight to the throat, with a broad band of gold, flowed to his feet; and at the fold gathered round the left knee, where now the kings of England wear the badge of St. George, was embroidered a simple cross [76]. In that chamber met the thegns and procures of his realm; but not they alone. No national Witan there assembled, but a council of war, composed at least one third part of Normans—counts, knights, prelates, and abbots of high degree.

And King Edward looked a king! The habitual lethargic meekness had vanished from his face, and the large crown threw a shadow, like a frown, over his brow. His spirit seemed to have risen from the weight it took from the sluggish blood of his father, Ethelred the Unready, and to have remounted to the brighter and earlier sources of ancestral heroes. Worthy in that hour he seemed to boast the blood and wield the sceptre of Athelstan and Alfred. [77]

Thus spoke the King:

"Right worthy and beloved, my ealdermen, earls, and thegns of England; noble and familiar, my friends and guests, counts and chevaliers of Normandy, my mother's land; and you, our spiritual chiefs, above all ties of birth and country, Christendom your common appanage, and from Heaven your seignories and fiefs,—hear the words of Edward, the King of England under grace of the Most High. The rebels are in our river; open yonder lattice, and you will see the piled shields glittering from their barks, and hear the hum of their hosts. Not a bow has yet been drawn, not a sword left its sheath; yet on the opposite side of the river are our fleets of forty sail—along the strand, between our palace and the gates of London, are arrayed our armies. And this pause because Godwin the traitor hath demanded truce and his nuncius waits without. Are ye willing that we should hear the message? or would ye rather that we dismiss the messenger unheard, and pass at once, to rank and to sail, the war-cry of a Christian king, 'Holy Crosse and our Lady!'"

The King ceased, his left hand grasping firm the leopard head carved on his throne, and his sceptre untrembling in his lifted hand.

A murmur of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, the war-cry of the Normans, was heard amongst the stranger-knights of the audience; but haughty and arrogant as those strangers were, no one presumed to take precedence, in England's danger, of men English born.

Slowly then rose Alred, Bishop of Winchester, the worthiest prelate in all the land. [78]

"Kingly son," said the bishop, "evil is the strife between men of the same blood and lineage, nor justified but by extremes, which have not yet been made clear to us. And ill would it sound throughout

England were it said that the King's council gave, perchance, his city of London to sword and fire, and rent his land in twain, when a word in season might have disbanded yon armies, and given to your throne a submissive subject, where now you are menaced by a formidable rebel. Wherefore, I say, admit the nuncius."

Scarcely had Alred resumed his seat, before Robert the Norman prelate of Canterbury started up,—a man, it was said, of worldly learning— and exclaimed:

"To admit the messenger is to approve the treason. I do beseech the King to consult only his own royal heart and royal honour. Reflect— each moment of delay swells the rebel hosts, strengthens their cause; of each moment they avail themselves to allure to their side the misguided citizens. Delay but proves our own weakness; a king's name is a tower of strength, but only when fortified by a king's authority. Give the signal for—war I call it not—no—for chastisement and justice."

"As speaks my brother of Canterbury, speak I," said William, Bishop of London, another Norman.

But then there rose up a form at whose rising all murmurs were hushed.

Grey and vast, as some image of a gone and mightier age towered over all, Siward, the son of Beorn, the great Earl of Northumbria.

"We have naught to do with the Normans. Were they on the river, and our countrymen, Dane or Saxon, alone in this hall, small doubt of the King's choice, and nidding were the man who spoke of peace; but when Norman advises the dwellers of England to go forth and slay each other, no sword of mine shall be drawn at his hest. Who shall say that Siward of the Strong Arm, the grandson of the Berserker, ever turned from a foe? The foe, son of Ethelred, sits in these halls; I fight thy battles when I say Nay to the Norman! Brothers-in-arms of the kindred race and common tongue, Dane and Saxon long intermingled, proud alike of Canute the glorious and Alfred the wise, ye will hear the man whom Godwin, our countryman, sends to us; he at least will speak our tongue, and he knows our laws. If the demand he delivers be just, such as a king should grant, and our Witan should hear, woe to him who refuses; if unjust be the demand, shame to him who accedes. Warrior sends to warrior, countryman to countryman; hear we as countrymen, and judge as warriors. I have said."

The utmost excitement and agitation followed the speech of Siward,— unanimous applause from the Saxons, even those who in times of peace were most under the Norman contagion; but no words can paint the wrath and scorn of the Normans. They spoke loud and many at a time; the greatest disorder prevailed. But the majority being English, there could be no doubt as to the decision; and Edward, to whom the emergence gave both a dignity and presence of mind rare to him, resolved to terminate the dispute at once. He stretched forth his sceptre, and motioning to his chamberlain, bade him introduce the nuncius. [79]

A blank disappointment, not unmixed with apprehensive terror, succeeded the turbulent excitement of the Normans; for well they knew that the consequences, if not condition, of negotiations, would be their own downfall and banishment at the least;—happy, it might be, to escape massacre at the hands of the exasperated multitude.

The door at the end of the room opened, and the nuncius appeared. He was a sturdy, broad-shouldered man, of middle age, and in the long loose garb originally national with the Saxon, though then little in vogue; his beard thick and fair, his eyes grey and calm—a chief of Kent, where all the prejudices of his race were strongest, and whose yeomanry claimed in war the hereditary right to be placed in the front of battle.

He made his manly but deferential salutation to the august council as he approached; and, pausing midway between the throne and door, he fell on his knees without thought of shame, for the King to whom he knelt was the descendant of Woden, and the heir of Hengist. At a sign and a brief word from the King, still on his knees, Vebba, the Kentman, spoke.

"To Edward, son of Ethelred, his most gracious king and lord, Godwin, son of Wolnoth, sends faithful and humble greeting, by Vebba, the thegn-born. He prays the King to hear him in kindness, and judge of him with mercy. Not against the King comes he hither with ships and arms; but against those only who would stand between the King's heart and the subject's: those who have divided a house against itself, and parted son and father, man and wife."

At those last words Edward's sceptre trembled in this hand, and his face grew almost stern.

"Of the King, Godwin but prays with all submissive and earnest prayer, to reverse the unrighteous outlawry against him and his; to restore him and his sons their just possessions and well-won honours;

and, more than all, to replace them where they have sought by loving service not unworthily to stand, in the grace of their born lord and in the van of those who would uphold the laws and liberties of England. This done—the ships sail back to their haven; the thegn seeks his homestead and the ceorl returns to the plough; for with Godwin are no strangers; and his force is but the love of his countrymen."

"Hast thou said?" quoth the King.

"I have said."

"Retire, and await our answer."

The Thegn of Kent was then led back into an ante-room, in which, armed from head to heel in ring-mail, were several Normans whose youth or station did not admit them into the council, but still of no mean interest in the discussion, from the lands and possessions they had already contrived to gripe out of the demesnes of the exiles;—burning for battle and eager for the word. Amongst these was Mallet de Graville.

The Norman valour of this young knight was, as we have seen, guided by Norman intelligence; and he had not disdained, since William's departure, to study the tongue of the country in which he hoped to exchange his mortgaged tower on the Seine, for some fair barony on the Humber or the Thames.

While the rest of his proud countrymen stood aloof, with eyes of silent scorn, from the homely nuncius, Mallet approached him with courteous bearing, and said in Saxon:

"May I crave to know the issue of thy message from the reb—that is from the doughty Earl?"

"I wait to learn it," said Vebba, bluffly.

"They heard thee throughout, then?"

"Throughout."

"Friendly Sir," said the Sire de Graville, seeking to subdue the tone of irony habitual to him, and acquired, perhaps, from his maternal ancestry, the Franks. "Friendly and peace-making Sir, dare I so far venture to intrude on the secrets of thy mission as to ask if Godwin demands, among other reasonable items, the head of thy humble servant—not by name indeed, for my name is as yet unknown to him—but as one of the unhappy class called Normans?"

"Had Earl Godwin," returned the nuncius, "thought fit to treat for peace by asking vengeance, he would have chosen another spokesman. The Earl asks but his own; and thy head is not, I trow, a part of his goods and chattels."

