

The Rival Heirs; being the Third and Last Chronicle of Aescendune eBook

The Rival Heirs; being the Third and Last Chronicle of Aescendune

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

The Rival Heirs; being the Third and Last Chronicle of Aescendune eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	8
Page 1.....	10
Page 2.....	12
Page 3.....	13
Page 4.....	15
Page 5.....	17
Page 6.....	19
Page 7.....	21
Page 8.....	23
Page 9.....	25
Page 10.....	27
Page 11.....	29
Page 12.....	31
Page 13.....	33
Page 14.....	35
Page 15.....	37
Page 16.....	39
Page 17.....	41
Page 18.....	43
Page 19.....	45
Page 20.....	47
Page 21.....	49
Page 22.....	51

Page 23.....	53
Page 24.....	55
Page 25.....	57
Page 26.....	59
Page 27.....	61
Page 28.....	63
Page 29.....	65
Page 30.....	67
Page 31.....	69
Page 32.....	71
Page 33.....	73
Page 34.....	75
Page 35.....	77
Page 36.....	79
Page 37.....	81
Page 38.....	83
Page 39.....	85
Page 40.....	87
Page 41.....	89
Page 42.....	91
Page 43.....	93
Page 44.....	95
Page 45.....	97
Page 46.....	99
Page 47.....	101
Page 48.....	103

Page 49.....	105
Page 50.....	107
Page 51.....	109
Page 52.....	111
Page 53.....	113
Page 54.....	115
Page 55.....	117
Page 56.....	119
Page 57.....	121
Page 58.....	123
Page 59.....	125
Page 60.....	127
Page 61.....	129
Page 62.....	131
Page 63.....	133
Page 64.....	135
Page 65.....	137
Page 66.....	139
Page 67.....	141
Page 68.....	143
Page 69.....	145
Page 70.....	147
Page 71.....	149
Page 72.....	151
Page 73.....	153
Page 74.....	155

Page 75.....	157
Page 76.....	159
Page 77.....	161
Page 78.....	163
Page 79.....	165
Page 80.....	167
Page 81.....	169
Page 82.....	171
Page 83.....	173
Page 84.....	175
Page 85.....	177
Page 86.....	179
Page 87.....	181
Page 88.....	183
Page 89.....	185
Page 90.....	187
Page 91.....	189
Page 92.....	191
Page 93.....	193
Page 94.....	195
Page 95.....	197
Page 96.....	199
Page 97.....	201
Page 98.....	203
Page 99.....	205
Page 100.....	207

Page 101.....	209
Page 102.....	211
Page 103.....	213
Page 104.....	215
Page 105.....	217
Page 106.....	219
Page 107.....	221
Page 108.....	223
Page 109.....	225
Page 110.....	227
Page 111.....	229
Page 112.....	231
Page 113.....	233
Page 114.....	235
Page 115.....	237
Page 116.....	239
Page 117.....	241
Page 118.....	243
Page 119.....	245
Page 120.....	247
Page 121.....	249
Page 122.....	251
Page 123.....	253
Page 124.....	255
Page 125.....	257
Page 126.....	259

Page 127.....	261
Page 128.....	263
Page 129.....	265
Page 130.....	267
Page 131.....	269
Page 132.....	271
Page 133.....	273
Page 134.....	275
Page 135.....	277
Page 136.....	279
Page 137.....	281
Page 138.....	283
Page 139.....	285
Page 140.....	287
Page 141.....	289
Page 142.....	291
Page 143.....	293

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
PREFACE.	1
CHAPTER I. THE ANGLO-SAXON HALL.	4
CHAPTER II. THE BLACK AND DARK NIGHT.	8
CHAPTER III. THE WEDDING OF THE HAWK AND THE DOVE.	12
CHAPTER IV. THE NORMAN PAGES.	16
CHAPTER V. A FRAY IN THE GREENWOOD.	22
CHAPTER VI. A REVELATION.	28
CHAPTER VII. FRUSTRATED.	31
CHAPTER VIII. VAE VICTIS.	37
CHAPTER IX. A HUNT IN THE WOODS.	44
CHAPTER X. EVEN THE TIGER LOVES ITS CUB.	50
CHAPTER XI. ALIVE—OR DEAD?	55
CHAPTER XII. THE ENIGMA SOLVED.	59
CHAPTER XIII. "COALS OF FIRE {xii}."	64
CHAPTER XIV. THE GUIDE.	68
CHAPTER XV. RESTORED TO LIFE.	73
CHAPTER XVI. RETRIBUTION.	76
CHAPTER XVII. THE ENGLISH HEIR TAKES POSSESSION.	80
CHAPTER XVIII. AT THE ABBEY OF ABINGDON.	85
CHAPTER XIX. AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CONQUEROR.	88
CHAPTER XX. THE MESSENGER FROM THE CAMP OF REFUGE.	93
CHAPTER XXI. TWO DOCUMENTS.	99
CHAPTER XXII. THE CHAPTER HOUSE OF ABINGDON.	102



CHAPTER XXIII. "GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY."	106
CHAPTER XXIV. THE CASTLE OF OXFORD.	111
CHAPTER XXV. IN THE FOREST OF LEBANON.	116
CHAPTER XXVI. "QUANTUM MUTATUS AB ILLO HECTORE."	120
CHAPTER XXVII. THE FRIENDS WHO ONCE WERE FOES.	124
CHAPTER XXVIII. AESCENDUNE ONCE MORE.	128

Page 1

PREFACE.

This little volume, now presented to the indulgence of the reader, is the third of a series intended to illustrate the history and manners of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers, whom a great historian very appropriately names "The Old English:" it does not claim the merit of deep research, only of an earnest endeavour to be true to the facts, and in harmony with the tone, of the eventful period of "The Norman Conquest."

The origin of these tales has been mentioned in the prefaces to the earlier volumes, but may be briefly repeated for those who have not seen the former "Chronicles." The writer was for many years the chaplain of a large school, and it was his desire to make the leisure hours of Sunday bright and happy, in the absence of the sports and pastimes of weekdays.

The expedient which best solved the difficulty was the narration of original tales, embodying the most striking incidents in the history of the Church and of the nation, or descriptive of the lives of our Christian forefathers under circumstances of difficulty and trial.

One series of these tales, of which the first was Aemilius, a tale of the Decian and Valerian persecutions, was based on the history of the Early Church; the second series, on early English history, and entitled "The Chronicles of Aescendune."

The first of these Chronicles described the days of St. Dunstan, and illustrated the story of Edwy and Elgiva; the second, the later Danish invasions, and the struggle between the Ironside and Canute; the third is in the hands of the reader.

The leading events in each tale are historical, and the writer has striven most earnestly not to tamper with the facts of history; he has but attempted to place his youthful readers, to the best of his power, in the midst of the exciting scenes of earlier days—to make the young of the Victorian era live in the days when the Danes harried the shires of Old England, or the Anglo-Saxon power and glory collapsed, for the time, under the iron grasp of the Norman Conqueror.

Sad and terrible were those latter days to the English of every degree, and although we cannot doubt that the England of the present day is greatly the better for the admixture of Norman blood, nor forget that the modern English are the descendants of victor and vanquished alike,—yet our sympathy must be with our Anglo-Saxon forefathers, in their crushing humiliation and bondage.

The forcible words of Thierry, in summing up the results of the Conquest, may well be brought before the reader. He tells us that we must not imagine a change of government, or the triumph of one competitor over the other, but the intrusion of a whole people into the bosom of another people, broken up by the invaders, the scattered

community being only admitted into the new social order as personal property—“ad cripti glebae,” to quote the very language of the ancient acts; so that many, even of princely descent, sank into the ranks of peasants and artificers—nay, of thralls and bondsmen—compelled to till the land they once owned.

Page 2

We must imagine, he adds, two nations on the surface of the same country: the Normans, rich and free from taxes; the English (for the term Saxon is an anachronism), poor, dependent, and oppressed with burdens; the one living in vast mansions or embattled castles, the other in thatched cabins or half-ruined huts; the one people idle, happy, doing nought but fight or hunt, the other, men of sorrow and toil—labourers and mechanics; on the one side, luxury and insolence; on the other, misery and envy,—not the envy of the poor at the sight of the riches of others, but of the despoiled in presence of the spoilers.

These countries touched each other in every point, and yet were more distinct than if the sea rolled between them. Each had its language: in the abbeys and castles they only spoke French; in the huts and cabins, the old English.

No words can describe the insolence and disdain of the conquerors, which is feebly pictured in the Etienne de Malville of the present tale. The very name of which the descendants of these Normans grew proud, and which they adorned by their deeds on many a field of battle—the English name—was used as a term of the utmost contempt. “Do you think me an Englishman?” was the inquiry of outraged pride.

Not only Normans, but Frenchmen, Bretons—nay, Continentals of all nations, flocked into England as into an uninhabited country, slew and took possession.

“Ignoble grooms,” says an old chronicler, “did as they pleased with the best and noblest, and left them nought to wish for but death. These licentious knaves were amazed at themselves; they went mad with pride and astonishment, at beholding themselves so powerful—at having servants richer than their own fathers had been {i}.” Whatever they willed they deemed permissible to do; they shed blood at random, tore the bread from the very mouths of the famished people, and took everything—money, goods, lands {ii}. Such was the fate which befell the once happy Anglo-Saxons.

And it was not till after a hundred and forty years of slavery, that the separation of England from Normandy, in the days of the cowardly and cruel King John, and the signing of Magna Carta, gave any real relief to the oppressed; while it was later still, not till after the days of Simon de Montfort, when resistance to new foreigners had welded Norman and English into one, that the severed races became really united, as Englishmen alike. Then the greatest of the Plantagenets, Edward the First, the pupil of the man he slew at Evesham, was proud to call himself an Englishman—the first truly English king since the days of the hapless Harold; and one of whom, in spite of the misrepresentations of Scottish historians and novelists, English boys may be justly proud: his noble legislation was the foundation of that modern English jurisprudence, in which all are alike in the eyes of the law.

Page 3

Not long after came the terrible “hundred years war,” wherein Englishmen, led by the descendants of their Norman and French conquerors, retaliated upon Normandy and France the woes they had themselves endured. Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt avenged Hastings; the siege of Rouen under Henry the Fifth was a strange Nemesis. During that century the state of France was almost as sad as that of England during the earlier period; it was but a field for English youth to learn the arts of warfare at the expense of the wretched inhabitants.

But these events, sad or glorious, as the reader, according to his age, may consider them, were long subsequent to the date of our tale; they may, however, well be before the mind of the youthful student as he sighs over the woes of the Conquest.

Two remarks which the writer has made in the prefaces to the former Chronicles he will venture to repeat, as essential to the subject in each case.

He has not, as is so common with authors who treat of this period, clothed the words of his speakers in an antique phraseology. He feels sure that men and boys spoke a language as free and easy in the times in question as our compatriots do now. We cannot present the Anglo-Saxon or Norman French they really used, and to load the work with words culled from Chaucer would be simply an anachronism; hence he has freely translated the speech of his characters into the modern vernacular.

Secondly, he always calls the Anglo-Saxons as they called themselves, “English;” the idea prevalent some time since, and which even finds its place in the matchless story of *Ivanhoe*, or in that striking novelette by Charles Mackay, “The Camp of Refuge,” that they called themselves or were called “Saxons,” is now utterly exploded among historians. It is true the Welsh, the Picts, and Scots called them by that designation, and do still; {iii} but they had but one name for themselves, as the pages of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle make manifest—“Englishmen.” Nor did their Norman conquerors affect to call them by any other title, although in their mouths the honoured appellation was, as we have said, but a term of reproach {iv}.

The author has chosen his two heroes, Wilfred and Etienne, if heroes they can be called, as types of the English and Norman youth of the period, alike in their merits and in their vices. The effects of adversity on the one, and of success and dominant pride on the other—happily finally subdued in each case beneath the Cross on Calvary—form the chief attempt at “character painting” in the tale.

It is not without a feeling of regret that he sends forth from his hands the last of these “Chronicles,” and bids farewell to the real and imaginary characters who have seemed to form a part of his world, almost as if he could grasp their hands or look into their faces.

They are interwoven, too, with many treasured remembrances of past days, of the listening crowd of boys, now scattered through the world, and lost to the sight of the narrator, but who once by their eager interest encouraged the speaker, and at whose request the earliest of these tales was written. Happy indeed would he be, could he hope the written page would arouse the same interest, which the spoken narrative undoubtedly created, or the tales had never been published.

Page 4

And now the writer must leave his tale to speak for itself, only taking this opportunity of assuring old friends, whose remembrances of a vanished past may be quickened by the story, how dear the memory of those days is to him; and to show this, however feebly, he begs leave to dedicate this tale to those who first heard it, on successive Sunday evenings, in the old schoolroom of All Saints' School, Bloxham.

A. D. C.

CHAPTER I. THE ANGLO-SAXON HALL.

It was the evening of Thursday, the fifth of October, in year of grace one thousand and sixty and six.

The setting sun was slowly sinking towards a dense bank of clouds, but as yet he gladdened the woods and hills around the old hall of Aescendune with his departing light.

The watchman on the tower gazed upon a fair scene outspread before him; at his feet rolled the river, broad and deep, spanned by a rude wooden bridge; behind him rose the hills, crowned with forest; on his right hand lay the lowly habitations of the tenantry, the farmhouses of the churls, the yet humbler dwellings of the thralls or tillers of the soil; the barns and stables were filled with the produce of a goodly harvest; the meadows full of sheep and oxen—a scene of rich pastoral beauty.

On his left hand a road led to the northeast, following at first the upward course of the river, until it left the stream and penetrated into the thick woodland.

Just as the orb of day was descending into the dense bank of cloud afore mentioned, the watchman marked the sheen of spear and lance, gilded by the departing rays, where the road left the forest. Immediately he blew the huge curved horn which he carried at his belt; and at the blast the inhabitants of the castle and village poured forth; loud shouts of joy rent the air—the deeper exclamations of the aged, the glad huzzas of children—and all hastened along the road to greet the coming warriors.

For well they knew that a glorious victory had gladdened the arms of old England; that at Stamford Bridge the proud Danes and Norwegians had sustained a crushing defeat, and been driven to seek refuge in their ships, and that these warriors, now approaching, were their own sons, husbands, or fathers, who had gone forth with Edmund, Thane of Aescendune, to fight under the royal banner of Harold, the hero king.

Who shall describe the meeting, the glad embraces, the half-delirious joy with which those home-bred soldiers were welcomed? No hirelings they, who fought for mere glory, or lust of gold, but husbands, fathers of families—men who had left the ploughshare and pruning hook to fight for hearth and altar.

“Home again”—home, saved from the fire and sword of the Northman, of whom tradition told so many dread stories—stories well known at Aescendune, where a young son of the then thane fifty years ago had died a martyr’s death, pierced through and through by arrows, shot slowly to death because he would not save himself by denying his Lord {v}.

Page 5

At that dismal period the whole district had been devastated with fire and sword, and there were old men amongst the crowd who well remembered the destruction of the former hall and village by the ferocious Danes. And now God had heard their litanies: "From the fury of the Northmen, good Lord deliver us," and had averted the scourge through the stout battle-axes and valiant swords of these warrior peasants and their noble leaders, such as Edmund, son of Alfgar.

Amidst all this joy the Lady Winifred of Aescendune stood upon the steps of the great hall to receive her lord, fair as the lily, a true Englishwoman, a loving wife and tender mother.

And by her, one on each side, stood her two children, Wilfred and Edith. He was an English boy of the primitive type, with his brown hair, his sunburnt yet handsome features, the fruit of country air and woodland exercise; she, the daughter, a timid, retiring girl, her best type the lily, the image of her mother.

And now the noble rider, the thane and father, descended from his war steed, and threw himself into the arms of the faithful partner of his joys and sorrows, who awaited his embrace; there was a moment of almost reverential silence as he pressed her to his manly breast, and then arose a cry which made the welkin ring:

"Long life to Edmund and Winifred of Aescendune!"

The bonfires blazed and illuminated the night; the bells (there were three at S. Wilfred's priory hard by) rang with somewhat dissonant clamour; strains of music, which would seem very rough now, greeted the ears; but none the less hearty was the joy.

"The comet—what do you say of the comet now?" said one.

"That it boded ill to the Northmen," was the reply of his neighbour.

They referred to that baleful visitor, the comet of 1066, which had turned night into day with its lurid and ghastly light, so that the very waves of the sea seemed molten in its beams, while the beasts of the field howled as if they scented the coming banquet of flesh afar off. Well might they stand aghast who gazed upon this awful portent, which had seemed to set the southern heavens on fire.

The banquet was spread in the great hall, and the returned warriors supped with their lord ere they retired to gladden their own families. Little was said till the desire for eating and drinking was appeased. But the minstrels sang many a song of the glories of the English race, particularly of the thanes of Aescendune, and of the best and noblest warrior amongst them—Alfgar, the companion of the Ironside, the father of the present earl, who had been borne to his grave full of years and honour amidst the tears of his people, in the very last year of the Confessor.

But when the boards were removed, the thanks rendered to the God who had given all, the huge fire replenished, the wine and mead handed round, then Edmund the Thane rose amidst the expectant silence of his retainers.

Page 6

"The health of Harold, our noble king, elected to that post by the suffrages of all true Englishmen! Nobler title no king on earth may claim."

It was drunk with acclamation.

"The memory of our brethren who went forth with us from Aescendune, and have left their bones at Stamford Bridge. Weep not for them, they have fallen in no unjust war, but for hearth and altar, for their country and their God; and this I swear, that while I rule at Aescendune, their souls shall never lack a mass at St. Wilfred's altar, nor their widows and orphans food and shelter."

This toast was drunk in solemn silence, and Edmund continued:

"Our toils are not yet over; we have one more battle to fight, and that may serve to free us from further need of fighting for the rest of our lives. William the Norman landed with sixty thousand men in Sussex, as many of you already know, while we were in Northumbria, or I trow he had never landed at all. The day after tomorrow we don our harness again to meet this new foe, but it will be child's play compared with that which is past. Shall we, who have conquered the awful Harold Hardrada, the victor of a hundred fights, fear these puny Frenchmen? They have come in a large fleet; a fishing boat will be too roomy to take them back; their bones will whiten and enrich the fields of Sussex for generations."

"The day after tomorrow!—start again the day after tomorrow, oh, my lord!" said a gentle, pleading voice.

"It must be so, my love; but why doubt that the God who has already given us such an earnest of victory will protect us still, and preserve us to each other?"

All the charm of the banquet was gone to the devoted wife, but young Wilfred pressed to his father's side.

"Thou wilt take me this time, father."

"Why, my boy, thou art barely fifteen, not old enough or strong enough yet to cope with men."

"But these Normans are hardly men."

"I fear me too much for thy tender age."

"Oh, father, let me go."

"Nay, thy mother needs thy care."

“But I must begin some day, and what day better than this? I can fight by thy side.”

“There is really little danger, my wife,” he said, in reply to the pleading looks of the mother; “I would not take him to meet the Danes, but there is less danger in these dainty Frenchmen. The grandson of Alfgar should be encouraged, not restrained, when he seeks to play the man, even as we repress not, but stimulate the first feeble attempts of the young falcon to strike its prey.”

The Lady Winifred said no more at the time, for the duties of a host demanded her lord’s care. The moon was high in the heavens ere the last song was sung, the last tale told, and the guests dismissed with these parting words:

“And now, my merry men all, your own homes claim your presence. One day ye may safely give to rest; the day after tomorrow we march again; for Harold will complete his levies on the 10th, and we must not be behind. Goodnight! Saints and angels guard your well-deserved rest.”

Page 7

The brief period of rest passed rapidly away, and the last night came—the last before departure for the fatal field of Senlac. Oh, how little did the Englishmen who left their homes with such confidence dream of the fatal collapse of their fame and glory which awaited them! They fell into the fatal error of underestimating their foe. Had it been otherwise, a host had assembled which had crushed the foreign invader; whereas there were few thanes in the midlands, and scarce any in the northern shires, who thought it worth while to follow Harold to Sussex.

So there were many who cried, “We have defended the northern shores and beaten the Danes; let the men of Sussex take their turn with these puny Frenchmen; we will turn out fast enough if they be beaten.”

Alas! it was too late to “turn out” when the only Englishman whose genius equalled that of William lay dead on the fatal field, and there was no king in Israel.

Amidst the general confidence begotten of the victory at Stamford Bridge there were some upon whom the dread shadow of the future had fallen, and who realised the crisis; foremost amongst these was the patriot king himself. He knew the foe, and was perhaps the only man in the country who did; he knew that civilisation had only sharpened the genius of the descendants of Rollo, without abating one jot of their prowess; that they were more terrible now than when they ravaged Normandy, two centuries earlier.

Yet he flinched not from the struggle.

And amidst all the confidence of her dependants, some such shadow seemed to have fallen on the Lady Winifred. An unaccountable presentiment of evil weighed upon her spirits. She could not leave her husband one moment while he was yet spared to her; ever and anon she was surprised into tender words of endearment, foreign to the general tenor of her daily life, which partook of the reserve of an unemotional age.

She begged hard that Wilfred might remain at home, but only prevailed so far as to obtain a promise that he should not actually enter the battle, and with this she was forced to rest content, to the great delight of the boy.

That last night—how brief it seemed! How frequent the repetition of the same loving words! How fervent the aspiration for the day of their happy reunion, the danger over!—how chilling the unexpressed, unspoken doubt, whether it would ever take place! Yet it seemed folly to doubt, after Stamford Bridge.

The supper, ordinarily, in those times, the social meal of the day, was comparatively a silent one. The very tones of the harp seemed modulated in a minor key, contrasting strongly with the jubilant notes of the previous night; and at an early hour, the husband

and wife retired to their bower, to sit long in the narrow embrasure of the window, looking out on the familiar moonlit scene, her head on his breast, ere they retired to rest.

“Dear heart, thou seemest dull tonight, and yet thou wert not so when we parted for the last fight. Thou didst thy best then to cheer thy lord.”

Page 8

"I know not why it is, but a chill foreboding seems to distress my spirits now, my Edmund; it must be mere weakness, but I feel as if I should never sit by thy dear side again."

"We are in God's hands, my dear one, and must trust all to Him. I go forth at the call of duty, and thou couldst not bid me to stay at home that men may call me 'niddering.'"

"Nay, nay, my lord, forgive thy wife's weakness; but why take Wilfred too?"

"He will be in no danger; he shall tarry with old Guthlac by the stuff. There will be many present like him, and whatever may chance to me or others, there can be no danger to them, for victory must follow our Harold. Hadst thou seen him at the Bridge thou couldst not doubt; he is the Ironside alive again, and as great as a general as a warrior.

"And now, dearest, a faint heart is faithlessness to God; let us commit ourselves in prayer to Him, and sleep together in peace."

The eastern sky was aglow with the coming dawn when they arose. Soon all was bustle in the precincts, the neighing of horses, the clatter of arms; then came the hasty meal, the long lingering farewell; and the husband and father rode away with his faithful retainers; his boy, full of spirits, by his side, waving his plumed cap to mother and sister as they watched the retiring band until lost in the distance.

They retired, the Lady Winifred and her daughter Edith, to the summit of the solitary tower, which arose over the entrance gate of the hall; there, with eyes fast filling with tears, they watched the departing band as it entered into the forest, then gorgeous with all the tints of autumn, the golden tints of the ash and elm, the reddish-brown of the beech—all combining to make a picture, exceeding even the tender hues of spring in beauty.

But all this loveliness was the beauty of decay, the prelude to the fall of the leaf; the forests were but arrayed in their richest garb for the coming death of winter.

Into these forests, prophetic in their hues of decay, glided the brilliant train of Edmund, the last English lord of Aescendune.

Farewell, noble hearts! Happier far ye who go forth to die for your country than they who shall live to witness her captivity.

CHAPTER II. THE BLACK AND DARK NIGHT.

It was the evening of Saturday, the 14th of October, in the year of grace 1066.

All was over; the standard—the royal standard of Harold—had gone down in blood, and England's sun had set for generations on the fatal field of Senlac or Hastings.

The orb of day had gone down gloomily; had it but gone down one hour earlier, all might yet have been well; it but lingered to behold the foe in possession of the hill where the last gallant Englishmen died with Harold, not one who fought around the standard surviving their king.

The wind had arisen, and was howling in fitful gusts across the ensanguined plain of the dead; dark night gathered over the gloomy slopes, conquered at such lavish waste of human life—dark, but not silent; for in every direction arose the moans of the wounded and dying.

Page 9

On the fatal hill, where the harvest of death had been thickest, the Conqueror had caused his ducal pavilion to be reared, just where Harold's standard had stood, and where the ruined altar of Battle Abbey stands now. They had cleared away the bodies to make room for the tent, but the ground was sodden with the blood of both Englishman and Norman.

The sounds of revelry issued from beneath those gorgeous hangings, and mocked the plaintive cries of the sufferers around.

"O Earth, Earth, such are thy rulers!" exclaimed a solemn voice. "To gratify one man's ambition, this scene disfigures thy surface, and mocks the image of God in man."

So spake a good monk, Norman although he was, who had followed Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, into England as his chaplain, selected because he could speak the English tongue—that warrior prelate, who in conjunction with Odo of Bayeux blessed the Conqueror's banners, and ministered in things sacred to the "pious" invaders.

He wandered, this good brother, from one dying sinner to another, absolving the penitent, and ministering to the parched lips of many a sufferer. His own long brown garment was stiff at the extremities with gore, but he heeded it not.

And at last, when he came to a heap of slain just where the Normans had first hewn their way through the English entrenchments, after the sham retreat had drawn away so many of their defenders, he was attracted by the sound of convulsive weeping.

There, kneeling beside the body of an English warrior, he saw a boy of some fourteen years, sobbing as if his young heart would break, while he addressed the slain one with many a plaintive cry.

"Father, wake; speak but once more to me; thou canst not be dead. Oh my father, only once more speak to thy son."