"That is comforting," said Mallet. "Marry, I thank thee, Sir Saxon; and thou speakest like a brave man and an honest. And if we fall to blows, as I suspect we shall, I should deem it a favour of our Lady the Virgin if she send thee across my way. Next to a fair friend I love a bold foe."

Vebba smiled, for he liked the sentiment, and the tone and air of the young knight pleased his rough mind, despite his prejudices against the stranger.

Encouraged by the smile, Mallet seated himself on the corner of the long table that skirted the room, and with a debonnair gesture invited Vebba to do the same; then looking at him gravely, he resumed:

"So frank and courteous thou art, Sir Envoy, that I yet intrude on thee my ignorant and curious questions."

"Speak out, Norman."

"How comes it, then, that you English so love this Earl Godwin?—Still more, why think you it right and proper that King Edward should love him too? It is a question I have often asked, and to which I am not likely in these halls to get answer satisfactory. If I know aught of your troublous history, this same Earl has changed sides oft eno'; first for the Saxon, then for Canute the Dane—Canute dies, and your friend takes up arms for the Saxon again. He yields to the advice of your Witan, and sides with Hardicanute and Harold, the Danes—a letter, nathless, is written as from Emma, the mother to the young Saxon princes, Edward and Alfred, inviting them over to England, and promising aid; the saints protect Edward, who continues to say aves in Normandy—Alfred comes over, Earl Godwin meets him, and, unless belied, does him homage, and swears to him faith. Nay, listen yet. This Godwin, whom ye love so, then leads Alfred and his train into the ville of Guildford, I think ye call it,—fair quarters enow. At the dead of the night rush in King Harold's men, seize prince and follower, six hundred men in all;

and next morning, saving only every tenth man, they are tortured and put to death. The prince is born off to London, and shortly afterwards his eyes are torn out in the Islet of Ely, and he dies of the anguish! That ye should love Earl Godwin withal may be strange, but yet possible. But is it possible, cher Envoy, for the King to love the man who thus betrayed his brother to the shambles?"

"All this is a Norman fable," said the Thegn of Kent, with a disturbed visage; "and Godwin cleared himself on oath of all share in the foul murder of Alfred."

"The oath, I have heard, was backed," said the knight drily, "by a present to Hardicanute, who after the death of King Harold resolved to avenge the black butchery; a present, I say, of a gilt ship, manned by fourscore warriors with gold-hilted swords, and gilt helms.—But let this pass."

"Let it pass," echoed Vebba with a sigh. "Bloody were those times, and unholy their secrets."

"Yet answer me still, why love you Earl Godwin? He hath changed sides from party to party, and in each change won lordships and lands. He is ambitious and grasping, ye all allow; for the ballads sung in your streets liken him to the thorn and the bramble, at which the sheep leaves his wool. He is haughty and overbearing. Tell me, O Saxon, frank Saxon, why you love Godwin the Earl? Fain would I know; for, please the saints (and you and your Earl so permitting), I mean to live and die in this merrie England; and it would be pleasant to learn that I have but to do as Earl Godwin, in order to win love from the English."

The stout Vebba looked perplexed; but after stroking his beard thoughtfully, he answered thus:

"Though of Kent, and therefore in his earldom, I am not one of Godwin's especial party; for that reason was I chosen his bode. Those who are under him doubtless love a chief liberal to give and strong to protect. The old age of a great leader gathers reverence, as an oak gathers moss. But to me, and those like me, living peaceful at home, shunning courts, and tempting not broils, Godwin the man is not dear— it is Godwin the thing."

"Though I do my best to know your language," said the knight, "ye have phrases that might puzzle King Solomon. What meanest thou by 'Godwin the thing'?"

"That which to us Godwin only seems to uphold. We love justice; whatever his offences, Godwin was banished unjustly. We love our laws; Godwin was dishonoured by maintaining them. We love England, and are devoured by strangers; Godwin's cause is England's, and— stranger, forgive me for not concluding."

Then examining the young Norman with a look of rough compassion, he laid his large hand upon the knight's shoulder and whispered:

"Take my advice—and fly."

"Fly!" said De Graville, reddening. "Is it to fly, think you, that I have put on my mail, and girded my sword?"

"Vain—vain! Wasps are fierce, but the swarm is doomed when the straw is kindled. I tell you this—fly in time, and you are safe; but let the King be so misguided as to count on arms, and strive against yon multitude, and verily before nightfall not one Norman will be found alive within ten miles of the city. Look to it, youth! Perhaps thou hast a mother—let her not mourn a son!"

Before the Norman could shape into Saxon sufficiently polite and courtly his profound and indignant disdain of the counsel, his sense of the impertinence with which his shoulder had been profaned, and his mother's son had been warned, the nuncius was again summoned into the presence-chamber. Nor did he return into the ante-room, but conducted forthwith from the council—his brief answer received—to the stairs of the palace, he reached the boat in which he had come, and was rowed back to the ship that held the Earl and his sons.

Now this was the manoeuvre of Godwin's array. His vessels having passed London Bridge, had rested awhile on the banks of the Southward suburb (Suth-weorde)—since called Southwark—and the King's ships lay to the north; but the fleet of the Earl's, after a brief halt, veered majestically round, and coming close to the palace of Westminster, inclined northward, as if to hem the King's ships. Meanwhile the land forces drew up close to the Strand, almost within bow-shot of the King's troops, that kept the ground inland; thus Vebba saw before him, so near as scarcely to be distinguished from each other, on the river the rival fleets, on the shore the rival armaments.

High above all the vessels towered the majestic bark, or aescas, that had borne Harold from the Irish shores. Its fashion was that of the ancient sea-kings, to one of whom it had belonged. Its curved and

mighty prow, richly gilded, stood out far above the waves: the prow, the head of the sea-snake; the stern its spire; head and spire alike glittering in the sun.

The boat drew up to the lofty side of the vessel, a ladder was lowered, the nuncius ascended lightly and stood on deck. At the farther end grouped the sailors, few in number, and at respectful distance from the Earl and his sons.

Godwin himself was but half armed. His head was bare, nor had he other weapon of offence than the gilt battle-axe of the Danes—weapon as much of office as of war; but his broad breast was covered with the ring mail of the time. His stature was lower than that of any of his sons; nor did his form exhibit greater physical strength than that of a man, well shaped, robust, and deep of chest, who still preserved in age the pith and sinew of mature manhood. Neither, indeed, did legend or fame ascribe to that eminent personage those romantic achievements, those feats of purely animal prowess, which distinguished his rival, Siward. Brave he was, but brave as a leader; those faculties in which he appears to have excelled all his contemporaries, were more analogous to the requisites of success in civilised times, than those which won renown of old. And perhaps England was the only country then in Europe which could have given to those faculties their fitting career. He possessed essentially the arts of party; he knew how to deal with vast masses of mankind; he could carry along with his interests the fervid heart of the multitude; he had in the highest degree that gift, useless in most other lands—in all lands where popular assemblies do not exist—the gift of popular eloquence. Ages elapsed, after the Norman conquest, ere eloquence again became a power in England. [80]

But like all men renowned for eloquence, he went with the popular feeling of his times; he embodied its passions, its prejudices—but also that keen sense of self-interest, which is the invariable characteristic of a multitude. He was the sense of the commonalty carried to its highest degree. Whatever the faults, it may be the crimes, of a career singularly prosperous and splendid, amidst events the darkest and most terrible,—shining with a steady light across the thunder-clouds,—he was never accused of cruelty or outrage to the mass of the people. English, emphatically, the English deemed him; and this not the less that in his youth he had sided with Canute, and owed his fortunes to that king; for so intermixed were Danes and Saxons in England, that the agreement which had given to Canute one half the kingdom had been received with general applause; and the earlier severities of that great prince had been so redeemed in his later years by wisdom and mildness—so, even in the worst period of his reign, relieved by extraordinary personal affability, and so lost now in men's memories by pride in his power and fame,—that Canute had left behind him a beloved and honoured name [81], and Godwin was the more esteemed as the chosen counsellor of that popular prince. At his death, Godwin was known to have wished, and even armed, for the restoration of the Saxon line; and only yielded to the determination of the Witan, no doubt acted upon by the popular opinion. Of one dark crime he was suspected, and, despite his oath to the contrary, and the formal acquittal of the national council, doubt of his guilt rested then, as it rests still, upon his name; viz., the perfidious surrender of Alfred, Edward's murdered brother.

But time had passed over the dismal tragedy; and there was an instinctive and prophetic feeling throughout the English nation, that with the House of Godwin was identified the cause of the English people. Everything in this man's aspect served to plead in his favour. His ample brows were calm with benignity and thought; his large dark blue eyes were serene and mild, though their expression, when examined, was close and inscrutable. His mien was singularly noble, but wholly without formality or affected state; and though haughtiness and arrogance were largely attributed to him, they could be found only in his deeds, not manner—plain, familiar, kindly to all men, his heart seemed as open to the service of his countrymen as his hospitable door to their wants.

Behind him stood the stateliest group of sons that ever filled with pride a father's eye. Each strikingly distinguished from the other, all remarkable for beauty of countenance and strength of frame.

Sweyn, the eldest [82], had the dark hues of his mother the Dane: a wild and mournful majesty sat upon features aquiline and regular, but wasted by grief or passion; raven locks, glossy even in neglect, fell half over eyes hollow in their sockets, but bright, though with troubled fire. Over his shoulder he bore his mighty axe. His form, spare, but of immense power, was sheathed in mail, and he leant on his great pointed Danish shield. At his feet sate his young son Haco, a boy with a countenance preternaturally thoughtful for his years, which were yet those of childhood.

Next to him stood the most dreaded and ruthless of the sons of Godwin—he, fated to become to the Saxon what Julian was to the Goth. With his arms folded on his breast stood Tostig; his face was beautiful as a Greek's, in all save the forehead, which was low and lowering. Sleek and trim were his bright chestnut locks; and his arms were damascened with silver, for he was one who loved the pomp and luxury of war.

Wolnoth, the mother's favourite, seemed yet in the first flower of youth, but he alone of all the sons

had something irresolute and effeminate in his aspect and bearing; his form, though tall, had not yet come to its full height and strength; and, as if the weight of mail were unusual to him, he leant with both hands upon the wood of his long spear. Leofwine, who stood next to Wolnoth, contrasted him notably; his sunny locks wreathed carelessly over a white unclouded brow, and the silken hair on the upper lip quivered over arch lips, smiling, even in that serious hour.

At Godwin's right hand, but not immediately near him, stood the last of the group, Gurth and Harold. Gurth had passed his arm over the shoulder of his brother, and, not watching the nuncius while he spoke, watched only the effect his words produced on the face of Harold. For Gurth loved Harold as Jonathan loved David. And Harold was the only one of the group not armed; and had a veteran skilled in war been asked who of that group was born to lead armed men, he would have pointed to the man unarmed.

"So what says the King?" asked Earl Godwin.

"This; he refuses to restore thee and thy sons, or to hear thee, till thou hast disbanded thine army, dismissed thy ships, and consented to clear thyself and thy house before the Witanagemot."

A fierce laugh broke from Tostig; Sweyn's mournful brow grew darker; Leofwine placed his right hand on his ateghar; Wolnoth rose erect; Gurth kept his eyes on Harold, and Harold's face was unmoved.

"The King received thee in his council of war," said Godwin, thoughtfully, "and doubtless the Normans were there. Who were the Englishmen most of mark?"

"Siward of Northumbria, thy foe."

"My sons," said the Earl, turning to his children, and breathing loud as if a load were off his heart; "there will be no need of axe or armour to-day. Harold alone was wise," and he pointed to the linen tunic of the son thus cited.

"What mean you, Sir Father?" said Tostig, imperiously. "Think you to——"

"Peace, son, peace;" said Godwin, without asperity, but with conscious command. "Return, brave and dear friend," he said to Vebba, "find out Siward the Earl; tell him that I, Godwin, his foe in the old time, place honour and life in his hands, and what he counsels that will we do.—Go."

The Kent man nodded, and regained his boat. Then spoke Harold.

"Father, yonder are the forces of Edward; as yet without leaders, since the chiefs must still be in the halls of the King. Some fiery Norman amongst them may provoke an encounter; and this city of London is not won, as it behoves us to win it, if one drop of English blood dye the sword of one English man. Wherefore, with your leave, I will take boat, and land. And unless I have lost in my absence all right here in the hearts of our countrymen, at the first shout from our troops which proclaims that Harold, son of Godwin, is on the soil of our fathers, half yon array of spears and helms pass at once to our side."

"And if not, my vain brother?" said Tostig, gnawing his lip with envy.

"And if not, I will ride alone into the midst of them, and ask what Englishmen are there who will aim shaft or spear at this breast, never mailed against England!"

Godwin placed his hand on Harold's head, and the tears came to those close cold eyes.

"Thou knowest by nature what I have learned by art. Go, and prosper. Be it as thou wilt."

"He takes thy post, Sweyn—thou art the elder," said Tostig, to the wild form by his side.

"There is guilt on my soul, and woe in my heart," answered Sweyn, moodily. "Shall Esau lose his birthright, and Cain retain it?" So saying, he withdrew, and, reclining against the stern of the vessel, leant his face upon the edge of his shield.

Harold watched him with deep compassion in his eyes, passed to his side with a quick step, pressed his hand, and whispered, "Peace to the past, O my brother!"

The boy Haco, who had noiselessly followed his father, lifted his sombre, serious looks to Harold as he thus spoke; and when Harold turned away, he said to Sweyn, timidly, "He, at least, is ever good to thee and to me."

"And thou, when I am no more, shalt cling to him as thy father, Haco," answered Sweyn, tenderly

smoothing back the child's dark locks.

The boy shivered; and, bending his head, murmured to himself, "When thou art no more! No more? Has the Vala doomed him, too? Father and son, both?"

Meanwhile, Harold had entered the boat lowered from the sides of the aescas to receive him; and Gurth, looking appealingly to his father, and seeing no sign of dissent, sprang down after the young Earl, and seated himself by his side. Godwin followed the boat with musing eyes.

"Small need," said he, aloud, but to himself, "to believe in soothsayers, or to credit Hilda the saga, when she prophesied, ere we left our shores, that Harold—" He stopped short, for Tostig's wrathful exclamation broke on his reverie.

"Father, father! My blood surges in my ears, and boils in my heart, when I hear thee name the prophecies of Hilda in favour of thy darling. Dissension and strife in our house have they wrought already; and if the feuds between Harold and me have sown grey in thy locks, thank thyself when, flushed with vain soothsayings for thy favoured Harold, thou saidst, in the hour of our first childish broil, 'Strive not with Harold; for his brothers will be his men.'"

"Falsify the prediction," said Godwin, calmly; "wise men may always make their own future, and seize their own fates. Prudence, patience, labour, valour; these are the stars that rule the career of mortals."

Tostig made no answer; for the splash of oars was near, and two ships, containing the principal chiefs that had joined Godwin's cause, came alongside the Runic aescas to hear the result of the message sent to the King. Tostig sprang to the vessel's side, and exclaimed, "The King, girt by his false counsellors, will hear us not, and arms must decide between us."

"Hold, hold! malignant, unhappy boy!" cried Godwin, between his grinded teeth, as a shout of indignation, yet joyous ferocity broke from the crowded ships thus hailed. "The curse of all time be on him who draws the first native blood in sight of the altars and hearths of London! Hear me, thou with the vulture's blood-lust, and the peacock's vain joy in the gaudy plume! Hear me, Tostig, and tremble. If but by one word thou widen the breach between me and the King, outlaw thou enterest England, outlaw shalt thou depart—for earldom and broad lands; choose the bread of the stranger, and the werewgeld of the wolf!"

The young Saxon, haughty as he was, quailed at his father's thrilling voice, bowed his head, and retreated sullenly. Godwin sprang on the deck of the nearest vessel, and all the passions that Tostig had aroused, he exerted his eloquence to appease.