"Alas! my poor boy, he will speak no more until the earth gives up her dead, and refuses to cover her slain; but we will comfort his soul with masses and prayers. How didst thou come hither, my poor child?"

"I followed him to the battle, and he bade me tarry by the stuff; but when all was lost Guthlac ran away, and I came hither to die with him if need should be. Oh my father, would God I had died for thee."

"Father, good father, what clamour is this?" said a deep voice, "some English lad mourning a sire?"

"Even so, my Lord of Blois. The poor child mourns his father."

“There be many mourners now. William Malet, with a lady whom Harold loved, and two good monks of Waltham, have just found the body of the perjured usurper. The face was so mangled, that no man might know him, but she recognised him by a mark on his body. So they have carried it away by the duke’s command to bury it by the shore which he strove so vainly to guard.”

“Oh may I but bear his body home to my poor mother,” moaned the lad.

“We will ask the Conqueror to grant thy petition, poor mourner,” said the sympathising monk.

Page 10

“William will not refuse his prayer, father, if thy superior, the Bishop of Coutances, urges it; he is all-powerful just now,” said Eustace of Blois. “The poor boy shall plead himself. Come, my lad, to the pavilion; there shalt thou ask for and obtain the poor boon thou cravest.”

The unhappy Wilfred—for our readers have of course recognised the young heir of Aescendune—repressed his sobs, strove to wipe away his tears, as if he felt them unmanly, and followed his conductors, the knight and the monk, towards the ducal tent.

There William, attended by all his chief officers—by Odo of Bayeux and Geoffrey of Coutances, by Hugh de Bigod and Robert de Mortain, and some few others of his mightiest nobles, was taking the evening meal, served by a few young pages, themselves the sons of nobles or knights, who learnt the duties of chivalry by beginning at the lowest grade, if to wait on the Conqueror could be so considered.

Speaking to the sentinel, the good chaplain was allowed to enter, and whisper low in the ear of the bishop.

“I can refuse thee nought after thy good service,” said the courtly prelate. “Thou say’st the poor boy has a boon to crave—the body of his sire, and begs through me—I will out, and speak to him.”

“Thy name, my son?” said Geoffrey to Wilfred.

“Wilfred, son of the Thane of Aescendune, in Mercia.”

“Hast thou been in the battle?”

“Only since all was over, or I had died by his side.”

“The saints have preserved thee for better things than to die in a cause accursed by the Church. Nay, my son, I blame thee not, thou art too young to know better.”

And truly the boy’s face and manner, winning though suffused with tears, might have softened a harder heart than beat beneath the rochet of the Bishop of Coutances, warrior prelate though he was.

So, without any further delay, he led the boy into the presence of the mighty Conqueror.

“Who is this stripling? an English lad, my lord of Coutances?”

“He has come to beg permission to carry away the body of his sire. Bend thy knee, my lad, and salute thy future king.”

“Nay, thy present one; coronation will but put the seal on accomplished facts,” said Eustace.

But young though Wilfred was, he had his father’s spirit in him, and spoke in broken sentences.

“My lord,” he said, “I cannot own thee as my king. My father would not have me abjure all he taught me before his body is yet cold. I but ask thee as a kind enemy, who wars not with the dead, to give me leave to remove him from this fatal spot—to take him home. Thou wilt not deny an English lad this poor boon, mighty duke as thou art.”

William understood English well, and was touched by the boyish spirit of the address, by the absence of fear.

“Thou dost not fear me then?” he said.

“He who lies dead on yon field for his country’s sake taught me to despise fear.”

Page 11

"Thou art verily a bold youth, and were there many like thee, England might yet be hard to win. A noble father must have begotten so brave a son."

Then turning to his guests:

"But I hope yet," he added, "to win the hearts of such as he. They loved Canute, although he conquered them. Am I less a foreigner than he? and may not I win their love as he did?"

"Begin then thy reign with an act of clemency, my royal son," said the bishop.

"I do; the lad shall have the protection he needs, and the assistance of our people, so far as our power yet extends."

The tears started once more into Wilfred's eyes.

"I thank thee, my Lord Duke, for my dead father's sake, and for my living mother, and will pray the saints to forgive thee the bloodshed of this day."

It was a curious ending to his speech, especially as the bloodshed was supposed to be on account of the saints, over whose bones the ill-fated Harold had taken his famous oath; but William had respect for courage and outspoken truthfulness, and more than once promoted men to high office in Church or State, who had withstood him in the face.

He only added, "When we meet again, my son, thou mayst judge thy king differently."

Wilfred left the ducal tent; the authority of Count Eustace speedily procured the assistance of some Norman camp followers, and the body was reverently removed from the heap of slain, and placed upon a litter. Wilfred slept in the tent of Eustace, and in the morning commenced his homeward journey, with the funeral cortege.

It is unnecessary to enter further into the details of that most sad journey. Suffice it to say that he was able to transfer the precious burden from Norman to English hands, and that he arrived home in safety, whither Guthlac had preceded him, with the tidings that all save himself had perished alike.

Therefore the return of Wilfred was like that of one dead and alive again, lost and found; and the poor widow felt she had yet something besides her daughter Edith to live for.

The immediate effects of the conquest were not felt for some few weeks in the central parts of Mercia, and nought interfered with the solemn function customary at funerals in those ages.

The second morning after the return of Wilfred was fixed for the burial of the deceased thane, in the priory church which his father had built in the place of an earlier structure burnt by the Danes in 1006.

It was a noble pile for those early days, built chiefly of stone, which was fast superseding wood as a material for churches, dedicated to St. Wilfred. The lofty roof, the long choir beyond the transept, gave magnificence to the fabric, which was surrounded without by the cloisters of the priory, of which it was the central feature.

In the south transept—for it was a cruciform church—was a chapel dedicated especially to St. Cuthbert, where the ashes of the deceased thane's forefathers reposed in peace beneath the pavement. There lay Ella of Aescendune, murdered by a Dane named Ragnar; his two sons, Elfric, who died young, and Alfred, who succeeded to the inheritance. There, as in a shrine, the martyr Bertric reposed, who, like St. Edmund, had died by the arrows of the heathen Danes, there the once warlike Alfgar, the father of our thane, rested in peace, his lady Ethelgiva by his side {vi}.

Page 12

The body lay in the great hall, where he had so recently feasted his retainers after the return from Stamford Bridge. Six large tapers burned around it, and watchers were there both by day and night.

There his people crowded to gaze upon the sternly composed features for the last time; there knelt in prayer his disconsolate widow, her son and daughter: they scarcely ever left the hallowed remains until the hour came when, amidst the lamentations of the whole population, the body of the gallant Edmund was borne to the tomb in that chapel of St. Cuthbert, where those gallant ancestors whose story we have told in former chronicles awaited him—"earth to earth, and dust to dust."

It was a touching procession. The body was borne by the chief tenants yet living, and surrounded by chanting monks, whose solemn "Domine refugium nostrum" fell with awful yet consoling effect upon the ears of the multitude. The churls and thralls, sadly thinned by the sword, followed behind their lady and her two children, Wilfred and Edith.

They placed the bier before the high altar while the requiem mass was sung, six monks kneeling beside it, three on each side, with lighted tapers. Then the coffin was sprinkled with hallowed water, perfumed with sweet incense, and borne to its last resting place in the chapel of St. Cuthbert, where they laid him by the side of his father, Alfgar the Dane.

"Ego sum resurrectio et vita, dixit Dominus—I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord."

CHAPTER III. THE WEDDING OF THE HAWK AND THE DOVE.

It was a feature peculiar to the Norman Conquest, that while its real injustice and disregard of moral right could hardly be surpassed in the annals of warfare, the conquerors strove to give to every act of violence and wrong the technical sanction of law and the appearance of equity.

This was easily done: first, by assuming that William was the lawful successor of Edward the Confessor, and that all who had opposed him were therefore in the position of conquered rebels; and secondly, since the Pope had excommunicated Harold, and sanctioned the invasion, by treating all his aiders and abettors as heretics or schismatics.

Generally these harsh doctrines were pushed to their legitimate consequences in cruel wrong inflicted upon an innocent people, and the Anglo-Saxon thanes and nobles who survived the first years of conquest were reduced to serfdom or beggary; but there were exceptions. William doubtless intended at first to govern justly, and strove to unite the two nations—English and Norman; therefore, when the occasion offered, he bade his

knights and barons who aspired to an English estate marry the widows or daughters of the dispossessed thanes, and so reconcile the conflicting interests. Hence the blood of the old Anglo-Saxon lords flows in many a family proud of its unblemished descent from the horde of pirates and robbers, whom a century and a half in France had turned into the polished Normans.

Page 13

Alas! the varnish was often only skin deep.

“Scratch the Norman, you will find the Dane,” said the old proverb—none the less ruthless and cruel because of the gloss of a superficial civilisation.

Within a few weeks after the fatal day of Senlac, all resistance on the part of the disunited English, left without a recognised leader, became hopeless; and William was crowned on Christmas Day at Westminster Abbey, which on the previous feast of the Epiphany, in the same year, as we reckon time, had witnessed the coronation of his hapless rival. There he swore to be a just ruler to English and Normans alike, and, doubtless, at the time he was sincere; but history records how he kept his oath, and the course of our story will illustrate it.

The lands of all who fought on Harold's side at Hastings were announced to be forfeited; hence the widow and son of Edmund were liable to be ejected from their home and possessions at Aescendune.

But the conduct of Wilfred on the night after the battle had won him friends, and they pleaded for the youngster whose gallant bearing had made an impression on the mighty Conqueror himself, who felt a passing interest in the brave boy.

Still he would only interpose to stay the execution of the unjust law, and to keep off the greedy Norman nobles, who were already prowling around the fair manor, on one condition: the lady of Aescendune must marry a Norman knight, recommended by himself; in which case, the right of succession after the death of his stepfather should rest with Wilfred, who by that time would doubtless have become Norman in all but lineage—so thought the Duke.

At first poor Lady Winifred utterly refused to consent; but when the prior of St. Wilfred reminded her that, in that case, she would lose all power of protecting her tenantry—the widows and orphans of those who had died around her husband, and that by refusal of the terms she threw away Wilfred's inheritance, and consigned herself and children to beggary—then she wavered, and after many a painful scene gave way, and consented to become the bride of Hugo de Malville, the earliest applicant for her hand and estate, when the year of mourning for her lost Edmund should have elapsed.

“I may give my hand,” she said, “but can never give my heart.”

The good Bishop of Coutances saw that the preliminaries were fairly arranged, for Hugo de Malville came from his diocese, where, if the truth be told, he had not borne an exemplary character, and the bishop would fain have found a better father for the young Wilfred; only the Conqueror was peremptory, and would brook no interference with his arrangements.

Therefore, all the good prelate could do was to see that the marriage contract was fairly drawn up by clerkly hands—that Wilfred stood next in succession. There was need of this, for Hugo had a son of the same age, a hopeful youth, named Etienne, the only being on earth whom he was known to love.

Page 14

This lad was named next in order of succession to Wilfred, failing issue from the new marriage.

The morning sun was shining brightly one October day, in the year of grace 1067, on the old moated manor of Aescendune, on its clear river and its deep woods, now bright with all the gorgeous tints of autumn.

All the good people of that well-known neighbourhood—well-known we mean to the readers of the former Chronicles—were gathered together in crowds on the green between the castle and the venerable priory of St. Wilfred, founded, as related in the first of these veritable family legends, by Offa of Aescendune.

Many a group of friends and kinsfolk had formed itself, some in eager but not loud discussion, in which the guttural tones of that English, so unlike our own, yet its direct progenitor in language, contrasted sharply with an occasional shout in Norman French from some marshal of the ceremonies, bent on clearing the course for the passage of the coming procession.

A deep gloom sat on many a brow—on nearly every aged one; for many of the youngsters were merry enough.

From the main archway of the old hall issued the bridal procession—whence the funeral of Edmund had but emerged one year before: she, surrounded by such friends and neighbours as yet lived and were permitted to hold their lands up to this time in peace, while he came from a neighbouring castle, newly erected, where he had spent the night with great pomp and state, preceded by heralds with their trumpets, and surrounded by all the knightly robbers who had been already successful in grasping manors and estates round Aescendune.

The Bishop of Coutances, vested in white stole, received them at the door of the priory church, attended by the English prior.

“Hugo,” said he, “wilt thou receive Winifred, here present, as thy wedded wife, according to the rites of our Holy Mother the Church?”

“I will,” he replied, in firm tones.

“Winifred, wilt thou receive Hugo, here present, as thy wedded husband, according to the rites of our Holy Mother the Church?”

She faltered, trembled, then said: “I will,” but all present must have marked her hesitation.

The bishop continued:

“I join you in matrimony in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

Then he sprinkled them both with hallowed water, and afterwards blessed the ring, praying that she who should wear it might ever be faithful to her spouse, and that they might live in the peace of God and in mutual charity.

Hugo placed the ring on her cold, shuddering finger, she trembling like an aspen leaf; after which the bishop led the way to the high altar, where the customary mass “pro sponso et sponsa” was said.

Page 15

Forth they now issued, the heralds first with their trumpets; then the men-at-arms with all the pomp of Norman array; then the principal tenants of the estate, looking more like prisoners than guests; then another troop of Norman men-at-arms; then each on his own horse, his squire by his side; the neighbouring barons, who had already built their castles and strengthened themselves in the land; then, preceded and attended by pages in sumptuous tunics of linen, fringed and girded with cloth of gold, the happy pair, he on his war steed, she on her white palfrey—he dark as the raven, she fair as the lily.

Wilfred and Etienne were walking side by side in the procession, and it was impossible to help being struck by the contrast in their appearance—the one supple and lithe in every limb, with dark, restless eyes, and quick, nervous temperament; the other, the English boy, with his brown hair, his sunburnt, yet handsome features—the fruit of country air and exercise—far stouter and sturdier than his foreign rival.

They were expected, of course, to be very friendly; but any keen observer would have noted a certain air of distrust which showed itself from time to time in their glances, in spite of the awkward advances they made to each other.

How could it be otherwise? Could they forget the deadly feud between their races? Could they forget that each was a claimant of the lands of Aescendune—the one by birth, the other by the right of conquest?

And now the bridal train reached the gates of the Hall amidst the plaudits of the Normans and the deep silence of the Englishmen—many of whom would sooner far have seen the fair Winifred in her grave than the wife of Hugo de Malville.

“What thinkest thou, Sexwulf, of this most outlandish wedding?”

“What can I think, Ulf, but that the good widow has lost her senses through grief at the death of her lord, the noble Edmund, else would the dove never mate the black crow.”

“Yea, she was pale as death as she entered the church.”

“Well she may be; she liketh not the match, only she would save the estates for her boy’s sake.”

“Will she be able to save them?”

“So the Conqueror hath promised. Wilfred, our young lord, is to inherit if he live; and if he die, then that dark young French lad—a true cub of the old wolf.”

“If he live. Well, I would not wager much upon his chance of a long life in that case.”

“Nor I; but we must not say so, if we value our ears, or our necks even.”

Long and loud was the revelry in the castle of Aescendune that night; as it is written in the old ballad of Imogene:

“The tables groaned with the weight of the feast, And many and noble were the guests.”

But no spectral form sat beside the bride, although there were not wanting those who half imagined the dead Edmund might appear—roused even from the grave, to see the seat he had occupied so many years in honour and worth, filled by this dark-browed Norman stranger.

Page 16

“Let us drink,” said the courtly bishop, “to the health and happiness of Norman lord and English lady, and may their union be a type of the union betwixt the two people, who, forgetting that they met as worthy foes at Senlac, may live as brethren under the noblest king in Christendom.”

The toast was drunk with acclamations; even the English guests thought they meant it in the delirium of the jovial scene, and fancied for a moment that Englishman and Norman might yet live in peace.

“Is it not sweet?” said the good prior to one of the English guests. “It reminds me of the happy time when it is said the wolf shall lie down with the lamb.”

“Methinks the lamb is likely in this case to lie down inside the wolf, especially if he be a Norman wolf.”

But the speaker, whose attendance was compulsory, or he had not been there, had few sympathisers at the moment.

“Let us hope for the best. Sir Hugo will not, cannot forget the solemn covenant he has made today, to love and to cherish, till death part him and his bride.”

“I hardly think, good father, that day is far off, judging by her looks.”

The wax tapers cast a sweet, soft light over the pale, sad features of Winifred of Aescendune, daughter of Herstan {vii} of Clifftown, on the Thames, who had but lately, full of years, gone to his rest, spared the sad days of the Conquest—days utterly unanticipated by those who died while Edward the Confessor yet reigned in peace, ere Harold visited the Norman court and swore over the holy bones.

She was but fulfilling a sad duty—at least she thought so—as she played her ill-omened part, sacrificing herself for her boy and her only daughter Edith. For what was the alternative? Was it not to go forth as fugitives and vagabonds on the face of the earth—a prey to every foreign noble—leaving her own dear people of Aescendune to the wolf, without intercessor or protector.

And thus it came to pass that Winifred of Aescendune married Hugo de Malville.

CHAPTER IV. THE NORMAN PAGES.

In the days of chivalry the first step towards the degree of knighthood was that of page. Boys of noble birth, about their twelfth year, were generally transferred from the home of their childhood to the castle of some gallant baron to learn the customs of war and peace at his hand, and to acquire habits of good order and discipline. These lads fared harder by far than modern boys do at our great schools; they slept on harder couches,



rose earlier, and had less dainty food. They were forced to pay implicit obedience to their superiors; modesty in demeanour, as becoming their age, was strictly required before their elders; and they had to perform many offices which would now be deemed menial.

Page 17

First they learned how to manage their horses with ease and dexterity; next how to use the sword, the bow, and the lance. They had to attend upon their lords in hunting—the rules of which, like those of mimic war, had to be carefully studied. The various blasts of the horn, indicating when the hounds were slipped, when the prey was flying, and when it stood at bay, had to be acquired, as also the various tracks of the wild animals—the fox, the wolf, the bear, the wild boar. Nights and days were frequently spent in the pathless woods, and the face of the country had to be carefully studied, while pluck and address were acquired by the necessity of promptitude when the wild beast stood at bay.

And when the deer or hart was slain they had to “brittle,” or break him up, with all precision, and during the banquet they had frequently to carve the haunch or chine, and to do it with some gracefulness.

All these arts were being acquired at the castle of Aescendune by Etienne de Malville, Louis de Marmontier, Pierre de Morlaix, and Wilfred of Aescendune, all of the age of fifteen or sixteen, but more advanced physically than boys of such years would be now; and, sooth to say, the boys had a stern preceptor in Hugo de Malville.

They slept in a common dormitory in one of the towers, on beds resembling boxes, stuffed with straw, with the skins of the wolf or bear for coverlets. They sprang out when the morning horn blew the reveille. First they attended the early mass in St. Wilfred’s monastic church, said at daybreak—for the Normans were very exact in such duties—after which they fenced, rode, or wrestled, and in mimic war gained an appetite for breakfast.

They ate dried meats, as a rule, with their cakes of bread, and washed them down with thin wine or mead, much diluted, and then the forest was generally the rendezvous.

On winter evenings, or when the weather was very bad, the chaplain was expected to teach them a little reading or writing in Latin or Norman French—never in English; and this was almost all the learning they acquired, in the modern sense of the word.

But they knew a hundred things modern boys know nothing at all about, and every muscle and nerve was braced to be steady and true, whether for fight or sport. Our young pages could find their way in the deep woods by observing the moss on the trees, or the sides on which the oaks or elms threw their branches the most freely; and when benighted they could sleep with patience on a couch of withered leaves, and not suffer with a cold in the head the next day. They feared neither wolf nor bear, nor, for that matter, anything save disgrace.

The imputation of cowardice, or of any mean vice, such as lying, was only to be avenged by bloodshed. No gentleman could bear it and retain his claim to the name. But there were higher duties inculcated wheresoever the obligations of chivalry were

fully carried out: the duty of succouring the distressed, or redressing wrong—of devotion to God and His Church, and hatred of the devil and his works.

Page 18

Alas! how often one aspect of chivalry alone, and that the worst, was found to exist; the ideal was too high for fallen nature. Our youthful readers will be able to judge which aspect was uppermost at Aescendune under its first Norman lords.

Nought was changed in the outward aspect of the scene, save that a stern Norman castle, with its dungeons and towers, was rising in the place of the old hall, doomed to destruction because it was ill adapted for defensive warfare.

Such defect had hardly been appreciated in the days of the old English thane, for England had enjoyed half a century of comparative peace, and her people had begun to build like those who sat at peace beneath their own “vine and fig tree,” ere the Normans brought the stern realities of war into the unhappy land, or rather of serfdom, oppression, and slavery, only varied by convulsive struggles for liberty—always, alas! destined to be made in vain.

The four pages were one day wandering in the outskirts of the forest, clothed in light hunting dresses—tunics, confined by broad belts and edged with fur; while leggings protected the feet and ankles from thorns. They each had hunting spears and bows, which were borne by young thralls, with sheaves of arrows strung to their backs, while they held dogs by leashes of leather.

He who bore the air of the leader of the party was tall and dark, of slender build, but with all those characteristics which denoted the conquering race; the fearless eye, the haughty air of those born to command. A second, our readers would have recognised as a typical English boy; his nut-brown hair and blue eyes contrasted strongly with the features of his companions, so marked then were those differences which have long since vanished—vanished, or at least have become so shared amongst the English people, that none can say which is of Anglo-Saxon, which of Norman blood, by the cast of the face.

And this English lad, whose dress in no wise distinguished him from his companions, was evidently ill at ease amongst them; from time to time he reddened as Etienne, Pierre, or Louis called the unhappy thralls “English swine,” “young porkers,” or the like, and bestowed upon them far more kicks than coins.

“You forget, Etienne, that I am English.”

“Nay, my brother Wilfred, thou wilt not allow me to do that, but of course in thy case ‘noblesse oblige.’”

These last words were uttered with a most evident sneer, and the other lads laughed aloud; whereupon the English lad reddened, then his fists clenched, and a looker-on would have expected an immediate outbreak, when suddenly a change passed over his features, as if he were making a violent effort at self composure.

“Thou hast dropped an arrow, thou young porker,” cried Etienne, the while he struck a violent blow with his switch across the face and eyes of one of his attendants; “dost thou think there are so few of thy fellow swine to shoot, that arrows are useless in these woods! Ah! look at that sight there, and take timely warning.”

Page 19

The sight in question was a gallows, from which rotted, pendant, the corpse of an unhappy Englishman, hanged for killing a deer.

"If every oak in Aescendune woods bore such acorns, civilised folk might soon be happy."

Wilfred uttered a deep malediction, which he could not suppress, and, leaving the party, disappeared from sight in the woods.

One of the Norman lads looked after him with some little appearance of sympathy, and when he had gone, said:

"Is it like gentlemen to torment each other thus?"

"Not each other, certainly!"

"He is your brother in a way, the son of your stepmother, the lady of Aescendune."

"He is in a way, but some brothers would be better out of the way than in it, besides—why does he not show fight? A Norman would with half the provocation."

"You could not fight with him," said Louis de Marmontier, who was the youngest of the pages who were learning "chivalry" at the castle of Aescendune, in company with Etienne and Wilfred, under the fostering care of the baron.

"I don't know," said the fierce young Norman, and, breaking off the conversation, switched savagely at the head of a thistle close at hand, which he neatly beheaded.

The others quite understood the action and the bitterness with which he spoke, for they knew that he considered himself defrauded of the lands of Aescendune by the arrangements Bishop Geoffrey had effected in favour of Wilfred.

Meanwhile, plunging into a thicket, and crossing a brook, Wilfred arrived by a shorter route first at the hall, and made his way to his mother's bower, situated in a portion of the ancient building not yet destroyed, although doomed to make way for Norman improvements.

The lady of Aescendune sat lonely in her bower; her features were pale, and she seemed all too sad for one so highly born, and so good a friend to the suffering and the poor; her gaze was like that of one whose thoughts are far away—perhaps they had strayed into Paradise in search of him whose loss was daily making earth more like a desert to her.

Wilfred came and stood beside her, and her hand played with his flowing hair until she felt that he was sobbing by her side.

“What is the matter, my dear boy?”

“Matter! I cannot bear it any longer. I must break the promise thou hast forced me to give.”

“Break thy promise, Wilfred? What would thy sainted father say, did he hear thee? And how dost thou know that he does not hear?”

“If he were here he would exact no such promise, I am sure; he would not at least make me appear as a coward in outlandish eyes, and cringe before these proud Frenchmen.”

Wilfred used the word Frenchmen with the greatest scorn. He knew that the Normans scorned the name as much as they did the name Englishmen, of which their descendants lived to be so proud.

What was this promise which bound the poor lad as in a chain of iron?

Page 20

Not on any account to let himself be drawn into a quarrel with Etienne.

“Thy father would feel as I do, dear son, were he in our place. Dost thou not see that we poor English only hold our own by sufferance, and that any pretext upon which they could seize would be used ruthlessly against us? Yes, thy death might be the result of any ill-timed quarrel, and thou mightest leave thy mother alone. Nay, dear, dear son, at least while thy mother lives.”

“Oh, how can I?”

“Bear as a Christian, then, if thou canst not as an Englishman. The time will not be long that I shall live to implore thee.”

“Nay, dear mother, surely thou art not ailing.”

“Sick unto death, Wilfred, I fear; nay, but for thee I should say, I hope; for shall I not then rejoin thy dear father in a land where war and violence are unknown? But for thy sake, dear son, I would fain live.”

Poor Wilfred was sobbing by her side, overcome by the blank vision thus opening before him. What would the world be to him, left alone amidst fierce and hateful foreigners, who had slain his father, and would willingly slay him?

“Mother, I cannot live without you. If you die—” and he could say no more, for it shamed his manhood to weep, as he would have said, “like a girl.”

Poor lad, we must excuse him.

“Now, my dear Wilfred, wilt thou not renew thy promise, and pray God for help to keep it?”

“Yes, by God’s help, at least while you live; but dost thou think thou art so ill, dear mother?—it is but fancy.”