In the midst of his arguments, there rose from the ranks on the strand, the shout of "Harold! Harold the Earl! Harold and Holy Crosse!" And Godwin, turning his eye to the King's ranks, saw them agitated, swayed, and moving; till suddenly, from the very heart of the hostile array, came, as by irresistible impulse, the cry, "Harold, our Harold! All hail, the good Earl!"

While this chanced without,—within the palace, Edward had quitted the presence-chamber, and was closeted with Stigand, the bishop. This prelate had the more influence with Edward, inasmuch as though Saxon, he was held to be no enemy to the Normans, and had, indeed, on a former occasion, been deposed from his bishopric on the charge of too great an attachment to the Norman queen-mother Emma [83]. Never in his whole life had Edward been so stubborn as on this occasion. For here, more than his realm was concerned, he was threatened in the peace of his household, and the comfort of his tepid friendships. With the recall of his powerful father-in-law, he foresaw the necessary reintrusion of his wife upon the charm of his chaste solitude. His favourite Normans would be banished, he should be surrounded with faces he abhorred. All the representations of Stigand fell upon a stern and unyielding spirit, when Siward entered the King's closet.

"Sir, my King," said the great son of Beorn, "I yielded to your kingly will in the council, that, before we listened to Godwin, he should disband his men, and submit to the judgment of the Witan. The Earl hath sent to me to say, that he will put honour and life in my keeping, and abide by my counsel. And I have answered as became the man who will never snare a foe, or betray a trust."

"How hast thou answered?" asked the King.

"That he abide by the laws of England; as Dane and Saxon agreed to abide in the days of Canute; that he and his sons shall make no claim for land or lordship, but submit all to the Witan."

"Good," said the King; "and the Witan will condemn him now, as it would have condemned when he shunned to meet it."

"And the Witan now," returned the Earl emphatically, "will be free, and fair, and just."

"And meanwhile, the troops——"

"Will wait on either side; and if reason fail, then the sword," said Siward.

"This I will not hear," exclaimed Edward; when the tramp of many feet thundered along the passage; the door was flung open, and several captains (Norman as well as Saxon) of the King's troops rushed in, wild, rude, and tumultuous.

"The troops desert! half the ranks have thrown down their arms at the very name of Harold!" exclaimed the Earl of Hereford. "Curses on the knaves!"

"And the lithsmen of London," cried a Saxon thegn, "are all on his side, and marching already through the gates."

"Pause yet," whispered Stigand; "and who shall say, this hour to-morrow, if Edward or Godwin reign on the throne of Alfred?"

His stern heart moved by the distress of his King, and not the less for the unwonted firmness which Edward displayed, Siward here approached, knelt, and took the King's hand.

"Siward can give no niddering counsel to his King; to save the blood of his subjects is never a king's disgrace. Yield thou to mercy, Godwin to the law!"

"Oh for the cowl and cell!" exclaimed the Prince, wringing his hands. "Oh Norman home, why did I leave thee?" He took the cross from his breast, contemplated it fixedly, prayed silently but with fervour, and his face again became tranquil.

"Go," he said, flinging himself on his seat in the exhaustion that follows passion, "go, Siward, go, Stigand, deal with things mundane as ye will."

The bishop, satisfied with this reluctant acquiescence, seized Siward by the arm and withdrew him from the closet. The captains remained a few moments behind, the Saxons silently gazing on the King, the Normans whispering each other, in great doubt and trouble, and darting looks of the bitterest scorn at their feeble benefactor. Then, as with one accord, these last rushed along the corridor, gained the hall where their countrymen yet assembled, and exclaimed, "A toute bride! Franc etrier!—All is lost but life!—God for the first man,—knife and cord for the last!"

Then, as the cry of fire, or as the first crash of an earthquake, dissolves all union, and reduces all emotion into one thought of self-saving, the whole conclave, crowding pell-mell on each other, hustled, jostled, clamoured to the door—happy he who could find horse, palfrey,—even monk's mule! This way, that way, fled those lordly Normans, those martial abbots, those mitred bishops—some singly, some in pairs; some by tens, and some by scores; but all prudently shunning association with those chiefs whom they had most courted the day before, and who, they now knew, would be the main mark for revenge; save only two, who yet, from that awe of the spiritual power which characterised the Norman, who was already half monk, half soldier (Crusader and Templar before Crusades were yet preached, or the Templars yet dreamed of),—even in that hour of selfish panic rallied round them the proudest chivalry of their countrymen, viz., the Bishop of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Both these dignitaries, armed cap-a-pie, and spear in hand, headed the flight; and good service that day, both as guide and champion, did Mallet de Graville. He led them in a circuit behind both armies, but being intercepted by a new body, coming from the pastures of Hertfordshire to the help of Godwin, he was compelled to take the bold and desperate resort of entering the city gates. These were wide open; whether to admit the Saxon Earls, or vomit forth their allies, the Londoners. Through these, up the narrow streets, riding three abreast, dashed the slaughtering fugitives; worthy in flight of their national renown, they trampled down every obstacle. Bodies of men drew up against them at every angle, with the Saxon cry of "Out—Out!" "Down with the outland men!" Through each, spear pierced, and sword clove, the way. Red with gore was the spear of the prelate of London; broken to the hilt was the sword militant in the terrible hand of the Archbishop of Canterbury. So on thy rode, so on they slaughtered—gained the Eastern Gate, and passed with but two of their number lost.

The fields once gained, for better precaution they separated. Some few, not quite ignorant of the Saxon tongue, doffed their mail, and crept through forest and fell towards the sea-shore; others retained steed and arms, but shunned equally the high roads. The two prelates were among the last; they gained, in safety, Ness, in Essex, threw themselves into an open, crazy, fishing-boat, committed themselves to the waves, and, half drowned and half famished, drifted over the Channel to the French shores. Of the rest of the courtly foreigners, some took refuge in the forts yet held by their countrymen;

some lay concealed in creeks and caves till they could find or steal boats for their passage. And thus, in the year of our Lord 1052, occurred the notable dispersion and ignominious flight of the counts and vavasours of great William the Duke!

CHAPTER III.

The Witana-gemot was assembled in the great hall of Westminster in all its imperial pomp.

It was on his throne that the King sate now—and it was the sword that was in his right hand. Some seated below, and some standing beside, the throne, were the officers of the Basileus [84] of Britain. There were to be seen camararius and pincerna, chamberlain and cupbearer; disc thegn and hors thegn [85]; the thegn of the dishes, and the thegn of the stud; with many more, whose state offices may not impossibly have been borrowed from the ceremonial pomp of the Byzantine court; for Edgar, King of England, had in the old time styled himself the Heir of Constantine. Next to these sat the clerks of the chapel, with the King's confessor at their head. Officers were they of higher note than their name bespeaks, and wielders, in the trust of the Great Seal, of a power unknown of old, and now obnoxious to the Saxon. For tedious is the suit which lingers for the king's writ and the king's seal; and from those clerks shall arise hereafter a thing of torture and of might, which shall grind out the hearts of men, and be called CHANCERY! [86]

Below the scribes, a space was left on the floor, and farther down sat the chiefs of the Witan. Of these, first in order, both from their spiritual rank and their vast temporal possessions, sat the lords of the Church; the chairs of the prelates of London and Canterbury were void. But still goodly was the array of Saxon mitres, with the harsh, hungry, but intelligent face of Stigand,—Stigand the stout and the covetous; and the benign but firm features of Alred, true priest and true patriot, distinguished amidst all. Around each prelate, as stars round a sun, were his own special priestly retainers, selected from his diocese. Farther still down the hall are the great civil lords and viceking vassals of the "Lord-Paramount." Vacant the chair of the King of the Scots, for Siward hath not yet had his wish; Macbeth is in his fastnesses, or listening to the weird sisters in the wold; and Malcolm is a fugitive in the halls of the Northumbrian earl. Vacant the chair of the hero Gryffyth, son of Llewelyn, the dread of the marches, Prince of Gwyned, whose arms had subjugated all Cymry. But there are the lesser sub-kings of Wales, true to the immemorial schisms amongst themselves, which destroyed the realm of Ambrosius, and rendered vain the arm of Arthur. With their torques of gold, and wild eyes, and hair cut round ears and brow [87], they stare on the scene.