“Nay, I feel I am daily, hourly, drawing nearer my end, as if the lamp of life were burning more and more dimly. Morning after morning I rise weaker from my bed, and mortal strength seems slowly and surely forsaking me. But it will be but a short parting; thou must pray that we may live for ever together. God will grant it for His dear Son’s sake.”

And the mother and son knelt down to pray.

It was too true, the English lady of Aescendune was slowly declining—passing away, drawing nearer daily to the bright land where her lost Edmund had gone before.

It was a complaint which no one understood, although a Jewish physician, whom her husband in his anxiety consulted, prescribed a medicine which he said would ensure her recovery in a few weeks. This medicine the baron—for to such rank had Hugo de Malville been raised, on his accession to the lands of Aescendune—this medicine he would always administer with his own hand. Sometimes Wilfred was standing by, and noticed that, dropped in water, it diffused at first a sapphire hue, but that upon exposure to the air, that of the ruby succeeded.

Oh, those days of anxiety and grief—those days when the loved patient was so manifestly losing her hold upon life, although sometimes there would come a tantalising change for the better, and bring back hopes never to be realised.

Page 21

The boyish reader will easily imagine what Wilfred had to bear all this time from his Norman companions, from whose society there was no escape—with whom he had to share not only the very few hours allotted to study, but those of recreation also. Study, indeed, meant chiefly the use and practice of warlike weapons, the learning of the technical terms of chivalry, and the acquirement, it may be, of sufficient letters to spell through a challenge.

So thoroughly was war the Norman instinct, that every occupation of life was more or less connected with it; and the only recreation which varied the hours of fencing, jousting, tilting, *etc.*, was the kindred excitement of the chase, pursued with the greatest avidity amongst the wooded hills around Aescendune.

Wilfred was not backward either in mimic war or in love of the chase; but he was growing taciturn and sullen, scarcely ever speaking, save when spoken to, and even in the latter case he generally replied with brief and curt words.

Hence it may be easily guessed that he was not popular.

For this he cared little; all his leisure was spent by the bedside of his dying mother, whom he felt he was so soon about to lose, and when with her and his sister Edith he felt that home—the home of his happy childhood—was not yet a mere remembrance of the vanished past.

But the sad day, so long foreseen, at length arrived.

She was in her chamber, with her son and daughter—the three were together for the last time on earth. They had been talking of the happy days when the husband and father was yet alive, before the fatal day of Senlac. Alone with her children, she felt far more at peace than usual; it seemed, she said, like the dear old times.

But this evening the presentiment of the coming end seemed strong upon her, and she spoke to her darling boy of the duties which would devolve upon him when she was gone, bidding him be obedient and loyal to his Norman stepfather, that he might have the more power to protect the poor oppressed people of Aescendune, and to shield his dear sister from harm in a world of wrong and violence. She bade him look forward to a better world, where parents and children, separated by death, would meet together never to part, and to live as a Christian man should, that he might not lose so dear a hope. The sun was slowly sinking in the west, amidst gorgeous clouds, and she gazed into the glowing depths, as if she saw the gate of Paradise therein.

It was but a few moments, while they yet lingered in conversation, that her children observed a deadly paleness, a strange gray hue, come over her face; suddenly she extended her arms, and fell back upon her couch.

Wilfred ran for help. Even the Norman servants loved their mistress, and hurried to her chamber; baron, priest, all were there; she lay as if insensible, but when Father Elphege, the prior, arrived, and began the litany for the dying, she raised her head and strove to follow.

Page 22

That morning she had received the Holy Communion at his hands; and of the familiar rites prescribed by the Church of those days for the comfort of the dying, only the last anointing, after the example of Him, whose body was anointed for His burial, remained, and with humble faith she received the holy rite.

This done, she made signs for her children to approach; she threw her arms fondly around them in turn, but could not speak.

The priest bade them all kneel down, and he recommenced the litany for the dying. Soon he came to the solemn words:

“Per Crucem et Passionem Tuam,
Libera eam Domine {viii}.”

She strove to make the holy sign of our redemption, and in making it, yielded her chaste soul to the hands of her merciful Father and loving Redeemer. She had gone to rejoin her own true love, and her poor children were orphans in a world of violence and wrong.

They laid her by the side of Edmund, and the same solemn rites we have described before were yet once more repeated. There were many, many true mourners, all the poor English who felt that her intercession alone had interposed between them and a cruel lord—and the very foreigners themselves, whom her meekness and gentle beauty had strangely touched—all mourned the lily of Aescendune.

But her children!—Who shall describe the sense of desolation which fell upon them as they stood by the open grave?

“Comfort them, O Father of the fatherless,” prayed the good prior; “comfort them and defend them with Thy favourable kindness as with a shield.”

CHAPTER V. A FRAY IN THE GREENWOOD.

After the last sad rites were paid to the Lady Winifred, a deep gloom fell upon Wilfred, and his sorrow was so great that it won respect from his Norman companions, at least for a time.

He was indeed alone, for the baron had sent his sister Edith to a convent for her better education, as he said, and as Wilfred had none of his own kith and kin about him, he avoided all company, save when the routine of each day forced him into the society of his fellow pages.

Such was the case one fine morning in early spring, a few months after the loss of his mother.

The four pages were in the tilt yard, where there stood a wooden figure, called a “quintain,” which turned round upon an axis, and held a wooden sword in one hand and a buckler in the other.

It was the duty of each of the athletes to mount his horse, and strike the buckler full in the centre with his lance, while riding by at full speed, under certain penalties, which will soon be perceived.

Etienne rode first, and acquitted himself with remarkable dexterity; after him Wilfred was invited by the maitre d’armes to make the trial, but he was comparatively unaccustomed to the game.

“Let Pierre or Louis try next,” said he.

The two boys, thus called upon, went through the trial fairly, striking the very centre of the shield, as befitted them. And then our Wilfred could not refuse to make the attempt. He rode, but his horse swerved just before meeting the mock warrior; he struck the shield, therefore, on one side, whereupon the figure wheeled round, and, striking him with the wooden sword, hurled him from his horse on to the sward, amidst the laughter of his companions.

Page 23

He rose, not very much hurt in body, but sadly out of temper, and, unable to bear the jeers of his companions, and their sarcastic compliments on his “graceful horsemanship,” he left the yard.

He was trying very hard to learn such feats, and yet could not gain the dexterity for these novel exercises; and, poor boy, he was quite weary of being laughed at, so he went and wandered pensively about in the forest.

He had, indeed, to chew the cud of bitter reflection, for his position was not at all a happy one. Few lads could have more to bear—cutting sarcasm, biting contempt, not openly or coarsely expressed, but always implied plainly enough—constant abuse of his nation, and even of his own immediate ancestors, on whose fair domains these Norman intruders were fattening.

“Oh! it is too hard to bear,” thought the poor lad.

And then he saw the unfortunate thralls of his father, ground down by the tyranny of these Norman lords and their soldiery, forced to draw stone and timber, like beasts of burden, for the purpose of building towers and dungeons for their oppressors, urged on with the lash if they faltered.

Since the death of their good lady, all this had been, of course, much worse.

And then, those forest laws, so vilely cruel. Wilfred saw men blind with one eye, or wanting a hand; and why? Because they had killed a hare or wounded a deer; for it would have been a hanging matter to kill the red hart.

Meanwhile he was growing in mind and body; he had now passed his seventeenth birthday, and was beginning to think himself a man; but where were the vassals whose leader and chieftain he was born to be?—where?

The people of Aescendune were diminishing daily—the English people thereof, we should say, for the places of those who fled their homes, and went no one knew whither, were filled by Normans, French, Bretons, or other like “cattle,” as Wilfred called them in his wrath.

Everywhere he heard the same “jabbering” tongue, that Norman French—French with a Danish accent, and he liked it little enough. Good old English was becoming rare; the strangers compared it to the grunting of swine or the lowing of cattle, in their utter scorn of the aborigines.

Were the descendants of Hengist, Horsa, Ella, Cerdic, Ercenwin, Ida, Uffa, and Cridda to bear this? and more especially was he, Wilfred, the grandson of the heroic Alfgar, whose praises as the companion in arms of the Ironside had been sung by a hundred



minstrels, and told again and again at the winter's fire in the castle hall—was he to bear this contumely? He could not much longer.

And then that scowling, dark, frowning, old Baron—there was a world of deadly mischief in his dark eye, which looked like light twinkling at the bottom of a black well. Once when Etienne was uttering some polished sarcasm at Wilfred's expense, the English lad caught the father's look, and there was something in it which puzzled him for a day or two.

Page 24

Wilfred knew the baron did not like him, and felt that the hatred was all the more deadly for never being expressed. He sometimes thought that his stepfather wished him to quarrel with Etienne, in the full belief that Norman skill must prevail, in case of a combat.

Single combat. Well, the pages were always talking about it. Etienne knew a brave knight who took his stand on a bridge, horse and all complete, and when any one came by of equal rank, this strange bridge warden had two questions to ask; first:

“Wilt thou acknowledge the Lady Adeliza of Coutances to be the most peerless beauty in the world?”

Supposing the newcomer not to be in love, and to be willing to admit the superiority of the fair charmer, then to him the bridge warden further added:

“Wilt thou admit that I am a better knight than thou—better with horse, sword, and lance?”

If the newcomer said “Yes,” he might pass without further toll; if not he must fight, yea, even to the death. And this our Norman pages thought the grandest thing in chivalry.

As yet they had kept from such direct insult as would necessitate an appeal to sword or lance in Wilfred’s case, which, indeed, pages could not resort to without the permission of their feudal superiors; but how long would this last?

The promise the poor lad had given to his beloved and lost mother had made him patient for a time; but his patience had been tried to the uttermost.

He looked on the woods which had once echoed to his father’s horn: for miles and miles they extended in trackless mazes of underwood, swamp, and brake; and report already credited them with being the haunt of outlaws innumerable.

“Where were all the fugitives from Aescendune?” thought our Wilfred; “did the woods conceal them?”

Well, if so, the day might come when he would be glad to join them.

While he was thus musing, the sun rose high in the heavens, and he heard the horns summon the hunters—he heard the loud baying of the hounds, but he heeded not—he loathed society that day, and satisfying his hunger with a crust of bread, obtained at the hut of a thrall, he wandered deeper into the forest.

The day was hot, and he grew tired. He lay down at the foot of a tree, and at length slept.

How long that slumber lasted he knew not, but he dreamt a strange and gruesome dream. He thought his ancestors—the whole line of them—passed before him in succession, all going into the depths of the wood, and that as each spectral form passed it looked at him with sorrow and pointed into the forest.

At length, in his dream, his father came and stood by him, and pointed to the woods likewise.

Meanwhile a lurid light was rising in the woods behind him, and a sense of imminent danger grew on the sleeper when strange outcries arose from the wood.

He was on the border land, twixt sleeping and waking, and the outcries were not all imaginary. There was the voice of one who besought for mercy, and the laughter and scornful tones of those who refused it; and these, at least, were real, for they awoke the sleeper.

Page 25

The cry which aroused young Wilfred from his sleep was uttered in a tone of distress, which at once appealed to his manhood for aid.

And it was a familiar voice—that of his own foster brother, the son of his old nurse, with whom, in the innocent days of childhood, he had sported and romped again and again; for distinctions of rank were far less regarded amongst the old English than amongst the Normans—they were “English all.”

The poor peasant lad had been so unfortunate as to bring down a hare with a heavy stick. The animal had risen just before him; the weapon was ready; the temptation too great. Forgetful of all but the impulse of the moment, he had flung the stick, and the hare fell. He was just rushing to seize his prize, when the three Norman pages came suddenly on the scene.

“Here is a young English lout, killing a hare,” shouted Etienne; “lay hold of him.”

And before the astonished Eadwin could fly, the son of his lord fulfilled his own command, and seized the culprit by the collar.

“How didst thou dare, thou false thief, to kill one of our hares? Dost thou not know the penalty?”

The unhappy lad stammered out faint excuses, in broken English; “he had not meant to do it—the thing rose up so suddenly”—and the like. But in the first place his captors did not understand his language sufficiently to make out the excuses, neither were they in the mood to receive any.

“What is the law?” said Etienne; “does it not say that he who slays a hare shall lose the hand that did the deed; and here is a poacher taken red handed. Louis, where is thy hunting knife?”

“We need not trouble to take him to the castle; off with his hand, and let him go.”

Their hunting knives, with which they were accustomed to “break up” the deer, were in their girdles, and, shame to say, the other two youths at once assented to Etienne’s proposal to execute the law themselves.

So they dragged their intended victim to a stump, and Etienne prepared to execute the cruel operation which he had witnessed too often not to know how to do it.

Poor Eadwin appealed in vain for mercy. They were laughing at his fright, and indeed there was so little sympathy between Norman lord and English thrall, that pity found no place to enter into the relations between them: it was the old Roman and his slave over again.

But an unexpected deliverer was at hand.

Just as the young “noble” was about to execute the threat; when the poor wrist was already extended by force on a rude stump; when the knife was already drawn from its sheath, Wilfred appeared on the scene, and, in a tone the Norman lads started to hear from him, exclaimed:

“Let him go; touch him if you dare; he is my foster brother; my thrall, if anybody’s.”

“Like cleaves to like,” said Etienne, sarcastically; “but, my fair brother, thou wilt hardly interfere with the due course of the law.”

Page 26

“Law! the law of butchers and worse than butchers—devils. Let him go.”

“Hadst thou not better try to rescue him? Thou hast not yet found an opportunity to show thy prowess.”

Wilfred lost all control, sprang at Etienne, struck him in a downright English fashion between the eyes, and knocked him down. The knife fell from his hand, and Wilfred seized it before the other youths could recover from their astonishment, and flung it into a pond close at hand.

Etienne rose up.

Now my young readers will probably anticipate a bout at fisticuffs; but no such vulgar a combat commended itself to the proud young Norman, even thus suddenly humiliated; neither did he, under these very trying circumstances, lose his self command.

Yet his hatred was none the less, nor did he cherish a less deadly design.

“Let the young brute go,” said he, as he arose, pointing to Eadwin. “There is something more important to be settled now than the question whether the young porker shall retain his cloven hoof or not. Wilfred, dost thou know thou hast struck a gentleman?”

“I have struck a young butcher.”

“Thanks; churls fight with words; knights, and would-be knights, with swords. Draw, then, and defend thyself; Pierre and Louis will see fair play.”

“Nay,” said the other two lads with one voice, “it were a sin and shame to fight thus, and we should have our knighthood deferred for years did we permit it. Pages may not fight to the death without the permission of their liege lord. The baron must give permission.”

“Wilfred, dost thou accept my challenge? I honour thy base blood in making it.”

“My ancestors were as noble as thine; nay, they ruled here while thine were but pirates and cutthroats. I do accept it.”

“Let us separate, then; we meet here at daybreak tomorrow.”

“But the permission of our lord?”

“I will answer for that,” replied his hopeful son.

The party separated: Wilfred took his foster brother, who had not made the least attempt to escape from the scene, trusting to the love of his young lord for protection, and no sooner were they alone than the poor lad overwhelmed his deliverer with thanks,

in which tears were not unmixed, because he knew that a price had yet to be paid, and that his beloved master was in danger.

“Nay, nay, Eadwin, I shall do very well—if not, there is not much left to live for now—only you must take care of yourself, or they may avenge themselves on you; indeed, when the baron hears the tale, I doubt not that he will send for you, and then I may not be able to save you—you must fly.”

“Not till I know—”

“Yes, this very night—thou knowest the Deadman’s Swamp?”

“Well.”

“The Normans could never find thee there, and thou and I have threaded its recesses a hundred times; go to the hollow tree where we have slept before now in our hunting days. I will seek thee tomorrow, if I live. If I do not appear before midday, you had better seek our people, whom these tyrants have driven to the greenwoods.”

Page 27

"I know where to find them, but you will come; why not fly to the woods with me now?"

"Honour prevents. And after all, you had better say goodbye at once to those at home, and be off: perhaps I had better say goodbye for thee—it will be safest."

A few more parting instructions, and they separated; the young thrall actually kneeling and kissing his young lord's hand with that devoted love nought save such obligations could give.

Wilfred was returning to the castle, when he met Pierre, who was evidently seeking him.

"Wilfred," he said, "I have come to offer you my services for tomorrow; you will want the offices of a friend."

"Art thou my friend?"

"Yes, since I see thou art not a coward. While I saw thee suffering insult after insult without ever resenting them, I thought thee craven, and could not speak thee fair; now thou art as one of us."

"Thou art not like other Normans, then."

"I am not Norman, but Breton, and perhaps we do not love the Normans over much in Brittany; at least, I can feel for one in thy position."

"Thanks," was all that Wilfred could stammer out.

These were almost the first kind words he had heard since his mother's death, save in those stolen moments when he had been alone amidst his English thralls and churls, and they had been but few.

"Thou art not so skilled in fencing as Etienne; I should advise an hour or two in the tilt yard, and I can tell thee of some of his feints, which are not a little dangerous."

"Thanks, I shall not have too much time."

"Dost thou think the baron will give leave?"

"Yes; he hates me in his heart. Were I the better swordsman, he might not consent."

"I agree with thee—wert thou dead, Etienne would be heir of Aescendune. At all events, thou wilt go to confession and get thy soul in order—betake thyself to thy holy gear—men fight none the worse for a clear conscience. And I would ask the intercession of St. Michael—men speak well of him in Brittany, and tell how he fought a combat a outrance with Satan, wherein the latter came off none the better man."

“I shall see Father Elphege tonight—we are not heathen, we English.”

“Ah! here comes Louis. Well, what news dost thou bring?”

“Good ones. Our lord permits the fight. You should have seen how stark and stern he looked when he saw his son’s eyes. Wilfred, thou hast a fist like a smith. Wilt thou do as well with the sword?”

“Tomorrow will show.”

“Well, it is quite right of thee to fight for thine own serfs; I would have fought for mine at Marmontier—none should have come between me and them. And I am glad we did not hurt the poor knave. Etienne will be a hard lord for thy people, if anything happens to thee.”

Oh, how the memory of his mother and her counsels came before the poor orphan.

Page 28

Still, how could he help it? He had done rightly, he felt sure; and he knew that his father would say so were hecums alive.

“And so would my grandfather,” thought he, “once the friend of the Ironside, of whose wondrous exploits he often told me in olden days around our winter fire. Would his spirit were with me now, and a little of his skill in arms.”

And thus musing, he arrived at the castle and betook himself, with Pierre, to the tilt yard. Louis went off to seek Etienne, whose second he was to be.

CHAPTER VI. A REVELATION.

The night was growing dark when Wilfred approached the priory, with the intention of seeking Father Elphege, and putting, as Pierre had said, “his spiritual gear in order.”

As we have remarked in other pages, men then attached no notion of sin to the mere act of fighting—there could not be a duty clearer to Christians of that strange epoch than to fight with each other whensoever the exigencies of society demanded—the very institution of knighthood was bound up with the idea.

So he had no anticipation that the good father would say, “Don’t fight.”

But when he approached the great door of the priory, with the venerable figure of the patron saint bending over the archway, a messenger—a lay brother—issued forth.

It was almost dark, but the man recognised Wilfred.

“Is it thou, Wilfred of Aescendune, in the flesh?”

“I am he.”

“Then I am glad to see thee, for thus my limbs are saved the toil of seeking thee, and my rheumatics make me dread the night air.”

“Seeking me?”

“Yes, verily; the good prior desireth thee earnestly, and adjured me to fetch thee without delay; and lo! Saint Cuthbert hath sent thee.”

What could the prior want of him? thought the lad; had he heard of the quarrel, through young Eadwin, and did he disapprove of it?

At all events, he would be saved the trouble of many words; and he entered.

He passed along the cloister, with its ceiling of carved wood and its rude wooden crucifix at the end thereof; he looked out at the little green square of grass, enclosed by the quadrangle, wherein reposed in peace the monks of former generations. Once the thought flashed over him, that a similar little grassy hillock might, ere a few hours were over, be raised above his own earthly remains; but that did not shake his purpose.

He ascended a spiral staircase and entered the prior's own cell.

"What, Wilfred! and so soon? Sooth to say, my messenger hath sped."

"He met me just outside the gate, father."

"By the blessing of heaven, my son."

"But why hast thou sent for me, and why this haste?"

"A dying man wishes to see thee—nay, do not start! he has a sad confession to make—one it will harrow thy blood to hear, and he cannot die in peace without thy forgiveness."

Page 29

"My forgiveness! How has he injured me? He is a Norman, I suppose?"

"Nay, he belongeth not to the proud race of our oppressors; he is an old serf of thy house. Dost thou remember Beorn the woodman?"

"Who slew the deer and sold them in secret, and when the deed was discovered, fled?"

"The same; it is he."

"But what harm hath he done so great that he should come here to ask forgiveness? 'Twas a small matter; at least, it seems so now."

"My son, that is not the matter he hath to confess."

"What is it, then?"

"Prepare thyself, my dear child; now be composed; you must resign yourself to God's will."

"Tell me, father, and end this suspense. What is amiss?"

"Nay, he must do that; I wanted to prepare thee; but tis about thy mother."

Wilfred turned pale at once and trembled, for the one passion which divided his soul with hatred to the Normans was love for the memory of his parents. What had the man got to say about his mother?

"But this is not constancy and firmness—thou quakest like an aspen leaf."

"Tell me, was aught amiss in my mother's death?"

"Didst thou ever suspect it?"

"Yes, but I put the thought away, as though it came from Satan."

"Well, poor child, thou wilt know now, and God help thee to bear it rightly."

Trembling and astonished, Wilfred followed the prior into an adjoining cell, where, propped up by cushions, lay the attenuated form of a dying man—the death sweat already on his brow, standing thereon in beads—the limbs rigid as a recent convulsion had left them.

Any one conversant in the signs which immediately precede death could have told that he had but a short time to live. The good monk, who was supporting him and breathing words of Christian hope into his ears, left him as the prior and Wilfred entered.

The prior took the monk's place, and supported the head of the penitent.

"Look," he said, as he raised him upon his arm, "Wilfred of Aescendune, the son of thy late lord."

The poor wretch groaned—such a deep hollow groan.

"Canst thou forgive me?" he said.

"Forgive thee what?"

"Tell him all, my son, and ease thy burdened mind."

The thrall then spake, in words interrupted by gasps and sighs, which we must needs omit as we piece his narrative together for the benefit of our readers.

"It is five years since I fled thy father's face, fearing his wrath, for I had slain his red deer and sold them for filthy lucre. Woe is me! I had better have trusted to his mercy and borne my fitting punishment; but, as Satan tempted me, I fled to the great city, where men are crowded together thick as bees in swarming time, to hide myself amongst many. There I was like to starve, and none gave me to eat, when a Jew who saw my distress, took pity on me and gave me shelter.

Page 30

"His name was Abraham of Toledo, a city far off over the salt sea, whence he had come to our English shores in the hope of gain; and he was mighty in magic arts and in compounding of deadly drugs to slay, or medicines to make alive. I became his servant, for I had nought else to do, and I blew his forge when he mixed strange metals, swept his chamber, mixed his medicines as ordered, and did all an ignorant man might do at his master's bidding."

"The wretch! he should be burnt," said the prior, who, like most Englishmen of his day, confounded all such researches with the black art; "didst thou ever see the devil there?"

"I did, indeed!"—the prior started—"but it was a Norman fiend, and his name Hugo of Aescendune."

"How!" Wilfred exclaimed, as he started violently.

"Silence, dear son, thou shalt soon hear," said Father Elphege. "Summon thy courage."

"One evening I was mixing some drugs in my master's laboratory, in a recess hidden from the rest of the room by a curtain, which happened to be drawn, when my master entered the room in company with a stranger.

"'Here, then, is the drug you seek; but it will be very costly—men must pay dear for vengeance,' said Abraham of Toledo.

"'It may not be vengeance, but an obstacle which I wish to remove from my path.'

"'That liquid was distilled by myself from many strange plants in far-off Araby; I may never replace it, and it is worth many pieces of gold.'

"'Thou shalt have them if thou wilt swear, thou dog of a Jew, that it possesses all the qualities thou hast said. If it fails, look to thyself; I am not one to be played with.'

"'The victim who takes but one drop daily shall decline and die within the half of a year; in half that time if the dose be doubled; a quarter if quadrupled.'

"'And no one shall detect the cause?'

"'Call the most learned physicians ye Christians have (dolts are they all), and they shall call it a natural death—consumption—so gradually shall the patient wear away.'

"'I will trust thee; here is the gold.'

"I had seen the man's face through the curtain; but no sooner was he gone than my master descended the stairs, calling for me. I managed to reach him without raising his

suspicion, and he pointed out the figure of his visitor receding in the distant gloom of the street.

“Follow and learn who he is.’

“I followed and dogged him to his lodging—it was the present lord of Aescendune.

“I knew of his marriage—I felt sure whom he wanted to destroy; yet I did not dare show myself at Aescendune, even to save so innocent a life—the life of so sweet and good a lady as she had ever been. But at length disease—an incurable disease—seized me, and the dread of approaching death and judgment has brought me to tell what it freezes my heart to say—all too late to save, but not perhaps to avenge—I tell thee thy mother was poisoned, O Wilfred of Aescendune!”

Page 31

"Tell me what would be the signs of the drug?"

"If dropped in water, it would, although colourless, impart a blue tinge to the liquid."

Wilfred hid his face in his hands and sobbed aloud.

"Dost thou forgive me?" said the dying thrall.

"Thou mightest have saved her, yet I do forgive thee."

"I might; it was my sin, and she was my liege lady, the gentlest and kindest."

"Thou art forgiven; but oh! my father! who shall do justice on the murderer, the poisoner?"

"That is thy task; the son must avenge his mother's blood, and do justice on the murderer. Listen, Wilfred: Dost thou remember Bishop Geoffrey of Coutances?"

"Well," said the poor boy, "he married them; but he, too, is a Norman—they are all alike."

"Nay, there be wise and good men amongst them, and this bishop is one. Thou shalt seek him, for he is now in Oxford: thou shalt start this very night, and tomorrow thou mayest reach him. I will give thee the written confession of this most unhappy but penitent Beorn, and the bishop will hear thee, and justice shall yet be done. But thou must depart at once, or he will have left the city. I will give thee food, and my palfrey shall be at thy service in an hour's time. And now, my child, while the food is preparing, go and pray at thy mother's tomb, and ask for grace to seek justice, not revenge; for it is not fitting the murderer should lord it longer over thy people and thee!"

And in another minute the unhappy lad was prostrate before his mother's tomb: all other thoughts had gone from him—Etienne, Pierre, and the rest were forgotten—he was absorbed in the thought of his parent's wrongs, and in the awful responsibility that knowledge had thrust upon him {ix}.

CHAPTER VII. FRUSTRATED.

Far to the south of the demesne of Aescendune stretched a wild expanse of woodland, giving shelter to numberless beasts of chase, and well known to our young hero, Wilfred.

It was traversed by one of those vestiges of old times, the Roman roads, and along this ancient trackway the poor lad, eager as the avenger of blood in old times, spurred the good prior's palfrey, which had never borne so impatient a rider before.



Onward, through the starry night, now on the open heath, now buried in the deep shadow of ancient trees, now in the darkness of the valley, then on the upland: here, startling the timid deer; there, startled himself, as the solitary wolf, not yet extinct in those ancient forests, glared at him from bush or brake—so Wilfred rode onward.

It was summer time, and the sun rose early; welcome was its light to our traveller, who rode on, trusting soon to reach a monastic house in the neighbourhood of Banbury, where a few poor English monks, not yet dispossessed by the Norman intruders, served God in their vocation, according to their light, and offered hospitality to the wayfarer.

Page 32

To these poor monks Wilfred had been commended by the good prior of Aescendune, and with them he purposed to rest all day, for it was not safe to travel before nightfall without a Norman passport. For Norman riders, soldiers of fortune, infested all the highways, and they would certainly require Wilfred, or any other English traveller, to show cause for being on the road, and, in default of such cause, would render very rough usage.

It was now drawing near the third hour of the day, and Wilfred had already spied his resting place from the summit of a hill. In spite of his woes, too, he wanted his breakfast, and was already speculating on the state of the monastic larder, when the road entered a small wood.

It was not a straight road at all, and the rider could not see a hundred yards before him, when suddenly a troop of horse came round a curve at a smart trot, and were upon him before he could escape their notice.

"Whom have we here?" exclaimed the leader.

Wilfred knew him; it was that same Count Eustace de Blois, who had rescued him from danger on the field of Senlac, and taken him to the tent of the Conqueror.

His first impulse was to tell Count Eustace everything and to claim his protection. Then he remembered that this Eustace was the friend of his stepfather, and the distrust—not to say hatred—he was beginning to feel to all Normans overcame, unhappily it may be, the first generous impulse of confidence.

"It is I, Wilfred of Aescendune," he coldly replied.

"So I see," said the Norman, "and marvel to meet thee alone and unattended on the highway, so far from home. Thou hast thy father's permission?"

"I have no father," said Wilfred, in a tone which at once betrayed that something was amiss.

"Stepfather, of course, I would say, and I judge from thy reply that all is not well. Wilt thou not tell me what is wrong?"

"My errand is urgent, and I only crave permission to continue my road in peace."

"You are more likely to continue it in pieces, when so many outlaws and cutthroats are about, and my duty will not suffer thee to go farther till I know that thou hast thy father's, that is, the baron's permission."

Wilfred's only reply was to set spurs to his horse, and to try to escape by flight from his troublesome interrogator; but although he did succeed in clearing the party, his poor

palfrey was tired, and the Norman horses were fresh, so the attempt was made in vain; he was pursued and brought back to Eustace de Blois.

“Why didst thou attempt to escape?” said that noble, grimly. “I fear that thou art playing the truant—against thine own interests, and must take thee with me whither I am bound, which happeneth to be Aescendune.”

“Nay, I pray thee suffer me to proceed; life and death hang upon my errand.”

“Confide in me then, and tell me all.”

But Wilfred could not; in his then frame of mind, he could not confide the story of his mother’s woes to a Norman—to his fevered mind one of the intruders was as bad as another—as well bring a complaint before one wolf that another wolf had eaten a lamb.

Page 33

"I cannot," was his reply; "it would be useless if I did."

"Why? I have befriended thee once."

"Art thou not a Norman?"

"Ah! I see where the shoe pinches," replied Eustace; "thou hast found some traitors who have been instilling rebellion into thy youthful ears. Well, if they are found, they shall ere long lack tongues wherewith to prate, and for the present thou must return home with me. Wilt thou go as a freeman or as a prisoner?"

"You have the power and must use it."

"Wilt thou promise not to attempt an escape?"

"No."

"Then I must perforce pass a band from one leg to another, beneath the belly of thy steed, or thou mayst leave thy tired palfrey and ride behind me with a strap binding thee to my belt. Which dost thou choose?"

"Do as it pleaseth thee."

There was a sad, heart-broken tone in Wilfred's voice, in spite of the defiance of his words, which interested the Norman count, who was not, as we have before seen, all steel; and during the journey which Wilfred made as a captive, Eustace made sundry attempts to win the poor youth's confidence, but all in vain.

Riding all day, Wilfred retraced in this ignominious manner the road he had so eagerly traversed under the veil of night; and at length, towards sunset, they came in sight of the priory, the bridge, and the castle of Aescendune.

"I think I may cut these bonds now, and thou needest not be seen to return in the guise of a captive. Once more, tell me all; I will be thy mediator with thy father."

"Father!" repeated Wilfred with an expression indicative of something deeper yet than scorn or hatred, but he said no more.

The blast of trumpets from the approaching troop aroused the inmates of the castle, and they flocked to their battlements to behold the pennon of Eustace de Blois, familiar to them on many a hard-fought field of old.

Immediately there was bustling and saddling, and a troop of horse issued over the drawbridge to greet the coming guest. Foremost amongst them was the grim stepfather, and by his side rode Etienne.

Imagine their surprise when they recognised Wilfred in the train of their visitor; we can hardly paint fitly the scornful looks of Etienne, or the grimness of the stepfather.

But there was etiquette to be consulted—a most important element in the days of chivalry—and no question was asked until all the customary salutations had been made.

“I see my son Wilfred has been the first to welcome thee; may I ask where he met thee on the road?” asked Hugo, of Eustace.

“Many a long mile from here; I will tell thee more anon.”

“Did he return of his own free will?” thought the baron, but politeness forced him to wait his guest’s own time for the dialogue which he felt awaited him.

Meanwhile Etienne had regaled Wilfred with a succession of scornful glances, which, strange to say, did not affect the latter much—deeper emotions had swallowed up the minor ones, and he could disdain the imputation of cowardice, although he could not but feel that his attempted flight would be ascribed by every one to fear of the combat, which had been offered to, and accepted by him, and from which he could not otherwise have saved himself.

Page 34

They dismounted within the courtyard, and Hugo made a certain communication to the seneschal. The latter came up to Wilfred as he stood listlessly in the crowd, the object of many a scornful glance.

“The baron, your father, bids you to follow me.”

The old retainer led the way up a staircase. On the third floor there was a chamber with a small loophole to serve as window, through which nothing larger than a cat could pass. There was furniture—a rough table and chair, a rude bed, and mattress of straw.

“You are to remain here until my lord comes to release you.”

The prisoner entered the chamber, and threw himself wearily on the bed, the door slammed with a heavy sound behind him, the steps of the gaoler (was he any better?) died away in the distance, and all was still, save a faint murmur from the courtyard below, or from the great hall, where the banquet was even now served.

Hours passed away, and a light step was heard approaching—it was certainly not the baron’s. Soon a voice was heard through the crevices of the rough planks which formed the door.

“Wilfred, art thou here?”

“I am. Is it thou, Pierre?”

“It is. Why didst thou flee the combat? Thou hast disgraced thyself, and me, too, as thy friend.”

“I cannot tell thee.”

“Was it not fear, then?”

“It was not.”

“Then at least vouchsafe some explanation, that I may justify thee to the others.”

“I cannot.”

“Thou wilt not.”

“If thou wilt have it so.”

“Farewell, then; I can be no friend to a coward.”

And the speaker departed: Wilfred counted his steps as he went down the stairs. One pang of boyish pride—wounded pride—but it was soon lost in the deeper woe.

A few more minutes and the warder brought the lad his supper. He ate it, and then, wearied out—he had had no rest during the previous night as the reader is aware, and had been in the saddle for twenty hours—wearied out, he slept.

And while he slept the door softly opened, and the baron entered. At the first glance he saw the lad was fast asleep, as his heavy and regular breathing indicated. He did not awake him, but gazed upon the features of the boy he had so deeply injured, with an expression wherein there was no lingering remorse, but simply a deep and deadly hatred. At length he was about to awake the sleeper, when he saw the end of a packet of parchment protrude from the breast of the tunic. The baron drew it softly out.

It was the letter of Father Elphege to the Bishop of Coutances.

The baron was scholar enough to read it—few Normans were so, and fewer English nobles; but he was an exception. He read and knew all; he read, and blanched a deadly white as he did so; his knees shook together, and a cold sweat covered his face.

It was known, then; to how many? Probably only to the prior and Wilfred, for it was but a dying confession of yesterday, as he gathered from the letter.

Page 35

A sudden resolution came upon him; he did not awake the sleeper, but retired to digest it at his ease in the security of his own chamber.

It was but little sleep the baron took that night. Hour after hour the sentinel heard him pacing to and fro. Had any one seen him, he would have judged that Hugo was passing through a terrible mental conflict.

"No, I cannot do it," he said, as if to some unseen prompter.

"It is the only way; crush all thine enemies at once, let not even a dog survive to bark at thee."

"But what would the world say?"

"The world need not know, if thou contrivest well."

"But such secrets will out—a bird of the air would carry the matter, if none else did."

"Such are the bogies with which nurses frighten children. Art thou not a man and a Norman?"

"But the poor monks—if they were but soldiers."

"The less crime if they perish—they are fitter to die; and they are but English swine, like their neighbours, of whom thou hast slain so many."

So, through the long hours did the Prince of Darkness commune with his destined prey. There are periods of temptation which none know in their intensity, save such as have by long habit encouraged the Evil One to tempt them—who have swallowed bait after bait, until they can digest a very large hook at last.

At length, just as the dawn was reddening the skies, the baron threw himself upon his pallet and slept, not the sleep of the innocent, for his features moved convulsively again and again, and sometimes it seemed as if he were contending with some fearful adversary in his dreams.

But no angel of good stood near his couch; long since had continual indulgence in evil driven his guardian away, and Satan had all his own way.

The sounds of life and activity were many about the castle, and still Hugo arose not, until the third or fourth hour. Then he swallowed hastily a cup of generous Gascon wine, and a crust of toasted bread, steeped in the liquor; after which he mounted his favourite steed, a high horse of great spirit, not to say viciousness, which none save himself cared to ride, and galloped furiously for hours through the forest, startling the timid deer and her fawn from many a brake.

It was evening when he returned: Wilfred had not yet been released.

Count Eustace had departed, not until he had sought an interview with Wilfred, in his prison chamber, which turned out to be a fruitless one; for, terrified although he was at the loss of his letter, the youth kept his secret.

It was a pity that he did so. Many a sad page yet to be written might have been saved. But was it unnatural that the poor orphan should feel an invincible reluctance to claim Norman aid? yet the Bishop of Coutances was Norman.

At length, supper being ready, Hugo came in and took his usual place at the head of the high table. All trace of his mental struggles was gone.

Page 36

"Bring my son Wilfred down to the hall."

The attendants hastened, and soon reappeared with the English heir of Aescendune.

He was calm and composed—that unhappy youth; he looked the baron straight in the face, he did not honour Etienne or any one else with a single glance; but waited to be questioned.

"Wilfred of Aescendune," said his stepfather, "why didst thou absent thyself yesterday, and traverse dangerous roads without permission?"

No answer.

"Didst thou fly because thou fearedst the combat, which thine own unmannerly insolence had brought upon thee?"

"No."

It was the only word Wilfred spoke, and that with emphasis. Etienne sneered.

"Perhaps thou mightest not have fled hadst thou known that the combat would have been a mere form. I had instructed the marshal of the lists to prevent deadly results."

Again Etienne cast a look at his companions, which seemed to give the lie to these words.

"Wilt thou promise to make no further attempt to leave the demesne without permission if thou art released from surveillance?"

"No," once more.

"Then I will no longer retain the charge of thee. Thou shalt go and do penance at the priory of thy sainted namesake, till thou dost come to a better mind. I will send thee after supper, and give fitting charge to Father Elphege."

Wilfred was forced to sit down during the meal, but he ate nothing.

When it was ended, the baron called old Osbert the seneschal and gave his instructions. They led the youth away; he did not return the baron's half-ironical salutation, but departed with his guards in silence.

High was the wassail in the castle that night, and many casks of wine were broached; at length all sought their couches and slept heavily.

But in the middle of the night many sleepers were aroused by the cry of *fire*! yet so heavy with wine were they, that few arose; hut most heard it as a man hears some sound in his sleep, which he half suspects to belong to dreamland, and turns again to his pillow.

Imagine the surprise with which such men (including Etienne, Pierre, and the other late companions of the unhappy Wilfred) learned that the monastery had caught fire accidentally in the night, and that so sudden had been the conflagration that none had escaped.

None! No; so far as men could discover. The priory built by Offa of Aescendune was a heap of smoking embers, and monks were there none, neither had any heard aught of the English heir of Aescendune.

The poor English who yet remained in the village were weeping over their lost friends, and the very Norman men-at-arms were hushed in the presence of their sorrow.

The shades of evening fell upon the desolate ruins, but nought had occurred to alleviate the calamity: all seemed to have perished unaided in the suddenness of their destruction—a thing improbable—unheard of—yet so it was.

Page 37

All seemed over—the English brethren and their guest blotted out from the earth. And none looked more contented than Baron Hugo.

CHAPTER VIII. VAE VICTIS.

If the Conqueror had really intended to govern the English justly, like his great predecessor Canute, circumstances over which he had small control were against him; when he committed himself to an unjust war of aggression against an unoffending people, for if Harold had given him offence, England had given none, he entered upon a course of evil in which he could not pause.

Canute was a heathen during his darkest and bloodiest days; when he became a Christian, his worst deeds lay behind him, and the whole course of his reign was a progress from evil to good, the scene brightening each day. This, our Second Chronicle sufficiently illustrates.

But William had no such excuse; he bore a high reputation for piety—as piety was understood in his day, before the invasion of England—he was, says a contemporary author, “a diligent student of Scripture, a devout communicant, and a model to prelates and judges.”

But after ambition led him to stain his soul with the blood shed at Senlac, his career was one upon which the clouds gathered more thickly each day; his Norman followers clamoured for their promised rewards, and he yielded to this temptation, and spoiled Englishmen, thane after thane, to satisfy this greed, until the once wealthy lords of the soil were driven to beg their bread, or to work as slaves on the land they had once owned.

Early in 1067 William returned to celebrate his triumph in Normandy, and while he was absent the government of the conquered country was committed to his half brother, Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, and William Fitz-Osborne. These rulers heard no cry for redress on the part of the poor English, scorned their complaints, and repulsed them with severity, as if they wished by provoking rebellion to justify further confiscations and exactions; in short, they made it impossible for the Conqueror to pursue his policy of conciliation. Rebellions arose and were stifled in fire and blood, and henceforth there was simply a reign of terror for the conquered; on one side insolence and pride, on the other, misery and despair.

Many of the English fled to the woods for refuge, and were hunted down, when their tyrants could accomplish their wishes, like beasts of prey, stigmatised with the title of “robbers” or “outlaws.” Such, as we have seen, was the case at Aescendune; and after the supposed death of Wilfred, no bounds were set to the cruelties and oppressions of

Hugo and his satellites; their dungeons were full, their torture chamber in constant use, so long as there were Englishmen to suffer oppression and wrong.

Autumn, the autumn of 1068, came with all its wealth of golden store; the crops were safely housed in the barns, the orchards were laden with fruit, the woods had put on those brilliant hues with which they prepare for the sleep of winter—never so fair as when they assume the garb of decay.

Page 38

Wilfred of Aescendune was gone. His tragical fate had aroused little sympathy amongst his Norman companions, hardened as they were by familiarity with scenes of violence; the burning of the abbey and the fiery fate of its inmates had been but a nine days' wonder. Etienne and his fellow pages spoke of their lost companion with little regard to the maxim, "nihil nisi bonum de mortuis," and seemed, indeed, to think that he was well out of the way.

There were few English left to mourn him: the baron would trust none in the castle, and the churls and thralls of the village had perished or taken refuge in the greenwoods, which lay, like a sea of verdure, to the north of the domain of Aescendune, where it was shrewdly suspected they might be found, enjoying the freedom of the forests, and making free with the red deer.

It was a primeval forest, wherein were trees which had witnessed old Druids, silver knife in hand, cutting the mistletoe, or which had stood in the vigour of youth when Caesar's legionaries had hunted those same Druids to their last retreats. Giant oaks cast their huge limbs abroad, and entwined in matrimonial love with the silver beech; timid deer with their fawns wantoned in the shade beneath, or wild swine munched the acorns. Here were slow sedgy streams, now illumined, as by a ray of light, when some monster of the inland waters flashed along after his scaly prey, or stirred by a sudden plunge as the otter sprang from the bank. Sometimes the brock took an airing abroad, and the wolf came to look after his interests and see what he could snatch.

While, in the upper regions, amidst that sea of leaves, whole tribes of birds, long since vanished from England, carried on their aerial business, and now and then the eagle made a swoop amongst them, and then there was a grand scattering.

Many a lonely pool there was, where the kingfisher had never seen the face of man; many a bushel, not to say waggon load, of nuts rotted for want of modern schoolboys to gather them; many an acre of blackberries wasted their sweetness on the desert air.

Now and then came the horn of the hunter, waking up the echoes, then the loud murmur of hounds, then the rush and clamour of the chase swept by, and all was quiet again, even as it is said to be in the solitudes of the Black Forest, when the Wild Huntsman has passed.

But there was a lonelier and yet wilder region, where the sound of the hunter's horn only penetrated in faint vibrations from the far distance.

This region was a deep and entangled morass, which had only been explored by the veteran hunter of former days, or by the hunted outlaw of the present. Streams had overflowed their banks, the water had stagnated, rank foliage had arisen, and giant trees rotted in swamp and slime.

The Normans had never penetrated into this wilderness of slimy desolation, although, of course, they had again and again reached its borders and found bogs of bottomless depth, quagmires which would suck one out of sight in a few minutes, and at nightfall legions of evil spirits, as they thought them—for after dark these sloughs were alive with Jack-o'-lanterns, which men believed to be the souls of unbaptized infants.

Page 39

In former Chronicles we have described the old hall of Aescendune, as it stood in Anglo-Saxon days; it was then rather a home, a kind of “moated grange,” than a fortress.

But when Hugo the Norman took possession, he could not endure to live in a house incapable of standing a regular siege. And well he might have such feelings, when he remembered that he lived in the midst of a subject population, to whom his tyranny had rendered him and his men-at-arms hateful.

So he sent at once for Ralph of Evreux, a skilful architect, whose line lay in the raising of castles and such like, who knew how to dig the dungeon and embattle the keep, and into his hands he committed the rebuilding of the castle of Aescendune.

All was bustle and activity. The poor thralls of the estate were “worked to death;” stone had to be brought from an immense distance, for wood might burn if subjected to fiery arrows; the moat was deepened and water let in from the river; towers were placed at each angle, furnished with loopholes for archers; and over the entrance was a ponderous arch, with grate for raining down fiery missiles, and portcullis to bar all approach to the inner quadrangle, which was comparatively unchanged.

In short, the whole place was so thoroughly strengthened, that the cruel baron might laugh to scorn any attempts of the unhappy English to storm it, should they ever reach such a pitch of daring.

Below the castle walls the new priory was rapidly rising from the ruins of the olden structure. It was to be dedicated to St. Denys—for the Normans did not believe in any English saints—and then it was to be inhabited by a colony of monks from the diocese of Coutances-outr-mer.

This was to take place in order to please Bishop Geoffrey, who had made some inconvenient inquiries into the circumstances connected with the burning of the old abbey and the death of Wilfred.

But no awkward circumstances came to light; if there had been any foul play, the actors therein kept their own counsel.

An incident which happened about this time caused no little comment.

It was an October evening; the inmates of the castle (now properly so called) were assembled at supper in the great hall, after a long day’s hunting of the wild boar.

In the middle of the meal, Pierre de Morlaix, who had tarried in the forest, entered, looking as pale as a ghost and very excited in manner, as if some extraordinary event had upset the balance of his mind. It was not without a very apparent effort that, remembering the composure of demeanour exacted by the feudal system from all pages, he repressed his excitement and took his usual place.

The baron, however, had marked his discomposure, and was curious to know its cause.

“Is aught amiss, Pierre?” he asked.

Pierre stammered, hesitated, then replied that there was nothing amiss, only that he believed he had seen a ghost, or something very much like one.

Page 40

Dead silence fell on all, for the belief in ghosts was universal in that age, as also in witchcraft and sorcery.

“A ghost, silly boy; what ghost? Thy fancy hath converted some white cow into a spectre, in the uncertain light of the evening.”

“Nay, I saw him too plainly.”

“Saw whom?”

“Wilfred.”

There was a pause—a dead pause, indeed; the baron changed colour and appeared to attempt to hide the perturbation of his spirit.

“Speak out, my son,” said the chaplain, “such things are sometimes permitted by Heaven.”

“Father, I was leaving the woods by the path which opens upon the summit of the hill, above the blasted oak, when I saw Wilfred, as when alive, standing on the summit, gazing upon the castle. He was between me and the evening light, so, although it was getting dark, I could not mistake him. He was deadly pale, and there was a look on his face I had never seen in life as he turned round and faced me.”

“Well! didst thou speak?”

“I dared not; my limbs shook and the hair of my head arose—fearfulness and trembling seized hold of me.”

Etienne sneered just a little, yet probably he would not have behaved better, only he might not have owned his fear.

“Well, did he disappear?”

“I looked again, and I thought he retreated into the woods, for he was gone.”

“Did he seem to see you?”

“He did not speak.”

“Well,” said the chaplain, “we will say a mass for him tomorrow, to quiet his disturbed spirit, and he will, perhaps, vex us no more, poor lad.”

Etienne and Louis were very anxious to hear all the details of Pierre's ghostly encounter, and questioned him very closely. The former vowed he would have challenged the spectre; he did not fear Wilfred living, nor would he fear him dead.

The whole conversation at the castle hearth that night was about ghosts, demons, witches, warlocks, vampires, werewolves, and such-like; and about two hours before midnight our young Normans went to bed pleasantly terrified.

It was All Saints' Day, the day appointed for the consecration of the new Priory of St. Deny's. The monks from Coutances had arrived. The bishop of that diocese, already known to our readers, had reached Aescendune to perform the ceremony, by permission of the Bishop of Worcester, the sainted Wulfstan, in whose jurisdiction the priory lay; and there was a grand gathering of Norman barons and their retainers.

Strange it was that the same Epistle and Gospel which still serve in the English Prayer Book for that day should have been read in the ears of the Norman warriors—that they should have heard the Beatitudes in the Gospel:

“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called the children of God:
Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy:”

—and then gone forth to work out their own righteousness in the manner peculiar to their nation. Well, perhaps there are not wanting similar examples of inconsistency in the nineteenth century.

Page 41

So, with all the pomp of ecclesiastical ceremony, with gorgeous vestments, lighted tapers, and clouds of incense, the new building was dedicated to God.

And then, while the preparations for the evening banquet in the hall were being made by the menials of the kitchen, the guests had a grand tournament on the open mead in front of the castle, where they did not study how to perform works of mercy.

We have not space to tell who won the prizes in this famous passage of arms—who was unhorsed—whom the fair ladies crowned—save that the young Etienne (now in his eighteenth year) distinguished himself in every trial of skill or courage, unhorsed three youths successively who opposed him, bore off the suspended ring—while riding at full speed—on the top of his lance, and received the garland from the hands of the fair Countess of Warwick, who presided as Queen of the Jousts, amidst the applause of all present, who declared that so brave and knightly a youth ought to have his spurs at once.

He looked, indeed, handsome and brave, that typical Norman youth, as he advanced with becoming modesty to kneel and receive the token of his valour and success; his gallant demeanour and bright eyes—albeit he was somewhat olive in complexion—did great execution amongst the ladies, and they congratulated Hugo of Malville and Aescendune upon his hopeful son and heir. No one thought of poor Wilfred, save perhaps to reflect that he was well out of the way.

The bishop and his clergy departed to the priory, but the greater number of the laity remained for the evening banquet at the hall, served with all the magnificence for which the Normans were so renowned, while the prior and his brethren entertained the ecclesiastics at a more sober repast.

The hall was filled by an assemblage of lords and ladies, arrayed in such gorgeous apparel that it would need a far better milliner than the writer to describe it; all the colours of the rainbow were there, and the men had their share of the gaudy hues as well as the women. Hugo was quite a sight, as he sat upon a dais, at the head of the table, with his hopeful son—the hero of the day—on his right.

And then the viands—there was venison dressed a dozen different ways, beef and mutton, chine and haunch of the wild boar: peacocks—feathers and all, the feathers not roasted but stuck in their proper places after the poor bird left the oven—very beautiful, but very tough was this piece de resistance. There were all sorts of gravies, all kinds of soups.

Then the fish—the turbot, the salmon, and the perch, chub, trout, and eel from the inland streams. Pike had not yet appeared in our waters—they were a later importation—and other fish were more plentiful in consequence.

Then the pastry—the castles in pie crust, with fruity warriors to man their battlements—how should aught but cook describe them properly?