On the same bench with these sub-kings, distinguished from them by height of stature, and calm collectedness of mien, no less than by their caps of maintenance and furred robes, are those props of strong thrones and terrors of weak—the earls to whom shires and counties fall, as hyde and carricate to the lesser thegns. But three of these were then present, and all three the foes of Godwin,—Siward, Earl of Northumbria; Leofric of Mercia (that Leofric whose wife Godiva yet lives in ballad and song); and Rolf, Earl of Hereford and Worcestershire, who, strong in his claim of "king's blood," left not the court with his Norman friends. And on the same benches, though a little apart, are the lesser earls, and that higher order of thegns, called king's thegns.

Not far from these sat the chosen citizens from the free burgh of London, already of great weight in the senate [88],—sufficing often to turn its counsels; all friends were they of the English Earl and his house. In the same division of the hall were found the bulk and true popular part of the meeting—popular indeed—as representing not the people, but the things the people most prized—valour and wealth; the thegn landowners, called in the old deeds the "Ministers:" they sate with swords by their side, all of varying birth, fortune, and connection, whether with king, earl, or ceorl. For in the different districts of the old Heptarchy, the qualification varied; high in East Anglia, low in Wessex; so that what was wealth in the one shire was poverty in the other. There sate, half a yeoman, the Saxon thegn of Berkshire or Dorset, proud of his five hydres of land; there, half an ealderman, the Danish thegn of Norfolk or Ely, discontented with his forty; some were there in right of smaller offices under the crown; some traders, and sons of traders, for having crossed the high seas three times at their own risk; some could boast the blood of Offa and Egbert; and some traced but three generations back to neatherd and ploughman; and some were Saxons and some were Danes: and some from the western shires were by origin Britons, though little cognisant of their race. Farther down still, at the extreme end of the hall, crowding by the open doors, filling up the space without, were the ceorls themselves, a vast and not powerless body; in these high courts (distinct from the shire gemots, or local senates)—never called upon to vote or to speak or to act, or even to sign names to the doom, but only to shout "Yea, yea,"

when the proceres pronounced their sentence. Yet not powerless were they, but rather to the Witan what public opinion is to the Witan's successor, our modern parliament: they were opinion! And according to their numbers and their sentiments, easily known and boldly murmured, often and often must that august court of basileus and prelate, vassal-king and mighty earl, have shaped the council and adjudged the doom.

And the forms of the meeting had been duly said and done; and the King had spoken words no doubt wary and peaceful, gracious and exhortatory; but those words—for his voice that day was weak—travelled not beyond the small circle of his clerks and his officers; and a murmur buzzed through the hall, when Earl Godwin stood on the floor with his six sons at his back; and you might have heard the hum of the gnat that vexed the smooth cheek of Earl Rolf, or the click of the spider from the web on the vaulted roof, the moment before Earl Godwin spoke.

"If," said he, with the modest look and downcast eye of practised eloquence, "If I rejoice once more to breathe the air of England, in whose service, often perhaps with faulty deeds, but at all times with honest thoughts, I have, both in war and council, devoted so much of my life that little now remains—but (should you, my king, and you, prelates, proceres, and ministers so vouchsafe) to look round and select that spot of my native soil which shall receive my bones;—if I rejoice to stand once more in that assembly which has often listened to my voice when our common country was in peril, who here will blame that joy? Who among my foes, if foes now I have, will not respect the old man's gladness? Who amongst you, earls and thegns, would not grieve, if his duty bade him say to the grey-haired exile, 'In this English air you shall not breathe your last sigh—on this English soil you shall not find a grave!' Who amongst you would not grieve to say it?" (Suddenly he drew up his head and faced his audience.) "Who amongst you hath the courage and the heart to say it? Yes, I rejoice that I am at last in an assembly fit to judge my cause, and pronounce my innocence. For what offence was I outlawed? For what offence were I, and the six sons I have given to my land, to bear the wolf's penalty, and be chased and slain as the wild beasts? Hear me, and answer!"

"Eustace, Count of Boulogne, returning to his domains from a visit to our lord the King, entered the town of Dover in mail and on his war steed; his train did the same. Unknowing our laws and customs (for I desire to press light upon all old grievances, and will impute ill designs to none) these foreigners invade by force the private dwellings of citizens, and there select their quarters. Ye all know that this was the strongest violation of Saxon right; ye know that the meanest ceorl hath the proverb on his lip, 'Every man's house is his castle.' One of the townsmen acting on this belief,—which I have yet to learn was a false one,—expelled from his threshold a retainer of the French Earl's. The stranger drew his sword and wounded him; blows followed—the stranger fell by the arm he had provoked. The news arrives to Earl Eustace; he and his kinsmen spur to the spot; they murder the Englishman on his hearth-stone.—"

Here a groan, half-stifled and wrathful, broke from the ceorls at the end of the hall. Godwin held up his hand in rebuke of the interruption, and resumed.

"This deed done, the outlanders rode through the streets with their drawn swords; they butchered those who came in their way; they trampled even children under their horses' feet. The burghers armed. I thank the Divine Father, who gave me for my countrymen those gallant burghers! They fought, as we English know how to fight; they slew some nineteen or score of these mailed intruders; they chased them from the town. Earl Eustace fled fast. Earl Eustace, we know, is a wise man: small rest took he, little bread broke he, till he pulled rein at the gate of Gloucester, where my lord the King then held court. He made his complaint. My lord the King, naturally hearing but one side, thought the burghers in the wrong; and, scandalised that such high persons of his own kith should be so aggrieved, he sent for me, in whose government the burgh of Dover is, and bade me chastise, by military execution, those who had attacked the foreign Count. I appeal to the great Earls whom I see before me—to you, illustrious Leofric; to you, renowned Siward—what value would ye set on your earldoms, if ye had not the heart and the power to see right done to the dwellers therein?"

"What was the course I proposed? Instead of martial execution, which would involve the whole burgh in one sentence, I submitted that the reeve and gerefas of the burgh should be cited to appear before the King, and account for the broil. My lord, though ever most clement and loving to his good people, either unhappily moved against me, or overpowered by the foreigners, was counselled to reject this mode of doing justice, which our laws, as settled under Edgar and Canute, enjoin. And because I would not,—and I say in the presence of all, because I, Godwin, son of Wolnoth, durst not, if I would, have entered the free burgh of Dover with mail on my back and the doomsman at my right hand, these outlanders induced my lord the King to summon me to attend in person (as for a sin of my own) the council of the Witan, convened at Gloucester, then filled with the foreigners, not, as I humbly opined, to do justice to me and my folk of Dover, but to secure to this Count of Boulogne a triumph over English liberties, and sanction his scorn for the value of English lives."

"I hesitated, and was menaced with outlawry; I armed in self-defence, and in defence of the laws of England; I armed, that men might not be murdered on their hearth-stones, nor children trampled under the hoofs of a stranger's war-steed. My lord the King gathered his troops round 'the cross and the martlets.' Yon noble earls, Siward and Leofric, came to that standard, as (knowing not then my cause) was their duty to the Basileus of Britain. But when they knew my cause, and saw with me the dwellers of the land, against me the outland aliens, they righteously interposed. An armistice was concluded; I agreed to refer all matters to a Witan held where it is held this day. My troops were disbanded; but the foreigners induced my lord not only to retain his own, but to issue his Herr-bann for the gathering of hosts far and near, even allies beyond the seas. When I looked to London for the peaceful Witan, what saw I? The largest armament that had been collected in this reign—that armament headed by Norman knights. Was this the meeting where justice could be done mine and me? Nevertheless, what was my offer? That I and my six sons would attend, provided the usual sureties, agreeable to our laws, from which only thieves [89] are excluded, were given that we should come and go life-free and safe. Twice this offer was made, twice refused; and so I and my sons were banished. We went;—we have returned!"