For awhile there was no conversation, save an occasional interjectional exclamation—“How good this fish!” “How tender this fowl!” Wines of Gascony and Burgundy were circulating freely, and were as usual brightening the eyes, quickening the tongue, and stimulating the palate.

Page 42

But when appetite was satisfied, then began the buzz of conversation to arise, then the gleemen tuned their harps to sing the praises of Norman warriors; nor did the toasts linger, nor was the drinking of many healths absent.

Amongst the singers—men of many songs—those of wealth and rank occasionally took turn; but there was no brighter voice or sweeter song than that of Louis de Marmontier, the third of our trio of pages. He had distinguished himself that day in the lists, following closely in the steps of Etienne, and now he seemed likely to win the prize for minstrelsy, as he sang the song of Rollo, accompanying himself with thrilling chords on the harp, whose strings had never uttered sweeter notes.

All at once, just when the attention of every one was fixed on the singer, a startling interruption occurred, and the strings ceased to vibrate.

A man, whose head was streaming with blood, whose features were pale and ghastly, and who seemed scarcely able to support his fainting limbs, was approaching the high dais, upon which reclined his lord.

The song ceased—the cry was heard—“Help! my lord; they are burning Yew Tree Farm, and I only am escaped to tell thee.”

Suddenly he trembled, staggered, and fell. They raised him up, but he was gone, his tale half untold. An arrow had pierced his breast, and he had spent his dying strength in a desperate attempt to reach his lord.

What had happened?

The horn was at this moment heard from the battlements, and its burden was “*Fire.*”

Hugo turned pale, in spite of his prowess, then cried out—“To horse! to horse!”

So crying, he rushed from the table, mounted his favourite steed, and, followed by such as could keep pace with him—there were not many—rode in the direction of the blaze, which was illuminating the northern sky.

Onward! onward! ride the Normans! Onward through bush or brake, or copse, or quagmire. Onward, till the clearing is reached, where the English Lords of Aescendune built Yew Farm.

When they arrived at the spot, Hugo and his Normans paused in astonishment.

For there, in the midst of the clearing, the farm buildings, one and all, stood enveloped in flames. It was plain, at first sight, that they must have been set on fire in many places at once, for in no other way could the flames have taken such complete and uniform hold.

But where were the inhabitants?

Not a living soul appeared, and the intense heat of the flames forbade closer observation.

And as they stood and gazed helplessly upon the conflagration, the remembrance of the burning of the Monastery came to many minds, and they wondered at the similarity of the circumstances.

“Was this the hand of God?”

At length roof after roof fell in with hideous din. The Normans waited about the spot and explored the neighbourhood, hoping to find, lighted by the lurid flame of the fire, that Roger and his labourers had found shelter somewhere. They searched in vain—they found no one.

Page 43

Slowly and sadly the party returned homewards to attend to their duties but early next morning the baron and a chosen band rode to the scene again.

Thick clouds of smoke ascended to the skies; a pungent smell overpowered all the sweet odours of the forest; blackened beams and stones, cracked and shivered by the heat, lay all around.

What had caused the fire? Could it have been accidental?

They soon decided that it could not.

Two things seemed conclusive on this point—the first, the simultaneous outbreak in all parts of the buildings; the second, the fact that no one had escaped, save the man who bore the news, and died, his story but half told.

But what had been the fate of the rest? Had they been shut in the buildings, and so left to die as the flames reached them?

The terrible conviction that such had been the case became general; but at the same time the similarity of the circumstances with those under which the Monastery had been burnt would necessitate a like conclusion in that case also; and if so, who had then been the incendiary?

There were those amongst the retainers of Baron Hugo who could have answered this question, but they were all puzzled concerning the latter conflagration, for they knew of no gathering of their conquered foes, and they imagined they were acquainted with every nook of the forest, save the impenetrable morass in its centre.

On the morrow there was to have been a great hunt; but instead of the chase of beasts, the more exciting one of men was now substituted—the “murderers” should be hunted out, cost what it might—“The vermin should be extirpated.”

The majority of the guests had departed the previous night, but many yet remained, the guests of Hugo, and with some of the wisest and most valiant of these he was taking counsel the following morning how best to track the outlaws, who had dared to commit this insolent deed, when Etienne appeared to announce that several of their people had not returned home from the fire, and amongst them his own fellow page, the minstrel of the previous night, Louis de Marmontier.

“We will find them; perchance they yet linger there. Bid a troop of horse be ready.”

They mounted, rode, arrived on the scene, and found no one there. Then they separated in all directions, two or three in each group, to find their missing comrades.

Etienne and Pierre, with a dozen men at arms—for the baron would not let them go forth less strongly attended—were eager in the search, for they loved their companion, and were very anxious about his safety.

Midway between the castle and the burnt farm, slightly out of the track, was a huge oak, and around it a slight space clear of undergrowth. A brook ran close by—a stream of sweet sparkling water—and Etienne rode thither to give the horses drink, when, as he approached, he saw the form of a youth leaning down, as if drinking, and thought he knew the dress.

Page 44

He approached eagerly. Yes, it was Louis; but he did not stir. Etienne dismounted and discovered the fact he had already anticipated: his young companion was dead: an arrow, evidently shot close at hand, had pierced his chest. The poor lad had but slight defensive armour—a light cuirass thrown on at the first alarm.

He had fallen and been left for dead, but had evidently afterwards dragged himself to the brook, in the agony of thirst, and had died while attempting to drink.

They placed the body reverently on the moss at the foot of the tree, and for a time were silent. The remembrance of his activity and gaiety on the previous day, and of his sweet minstrelsy on the very eve of his voice being hushed for ever, came sadly to their minds. At length Etienne broke the silence.

“Draw forth the arrow,” he said.

They drew it forth and gave it him, bloodstained as it was: he looked closely upon it.

“This is an arrow from the same quiver as that which killed Gislebert; it is of English make, such as those clumsy louts use.”

It was indeed a heavy, broad shaft, quite unlike the slender, tapering arrows of Norman workmanship, adapted for a long flight, in days when a furlong was considered a boy’s distance.

“Our own serfs turn upon us. Well, they will rue it ere long; a short shrift and a long rope will be their portion.”

“Ah! I remember noticing such in the quiver of the young thrall Eadwin,” said Pierre—“he whose hand you sought to cut off for poaching.”

They said no more on that occasion, but pursued in silence the train of thought suggested.

It was a strange gathering that night at the castle; for corpse after corpse was borne in from the woods to receive Christian burial at the priory, all killed by arrows, and those arrows—which the slayers had not troubled to remove, as if they disdained reprisals—all of the clumsy sort used by the “aborigines”

CHAPTER IX. A HUNT IN THE WOODS.

The winter of the year 1068 was setting in with great severity, sharp winds from the north and east had already stripped the faded leaves from the trees of the forest, and the heavens were frequently veiled by dark masses of cloud, from whence fast-falling snow ever and anon descended.

The winter opened drearily for the inhabitants of Aescendune, for the “mystery of the forest” was yet unsolved; none knew whence those incendiaries had issued who had given Yew Farm, with all its inmates, to the vengeful flames; but that this latter conflagration was in some way connected with the earlier destruction of St. Wilfred’s Priory seemed not unlikely to most men.

Hugo de Malville cum Aescendune was not the man to sit calmly on the battlements of his newly-built towers and survey the destruction of his property, although he was not free from a terrible dread that his sins were finding him out, at which times he was like a haunted man who sees spectres, invisible to the world around.

Page 45

Well did he surmise from whom the deadly provocation came, the loss of his farm, the death of a noble lad committed to his care; not to mention the loss of some common men, who could easily be replaced: for there were ever fresh swarms of Normans, French, and Bretons pouring into poor old England, as though it were some newly discovered and uninhabited land.

The aggressors, he doubted not, were the outlaws his tyranny had driven to the forests, the forerunners of the Robin Hoods and Little Johns of later days, whose exploits against the Norman race awoke the enthusiasm of so many minstrels and ballad makers {x}.

But all his efforts were in vain: neither men nor dogs could track the fugitives, although all the woods were explored, save only that impassable Dismal Swamp, where all seemed rottenness and slime, and where it could scarcely be imagined aught human could live.

Day after day the vengeful baron ranged the woods with his dogs and men-at-arms, but all in vain.

Neither would Etienne forbear his woodland sports, although the stragglers in the forest were constantly cut off by their unseen foe; but in his hunts, accompanied by Pierre, his sole surviving companion, he sought more eagerly for the tracks of men than of beasts, and vowed he would some day avenge poor Louis.

Brave although the Normans were, they hesitated to remain in the outlying cottages and farms which were yet untouched by the destroyer, and therefore, by their lord's permission, concentrated their forces in and around the castle, where they kept diligent watch, as men who held their lives in their hands, and shunned the woods after nightfall.

For night after night the fatal fires blazed, now at one extremity of the domain, now at another, until there threatened to be very little left to burn, unless some prompt and decisive measures were taken; but superstitious fears united with natural ones to assist the unseen enemy, by paralysing the courage of the hitherto invincible Norman.

This state of things could be endured no longer; and the baron sent embassies to the neighbouring barons to beg their aid against a combination of outlaws united against law and society, who had burnt his farms and slain his retainers, and whom, owing to his limited numbers, he had yet failed to exterminate.

The Normans clung together; hence their power—as the weakness of the poor English was disunion—and favourable replies being received, a day was appointed for a general search to be made in the forest by the barons living near its borders.

It came at last—a day in November, when the sun seemed making a last effort to prevail against coming winter. The wind was fresh and bracing, and nature appeared bright and cheerful, on that long-to-be-remembered morning.

Early in the morn, just after sunrise, Bernard de Torci, Gilbert d'Aubyn, Eustace de Senville, and a large body of their retainers, arrived at the castle. They found the men of Aescendune prepared to receive them, and the leaders entered the council chamber of their host.

Page 46

There they perfected their plans—the forest was divided into portions, and a district assigned to each leader to be subdivided and thoroughly explored. All human tracks were to be followed up by the help of the hounds, and prisoners, when taken, to be sent, under guard, to the castle, there to be rigorously examined, if necessary by torture.

The only part of the scheme presenting any real difficulty was the morass in the centre of the forest, already known to our readers. Hugo believed it impenetrable, and that no human being could live within its area; but he sent for his chief huntsman, and examined him before his fellow nobles.

He found that old Ralph regarded the Dismal Swamp, as they called the morass, as utterly uninhabitable and impassable; he had never heard any sounds of life from within; he thought the place haunted; it abounded in quagmires, and corpse lights and baleful fires were seen on its waters at night.

The man was dismissed, and it was decided, that the borders of the morass should be explored, although with little hope of finding any trace of the foe; but should such be found, it was not to be neglected, the more especially if the search were conducted elsewhere in vain.

The northern part of the forest fell to Hugo's share, and was subdivided by him between his chief retainers. Every nook was to be investigated, and signals were arranged whereby all the hunters could be assembled together in case of need.

The work was a very arduous one, for the portion assigned to the retainers of Aescendune alone, occupied a circuit of some fifteen miles, bounded on the east by a stream which ran into the Avon, on the north by a well-defined range of wooded hills.

This was the most important section of all, for what faint indications had been gained of the whereabouts of the foe, all pointed in this direction.

The men-at-arms were divided into five distinct bands, lightly armed, because of the distance they had to travel, and Etienne claimed and obtained the command of one party.

However, the baron, while he had no doubt of his son's valour, grievously doubted his discretion, and added to the party Ralph, his chief forester, strictly charging Etienne in any difficulty to be guided by his advice—directions which the young heir received with a toss of the head, which spoke volumes for his submission.

They entered the forest—a gallant array, each party numbering about twenty, and there were nearly twenty of such bands; but when they divided and again subdivided, and each took their different routes, they appeared lost in the vastness of the forest, and in a

very few minutes every band was so isolated that they heard no sounds indicating that any save themselves were in the wood.

We will leave all other parties to their fate, and confine our attention to that commanded by Etienne, which, indeed, was destined to surpass all the others in the results accomplished, and in their influence on the future destinies of all the personages in our history.

Page 47

They proceeded fully five miles from home before their real task began. Perhaps the reader will wonder how they could know their own destined region in so pathless a wilderness, but it was part of the training they had received as hunters to find their way in the lonely woods; and there were signs innumerable which told them where they were, and in what direction they were going. Etienne alone, could guide his men while day lasted, as well as a pilot could steer a ship in a well-known archipelago, and in Ralph he had a tower of strength.

Every landmark was known—the course of every stream; each tree, by the direction in which it threw its boughs and by the mosses at the foot of its trunk, told the points of the compass.

Yet there were probably, in so large an extent of country, many wild glens and deep fastnesses hitherto untraversed, and these had to be discovered and explored.

Straight through the territory assigned to them marched our little band; keen-nosed dogs went first, secured by leashes, that the game they continually aroused might not lead them astray; men followed who, like American Indians, looked for “trails” in every soft surface of ground, and along the banks of each stream of sweet water, where men might come to drink, but by noon they had traversed the whole extent of their territory in a straight line, and discovered nothing. Once, indeed, they thought they were on the scent of man; but they had crossed the trail of a wild boar and could not restrain themselves from following it up, the scent was so fresh, and herein they wasted much time, but succeeded in killing their boar; and Etienne at once proposed that, since it was midday, they should light a fire and dine upon its flesh.

The forester, old Ralph, objected that the smoke would reveal their presence, and frustrate the object of their expedition; but the young noble replied so rudely that the old man withdrew his objection.

The fire was kindled, the smoke arose high above the tree tops in the clear atmosphere, and soon the poor boar was dissected, and the choicest parts of his flesh held on spits. 'Twas somewhat fresh, but none the worse, thought the roasters, for that.

The glade in which they were seated, through which the little brook foamed and tumbled, was surrounded by magnificent old oaks, some with hollow trunks, others with branches gnarled and twisted in a thousand fantastic shapes, some yet retained a portion of their leaves—brown and sere, one or two were enveloped with ivy, and here and there the mistletoe could be seen, thick and verdant. It was a spot the Druids must have delighted to haunt in the times gone by, and one a painter might like to haph upon now in his woodland strolls.

Some fallen logs were close by the stream, and upon these one party placed the viands, or seated their own comely forms, while others piled fresh sticks upon the fire,

and held out the fizzing meat on spits—full of enjoyment of the hour, and utterly careless of danger.



Page 48

Pierre was seated on one of the fallen trees; Etienne was playing with the dogs, now only two in number, when the elder of them lifted its nose in the air, and then began to growl ominously.

"The dog begins to be uneasy," said old Ralph.

"Another wild boar, probably."

"Had we not better appoint a sentinel or two? we might be taken by surprise in this glade."

"Ralph, where hast thou left thy manhood? Art thou afraid of these shadows?"

"They were not shadows who burnt our farms."

"I wish they had some substance, then we might get hold of them."

"May I appoint men to keep watch?"

"It is not necessary," replied Etienne, quite wilfully, for he had determined not to be advised.

The meal was now prepared, and the whole party gathered round the fire, arranging the logs so as to form seats. They were soon eating with the zest of men who have had the advantage of forest air, when they were disturbed by another growl from the older dog.

Ralph looked uneasily round.

"He smells another boar, but one is enough for our dinner," said Etienne, and they turned again to their meal.

Suddenly one of their number, a woodman named Gilbert, leapt up with a wild cry, and then fell down in their midst dead.

An arrow had pierced his heart.

The Normans rose aghast at this sudden intrusion of death, and gazed wildly around.

But all was yet silent, no war cry followed this deadly act of hostility—the woods seemed asleep.

"To cover," cried Ralph the forester, assuming instinctively the command; "let your own arrows be ready for these lurking cowards."

And the Normans, sheltering themselves behind the trunks of the trees, stood, their arrows fitted to the string, to await the onset they momentarily expected.

But it did not take place, and after a trying pause of some minutes, Etienne, who had quite recovered his audacity, and who was a little nettled at being, as it were, superseded in the command for the moment, shouted:

“Keep your eyes open and search the cover, the miscreants have probably fled, but we may put the dogs on the track.”

The obedient vassals obeyed, not without some hesitation, for they felt that the moment of exposure might be that of death. Still they were forced to undergo the risk, and they searched the immediate neighbourhood, omitting no precautions that experience in woodland warfare suggested.

But all their search was in vain.

“Shall we blow the horn and summon further assistance?” said Ralph.

“No, we shall but recall the other parties from their duties,” said Etienne, not wisely, for the cause was sufficient—they were at least in the neighbourhood of the foe whom all panted to discover; but he was angry with the old forester, and would receive no suggestion.

The dogs, although they ran hither and thither, their noses to the ground, seemed as much in fault as the men, and after an hour had passed in this vain attempt to track the invisible foe, Etienne gave orders to abandon the spot and resume their appointed task, for they had yet to explore a square mile or two of forest—those nearest the morass.

Page 49

But here Ralph ventured a remonstrance; the day was far spent, they had but an hour or two of daylight, and there were heavy clouds in the northeast, which seemed to indicate a snowstorm; he thought “they had better return towards home as fast as they could, and finish their work on the morrow.”

“If thou fearest for thyself, I give thee leave to return, old man; for me, I will stay here till my duty is accomplished, and so will all who value their fealty.”

“It is the first time one of thy house has ever thus spoken to me, my young lord.”

“Let it be the last time then,” said the proud youth; “it depends but upon thyself; and now lead the way—our path is westward. Examine the ground closely; we know we are in the neighbourhood of the foe.”

They obeyed, and an hour passed away without any further alarm, when the dogs recommenced their warning growls.

The men appeared terrified: they knew what had followed those warnings before, and their light jerkins of untanned leather were not proof against arrows. They directed their keenest glances into the forest.

The tall trees rose like the pillars of a cathedral, supporting the fretwork of branches on every side; here and there some monarch of the woods had fallen, and was now covered over with ivy; but no other shelter seemed at hand which might conceal a foe, save some little undergrowth here and there.

But the most serious thing was the hour; the day was fast declining; the clouds which floated above them were fast assuming those roseate tints which they receive from the setting sun; while behind them vast masses, which looked black by contrast with the glowing west, were slowly obscuring the heavens, and the winds were heard moaning more and more loudly as each minute passed.

There was hardly a member of the band who did not share Ralph’s uneasiness, and who would not have given much to find himself safe in the castle; but their wilful young leader was still unmoved—it must be owned that his courage bordered on foolhardiness.

At length the darkness came, as with a rush, upon them; the black clouds were overhead; some feathery flakes of snow blew about them—precursors of the coming storm. Their work was still unaccomplished, but Etienne at length heeded the murmurs of the party, and calling them together, for they had dispersed to look after the signs they hoped to find, said:

“I fear we must leave our work unfinished—we can see no longer, and may as well return home.”

“My lord, would it please thee to number the party? we should be twenty.”

“Count them thyself,” he said.

“Fifteen.”

“We left one behind us where we rested, but where are the rest?” said Ralph.

“It is useless to search for them now—it is so dark, the hour is late—we must return tomorrow.”

“Perhaps,” said the old forester, sorrowfully, “but we are in a forest infested by these English fiends, perhaps by real demons. There are many who affirm as much, and there is not a man here who might not profitably give up a year of his life to be just five miles nearer home.”

Page 50

The old man took the office of guide upon himself, naturally, as the most experienced in woodcraft, and for a mile or two led with confidence; but at length the darkness became intense, and the guide paused.

The night was indeed terrible; it was as black as ink—they could scarce see the uplifted hand when held before the face; while, to add to their discomfort, the snow, now they had changed their course, blew into their faces; the wind had risen and moaned in hollow gusts amidst the tree tops. Its wailings seemed like prognostications of coming evil.

It was at this juncture Ralph was forced to confess he could no longer feel certain of the track.

“Let us trust to the dogs,” said he; “they have an instinct better than our reason. Let them have long leashes, and go as freely as possible; we shall easily follow them, and, please God, shall reach home in time.”

“There is a better guide,” replied Etienne, as they all suddenly saw a solitary light, as from a man carrying a torch, arise before them in the darkness, and glide gently on into the depths of the forest.

CHAPTER X. EVEN THE TIGER LOVES ITS CUB.

We must once more use the privilege of an author, and transport our readers from the distant forest to Aescendune, speedily as the Genius of the Lamp transported the palace of Aladdin.

The November evening was setting in drearily, the fast-fading gleams of daylight were disappearing amidst thickly-falling snow—it was the hour when tired mortals shut doors and windows, turn instinctively to the cheerful hearth, and while they hear the wind roar without, thank God they are sheltered from its blasts; and perhaps think with some pity of poor homeless wanderers, in pathless forests, or on dismal moors.

Troop after troop, the wearied and dispirited Normans returned from their fruitless chase, till all were safely housed, save one unhappy band. First came the wicked old baron himself, with all his twenty retainers, safe and sound, then Bernard de Torci, who had won to himself an English wife and the manor of Wylmcotte; then Gilbert D’Aubyn of Bearleigh. One after another the troops came in from the outer darkness, white with snow, and shook their mantles and jerkins in the guard chamber within the entrance archway, after which their leaders repaired to the bathroom—for, in their way, the Norman warriors were luxurious—and afterwards, perfumed and anointed, donned the festal robes in which they hoped to dazzle the eyes of the fair, if such were to be found in the Castle of Aescendune.

The hour appointed for the banquet was the first hour of the night—six in the evening we should now call it—and the Majordomo sought his lord.

He found him risen from the bath and vested in flowing robes of richest texture, with an ermine mantle around his shoulders.

“The banquet is ready, my lord, but the guests have not all arrived.”

Page 51

"Has my son returned?"

"He has not come back yet, my lord. Shall I delay the banquet?"

"Are all the others in?"

"Sir Eustace de Senville has not yet come from the forest."

"Let it be delayed half an hour."

The old servant shook his head—the roast meats were done to a turn, and he feared the reputation of the ten cooks, who had toiled the long afternoon before the fires, might suffer.

The baron paced impatiently up and down his chamber.

There is some redeeming feature in the hearts of the worst of us: even Lady Macbeth could not herself slay King Duncan, "he looked so like her father," and the one weak point in the armour of proof—of selfishness, we should say—which encrusted Hugo de Malville, was his love for his son.

Etienne was to him as the apple of his eye; and little wonder—the qualities which, we doubt not, nay, we trust, disfigure that amiable youth in the minds of our gentle readers—his pride, his carelessness for the bodily or mental sufferings of others—all these things were nought to the Norman noble, he loved to see his son stark and fierce, and smiled as he heard of deeds which better men would have sternly refused to condone.

He almost longed for war—for some rebellion on the part of the English—that Etienne might flesh his sword and win his spurs, and, as we see, that wish, at least, was gratified.

But it was this very love for his own son which had made the old baron so unloving a stepfather to Wilfred, in whom he could only see the rival of his boy, and both mother and son were obstacles to be removed—the old sinner did not sin for himself, it must be confessed.

Half an hour passed. Sir Eustace, the last who arrived that night, came in, and the baron, to the great relief of the cooks, descended to the hall.

Still he was far too proud and jealous of his dignity to show his anxiety in voice or mien. He descended calmly to the banquet, the chaplain blessed the food, and the tired and hungry nobles fell to at the high table, while their retainers feasted below.

It was a bright and dazzling scene: at the head of the hall sat the Baron and his chief guests upon a platform. Above it hung trophies of war or the chase—arms borne in

many a conflict, swords, spears, arrows—to each of which some legend was attached; the antlers of the giant stag, the tusk of the wild boar, the head and bill of some long-necked heron.

Below, at right angles to the high table, were three other tables, not fixtures, but composed of boards spread over trestles, and covered with coarse white cloths. At these sat the retainers, the men whose rank did not entitle them to sit at the high table, to the number of some three hundred—there was not an Englishman amongst them.

Page 52

All day long the cooks and their menials had groaned before the huge fires, where they roasted deer, sheep, oxen, swine, and the like, and now they bore the joints in procession around the tables, and the guests cut off—with the knives which hung at their girdles, and which, perchance, had been more than once stained by the blood of their foes—such portion of the meat as they fancied, transferred it to their trenchers, and ate it without the aid of forks; nevertheless there were napkins whereon to wipe their hands when they had done.

The leaders sat at the high table—the leaders of each of the numerous bands which had scoured the forest; one, and only one, was absent, and he was, as our readers know, Etienne, son of Hugo.

Naught was said until hunger and thirst were appeased—until basins were brought round with scented water, in which our lords washed their fingers, and after waving them gracefully in the air, dried them with the delicate napkins with which they were girded: and rich wines were poured into goblets of gold and silver; then Hugo asked, from his seat upon the dais:

“What success has gladdened our arms today? Doubtless some of our knights have news for us.”

“I have seen no foe, save the wild boar and a stray wolf, although I have tramped the forest from the rising to the setting sun,” said Sir Bernard.

“Nor I,” “nor I,” said one after the other around the table.

The old man, Eustace de Senville, was silent till all had spoken; then, like Nestor of old, wise, and qualified by age to act as counsellor, he let fall his weighty words, which fell from his lips like the flakes of thick falling snow without.

“My lot hath been different,” he said; “it fell to me to explore the quarter of the forest next to that assigned to the son of our host. We had already completed our task, and were on the point of returning homewards, for the sun was already low, when we heard the blast of a horn appealing to us for aid.”

“From what quarter?” said the baron.

“That assigned to your son. We at once hastened to render help, and, after some fruitless search, heard the horn once more, and, guided by its sound, reached a spot where the groans of one in pain fell upon our ear, amidst the increasing darkness of the forest. We found the victim, his horn by his side, dead—pierced through by an arrow. The life had been ebbing when, hearing our signals, he had striven with his last breath to summon us that he might not die alone, and, indeed, his face looked as one who had died in awful fear with some gruesome sight before his eyes.”

“To what party did he belong?”

“He wore the badge of Aescendune, he was short of stature, one shoulder somewhat higher than the other, and he wore this belt, which we have brought home in hopes he may be known thereby.”

The baron took the belt, with hands which shook in spite of all his efforts at composure, and knew it to belong to one Torquelle, who had been in attendance on his son.

Page 53

"Etienne hath found foes," he said in a voice which he strove to render calm.

"A light snow had begun to fall," continued the speaker, "the sun was already very low, and it was dusk in the woods, when our dogs began to growl. Dimly in the shade we saw three or four beings creeping forward, as if studying the ground carefully. We watched them with fear, doubting if they were of this world."

"Why?"

"They had horns, and tails, and huge ears."

"They say the wood is haunted by wood demons."

"Then thou wert afraid to follow?"

"We dare fight men, we fear none who breathe; but we shrink from Satan and his hosts. Still we sent a flight of arrows, and they vanished."

"Was the distance near enough to do execution?"

"Scarcely, had they been men; it mattered not if they were what they appeared to be."

Strange to say, the idea that the foe had been masquerading for the purpose of frightening them, never struck our Normans.

"When they had gone, we approached the spot," continued the aged knight of Senville, "and found foot marks in the snow, which, from the previous fall, lay lightly on the ground, for the storm of tonight had hardly set in. There were marks of one of our parties, and we saw by torchlight strange footprints, as if they had been tracked by two or three daring foes—we thought we distinguished hoof marks."

A terrible silence fell upon the whole assembly, as the idea that they had been contending with demons, and not with mortals, fell upon them, and perhaps the bravest would have hesitated to enter the forest that night, however dire the need.

The baron knew this; yet when supper was over, when the hour of retiring to rest had arrived, and still there were no signs of his son, he selected a band of trusty warriors, who, in spite of the story of the demons, which Eustace's men had made known throughout the castle, would not be untrue to their lord.

And with these men, while all the rest slept, he penetrated the forest, and with torches and horns made night hideous, until cold and fatigue drove him home, his heart heavier than before, his desire unaccomplished.

He threw himself upon his couch, only to be haunted by dreadful dreams, in which he saw his son surrounded by the demons of Sir Eustace's tale, and in every other variety of danger or distress, like the constantly shifting scenes of a modern theatre.

And in all these dreams the "Dismal Swamp" played a prominent part.

Day broke at last, cold but bright; the first beams of the sun gladdened the castle, reflected keenly from the white ground, the trees hung with frozen snow, which had broken many branches to the ground—the winter seemed to have come in good earnest.

Early in the day, a hundred men, well armed and mounted, led by the baron, again entered the forest. They reached, in due course, the part of the wood assigned to Etienne on the previous day.

Page 54

The snow had effaced all tracks, but Sir Eustace speedily found the spot where he had left the dead man, and there was the corpse, stiff and frozen, but it was evident that the knight's description given the previous evening was all too correct. The man had died in great horror and anguish; the arrow yet remained in his body. It was, as in the earlier cases, one of English make—a clumsy shaft, unlike the polished Norman workmanship.

"We must search the whole district," said the baron; "but we had better keep together."

Every one shared this opinion.

It was the unknown danger that troubled them, the thought that supernatural powers were arrayed against them, that the English had called the fiends to their aid, which terrified these hardened warriors.

If the English had, indeed, sought by ghostly disguise to affright their foes, they had well succeeded.

It was late in the morning before the glade was reached where our party had rested, and the body of the man first slain was discovered, and the whole band gathered around it.

Like the others, he had fallen by an English arrow.

The fear that all their friends had thus fallen became general, and expressed itself in their countenances. The baron was livid.

There was no possibility of tracing the party, the snow had covered the footsteps; but evidence was soon found in the fragments of food—the remains of the carcase of the wild boar—to show that this had been the midday rest, and that here the very beginning of hostilities had taken place.

They returned thence to the spot where Torquelle was slain. Fear and trembling seized many of the baron's warriors as they gazed upon those distorted features—fear, mingled with dread—so mysterious were the circumstances. They buried the body as decently as time permitted, and continued their course until they came upon another corpse slain in like manner.

Horror increased: at every stage the baron feared to find the dead body of his son. They still pursued the same line: it led to the edge of the Dismal Swamp, and there it ended.

They stood gazing upon that desolate wilderness.

"No human being could penetrate there," said Sir Bernard.

“Try.”

Hugo advanced, dismounting for the purpose, but sank almost directly in a quagmire covered with snow, and was drawn out with difficulty.

“No, the place is enchanted.”

“Guarded by fiends.”

“Listen.”

Cries as of men and dogs came across the waste.

“They are the demons of the pit, who would lead us into the quagmires.”

“They sound like human voices.”

“Come what will, if hard frost will but freeze the ground, we will search the place,” said the baron. “Come, my men, we can do no more; let us return—it is near nightfall.”

This welcome order was obeyed by all the Normans with the greatest alacrity, for they dreaded the approach of night, and the terrors of the forest, which had already proved so fatal to their companions.

Page 55

No further mishap befell them; weary and footsore they reached the castle, but the heaviest heart amongst them was that of Hugo.

CHAPTER XI. ALIVE—OR DEAD?

The reader will remember that we left Etienne of Aescendune cum Malville and his band in a most critical moment—lost in a wilderness full of enemies of unknown number and uncertain position; but with a gleam of comfort in the shape of a light which had arisen out of the gloom before them.

“It is one of the rascals carrying a torch. Let loose the dogs; if they but seize him, we can extort the whole truth; then we shall know what to do.”

Ralph immediately slipped the older and fiercer hound, and tried to set him on the destined prey; but to his astonishment the beast bounded forward but a few yards, then returned with its tail between its legs and whined piteously.

“Are we all bewitched?” exclaimed Etienne.

“Witches and warlocks are said to abound in these woods, and many other works of Satan also.”

“The light goes steadily onwards: it is a man carrying a torch; let us follow him up.”

They followed rapidly, the torch going smoothly on before them, when all at once the whole party fell into a miry slough up to their waists.

The deceitful light danced about in a joyous manner, as if it were mocking them, and then went out and left them all in utter darkness, struggling vainly in the mud and slime.

“Where are we?” said Pierre, piteously.

“In the Dismal Swamp,” said Ralph.

“Amongst toads and snakes,” cried another.

At this moment half-a-dozen lights appeared in various directions.

“Good heavens, the place is alive with marsh fires.”

“They are what the English call Jack-o’-lanterns.”

“They are ignes fatui,” said Pierre.

“They are the souls of unbaptized babies,” said Ralph. “Let us try to return to the firm ground we have left.”

More easily said than done. Our unfortunate Normans struggled vainly in the darkness and in the mire, uttering piteous exclamations—cold and frozen, and mocked ever and anon by some blazing light. Many a vow did they make to our Lady of Sorrows, and to St. Erroutt, St. Gervaise, St. Denys, and every other Norman saint, till somebody suggested that the English saints might know more about the morass, and they condescended to appeal to St. Chad (mighty in those parts), beseeching his help in their distress.

Suddenly a piercing cry told that one was being swallowed up in some quicksand; but they could give no aid, and only shudder in helplessness.

At that moment Etienne caught hold of the loose leash by which one of the dogs was secured.

“Let us follow the dogs,” he said; “they always scent out firm ground.”

There was now, happily for them, more light; it had long since ceased to snow, and the stars came out brightly.

Page 56

"See," said Pierre, "the moon is rising; we shall have it quite light soon."

"Would it had risen earlier," croaked Ralph.

The dogs, their noses to the ground, went on bravely, winding in and out between quagmire and rotting herbage. Had the light been brighter, our Normans would have perceived the impressions of numerous footmarks of men on the path they were taking—the dogs were at last on the scent they had sought all day, whether for weal or for woe.

At length the path suddenly ascended a bank, and the light through the tree tops showed that they were approaching a clearing.

They ascended cautiously, and from the summit of the short ascent looked out upon an elevated tableland in the midst of the morass. Before them, encircled by a little brook, which shortly afterwards swelled the waters of the morass, stood a large rustic dwelling, overgrown with ivy; and not far distant rose many houses or huts—in fact, to their no small amazement, they beheld a village, and one, too, that no individual amongst them had ever seen or heard of before.

"'Tis the very nest of vipers we have sought all day," said Etienne.

"And have found to our undoing," lamented Ralph.

"See, there is light behind that shutter, I will creep up and look in," said Etienne; "rest you all here."

There was no glass in common use in those days, and, save when horn was employed, people—the poor at least—had to choose, even in the daytime, between darkness and warmth; for when they let in the light, they let in the weather.

Looking through the chinks in the shutters, Etienne gazed inside.

It was the farmhouse occupied by a former lord, Elfwyn of Aescendune, during the Danish invasions, as recorded in a former Chronicle, and was larger and more commodious than usual in those days. There were several smaller houses, or rather huts, around; but if they had inmates, they were all silent—perhaps asleep, for the hour was late.

Beside a fire, kindled beneath a large open chimney, such as were then in use in the bettermost houses—for the poor were content with a hole in the roof—sat a youth of some sixteen years of age, busily attending to a large pot over the fire, from which, from time to time, savoury fumes ascended, the odour of which gladdened even the olfactory organs of our young Norman aristocrat.

Etienne knew him: it was Eadwin, the son of Wilfred's old nurse, for whom he had an ancient grudge, which he at once resolved to gratify.

He summoned Ralph and the rest who had escaped the morass—they were only ten in number, the others had succumbed to the horrors of that fearful night.

Yet even so, the impulses of pride and cruelty were not subdued in the heart of Etienne, son of Hugo.

“The English robbers have left their haunt for a time; doubtless they were the fellows who passed us in the forest, and there is but one boy left in charge, of whom I know something; we will seize him and learn the truth.”

Page 57

“Suppose they come back while we tarry here?”

“We will set a watch to warn us in good time.”

Etienne stepped lightly to the door; it was actually unbarred, so secure did the English feel in this hitherto inaccessible retreat, and his hand was on the shoulder of his intended victim before he had taken the alarm. He turned round and started violently as he recognised his ancient enemies, then made a vain attempt to gain the door, which was immediately and easily frustrated.

“Nay, thou young oaf, thou canst not escape. Dost thou not know thy own lords? Thou art a runaway thrall, and thy life is forfeited; but if thou wilt but use thy tongue, thou mayest perchance save it and escape lightly. Tell me—Who are the people who live here? Who is their leader? How many there be? Where they are now?”

The young dweller in the woods had by this time recovered his self possession. He was a mere lad, yet endued with manly courage which fitted him to endure nobly for the sake of those whom he loved.

“Thou art not my true lord, and never wast; neither will I answer thy questions, though thou slay me.”

“Then thou mayst prepare for death.”

“They live who may avenge me.”

“We will chance that. Stand yonder, against the wall, stretch out thine arms, or they shall be stretched for thee.

“Tie him, my men, to that post—” pointing, as he spoke, to one of the uprights which supported the roof, and which was partially detached from the wooden wall—“and extend his arms to the posts on either side.”

Conscious that resistance was hopeless, Eadwin submitted quietly to be bound, listening nevertheless so eagerly for sounds from without that Ralph marked his strained attention; Etienne was intent upon his designed cruelty.

“Once more, wilt thou answer me?” he said.

“No,” said his victim, quietly and firmly.

“Then thou must suffer. Thou shalt die as thy St. Edmund did—fit death it was, too, for a beggarly English saint. I ask thee for the last time.”

No reply. Etienne bade the men stand aside, and then, taking his stand at the other end of the room, which may have been twenty feet long, took accurate aim and shot an arrow through the muscle of the right arm.

“Wilt thou speak?”

Beads of sweat stood upon the brow; but the lips found strength yet to answer—once more the bolt flew, and the left arm was pierced in turn.

“Wilt thou answer my questions now?”

“The rebels and fools, thy countrymen, have been amusing themselves by shooting at us all day; methinks the tables are turned now.”

He shot again and wounded his victim in the shoulder. The whole frame trembled; the lips moved, as if in prayer.

“Let me shoot this time,” said Pierre, “if he will not answer.”

“Take the bow then; hit the other shoulder.”

Pierre took very accurate aim, and shot right through the heart. One convulsive throb, and the body hang by the cords dead, and past the reach of suffering.

Page 58

“Thou fool!” said Etienne, forgetting his customary courtesy to his equals, “thou hast spoilt all—we may never learn the truth now.”

“He was too brave a lad to be tortured,” said Pierre, upon whom the patient courage of the sufferer had made a very deep impression, “so I gave him the coup de grace.”

“My lord, had we not better depart? These English may return at any moment; tomorrow we may come with all the force at our command.”

“We will sup first at all events. That soup smells good; it will put a little warmth into our bodies, and it is worth a little risk to have the chance of drying our clothes at this fire.”

So they left the body of poor Eadwin where it had fallen, and being now spent with hunger, they poured the soup into basins and ate it greedily.

Suddenly the door was burst open, the room was filled with their foes—uplifted weapons, deadly blows, cries, curses in English and French—in short, such a melee ensued that it passes all our power to describe it. The fire was kicked over the place—blood hissed as it ran over the floor and met the hot embers—the torches were speedily extinguished or converted into weapons—men rolled over and over in deadly strife, seeking where to plant the dagger or knife—they throttled each other, or dashed hostile heads against the floor—they tore the hair or beard as they struck beneath, not with the fist, but the knife—on rolled the strife—the very building shook—till there was a sudden lull, and in a few more minutes it was peace.

A dozen Englishmen stood upright amidst prostrate corpses, many streaming with blood; while many bodies lay on the floor, eight of which were discovered, when the lights were rekindled, to be Normans.

Only one Norman yet lived, and he was wounded—it was Pierre.

The young Breton lay on the ground, grievously wounded in several places, yet not mortally—and fully conscious—when he heard an eager voice inquire in a tone of authority:

“What is the meaning of all this? How did they cross the morass? Are many of our people hurt?”

He looked up; the voice startled him. Well it might—it was to him a voice from the grave.

There, in the doorway, living and well, strong and well-liking, in the glare of torchlight, stood his former companion, Wilfred of Aescendune.

Their eyes met, and they gazed fixedly, yes, and proudly, upon each other; but the glance of Wilfred softened first. He saw before him the only one of his former companions who had ever given him a friendly word, whom misapprehension alone had estranged from him, which he (Wilfred) had refused to remove.

“We meet again, Pierre de Morlaix.”

“Thou art not dead, then. How didst thou escape? Who burnt the monastery?”

“Art thou so demented as to ask me? Dost thou think English torches fired an English house of God? Times are changed now, and thou seest me surrounded by the vassals of my father’s house, who own no lord but their natural chieftain. But where is Etienne? We have watched your party all day, and know that the young tyrant was their leader. Is he amongst the dead?”

Page 59

“Look for thyself.”

No. Etienne was not amongst the dead. How, then, had he escaped?

“Search the premises—search the woods—stop the paths across the morass—men and dogs, all of you. Better all the rest had escaped: he shall never, never live to be lord of Aescendune.”

And Wilfred vanished to give orders out of doors.

An hour had passed away; the dead had been removed, the English to be decently buried—for there was an old church built by Elfwyn of Aescendune, during the Danish wars {xi}, and around it lay the graves of those who had died in troublous times; there English priests were still found to serve at the altar; Norman tyranny did not spare the English Church any more than the English nobility.

But the Norman dead were simply carried to a quagmire of bottomless depth which absorbed the bodies, and furnished a convenient though dreadful grave.

And in this division of the slain, young Eadwin, pierced with four wounds, was found; and the arrows, yet remaining, showed at once that he had not fallen in fair strife.

The search for Etienne, still unsuccessful, was being eagerly pursued, when Wilfred returned, bent on questioning Pierre, and beheld the dead body of Eadwin.

He was deeply moved, for he had loved the poor lad, his foster brother, well, and could not easily restrain his emotion, but so soon as he was master of himself, the desire for vengeance superseded softer emotions, and he ordered the wounded Pierre to be brought before him.

He had no difficulty in learning the truth. Pierre, now upon his mettle, somewhat sorrowfully said that as the young thrall would not answer his lord when bidden, Etienne had endeavoured to compel him.

“Thou hadst, then, no part in it?”

“I gave the coup de grace.”

“Then thou hast sealed thine own fate: it is folly to extend mercy to those who never show it.”

“I have not asked it of thee—of the associate of murderers and outlaws.”

The sun rose clear and bright after that eventful night—the storm was over—its rising beams fell upon a company of archers drawn up in the English encampment—upon a

young warrior doomed to die, who stood bravely before them. The gray-haired priest who had prepared him for death—the only favour shown him—bade him a last farewell; the bows twanged, and the same arrows which had transfixed the flesh of Eadwin pierced the heart of Pierre de Morlaix.

CHAPTER XII. THE ENIGMA SOLVED.

We owe our readers some apology for having so long trifled with their patience concerning the fate of Wilfred, and we trust they are somewhat anxious to hear how he escaped the flames on that fatal night when the monastery was burnt.

When good Father Alphege heard that the boy had returned under captivity, for whose safety he was so anxious, he sent at once another messenger to the good Bishop Geoffrey, imploring his aid for the orphan.

Page 60

But the monastery was already watched and neither letter nor messenger was ever heard of again.

Imagine the good Father's astonishment when the following night he received Wilfred safe and sound from the hands of Hugo, to do penance.

"Wilfred, my dear boy, tell me all. What has become of the letter I entrusted you with?"

"It was taken from me in my sleep. Write another; oh father, let me start again at once!"

"The roads are all beset, my dear child, as I have heard today. I have already sent a messenger, but tremble for his safety."

"What can I do to avenge my mother—my dear mother?"

"Wait, my child, only for a little while; God is too just to let such crime remain unpunished."

"Why was not his arm outstretched to save? Oh, my father, I shall become an infidel if this villain escapes unpunished!"

"Only wait; one day is with Him as a thousand years."

"But I shall not live a thousand years; I must see the day myself."

"Nay, dear child, thou art not thyself; this is wicked. Go into the church and pray for the grace of patience."

"I cannot pray—I must act."

"Go and pray, my son. Come to me again in half an hour; I have inquiries to make which touch thy safety. I would fain know why the baron sent thee here, since he knoweth all; it would seem the last thing he would be likely to do."

The good prior soon found by personal observation that the monastery was watched, and had been so since Wilfred entered it, and saw at once that did he start again the lad would never reach his journey's end, and that suspicion would be thrown upon him and his brethren.

He did not hesitate long; he had no doubt that Wilfred's life was somehow threatened, and resolved to secure his safety. He sent for a certain brother Kenelm, a monk in priestly orders, who had long been entrusted with a delicate duty.

"How are our poor brethren in the woods, my brother?"

“They are faring well; there is no lack of venison, and their corn crops are ripening for harvest. The land, thou knowest, hath been cultivated for many years.”

“It is providential that the Normans have never discovered that little Zoar, which may remain unknown until their tyranny be overpast; for surely God will not quite forget this poor people, sinners although we have all been.”

“The morass grows wider and deeper every year; the course of the brooks which form it has been quite choked, and their waters but tend to increase the desolation around.”

“Couldst thou find thy way there this very night?”

“Surely, if there were need.”

“There is great need. The young thane, Wilfred, is in danger—there is some plot against his life. What it is I know not, but our poor house has been watched ever since he has been here. Come to the window and look; I have blown out the light; now look—dost thou not see a man under the shade of the beech, near the entrance gate?”

Page 61

“Verily I do, father.”

“And now come with me (leading him along a passage); look through this window.”

“Yes, there is another. Why do they watch?”

“That the young Wilfred may not escape; they think we shall send him off again, as they know I did before.”

“How do they know, father?”

“They have read my letter to the bishop.”

“Then why have they sent him here? I am quite bewildered.”

“That he may be sent again, entrapped, or slain, and failing that, I know not what they will do. But we will outwit them; thou shalt take him this very night to his poor thralls who dwell in the swamp. They will rejoice to see him, and will live or die for him, as seemeth best.”

“But since we are watched, how shall we escape?”

“By the river. It is very dark: thou must unmoor the boat and float down the stream for a full mile, without noise of oars, then enter the forest and place the precious boy in safety.”

“It shall be done, father.”

“And quickly. Here he comes—supper, and then thou must say thy compline on the river: thou wilt go while all the rest are in the chapel, and mayst join us in spirit.”

The good prior then went to the church, through the great cloister. The poor lad he loved was praying and weeping.

“Wilfred,” said the prior, “dost thou feel better now? Hast thou poured out thy soul before thy Heavenly Father?”

“Better? yes, a little better now, father.”

“Come with me to the refectory.”

They left the church.

“Now eat a good meal.”

“I cannot eat—it chokes me, father.”

“Thou must, my dear son; it is a duty, for thou must travel far tonight.”

“Thank God.”

“But it is not to Oxford, my son; thou wouldst not outlive the night. It is that very journey they want thee to essay.”

“Why?”

“That they may slay thee by the way.”

“I may have my father’s sword, which hangs over his tomb, may I not?”

“Silly boy, what could one do against a score? Nay, thou must go and hide for the present in the forest—thou rememberest ‘Elfwyn’s Grange’?”

“Where my great grandfather hid from the Danes? Yes, many a time have I gone there to shoot wild fowl, while my poor father was alive.”

“And thou knowest the buildings in the midst of the firm ground?”

“Well.”

“Thou hast never told thy Norman companions about them?”

“Never! they one and all think the morass a mere desert, a continuous swamp.”

“So much the better, my dear son, for more than half the poor folk who have deserted the village are there, and Father Kenelm will take thee to them, for he knoweth the way, ministering to them weekly as he does.”

“But why may I not stay here?”

“I dare not keep thee, dear child; I fear some plot against thy life; nay, the morass is the only safe place for thee till we can communicate with the bishop, who has once befriended thee and may do so again.”

Page 62

“Oh father, let it not be long!”

“That is in God’s hands; abide patiently and wait thou on the Lord, and He shall make thy path plain. Now eat; I will not say one word more till thou art full.”

Poor Wilfred did his best, and ate the last meal he was ever to eat under that fated roof. The good fathers never suspected the real design of their remorseless enemy.

The supper over, beneath those beams which were soon to fall blazing upon their fated inmates, the lad bid a last farewell to the good prior, to whom he had transferred the affection he once felt for his dear parents. He fell on his shoulder, he wept, embraced, and parted. The good prior wept, too. They never met again.

“Take care of the precious lad, Father Kenelm; remember thou hast the hope of Aescendune with thee.”

They entered the little “punt” very quietly. The night was warm, but fortunately obscure. They unmoored, and dropped down the stream in perfect silence, listening to the bell as it tolled for compline.

At length they reached the place the prior had indicated. They left the boat, and entered the forest in safety, utterly undiscovered—here, only Father Kenelm’s accurate knowledge of the place could have availed them in the darkness.

In three hours they had traversed ten woodland miles, and drew near the quagmires. The path became fearfully intricate, and Wilfred was startled by the marsh fires, while Father Kenelm began to pray for the poor souls—he somehow supposed them to be, or to represent, poor silly wandering souls—the while the night owl sang a dismal chorus to his ditty. They followed a devious winding road—in and out—with much care, the father holding Wilfred’s hand all the time, until they emerged and found themselves ascending between two steep banks. It was a narrow valley, through which a brook poured its waters into the desolation beneath.

At the summit they stopped and rested for a few minutes. It was not, as may be imagined, very high; but beneath lay the whole extent of the Dismal Swamp. It was after midnight.

“What can that brightness in the sky portend, my child? There must be some dreadful fire; and, alas! it looks as if in the neighbourhood of Aescendune!”

“I hope it is the castle.”

The poor monk was very much alarmed; he feared it might be the monastery, and the reader knows he was right.

Now the heavens were lit up with intense brightness, now it faded again. It was long before they left the summit and the view of the reddened sky.

“May it not be the northern lights?”

“Nay, my son, it is south of us, and they never look quite like this. I fear me mischief is abroad, and shall not be happy till I get me home again tomorrow.”

Poor Father Kenelm, the woods were now his sole home.

At length, as the brightness disappeared, they continued along the brook, until they reached a wide extent of flat meadow ground traversed by the stream, separated by low hills from the morass.

Page 63

In the centre of the valley, if such it may be called, the brook divided, enclosing about an acre of ground, ere its streams met again, hurrying down to the morass. Deep and rapid as it was, its course had been but short; a copious spring burst from the ground not half a mile above, whence streams issuing different ways helped to form the slimy waste which girt in this little island of firm land.

There, in the ground enclosed by the divided stream, was the home once inhabited by the ancestors of our young hero. The monk knocked loudly at the door—no watch was kept—the marsh was their protection.

The dogs began to bark, and one or two which were loose came up, half disposed to make war upon the travellers, but they soon recognised the monk. Lights were seen, the doors opened, two or three sunburnt faces appeared in the doorway.

“Sexwulf, I bring you a guest; look at him—dost thou know him?”

“It is our young lord!”

Late though it was, the whole household was soon in uproar—the welcome was grand—and it was all the good father could do to prevent their arousing the whole village, to hear the joyful news that their young lord—rescued from Norman tyranny, which had even threatened his life—was there, relying on their protection, and that they, esteemed by the world as outlaws, were his chosen guardians. They felt indeed, now, that they were not outlaws, but patriots fighting against successful tyrants—the foes of their country; even as the brave Hereward (so they had heard) was fighting in the Camp of Refuge, amongst the fens of East Anglia.

And for Wilfred, the representative of a house which had ruled them for centuries, the son of their lamented lord, who had died so bravely at Senlac, they would one and all, if necessary, lay down their lives.

On the morrow, at eventide, Father Kenelm returned from Aescendune, horror struck, and brought the news of the burning of the abbey and the lamentable fate of his brethren.

There was not an Englishman whose heart was not moved with indignation and pity, nor one who failed to lay the burden of the deed where our readers have long since, we doubt not, laid it—on the head of Hugo.

Hence those terrible reprisals our pages have recorded—hence no mercy was shown to the merciless; and the war between the baron and his revolted dependants became one of extermination.

Every day brought accessions to their number; they were in communication with similar centres of disaffection in all parts of the midlands; and they confidently hoped for the day when the Normans should be expelled, and England be England again.