"And in arms," murmured Earl Rolf, son-in-law to that Count Eustace of Boulogne, whose violence had been temperately and truly narrated. [90]

"And in arms," repeated Godwin: "true; in arms against the foreigners who had thus poisoned the ear of our gracious King; in arms, Earl Rolf; and at the first clash of those arms, Franks and foreigners have fled. We have no need of arms now. We are amongst our countrymen, and no Frenchman interposes between us and the ever gentle; ever generous nature of our born King."

"Peers and proceres, chiefs of this Witan, perhaps the largest ever yet assembled in man's memory, it is for you to decide whether I and mine, or the foreign fugitives, caused the dissensions in these realms; whether our banishment was just or not; whether in our return we have abused the power we possessed. Ministers, on those swords by your sides there is not one drop of blood! At all events, in submitting to you our fate, we submit to our own laws and our own race. I am here to clear myself, on my oath, of deed and thought of treason. There are amongst my peers as king's thegns, those who will attest the same on my behalf, and prove the facts I have stated, if they are not sufficiently notorious. As for my sons, no crime can be alleged against them, unless it be a crime to have in their veins that blood which flows in mine—blood which they have learned from me to shed in defence of that beloved land to which they now ask to be recalled."

The Earl ceased and receded behind his children, having artfully, by his very abstinence from the more heated eloquence imputed to him often as a fault and a wile, produced a powerful effect upon an audience already prepared for his acquittal.

But now as, from the sons, Sweyn the eldest stepped forth; with a wandering eye and uncertain foot, there was a movement like a shudder amongst the large majority of the audience, and a murmur of hate or of horror.

The young Earl marked the sensation his presence produced, and stopped short. His breath came thick; he raised his right hand, but spoke not. His voice died on his lips; his eyes roved wildly round with a haggard stare more imploring than defying. Then rose, in his episcopal stole, Alred the bishop, and his clear sweet voice trembled as he spoke.

"Comes Sweyn, son of Godwin, here to prove his innocence of treason against the King?—if so, let him hold his peace; for if the Witan acquit Godwin, son of Wolnoth, of that charge, the acquittal includes his House. But in the name of the holy Church here represented by its fathers, will Sweyn say, and fasten his word by oath, that he is guiltless of treason to the King of Kings—guiltless of sacrilege that my lips shrink to name? Alas, that the duty falls on me,—for I loved thee once, and love thy kindred now. But I am God's servant before all things"—the prelate paused, and gathering up new energy, added in unfaltering accents, "I charge thee here, Sweyn the outlaw, that, moved by the fiend, thou didst bear off from God's house and violate a daughter of the Church—Algive, Abbess of Leominster!"

"And I," cried Siward, rising to the full height of his stature, "I, in the presence of these proceres, whose proudest title is milites or warriors—I charge Sweyn, son of Godwin, that, not in open field and hand to hand, but by felony and guile, he wrought the foul and abhorrent murder of his cousin, Beorn the Earl!"

At these two charges from men so eminent, the effect upon the audience was startling. While those not influenced by Godwin raised their eyes, sparkling with wrath and scorn, upon the wasted, yet still noble face of the eldest born, even those most zealous on behalf of that popular House evinced no sympathy for its heir. Some looked down abashed and mournful—some regarded the accused with a cold, unpitying gaze. Only perhaps among the ceorls, at the end of the hall, might be seen some compassion on anxious faces; for before those deeds of crime had been bruited abroad, none among the

sons of Godwin more blithe of mien and bold of hand, more honoured and beloved, than Sweyn the outlaw. But the hush that succeeded the charges was appalling in its depth. Godwin himself shaded his face with his mantle, and only those close by could see that his breast heaved and his limbs trembled. The brothers had shrunk from the side of the accused, outlawed even amongst his kin—all save Harold, who, strong in his blameless name and beloved repute, advanced three strides, amidst the silence, and, standing by his brother's side, lifted his commanding brow above the seated judges, but he did not speak.

Then said Sweyn the Earl, strengthened by such solitary companionship in that hostile assemblage,—“I might answer that for these charges in the past, for deeds alleged as done eight long years ago, I have the King's grace, and the inlaw's right; and that in the Witans over which I as earl presided, no man was twice judged for the same offence. That I hold to be the law, in the great councils as the small.”

“It is! it is!” exclaimed Godwin: his paternal feelings conquering his prudence and his decorous dignity. “Hold to it, my son!”

“I hold to it not,” resumed the young earl, casting a haughty glance over the somewhat blank and disappointed faces of his foes, “for my law is here”—and he smote his heart—“and that condemns me not once alone, but evermore! Alred, O holy father, at whose knees I once confessed my every sin,—I blame thee not that thou first, in the Witan, liftest thy voice against me, though thou knowest that I loved Algive from youth upward; she, with her heart yet mine, was given in the last year of Hardicanute, when might was right, to the Church. I met her again, flushed with my victories over the Walloon kings, with power in my hand and passion in my veins. Deadly was my sin!—But what asked I? that vows compelled should be annulled; that the love of my youth might yet be the wife of my manhood. Pardon, that I knew not then how eternal are the bonds ye of the Church have woven round those of whom, if ye fail of saints, ye may at least make martyrs!”

He paused, and his lip curled, and his eye shot wild fire; for in that moment his mother's blood was high within him, and he looked and thought, perhaps, as some heathen Dane, but the flash of the firmer man was momentary, and humbly smiting his breast, he murmured,—“Avaunt, Satan!—yea, deadly was my sin! And the sin was mine alone; Algive, if stained, was blameless; she escaped—and—and died!”

“The King was wroth; and first to strive against my pardon was Harold my brother, who now alone in my penitence stands by my side: he strove manfully and openly; I blamed him not: but Beorn, my cousin, desired my earldom; and he strove against me, wily and in secret,—to my face kind, behind my back spiteful. I detected his falsehood, and meant to detain, but not to slay him. He lay bound in my ship; he reviled and he taunted me in the hour of my gloom; and when the blood of the sea-kings flowed in fire through my veins. And I lifted my axe in ire; and my men lifted theirs, and so,—and so!—Again I say— Deadly was my sin! Think not that I seek now to make less my guilt, as I sought when I deemed that life was yet long, and power was yet sweet. Since then I have known worldly evil, and worldly good,—the storm and the shine of life; I have swept the seas, a sea-king; I have battled with the Dane in his native land; I have almost grasped in my right hand, as I grasped in my dreams, the crown of my kinsman, Canute;—again, I have been a fugitive and an exile;—again, I have been inlawed, and Earl of all the lands from Isis to the Wye [91]. And whether in state or in penury,—whether in war or in peace, I have seen the pale face of the nun betrayed, and the gory wounds of the murdered man. Wherefore I come not here to plead for a pardon, which would console me not, but formally to dis sever my kinsmen's cause from mine, which alone sullies and degrades it;—I come here to say, that, coveting not your acquittal, fearing not your judgment, I pronounce mine own doom. Cap of noble, and axe of warrior, I lay aside for ever; barefooted, and alone, I go hence to the Holy Sepulchre; there to assoil my soul, and implore that grace which cannot come from man! Harold, step forth in the place of Sweyn the first-born! And ye prelates and peers, milites and ministers, proceed to adjudge the living! To you, and to England, he who now quits you is the dead!”

He gathered his robe of state over his breast as a monk his gown, and looking neither to right nor to left, passed slowly down the hall, through the crowd, which made way for him in awe and silence; and it seemed to the assembly as if a cloud had gone from the face of day.

And Godwin still stood with his face covered by his robe.

And Harold anxiously watched the faces of the assembly, and saw no relenting.

And Gurth crept to Harold's side.

And the gay Leofwine looked sad.

And the young Wolnoth turned pale and trembled.

And the fierce Tostig played with his golden chain.

And one low sob was heard, and it came from the breast of Alred the meek accuser,—God's firm but gentle priest.

CHAPTER IV.