So Wilfred regarded his banishment in the forest as a temporary one at the best, and no longer looked for the aid of Normans, lay or ecclesiastical, to avenge his mother's wrongs and his own; he would vindicate them by the strong hand.

He was now eighteen years of age, practised in all manly sports and warlike exercises, braced by daily use to support fatigue in mind and body, and every day rendered him more qualified to be the leader of his own people in the desperate warfare which lay between them and their rights.

Page 64

He shared their hardships, fared as they did, exposed himself as far as they would permit him to every peril, and was modest enough (unlike his Norman rival) to be guided by the advice of his elders, the wisest of his late father's retainers.

One fault—and one the youthful reader will, we fear, look very lightly upon—was gaining upon him—a deep and deadly hatred to everything Norman. It was even rumoured that, like Hannibal of old, he had vowed an undying hostility to the foes of his country and his house; if so, our pages will show how he kept his word.

In this feeling Father Kenelm, who now ministered wholly to the spiritual necessities of the dwellers in the Dismal Swamp, strove feebly to restrain him; but Wilfred was rapidly outgrowing all restraint, and perhaps the good father, who after all was human, and the sole survivor of a happy and united brotherhood, did not feel very deeply shocked by the hatred manifested to the destroyers of his brethren.

Yet he pleaded for Pierre de Morlaix on the eventful night recorded in our last chapter; but the cruel death of Eadwin at the hands of the invaders rendered his prayers useless. The whole feeling of the little community was with Wilfred in the matter; besides, they wanted no prisoners, and dared not set one free to disclose the secret of their refuge.

But we must resume the thread of our story, for our readers are doubtless profoundly interested in the fate of Etienne, the rival heir, and we must apologise for having kept them so long in suspense.

CHAPTER XIII. “COALS OF FIRE {xii}.”

The unhappy youth, whose recklessness and folly had led to the entire destruction of the troop confided to his care, was now their sole survivor.

In that hour, when all was lost, at the close of the deadly struggle in the house, he had crawled through the door, ere the lights were rekindled which had been extinguished in the frenzy of the conflict, and sought refuge in flight: not so much, it must be owned, because he feared death (although youth naturally clings to life), as because he longed to live for vengeance, and to carry the secret of the “Dismal Swamp” to Aescendune.

He was bleeding, bruised, scarcely able to move without pain—all his energy seemed exhausted in the supreme effort which had saved him, at least for the time; but it was again very dark, thick clouds charged with snow once more obscured the moon, and the cover of the trees was before him, which he sought, determined rather to perish in the morass than to become the sport of his triumphant foes.

He had gained the desired shelter, and had paused to rest himself and consider what to do next, when he felt something living come into contact with his legs. He started, as

well he might under the circumstances, when he saw to his great relief that it was one of the dogs which had accompanied his party throughout the day, and hope sprang up in his breast. The hound might perhaps lead him back through the morass.

Page 65

At that moment, the arrival of Wilfred with a large body of fresh enemies took place, and Etienne was yet within hearing when his rival stood in the doorway and cried aloud:

“Etienne, son of Hugo, has been here and escaped; hunt him down, men and dogs; he can hardly have passed the morass; we must not let him live to become a murderer like his father.”

The voice sounded like a summons from the dead. Etienne turned pale; then the blood coursed rapidly through his veins, as he saw by the light of the moon, which emerged just then from a cloud, his hated rival, standing in front of the farmhouse—alive, and for the time victorious.

Now all was clear. Wilfred was the cause of the calamities which had fallen upon them, and the leader of the outlaws; and Etienne, who, to do him justice, never suspected the true author of the crime, doubted not that his rival had fired the monastery to conceal his flight.

He felt an intense desire that he might grapple with his young foe in the death struggle. Willingly would he have accepted such a decision between their rival claims; but he was alone, wounded, exhausted, a faithful dog his sole friend. He felt that the day of vengeance must be postponed.

He spoke to the poor hound, and succeeded in making it comprehend that he wanted “to go home.” With that canine sagacity which approaches very near to reason, the dog at once sought for the path by which they had entered the morass, found it, and ran forward eagerly. Etienne entered it, trembling with hope, when the dog stopped, growled, and came back to its lord. The steps of many feet were heard approaching.

“The place swarms with foes,” muttered the hunter, who had become in his turn the hunted.

A crash in the bush behind, and a huge English mastiff rushed upon Etienne. His Norman sleuth hound threw himself upon the assailant of his master, and a terrific struggle ensued. Etienne did not dare wait to see its conclusion or help his canine protector, for the noise of the conflict was drawing all the English there; but he struggled back to the open, and ran along the inner edge of the wood, hoping to find another track through the morass.

Suddenly he stumbled upon a swift little stream flowing down a bank into the desert of slime. He felt at once that it must rise from the chain of hills behind, and that by following it he might get out of the swamp; it was all too like a mountain current to have its origin in the level, and he determined to follow it.

Besides, if he walked up the stream, he would baffle the English dogs, for water leaves no scent; in short, collecting all his energies, he strode rapidly up the brook.

But his strength was not equal to a sustained effort; the excitement of the night had been too much for him; and after he had traversed about a mile, he sat down to rest on the bank, and fell into a dead faint.

The first beams of the rising sun had illuminated the horizon, the very time at which poor Pierre was led forth to die, when an aged Englishwoman, coming down to draw water at the spring, espied the fainting youth.

Page 66

She advanced to his side, and seemed moved by compassion as she gazed upon the wounded, bloodstained form.

“How young he is, poor lad. Ought I to help him? Yes, it must be right to do so. How the cry of hounds and men comes up the glen!”

“Wake up, wake up!” she cried, and sprinkled water upon his face.

He rose up as if from a deep sleep.

“Mother, what is it?”

“Come with me; I will give thee shelter.”

His senses returned sufficiently for him both to comprehend her meaning and his own danger, and he followed mechanically. Just above, the waters of the stream, dammed up for the moment, had formed a little pond, surrounded by trees, save on one side, where was a little garden of herbs, and in its centre, close by the stream, stood a humble cot.

It was built of timber; posts had been driven at intervals into the ground, willow twigs had been woven in and out, the interstices filled with the clay which was abundant at the edge of the pond—and so a weather-proof structure had been built. There was no chimney, only a hole in the roof for the smoke to escape, above the place for the fire.

Within, the floor was strewn with rushes; there was a table, two or three rough chairs made of willow, a few household implements.

At one extremity a curtain, made of skins of wolf or deer, was drawn across the room, beyond which was a couch, a kind of box filled with rushes and leaves, over which lay a blanket and coverlets, of a softer material than one would have expected to find in a peasant’s hut of the period.

Many other little articles seemed to have been destined for a prouder dwelling; but all besides betokened decent poverty. All was clean, and there could be little danger of hunger in the settlement, while the woods were full of game, and their little fields were fruitful with corn.

Into this abode the old dame led her guest.

“Thou art Norman,” she said.

“I am the son of the lord of Aescendune. If thou canst aid me to escape my foes, thou shalt name thy own reward.”

“Not all the gold thou hast would tempt me to aid thee; but the love of One who died for us both forbids me to give thee up to death. Thou art too young, poor youth, to be answerable for thy father’s sins.”

A proud speech was on his lips, but prudence prevailed, and the worthy cub of the old wolf determined to wear sheep’s clothing till his claws were grown again.

“The saints reward thee,” he said, “since no other reward thou wilt have.”

He could say no more, but staggered into her hut, his strength quite gone.

Nearer and nearer drew the cry of hounds and men.

“Save me if thou canst,” he said.

She took him behind the curtain, made him lie down on the couch, which was her own, and covered him completely over with a coverlet. Then she charged him to lie quiet, whatever happened, and shut the door of her hut.

Page 67

By and by it burst open, and Wilfred stood in the doorway.

“Mother, hast thou seen any one pass this way? The Normans have been in the hamlet: we have slain all but one, and he, the worst of all, has escaped us.”

“Canst thou not spare even one poor life?”

“Nay, it is Etienne, son of the old fiend Hugo; besides, once safe off, he would betray our secret before we are ready for action.”

“I cannot help thee in thy chase; thou knowest how I hate and shrink from bloodshed, as did thy sainted mother.”

“Yes, but they did not shrink from poisoning her—they whom she would not have harmed to save her own life.”

“God will avenge—leave all to Him.”

“Nay, mother, we waste time; if thou hast not seen him, we go.”

“Hast thou seen my Eadwin? He is generally here with the lark?”

Wilfred's face changed; he stammered out some evasive reply, and dashed out to join the men and hounds, who were quite at fault; they had lost the scent far below, where Etienne entered the brook, and were diligently investigating, one by one, all the tracks that led from the morass.

Etienne had heard all, and his heart smote him. From the language used, the words he had heard, he felt that this old woman must be the foster mother of his rival, and, if so, the mother of that very Eadwin he had so cruelly put to death the previous night; he quite understood Wilfred's evasive reply.

His heart smote him, and he repented of this cruelty, at least: he dreaded the moment when his preserver must learn the truth. Would she then give him up?

What, too, did Wilfred mean by his allusion to poison? Had he any grounds for such suspicion? Poison was not an unknown agent amongst the Normans. The great Duke himself had been suspected (doubtless wrongfully) of removing Conan of Brittany by its means.

But fatigue overcame him, and he slept. And during that sleep symptoms of fever began to show themselves. He began to talk in his dreams—“There goes a fire—avoid it, it is an evil spirit—shoot arrows at it. Make it tell the secret—now we shall know about the swamp. Here is a fiend throttling me—oh, its awful eyes, they blaze like two marsh fires. No, tie him to the wall; he shall tell the truth or die. What are you giving me



to drink?—it is blood, blood. You have poisoned me—I burn, burn—my veins are full of boiling lead—my heart a boiling cauldron. See, there are the marsh fiends—they are carrying away Louis and Pierre—their tails are as whips—ah, an arrow through each of their arms will stop them. Where is my armour?—a hunting dress won't stop their darts, or save one from their claws. Oh, father, help me—save me from the goblins.”

In this incoherent way he talked for hours, and the old dame shuddered as he confused the real tragedy of the previous night with imaginary terrors. Oh, how awful were his ravings to her, when at last she learned the truth. Yet in those very ravings he showed that remorse was at his heart.

Page 68

She wept as she sat by his bed—wept over the son he had slain. The details of that tragedy were, however, studiously concealed from her by Wilfred's sedulous care; yet she knew Etienne had been the leader of the hostile troop, in conflict with whom she supposed her Eadwin to have fallen in fair open fight; for she was led to understand he had been slain in the terrific struggle in the house.

"The only son of his mother, and she was a widow."

Father Kenelm came and read to her the story of the widow's son at Nain, from King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon version of the Gospels. Not even to him did she confide the secret, or tell who was separated from the good priest only by a curtain—an instinct told her it was right to tend and save—she would trust nothing else.

But in spite of this resolution the good father discovered it all; for while he read the sweet story of old, he heard a cry in Norman French.

"Keep off the fiend—the hobgoblin—he has got burning arrows—snakes! snakes! there are snakes in the bed!"

"What means this, good mother?"

"Oh, thou wilt not betray him."

"Hast thou a fugitive there? Methinks I know the voice. Can it be the son of the wicked baron?"

"He is not answerable for his father's sin; oh, do not betray him—he is mad with fever."

"Dost thou mean to release him, should he get well? Methinks it were better that he should die."

"With all his sins upon his head? May the saints forbid."

"At least were he but absolved after due contrition, and thou knowest that thou hast little cause to love him."

"His death cannot give me back my boy," and she wept once more.

"Nay, it cannot; but if thou dost save him, it shall be under a solemn pledge never to betray the place of our retreat. I will myself swear him upon the Holy Gospels. But woe to him should our young lord Wilfred discover him; I verily believe he would die the death of St. Edmund {xiii}."

"Canst thou not teach poor Wilfred mercy—thou art his pastor and teacher?"

“He grows fiercer daily, and chafes at all restraint. Remember what he has suffered.”

“The greater the merit, could he but forgive. You will keep my secret, father?”

“I will: let me see him.”

Father Kenelm went behind the curtain and watched the sufferer. Etienne glared at him with lacklustre eyes, but knew him not, and continued his inarticulate ravings. His forgiving nurse moistened his lips from time to time with water, and by him was a decoction of cooling herbs, with which she assuaged his parching thirst.

“Thou art a true follower of Him who prayed for His murderers,” said Father Kenelm.
“The Man of Sorrows comfort thee.”

CHAPTER XIV. THE GUIDE.

Rarely had a spring occurred so dry as that of 1069. With the beginning of March dry winds set in from the east, no rain fell, and the watercourses shrank to summer proportions.

Page 69

All that winter Hugo de Malville had mourned in hopeless grief the loss of his boy—his only child; but at length grief deepened into one bitter thirst—a thirst for revenge.

That the Dismal Swamp protected the objects of his hatred from his sword he felt well assured; and had the frost been keen enough to render the marshes penetrable, he would have risked all in a desperate attempt to root out the vermin, as he called the poor natives, from the woods.

But frost alternated with thaw, and snow with rain, and no attempt was likely to be attended with success; so he waited and added compound interest to his thirst for vengeance.

At length set in the dry and fierce winds of which we have spoken, and he felt secure of his prey at last; so preparations were at once made for a grand battle in the marshes.

The keen winds continued, and the scouts reported that the swamp was drier than they had ever seen it before. At length April arrived, and with its earliest days—days of bright sunshine—it was decided to delay no longer, but to explore the marshes with the whole force of the barony, strengthened by recruits from the castles of the neighbouring Norman nobles who willingly lent their aid, and hastened to share the sport dearest of all to the Norman mind.

But one thing was necessary to secure success—a guide, and how to procure one was the riddle which puzzled Hugo, both by day and night.

No Norman could help them; but might not some Englishmen serve, not as willing tools, but under the compulsion of force and the dread of torture?

There were no English in the domains of the baron; all had fled into the forest who were yet alive. There were, it is true, native woodmen in other parts of the wilderness; but they were not vassals of Hugo, and one and all had repeatedly disclaimed knowledge of that part of the forest which was to be explored.

In his perplexity Hugo offered great rewards to anyone who would discover any of the former people of Aescendune and bring them before him.

Leaving Hugo and his friends to concert their murderous plans, we must invite the reader to accompany us once more to freedom's home, the Dismal Swamp.

A council was being held at this selfsame time, which materially assisted the schemes of the baron, although not greatly to his ultimate gratification.

It was held around the fire in the same farmhouse in which poor Eadwin had met his death, and which had now become the headquarters of the outlaws whom Norman tyranny had made.

Wilfred, young although he was, presided—for was he not the representative of the ancient lords of Aescendune, and those gathered around him the descendants of the men whom his fathers had often led to victory?

On his right sat Haga, the oldest retainer of his house, a man who at the beginning of the century had actually fought with Alfgar against the Danes; on his left, Boom, the ancient forester of the Aescendune woods—as moderns would say, “the head keeper.”

Page 70

And there were Sexwulf and Ulf, Tosti and Elfwold, Ernulph and Ordgar, Oslac and Osgood, Wulfsy and Ringulph, Frithgist and Wulfgar—men whose names sounded rough and uncouth in Norman ears, but were familiar enough to the natives.

The whole party having assembled, Wilfred, as a consequence of his rank, spoke first and opened the debate.

“We have all come together tonight, Englishmen and friends, to consider what we shall do in a very grave crisis—the gravest which has yet occurred since we fled to this refuge from the Norman tyrant Hugo—whom may the saints confound. The thrall, Oslac, imperilling his life for our sake, has been to Aescendune, and brings us back certain information that there is a great gathering of men and horse to explore the swamp, for they guess shrewdly that we are hidden here, and they know now who burnt their farms and slew their men in the woods—thus making them afraid, the cowards, to venture therein save in large parties.

“But since the old bear has lost his cub, his thirst for vengeance incites him to stake all upon one grand attempt to penetrate our fastnesses, and the dryness of the season seems to him to make it possible.”

“Our pools and sloughs are never quite dry—they are bottomless,” said Beorn, “and you might stow away the castle of Aescendune in some of them, and ’twould sink out of sight.”

“But it is our object to foil his good intentions towards us: sooner or later we must fight him, and why not now? Haga, my father, thou art the oldest and wisest here present; speak, and we will be guided by thy counsel.”

“Let the Norman come,” said the sage solemnly; “he shall perish in his pride.”

“In what manner shall he die?”

“By the death meet for the sacrilegious destroyer of the priory—by fire—it is God’s will, revealed to me in visions of the night.”

“Fire? how?” cried several; then one common idea seemed to strike them all.

“The reeds. Once entangled in the marshes, we might fire them all round.”

“But how shall we get him to enter the marshes where the dry rushes are thickest?”

“There is a bed of rushes and weeds half a mile across, around the heron’s pool, and it is now so dry just there, that it would bear the accursed foe, horses, and armour, could they be enticed to follow the path which traverses it.”

“Who shall entice them and prevail?” said Beorn.

“Will any of our men risk their own lives and volunteer as guides to the Normans? They are seeking guides everywhere.”

There was a dead silence. At length a man arose—Ordgar, son of Haga.

“I will take my life in my hand to deliver my people from the tyranny of this Norman wolf.”

“God bless thee, my son,” said his aged sire; “thou art the light of mine eyes, but I can risk thee in thy country’s cause and the cause of the House of Aescendune.”

Page 71

"It is a holy cause," said Father Kenelm, who was present: "God's arm is bared for vengeance—the blood of my martyred brethren cries aloud from beneath the altar."

"And thou wilt say a mass for us?"

"It is my duty, since I may not fight with carnal weapons."

"But, Ordgar, how dost thou propose to act?"

"They are scouring the woods daily, in search of some of us poor English, whom they may force by torture to be their guides. I will throw myself in their way."

"They will not harm thee, my son; they are too eager for a guide who knows the paths through the swamp."

"But thou must not appear too willing," said Beorn.

"Trust me for that; I will not promise to serve them till I have at least seen their torture chamber."

"Ordgar, thou dost indeed show a spirit worthy of an Englishman; and while such live, I shall never despair of my country," said the youthful chieftain. "Should God restore me to the halls of my fathers, none shall be more honoured of his lord than thou; and shouldst thou fall, fear not but that English bards will be found to sing thy praises."

A few days later Hugo was scouring the forest like a wolf in search of his prey. His men-at-arms were scattered through the woods, seeking for tracks of men. Huge dogs attended them, who were encouraged to explore every thicket.

They were near the Dismal Swamp.

All at once a dog gave the peculiar whine which indicated that he had found scent, and immediately afterwards started forward, his nose to the ground, followed by two or three others.

The men-at-arms followed, and Hugo amongst his retainers.

Suddenly they broke into open view of the chase—a man was seen running before them for his life.

The dogs gave tongue and followed him so swiftly that it was with difficulty he could escape their fangs by climbing a tree.

It was a poor refuge—dogs and Normans were speedily at the foot.

"Come down, fellow," said Hugo, sternly, "unless thou desirest to be brought down by an arrow."

"Mercy, mercy," cried the fugitive.

"What dost thou fear? If thou art a true man no harm shall befall thee. We are not robbers."

The Englishman, for such he was, descended, and was at once secured and bound to prevent his escape.

"Now, fellow," said Hugo, "who art thou? Whose vassal art thou?"

"My name is Ordgar, son of Haga."

"Haga, formerly a thrall of my estate?"

"The same."

"Where is thy accursed sire?"

"I cannot betray my father."

"This is the very man we want!" said Hugo; "bring him along. The torture will soon help him to find a tongue. Surely the saints have heard our prayers and given him to us."

A quaint idea of sanctity, that of Hugo.

They dragged the intended victim forward through the woods. Once or twice he appeared to make desperate efforts to escape, but we need not say made them in vain.

Page 72

We must shift the scene to the torture chamber.

Imagine a long dark room, below the level of the ground, underneath the keep; stone flags below, a vaulted ceiling above; dimly lighted by torches fixed in sconces in the wall; a curtain covering a recess; in front, a chair for Hugo and a table for a scribe, with ink horn and parchment.

Around the table were gathered Hugo himself, his guests Raoul de Broc, Tustain de Wylmcote, Ralph de Bearleigh, his seneschal, chamberlain, and other confidential officers of his household, and four strong brawny men-at-arms—sufficient to manage the prisoner with ease.

Ordgar, son of Haga, stood alone at the foot of the table, before all this hostile array.

“Villain,” said Hugo (the name only imported serf), “thy name?”

“I have told thee, Ordgar, son of Haga.”

“Thou art a vassal of Aescendune?”

“I was.”

“And art: my rights over thee cease not.”

“I do not acknowledge thee as my lord.”

“Thou mayst think better of it anon. Now thou wilt please answer my questions.

“Scribe, take down his replies.”

“He will not fill much parchment.”

“We shall see.

“Where hast thou been hiding from thy lawful master?”

“I have not been hiding from my lawful lord.”

“Fool, dost thou bandy words with me? Answer.”

“In the woods, then.”

“What woods?”

“The forests around thee.”



“Dost thou know the Dismal Swamp?”

“Well.”

“Hast thou been hiding there?”

“Yes.”

“How many of thy comrades are in hiding at that place?”

“I may not tell thee.”

“Behold. Tormentor, remove the curtain.”

The curtain was drawn back, and revealed a strange assortment of those implements by which man, worse than the beast of the field, has sinned against his fellow. There were the rack, the brazier with its red-hot pincers, the thumbscrew, and, in short, instruments—happily unknown now—in the greatest variety; all intended to wring the truth from crime, or worse, the self-condemning falsehood from the lips of helpless innocence {xiv}.

“Wilt thou answer?”

“I will not betray the innocent.”

“Seize him, tormentors.”

’Twas said and done, and after a short and furious struggle, the victim was laid on the rack.

“Turn.”

The tormentors, clad in leathern jerkins, hideous with masks to hide their brutal faces, turned the handles which worked pulleys and drew the victim’s limbs out of joint.

“Hold—enough—I will confess.”

“Release him.”

“What dost thou ask me?”

“How many are there in the Dismal Swamp?”

“Maybe a hundred.”

“Thou art trifling with me; I see we must put thee on the rack again.”

“Nay, thou wouldst force me to deceive thee; there cannot be many more.”

Page 73

“Who is their leader?”

“Haga, son of Ernulph.”

“Thy father?”

The victim seemed resolved to say no more.

“Place him on the rack again.”

But the fortitude of the captive did not seem equal to the last supreme trial.

“Hold!” he cried, “I will confess all.”

He owned that his father Haga was the leader of the outlaws, and being interrogated eagerly by the baron about Etienne, stated that the latter was detained as a prisoner in the Swamp, in case they should need a hostage.

“God be thanked!” said Hugo.

He could yet take that holy name on his murderous lips, and sooth to say he did feel gratitude.

The next step was to persuade Ordgar to guide the Normans through the Dismal Swamp to the English settlement. A fresh application of the torture seemed needed to secure this desirable end, but the victim yielded when the pain was about to be renewed—yielded to the weakness of his own flesh, combined with a promise from the baron that his father should not only be spared, but restored to the little farm he had, formerly occupied at Aescendune, under the last English thane.

In short, the bargain was concluded, and Ordgar, son of Haga, became the promised guide of the foes of his country.

CHAPTER XV. RESTORED TO LIFE.

Day after day Etienne de Malville tossed upon the couch in the hut of the woman whom he had so cruelly bereaved, struggling against the throes of fever. In his ravings he was prone to dwell upon all the scenes of horror he had recently passed through, and yet some Providence, intervening, kept from his lips the one revelation which might have endangered his safety—that he was himself the murderer of the son of his preserver.

Sometimes Father Kenelm visited the hut, and although in his heart he deeply regretted that Etienne had not shared the fate of his companions, yet he was too much a

Christian to frustrate the good deed of poor old Hilda, by revealing the secret of his existence.

At length, some weeks after the commencement of his illness, after days of parching thirst and delirious dreams, Etienne woke one morning, conscious, and gazed dreamily about him.

The crisis had passed; he was no longer in danger from the fever, and his senses were clear of the terrible and shadowy impressions which had hung about him like a gigantic nightmare.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

"He is conscious, father," said the old woman. "What does he say?" for Etienne spoke in Norman French.

"Thou hast been in great danger, my son, and this good woman hath saved thee and sheltered thee from thy foes."

"Thanks, good mother."

There was a tone of deep feeling in his voice as he said these words—"but what has passed? I have a confused remembrance of hunting and being hunted, in a midnight forest, and of a deadly combat in a dark chamber, from which I seemed to wake to find myself here."

Page 74

“Thy destiny has, indeed, been nearly accomplished, and that thou art the survivor of the party with which thou didst invade the Dismal Swamp is owing to this widow woman,” said the good father in the patient’s own tongue.

Etienne fell back on his pillow and seemed trying to unravel the tangled thoughts which perplexed him. Once more the dame came and brought him a cooling drink. He drank it, thanked her, and fell back with a sigh.

Yes, it all came to him now, as clear as the strong daylight—and with it came remorse. He had cruelly slain young Eadwin, and the mother of the murdered lad—for he knew her—had rescued him from what his conscience told him would have been a deserved fate, at least at the hands of the English.

There are crises in all men’s lives—and this was one in the life of Etienne—when they choose good or evil.

And from that time, new impressions had power over him. He lay in deep remorse, knowing that he still owed his life to the forbearance, and more than forbearance, with which he had been treated.

“If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.”

Etienne now felt these coals of fire.

He was not all pride and cruelty. His education had made him what he was, and probably, under the same circumstances, with such a father and the training of a Norman castle, many of my young readers who have detested his arrogance would have been like him, more or less.

“Their lot forbids, nor circumscribes alone, Their growing virtues, but their crimes confines.”

But now the generosity which lay hidden deep in his heart was awakened; the holy teachings which, in his childhood he had heard at his mother’s knee—a mother who, had she lived, might have influenced his whole conduct—came back to him. There were many pious mothers, after all, in Normandy. Pity they had not better sons.

“Forgive us our trespasses.”

The daily ministrations of the poor childless widow, whom he had made childless, were a noble commentary on these words.