This memorable trial ended, as the reader will have forseen, in the formal renewal of Sweyn's outlawry, and the formal restitution of the Earl Godwin and his other sons to their lands and honours, with declarations imputing all the blame of the late dissensions to the foreign favourites, and sentences of banishment against them, except only, by way of a bitter mockery, some varlets of low degree, such as Humphrey Cock's-foot, and Richard son of Scrob. [92]

The return to power of this able and vigorous family was attended with an instantaneous effect upon the long-relaxed strings of the imperial government. Macbeth heard, and trembled in his moors; Gryffyth of Wales lit the fire-beacon on moel and craig. Earl Rolf was banished, but merely as a nominal concession to public opinion; his kinship to Edward sufficed to restore him soon, not only to England, but to the lordship of the Marches, and thither was he sent, with adequate force, against the Welch, who had half-repossessed themselves of the borders they harried. Saxon prelates and abbots replaced the Norman fugitives; and all were contented with the revolution, save the King, for the King lost his Norman friends, and regained his English wife.

In conformity with the usages of the times, hostages of the loyalty and faith of Godwin were required and conceded. They were selected from his own family; and the choice fell on Wolnoth, his son, and Haco, the son of Sweyn. As, when nearly all England may be said to have repassed to the hands of Godwin, it would have been an idle precaution to consign these hostages to the keeping of Edward, it was settled, after some discussion, that they should be placed in the Court of the Norman Duke until such time as the King, satisfied with the good faith of the family, should authorise their recall:—Fatal hostage, fatal ward and host!

It was some days after this national crisis, and order and peace were again established in city and land, forest and shire, when, at the setting of the sun, Hilda stood alone by the altar-stone of Thor.

The orb was sinking red and lurid, amidst long cloud-wracks of vermeil and purple, and not one human form was seen in the landscape, save that tall and majestic figure by the Runic shrine and the Druid crommell. She was leaning both hands on her wand, or seid-staff, as it was called in the language of Scandinavian superstition, and bending slightly forward as in the attitude of listening or expectation. Long before any form appeared on the road below she seemed to be aware of coming footsteps, and probably her habits of life had sharpened her senses; for she smiled, muttered to herself, "Ere it sets!" and changing her posture, leant her arm on the altar, and rested her face upon her hand.

At length, two figures came up the road; they neared the hill; they saw her, and slowly ascended the knoll. The one was dressed in the serge of a pilgrim, and his cowl thrown back, showed the face where human beauty and human power lay ravaged and ruined by human passions. He upon whom the pilgrim lightly leaned was attired simply, without the brooch or bracelet common to thegns of high degree, yet his port was that of majesty, and his brow that of mild command. A greater contrast could not be conceived than that between these two men, yet united by a family likeness. For the countenance of the last described was, though sorrowful at that moment, and indeed habitually not without a certain melancholy, wonderfully imposing from its calm and sweetness. There, no devouring passions had left the cloud or ploughed the line; but all the smooth loveliness of youth took dignity from the conscious resolve of men. The long hair, of a fair brown, with a slight tinge of gold, as the last sunbeams shot through its luxuriance, was parted from the temples, and fell in large waves half way to the shoulder. The eyebrows, darker in hue, arched and finely traced; the straight features, not less manly than the Norman, but less strongly marked: the cheek, hardy with exercise and exposure, yet still retaining somewhat of youthful bloom under the pale bronze of its sunburnt surface: the form tall, not gigantic, and vigorous rather from perfect proportion and athletic habits than from breadth and bulk—were all singularly characteristic of the Saxon beauty in its highest and purest type. But what chiefly distinguished this personage, was that peculiar dignity, so simple, so sedate, which no pomp seems to dazzle, no danger to disturb; and which perhaps arises from a strong sense of self-dependence, and is connected with self-respect—a dignity common to the Indian and the Arab, and rare except in that state of society in which each man is a power in himself. The Latin tragic poet touches close upon that

sentiment in the fine lines—

"Rex est qui metuit nihil;
Hoc regnum sibi quisque dat." [93]

So stood the brothers, Sweyn the outlaw and Harold the Earl, before the reputed prophetess. She looked on both with a steady eye, which gradually softened almost into tenderness, as it finally rested upon the pilgrim.

"And is it thus," she said at last, "that I see the first-born of Godwin the fortunate, for whom so often I have tasked the thunder, and watched the setting sun? for whom my runes have been graven on the bark of the elm, and the Scin-laeca [94] been called in pale splendour from the graves of the dead?"

"Hilda," said Sweyn, "not now will I accuse thee of the seeds thou hast sown: the harvest is gathered and the sickle is broken. Abjure thy dark Galdra [95], and turn as I to the sole light in the future, which shines from the tomb of the Son Divine."

The Prophetess bowed her head and replied:

"Belief cometh as the wind. Can the tree say to the wind, 'Rest thou on my boughs,' or Man to Belief, 'Fold thy wings on my heart'? Go where thy soul can find comfort, for thy life hath passed from its use on earth. And when I would read thy fate, the runes are as blanks, and the wave sleeps unstirred on the fountain. Go where the Fylgia [96], whom Alfader gives to each at his birth, leads thee. Thou didst desire love that seemed shut from thee, and I predicted that thy love should awake from the charnel in which the creed that succeeds to the faith of our sires inters life in its bloom. And thou didst covet the fame of the Jarl and the Viking, and I blessed thine axe to thy hand, and wove the sail for thy masts. So long as man knows desire, can Hilda have power over his doom. But when the heart lies in ashes, I raise but a corpse, that at the hush of the charm falls again into its grave. Yet, come to me nearer, O Sweyn, whose cradle I rocked to the chaunt of my rhyme."

The outlaw turned aside his face, and obeyed.

She sighed as she took his passive hand in her own, and examined the lines on the palm. Then, as if by an involuntary impulse of fondness and pity, she put aside his cowl and kissed his brow.

"Thy skein is spun, and happier than the many who scorn, and the few who lament thee, thou shalt win where they lose. The steel shall not smite thee, the storm shall forbear thee, the goal that thou yearnest for thy steps shall attain. Night hallows the ruin,—and peace to the shattered wrecks of the brave!"

The outlaw heard as if unmoved. But when he turned to Harold, who covered his face with his hand; but could not restrain the tears that flowed through the clasped fingers, a moisture came into his own wild, bright eyes, and he said, "Now, my brother, farewell, for no farther step shalt thou wend with me."

Harold started, opened his arms, and the outlaw fell upon his breast.

No sound was heard save a single sob, and so close was breast to breast, that you could not say from whose heart it came. Then the outlaw wrenched himself from the embrace, and murmured, "And Haco—my son—motherless, fatherless—hostage in the land of the stranger! Thou wilt remember—thou wilt shield him; thou be to him mother, father in the days to come! So may the saints bless thee!" With these words he sprang down the hillock.

Harold bounded after him; but Sweyn, halting, said, mournfully, "Is this thy promise? Am I so lost that faith should be broken even with thy father's son?"

At that touching rebuke, Harold paused, and the outlaw passed his way alone. As the last glimpse of his figure vanished at the turn of the road, whence, on the second of May, the Norman Duke and the Saxon King had emerged side by side, the short twilight closed abruptly, and up from the far forestland rose the moon.

Harold stood rooted to the spot, and still gazing on the space, when the Vala laid her hand on his arm.

"Behold, as the moon rises on the troubled gloaming, so rises the fate of Harold, as yon brief, human shadow, halting between light and darkness, passes away to night. Thou art now the first-born of a House that unites the hopes of the Saxon with the fortunes of the Dane."

"Thinkest thou," said Harold, with a stern composure, "that I can have joy and triumph in a brother's

exile and woe?"

"Not now, and not yet, will the voice of thy true nature be heard; but the warmth of the sun brings the thunder, and the glory of fortune wakes the storm of the soul."

"Kinswoman," said Harold, with a slight curl of his lip, "by me at least have thy prophecies ever passed as the sough of the air; neither in horror nor with faith do I think of thy incantations and charms; and I smile alike at the exorcism of the shaveling and the spells of the Saga. I have asked thee not to bless mine axe, nor weave my sail. No runic rhyme is on the sword-blade of Harold. I leave my fortunes to the chance of mine own cool brain and strong arm. Vala, between thee and me there is no bond."

The Prophetess smiled loftily.

"And what thinkest thou, O self-dependent! what thinkest thou is the fate which thy brain and thine arm shall will?"

"The fate they have won already. I see no Beyond. The fate of a man sworn to guard his country, love justice, and do right."

The moon shone full on the heroic face of the young Earl as he spoke; and on its surface there seemed nought to belie the noble words. Yet, the Prophetess, gazing earnestly on that fair countenance, said, in a whisper, that, despite a reason singularly sceptical for the age in which it had been cultured, thrilled to the Saxon's heart, "Under that calm eye sleeps the soul of thy sire, and beneath that brow, so haught and so pure, works the genius that crowned the kings of the north in the lineage of thy mother the Dane."

"Peace!" said Harold, almost fiercely; then, as if ashamed of the weakness of his momentary irritation, he added, with a faint smile, "Let us not talk of these matters while my heart is still sad and away from the thoughts of the world, with my brother the lonely outlaw. Night is on us, and the ways are yet unsafe; for the king's troops, disbanded in haste, were made up of many who turn to robbers in peace. Alone, and unarmed, save my ateghar, I would crave a night's rest under thy roof; and"—he hesitated, and as light blush came over his cheek—"and I would fain see if your grandchild is as fair as when I last looked on her blue eyes, that then wept for Harold ere he went into exile."

"Her tears are not at her command, nor her smiles," said the Vala, solemnly; "her tears flow from the fount of thy sorrows, and her smiles are the beams from thy joys. For know, O Harold! that Edith is thine earthly Fylgia; thy fate and her fate are as one. And vainly as man would escape from his shadow, would soul wrench itself from the soul that Skulda hath linked to his doom."

Harold made no reply; but his step, habitually slow, grew more quick and light, and this time his reason found no fault with the oracles of the Vala.

CHAPTER V.

As Hilda entered the hall, the various idlers accustomed to feed at her cost were about retiring, some to their homes in the vicinity, some, appertaining to the household, to the dormitories in the old Roman villa.

It was not the habit of the Saxon noble, as it was of the Norman, to put hospitality to profit, by regarding his guests in the light of armed retainers. Liberal as the Briton, the cheer of the board and the shelter of the roof were afforded with a hand equally unselfish and indiscriminate; and the doors of the more wealthy and munificent might be almost literally said to stand open from morn to eve.

As Harold followed the Vala across the vast atrium, his face was recognised, and a shout of enthusiastic welcome greeted the popular Earl. The only voices that did not swell that cry, were those of three monks from a neighbouring convent, who choose to wink at the supposed practices of the Morthwyrtha [97], from the affection they bore to her ale and mead, and the gratitude they felt for her ample gifts to their convent.

"One of the wicked House, brother," whispered the monk.

"Yea; mockers and scorners are Godwin and his lewd sons," answered the monk.

And all three sighed and scowled, as the door closed on the hostess and her stately guest.

Two tall and not ungraceful lamps lighted the same chamber in which Hilda was first presented to the reader. The handmaids were still at their spindles, and the white web nimbly shot as the mistress entered. She paused, and her brow knit, as she eyed the work.

"But three parts done?" she said, "weave fast, and weave strong."

Harold, not heeding the maids or their task, gazed inquiringly round, and from a nook near the window, Edith sprang forward with a joyous cry, and a face all glowing with delight—sprang forward, as if to the arms of a brother; but, within a step or so of that noble guest, she stopped short, and her eyes fell to the ground.

Harold held his breath in admiring silence. The child he had loved from her cradle stood before him as a woman. Even since we last saw her, in the interval between the spring and the autumn, the year had ripened the youth of the maiden, as it had mellowed the fruits of the earth; and her cheek was rosy with the celestial blush, and her form rounded to the nameless grace, which say that infancy is no more.

He advanced and took her hand, but for the first time in his life in their greetings, he neither gave nor received the kiss.

"You are no child now, Edith," said he, involuntarily; "but still set apart, I pray you, some remains of the old childish love for Harold."

Edith's charming lips smiled softly; she raised her eyes to his, and their innocent fondness spoke through happy tears.

But few words passed in the short interval between Harold's entrance and his retirement to the chamber prepared for him in haste. Hilda herself led him to a rude ladder which admitted to a room above, evidently added, by some Saxon lord, to the old Roman pile. The ladder showed the precaution of one accustomed to sleep in the midst of peril, for, by a kind of windlass in the room, it could be drawn up at the inmate's will, and, so drawn, left below a dark and deep chasm, delving down to the foundations of the house; nevertheless the room itself had all the luxury of the time; the bedstead was quaintly carved, and of some rare wood; a trophy of arms—though very ancient, sedulously polished—hung on the wall. There were the small round shield and spear of the earlier Saxon, with his vizorless helm, and the short curved knife or saex [98], from which some antiquarians deem that the Saxish men take their renowned name.

Edith, following Hilda, proffered to the guest, on a salver of gold, spiced wines and confections; while Hilda, silently and unperceived, waved her seid-staff over the bed, and rested her pale hand on the pillow.

"Nay, sweet cousin," said Harold, smiling, "this is not one of the fashions of old, but rather, methinks, borrowed from the Frankish manners in the court of King Edward."

"Not so, Harold," answered Hilda, quickly turning; such was ever the ceremony due to Saxon king, when he slept in a subject's house, ere our kinsmen the Danes introduced that unroyal wassail, which left subject and king unable to hold or to quaff cup, when the board was left for the bed."

"Thou rebukest, O Hilda, too tauntingly, the pride of Godwin's house, when thou givest to his homely son the ceremonial of a king. But, so served, I envy not kings, fair Edith."

He took the cup, raised it to his lips, and when he placed it on the small table by his side the women had left the chamber, and he was alone. He stood for some minutes absorbed in reverie, and his soliloquy ran somewhat thus:

"Why said the Vala that Edith's fate was inwoven with mine? And why did I believe and bless the Vala, when she so said? Can Edith ever be my wife? The monk-king designs her for the cloister—Woe, and well-a- day! Sweyn, Sweyn, let thy doom forewarn me! And if I stand up in my place and say, 'Give age and grief to the cloister—youth and delight to man's hearth,' what will answer the monks? 'Edith cannot be thy wife, son of Godwin, for faint and scarce traced though your affinity of blood, ye are within the banned degrees of the Church. Edith may be wife to another, if thou wilt,—barren spouse of the Church or mother of children who lisp not Harold's name as their father.' Out on these priests with their mummeries, and out on their war upon human hearts!"

His fair brow grew stern and fierce as the Norman Duke's in his ire; and had you seen him at the

moment you would have seen the true brother of Sweyn. He broke from his thoughts with the strong effort of a man habituated to self-control, and advanced to the narrow window, opened the lattice, and looked out.

The moon was in all her splendour. The long deep shadows of the breathless forest chequered the silvery whiteness of open sward and intervening glade. Ghostly arose on the knoll before him the grey columns of the mystic Druid,—dark and indistinct the bloody altar of the Warrior god. But there his eye was arrested; for whatever is least distinct and defined in a landscape has the charm that is the strongest; and, while he gazed, he thought that a pale phosphoric light broke from the mound with the bautastein, that rose by the Teuton altar. He thought, for he was not sure that it was not some cheat of the fancy. Gazing still, in the centre of that light there appeared to gleam forth, for one moment, a form of superhuman height. It was the form of a man, that seemed clad in arms like those on the wall, leaning on a spear, whose point was lost behind the shafts of the crommell. And the face grew in that moment distinct from the light which shimmered around it, a face large as some early god's, but stamped with unutterable and solemn woe. He drew back a step, passed his hand over his eyes, and looked again. Light and figure alike had vanished; nought was seen save the grey columns and dim fane. The Earl's lip curved in derision of his weakness. He closed the lattice, undressed, knelt for a moment or so by the bedside, and his prayer was brief and simple, nor accompanied with the crossings and signs customary in his age. He rose, extinguished the lamp, and threw himself on the bed.

The moon, thus relieved of the lamp-light, came clear and bright through the room, shone on the trophied arms, and fell upon Harold's face, casting its brightness on the pillow on which the Vala had breathed her charm. And Harold slept—slept long—his face calm, his breathing regular: but ere the moon sunk and the dawn rose the features were dark and troubled, the breath came by gasps, the brow was knit, and the teeth clenched.

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