“Mother,” he said, one day, “forgive me—I have much to be forgiven—I cannot tell thee all.”

“Nay, thou needst not; thou art forgiven for the love of Him who has forgiven us all.”

For a long time yet he lingered a prisoner on his couch; for fever had so weakened him that he could hardly support his own weight.

But at length convalescence set in, and his strength returned; but he could only take exercise—which was now necessary to his complete recovery—when Father Kenelm was at hand to act as a scout, and warn him to retire in the case of the approach of any Englishman; for although he had adopted the English dress, yet his complexion and manner would have betrayed him to any observer close at hand.

At length came the day of deliverance.

Page 75

It was a day in early April. The east winds of March had dried the earth, the sun had now some power, and the trees were bursting into leaf in every direction. It was one of those first days of early summer, which are so delicious from their rarity, and seem to render this earth a paradise for the time being.

The convalescent was out of doors, inhaling the sweet breeze, in the immediate proximity of the hut, when the good father appeared.

“My son,” he said, “dost thou feel strong enough to travel?”

“I do, indeed, father,” said the youth, his heart bounding with delight; “but may I go, and without any ransom?”

“Surely; we have not preserved thy life from love of filthy lucre.”

“I feel that father, in my very heart; but hast thou no pledge to demand? Dost thou trust all to my gratitude?”

“Thou wilt never fight against the poor fugitives here, my son?”

“Nor betray the path to their retreat” added Etienne.

“That is already known,” said the father.

“Known! then war is at hand.”

“It is, and I would remove thee, lest harm should befall thee. Thou wilt travel hence with me at once.”

“Before we start I would fain be shriven by thee, for I have grievously sinned, and to whom can I more fitly make my shrift? so that he who has ministered to the body may in turn minister to the soul.”

“There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth,” said the good monk, greatly moved, “and right gladly will I discharge mine office towards thee.”

The hour had come for Etienne to depart. He had bidden farewell to the faithful Hilda. His last words were—“Thou hast lost one son, mother, but found another; if Etienne de Malville lives, thou shalt be recompensed one day.”

The two pedestrians left the hut and, keeping close along the border of the marsh, under the shadow of the trees, came at last to the little isthmus which joined the firm ground within the marsh, to a chain of woody hills.

The ground was so covered with vegetation and undergrowth that it was difficult to advance, save by one narrow path; but Etienne saw at once that in this direction the settlement could be assaulted at any time of the year with every chance of success.

The monk must have been aware also that he was betraying the secret of this approach to a Norman; but strangely enough, he did not seem to trouble about it at this juncture.

“Father,” said Etienne, “I would fain ask thee one question before we part.”

“Speak on, my son.”

“I would fain know, father, what murderous hand gave thy abbey to the flames—a deed abhorred by all good men, whether Normans or English.”

“Thou dost not know then?”

“Surely not, father.”

“I may not tell thee whom all suspect; it is better for thy peace of mind that it should remain a mystery till God solve the riddle.”

Page 76

"Thou mayst not tell how Wilfred escaped either," added Etienne, who in his heart thought that the outlaws had fired the place and released him from his imposed penance.

"On all these points my lips are sealed. Perhaps in God's own time thou wilt learn the truth."

"Then I may not act as a mediator between my father and his fugitive vassals?"

"Not under present circumstances. There is a dark mystery, which God in His mercy hides from thee."

They had now gained a slight elevation, and could see the tops of the trees below them for miles, including a portion of the swamp.

"Father, how full the woods are of smoke: look, it is rolling in great billows over the tree tops. Surely the woods are on fire."

"I have heard that in foreign countries the woods are so dry in summer that they burn easily, and that people caught in the forests have great difficulty in saving their lives; but it is not so here, the reeds and flags of the marshes alone are on fire."

"Methinks I hear the shouts of men who strive for mastery," and as he spoke, the fire of the warrior kindled in his eyes.

"Thou mayst not join them if such be the case; thou wilt keep thy promise, my son."

"Yes," said the tamed tiger cub, with a sigh; "yet I would fain know what my father is doing. Let us go on."

Two more hours of forest travelling carried them far from the sound of the conflict and they gained the outskirts of the forest. Entering some nicely cultivated meadows, they came in sight of a small Norman priory, which Etienne had visited in earlier days, when out on woodland expeditions; for it was miles from Aescendune, and the way lay through the forest.

"Farewell my son, I must leave thee here. They are thy countrymen in yonder cell, and will gladly entertain thee."

"Thy blessing, my father."

"It is thine, my son. Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God, and He will bless thee."

Etienne sat on the trunk of a fallen tree, for he was very tired, and watched the departing figure of Father Kenelm. His eyes were dim, for he felt very much touched, for the time at least.

But he was now restored to life and liberty, and no bird in the sky, no deer on the mountain, felt more blithe and happy than he soon began to feel.

There is an old adage about the Evil One. It is said he became sick and wanted to be a monk, but when he became well—well—Was this the case with Etienne?

Time will show: for the present we leave him blowing the horn suspended at the gate of St. Ouen's priory.

CHAPTER XVI. RETRIBUTION.

*"Raro antecedentem scelestum
Deseruit pede Poena claudo."*

It was midday, and the sun was pouring the full power of his noontide beams on the wilderness of reeds and flags which overspread the southern side of the Dismal Swamp, reposing on the treacherous surface of bog, quagmire, and quicksand.

Page 77

Signs of life there were none, save when the bittern rose from its nest, amidst the long reeds or sedgy grass, or the moor fowl flew over the surface of the inky water, which here and there collected into pools. The feeble hum of insects filled the air, but all else was peace and solitude.

Save that there was a sign of life on the farther side of the Swamp—a solitary figure half concealed by bushes, stood watching on a promontory of firm land, looking anxiously—from his slight elevation over the surface of the fen.

He was an aged man, who had seen some ninety summers; his long beard descended below the girdle which confined his brown tunic at the waist. It was Haga, the father of Ordgar.

“My eyes are not what they were, and I see no sign as yet. Ah, here comes little Siward!”

A boy of some twelve years approached him very silently, as if some serious business was about to be transacted, of such nature as to subdue boyish loquacity.

“Come hither, Siward, my grandchild, and lend me thine eyes and ears, for mine are now dulled by age. Dost thou hear aught?”

“I hear the bittern boom, and the woodpecker tap, but that is all.”

“Sit down by my side, and watch with me; the time is at hand.”

“Will my father be with them?”

“He will, my child.”

“And he will come home safely to us, when all is over?”

“That is as God wills, dear child; his life belongs to his country. Thou mayst pray for him,” he added, as he saw tears rise to the eyes of the boy.

“I do,” said the child.

They sat awhile in perfect silence, when at last the boy appeared to listen intently.

“Grandfather,” he said, “I hear the sound of many feet.”

“Art quite sure?”

“Yes, and now I see men advancing from the shade of yonder thicket of beech.”

“And I see them too; go and warn Tosti, Sexwulf, Ulf and Frithgift, and be sure that thou keepest out of the fen thyself.”

“Only thou wilt bring father back home with thee?”

“By God’s help, my child.”

At this moment a numerous and warlike band of Normans emerged from the woods, in full view, and paused on the edge of the Swamp.

“Now they come forth to their doom. The Lord hath delivered them into our hands,” said Haga.

Foremost amongst them the old man recognised his son Ordgar; his arms were bound, and a cord attached to the thongs which confined them, held by a man-at-arms.

We will transport ourselves to the other side of the Swamp.

Hugo sat there on his steed, in the full panoply of warlike pride, throbbing with the desire of vengeance, and with the hope of recovering his son—whom he was destined never to see again; for justice, although her pace may seem tardy, seldom fails to overtake evildoers, even in this world; and he who, as men thought, had slain others by fire, was destined to perish by the same avenging element.

Page 78

But no shadow of coming events was there to disturb his equanimity; all seemed to promise the gratification of his fondest wishes, and he was in the highest spirits.

And now he bade them bring Ordgar forward, and the guide—his feet free, but his arms bound—stood before him.

“Thou hast said that thou knowest the road through the Swamp?”

“I do.”

“Lead on, then, and beware of treachery; for if there be any doubt, even a doubt, of thy faith, thou diest.”

“Fear not; my faith is pledged—it shall be kept.”

Pledged, yes: but to whom?

The Normans failed to see the “double entendre” of this reply. Their claim was but the omnipotence of torture.

The thrall led the way to a spot where the earth bore marks of footsteps; here it was evident men had recently entered the maze which stretched before them.

Hugo pressed forward and took the cord himself.

“Now,” he said, “Normans, follow me. Lead on, thrall; remember thy farm at Aescendune, and thy forfeit life.”

Onward, infatuated as the Egyptians when they passed between the suspended walls of the Red Sea, the band followed their leader into the maze; the path was narrow, the reeds were tall, and soon they towered above the heads of the rash invaders.

High bulrushes, tall flags; thick, sedgy vegetation beneath; the ground, firm enough below at first, soon became quaking and felt strangely elastic under their feet. The marsh was here of great width, and shortly they had advanced a considerable distance from firm ground, and were in the midst of the Swamp.

And here the path became more and more difficult. Sometimes only one could pass at once; nor could they see distinctly where they were going. The sun, too, which might have guided them as to the direction of their march, was temporarily clouded.

“Dog,” said Hugo to the captive guide, “if thou misleadest us thou shalt die.”

“A man can die but once.”

“Thou art a bold villain,” said the baron, raising his sword.

“Slay me, and who will guide thee through the marsh?”

“True; do thy duty and fear nought.”

“I will do my duty.”

All this passed while they were slowly advancing, and the strange part of it was this, that they did not seem to get to the end of their toil. Little did they suspect that they were wandering in a path which knew no end, save the bottom of the quagmire.

And now the marks of the feet, which had hitherto appeared plain before Hugo as he rode, were seen no more; nor could the baron tell the precise spot when they faded from sight; they had become fainter and fainter, and then had vanished.

“Dog, where are the footmarks? thou art wandering from the road.”

“We shall soon find them again.”

“Are we nearly over the Swamp?”

“Thou wilt see firm land soon.”

Page 79

The baron grasped the cord tightly.

Onward they wandered, and still naught but rushes and flags, sedges and dried reeds, met their gaze, until a promontory of firm ground—a rock of deep red sandstone—rose from the mire, above their heads—distant, it might be, a bow shot.

The baron uttered a sigh of relief, when his horse stumbled; the poor brute strove to recover his footing, and sank deeper into the treacherous quicksand. Over went the Baron, over his horse's head.

Ordgar snatched at the cord; it escaped Hugo's grasp; the guide was amidst the reeds, and in one moment he had made his escape; the reeds parted, waved again, higher than the head of the fugitive, and the baron saw him no more; only a mocking laugh arose to augment the rage of the baffled tyrant.

But that rage was speedily changed to terror, for, as the baron rose, his feet sank beneath him, and he felt as if some unseen hand had grasped them in the tenacity of the quicksand, just as a faint cloud of smoke rolled by overhead.

Meanwhile the men in the rear were pressing on, and the foremost advanced to help their leader and his struggling steed; but all who did so were soon in the mire in like fashion, sinking deeper with each struggle.

Oh, how awful that sucking, clasping feeling beneath the surface of the earth, that gradual sinking out of sight—a process lasting perhaps for hours. But hours were not given to Baron Hugo; for at this moment the awful cry of "Fire!" "Fire!" was heard on all sides, and a loud mocking shout of laughter from hundreds of unseen enemies, now safe on the firm ground beyond the Swamp, was the answer.

A cloud of thick smoke rolled over the reeds, and cries of distress and anguish arose yet more loudly.

"Death to the incendiary! let him who burnt the monks of St. Wilfred die by fire himself as is meet!"

The latter cry arose from the borders of the Swamp, hidden from sight by thick eddying billows of smoke.

A flashing sheet of flame, then another—clouds of thick smoke rolling above—the crackling of flame, devouring the dry herbage—stifling heat, yet more unendurable each moment—suffocation impending as the air became thicker and denser.

Held by the quicksand, and sinking deeper and deeper—only raised above the ground from the middle of the body; so Hugo awaited his just fate—and felt it just.

“Oh for an hour to repent! oh for a priest! My sins have found me out.”

A sudden gust of wind opened a passage through the smoke, and revealed in the lurid light of the flames—Wilfred of Aescendune!

For a moment the baron thought himself dead, and at the judgment seat; then as he saw his supposed victim standing in safety, afar off on the high rock, and pointing out the scene, with awe yet exultation on his youthful face, he grasped, as in a moment, the whole secret of the forces which had been arrayed against him, and tasted an agony bitterer than that of death.



Page 80

"All is lost," he cried.

His courage now gave way; he proffered fabulous rewards to any who would save him; but none could help; nay, all were in like distress. His brain reeled—the flames approached—nearer—nearer.

It was an awful scene. The marsh was a raging furnace. The exulting cries of the English mingled with the groans of their suffering foes. Pity there was none—the remembrance of the burnt priory had extinguished that sweet virtue.

Ah! who shall tell of the terrible hatred, the thirst of blood, which war—begotten of man's fellest passions—had created in the hearts of the oppressed? Who would not pray for peace on earth, good will towards men {xv}?

CHAPTER XVII. THE ENGLISH HEIR TAKES POSSESSION.

The castle and village of Aescendune lay in deep silence all through this eventful day; it was in early spring, and the air was balmy, the sun bright, the birds sang their sweetest songs, the hedgerows and trees put forth their fresh green buds, and all nature seemed instinct with life.

Only a few gray-headed servitors were left to guard the precincts of the castle, for no attack was apprehended from the marauders of the forest, as the Normans styled the English; and every one who could bear arms had left to swell the final triumph of Hugo.

Noontide came, and found the little band, of some score aged men, intent upon their midday meal. This accomplished, they reclined in various easy positions, around the battlements, or on the greensward without, while some had even penetrated into the forest in their eagerness to hear the first news of the extermination of the English, which none doubted was close at hand.

Towards the evening, one of them, who lay reclining on a mossy bank beneath a spreading beech, on a slight eminence, observed a great smoke rising above the tree tops in the distance.

"Doubtless," thought he, "they are smoking the vermin out, or burning the houses and barns—of which we have heard—within the circle of the Deadly Swamp."

But as the smoke increased more and more, a certain vague feeling of anxiety gained possession of him, and he longed for more accurate means of observation.

"Would I were not so old!

“Oh, young Tristram,” he cried, as he observed a Norman boy, son of one of the men-at-arms—a lad of about twelve years of age—“come here!”

“What does all that smoke mean?” cried the lad; “are they burning the encampment of the rebels, or has the forest caught fire? it is dry enough.”

“No doubt they are burning the huts of those rebels and outlaws in the Swamp; but, Tristram, thou art young; canst thou not run over through the woods? The hill, whereon the pine lately struck by lightning stands, will command a distant view of the Swamp; then return, and tell me all.”

The boy started like a greyhound, and ran through the woods with eagerness.

Page 81

"A fine stripling, that; the saints grant his arms may turn out as good as his legs," growled out old Raoul; and so he waited with such patience as he could command.

An hour passed, and the old man was dozing, when the boy returned.

"Wake up, old man," he said, "I bring news."

"News—what news? Are they all burnt—slain—captives?"

"I know not; only the Dismal Swamp is a mass of flame, and all the reeds and flags are burning merrily; 'tis such a bonfire!"

"I believe the lad would clap his hands at a bonfire, if his own grandmother were burning therein as a witch. How dost thou know whether this is for us or against us?"

"How can I tell?" said the lad, more seriously.

"Perchance our people had not all crossed, and the English fired it to secure their own safety. But how could they have foreseen our expedition?"

His anxiety was not of long duration, for an object was seen emerging from the shadow of the woods, and making by the base of the little hill towards Aescendune.

"What cheer?" cried the old man, "hither!"

And as he spoke the stranger turned his head, hearing the familiar sounds, and ascended the hill slowly, and with pain.

He presented a dismal object; his hair and beard had been scorched in some intense fire, and his clothes blackened and burnt.

The two Normans, old man and boy, stood up aghast.

"What! is it thou, Owen of Bayeux?"

"I was that man a few hours ago. I doubt what I am now."

"What hast thou suffered, then? Where are the baron and his men?"

"Burnt in the Dismal Swamp?"

"Burnt?"

"Yes, burnt; I speak good French do I not?"



“Owen, Owen,” cried the old Raoul, “do not mistake thy friends for foes! tell us what dreadful event has happened, to disturb thy reason.”

“Would it were but disturbed! Oh that I should have lived to see this day!”

“Tell us,” cried young Tristram, “tell us, Owen.”

“A fate was on us, as on the Egyptians of old; only they perished by water, we by fire.”

“But how?”

“Ordgar the guide, whom we thought we had secured so opportunely, led us into the marshes and left us therein; and while we were there, the English fired the reeds and bulrushes on all sides.”

“And the baron?”

“He and all have perished; I only have escaped to tell thee. Where are the rest who were left behind?”

“Here they are,” cried Tristram, as a group of old warriors approached.

“Come, Roger, Jocelyn, Jolliffe—come hear the news,” cried the boy. “Oh, come and hear them; can they be true? All burnt? all dead?”

The horror-struck Normans soon learnt the fatal truth from Owen of Bayeux, and all their stoical fortitude was shaken.

Page 82

"I was one of the last on the track, and saved only by a mere chance, or the grace of St. Owen, my patron. I had dropped my quiver of arrows, and had gone back a few steps to fetch it; they brought me to the edge of the reedy marsh, and I was just returning, having found the quiver, when I heard a cry, followed by echoes as from a chain of sentinels all round the marsh—'Fire the reeds!' I ran back to the main land, climbed a tree which stood handy, and saw the marsh burst into fire in a hundred spots. It was lighted all round, while our men were in the midst. A chain of enemies surrounded it. I did my best to warn our lord or to die with him. I penetrated the marsh a little distance, when the flames beat me back—man can't fight fire."

"Let us go to the castle, take what we can carry, and fly," said Raoul; "they will be here soon, if they have destroyed our men; and there will be no safety nearer than Warwick for us."

"Can we abandon our post?" asked one.

"Not till we are sure all is lost," said another.

"Tristram, thou must remain here and watch, and warn us if any approach."

"But how long shall I stay?" sobbed the alarmed boy.

"Nay, he is too young," cried the fugitive from the marsh; "besides, it is needless. I know they are all coming upon us—they are thousands strong instead of hundreds, as that liar, the guide, stated. We must fly ourselves, for the time, and bid the monks, the women, and children to fly also."

"Shall we burn the castle, lest it fall into their hands as a stronghold?"

"Nay, that were to give up all; we shall return thither again, and that soon; leave it open for them. The Norman lion will prove more than a match for the English wolf in the long run."

"Onward, then—home—home."

And the dispirited men returned to the castle.

It was manifestly useless to attempt to defend the place; all that could be done was to save their lives, and such "portable property" as could be removed on the instant.

So the old men only returned to warn their astonished comrades, and then gathering such household goods as they most valued, they loaded the horses and oxen which remained, and journeyed to bear the news to Warwick.

But before they went, Tristram was sent to warn the prior and his confreres at the priory of St. Denys that danger was at hand.

"I care not," said that valiant prior of the Church Militant, "though as many Englishmen were in the woods as leaves on the trees; they shall be excommunicated if they interfere with us; our weapons are not carnal."

So the Norman Prior and his monks shut their gates and remained, while through the forest road the men-at-arms escorted all the women and children of the village, the interlopers who had taken the place of the banished English, towards the town of Warwick, and its famous castle, where Henry de Beauchamp had recently been appointed governor by the Conqueror, the first Norman Earl of Warwick, and the ancestor of a famous line of warriors. We have already met his countess at Aescendune, on the occasion of the dedication of the new priory.

Page 83

The Normans had all left the castle and village before sunset, leaving the gates open and the drawbridge down, as they expressly said that the English might be under no temptation to devastate a place which must soon be in their hands again.

The castle lay empty and deserted for an hour or two; the cattle, too many to be removed, began to low and bleat because they missed their customary attention; only in the Priory of St. Denys did things go on as usual; there the bells rang out for vespers and compline, and the foreign brethren went on their way as if the events of the day had no importance for them.

It was already nightfall, when the forests gave up hundreds of armed men from their dark shade, who poured down like a torrent upon Aescendune, and directed their course towards the castle, where they were somewhat astonished to find the drawbridge down, the gates open.

At first they paused as if they feared treachery, but Wilfred stepped forward and stood in the gateway.

Turning round he addressed the multitude.

“Men of Aescendune, bear me witness that, in the name of my fathers and ancestors, I, their heir, take possession of mine inheritance.”

A loud burst of cheers greeted these words, and the English, following their young lord into the castle, found it utterly deserted.

No words can describe the glee with which they paraded the battlements, and flung out the ancient banner of the house of Aescendune to the winds, from the summit of the keep, after which they penetrated chamber after chamber, with almost childish curiosity, so new was the idea of such a building to their imaginations.

But it was with sensations of chilling horror that they explored its dungeons beneath the very foundations of the towers. Some were cells for solitary confinement, of the shape of a tomb and not much larger, the stone doors of which shut with a gloomy solemn sound—the knell of hope to the captive.

And then they came to the torture chamber, of which they had already heard from Ordgar, son of Haga, and saw the seat of judgment, so often occupied by him who had now passed to his dread account; they beheld the rack, the brazier, the thumbscrew, and shuddered.

“I am sick,” said the English heir; “take away these accursed things; burn what will burn, and throw the rest in the river; should our grandchildren find them, they may well ask what they were made for.”

Meanwhile the monks at the new priory were calmly awaiting their fate with a courage worthy of a better cause. They heard the joyful shouts of the English as they took possession of the castle, without flinching; they rang their bells loudly and defiantly, for the compline service at the third hour of the night (9 P.M.) This last act of audacity was too much; the natives surrounded the new priory, beat at its doors, rang the bell at the gate, blew their horns, and made a noise which baffles description, while they proceeded to batter down the gates.

Page 84

But not until the service was concluded, when the gate only hung by one hinge, did the prior appear.

"Who are ye," he cried, "who molest the house of God, and those who serve Him within?"

"A pious fox"—"a holy fox"—"smoke them out"—"set the place on fire"—"let them taste the fate which befell better men on this spot!"

"In whose name," said the undismayed prior, "do ye summon me?"

"In the name of the descendant of him who first founded this priory—of Wilfred, thane of Aescendune."

"Ye mock us; he is dead."

"Nay, he lives," said a voice, and our youthful hero appeared on the scene, and addressed the astonished monk.

"Prior, go forth from the house thou and thy brethren have usurped, and make way for the true owners. By my side stands the sole survivor of the brethren whom Hugo de Malville slaughtered, Father Kenelm, a Benedictine like thyself. Admit him; he will tell thee all."

"Since it may be no better, he shall come in. If I open the gates for him, ye will not take advantage?"

"Stand back," cried Wilfred, "let the holy monk enter alone."

And, shortly after, Father Kenelm stood in the chapter house, and explained all to the astonished Norman brethren. He told the story of the destruction of their predecessors, and pointed out the danger of resisting the now triumphant English, who felt themselves the avengers of their slaughtered ministers and friends, the former monks of St. Wilfred.

"It is well," said the other; "we will go forth; thou speakest with justice, as brother to brother, and whatever befall thy companions, this shall be counted in thy favour if I have a tongue to speak."

So the Norman prior and his monks took their way unharmed to the nearest house of their order.

It was night and dark clouds of smoke rolled heavenward, blotting out the fair stars from sight. Silence dread and awful reigned over the Dismal Swamp, the scene of strife and suffering; the very beasts fled the spot, nor could the birds of night linger in the heated air.

But at Aescendune all was tumult and joy. The English had advanced against an undefended stronghold, and Wilfred was at last, as his fathers had been, Lord of Aescendune.

There was a banquet that night in the castle hall. In the old days of Roman triumphs, a man was placed behind the seat of the conquering general as he sat in the intoxication of success, and amidst the adulation of the multitude ever and anon whispered—
“Memento to morituum.”

So also there was an unseen attendant behind the chair of Wilfred. In vain he strove to drive it away; the future would thrust itself upon him.

He had slaked his vengeance to the uttermost and had no remorse: he had avenged father, mother—the spiritual guides of his youth; still he had once heard, even from them—“Vengeance is mine: I will repay saith the Lord.”

Page 85

“Sing, bards,” he cried out; “has no minstrel a new strain?”

They exerted themselves to the utmost; and Wilfred, determined to rise to the occasion, threw off his sadness, ceased to speculate as to the chances of the insurrection {xvi}; that night, at least, he would give to joy—he would encourage his people who loved him so faithfully by rejoicing with them.

So the song and the banquet lasted until the midnight hour, and the castle of Hugo echoed the old forgotten songs of the glories of Anglo-Saxon England.

CHAPTER XVIII. AT THE ABBEY OF ABINGDON.

Upon the banks of the Isis, about eight miles above its junction with the Tame, stood the ancient town of Abingdon, which had grown up around the famous monastic foundation of Ina, King of Wessex {xvii}.

The river divides, at this point, into three branches, encircling two islands {xviii}; partly on the southern bank, and partly on the nearest of these islands, stood the mighty Abbey, one of the largest and most renowned of the Benedictine houses of England.

And on the other island the Conqueror himself had built a country seat whither he often retired, as convenient headquarters, whence to enjoy the pleasures of the chase in the vale of White Horse, famous in the annals of the Anglo-Saxon race for Alfred's great victory over the Danes.

Few, alas, of the old English inhabitants lingered in the town, save as bondsmen; few of the old English brethren, save as drudges.

For had they not alike incurred the wrath of the victor? Had not the chief vassals of the abbey led their men forth to fight under the hapless Harold?—nevermore, alas! to return—and had not the monks blessed their banner and sanctified their patriotic zeal?

And since, on the one hand, William claimed to be the lawful sovereign, and, on the other, the Pope had blessed the invaders, it was clear that the Godrics and Thurkills who had committed their cause to God before the wonder-working black cross of St. Mary's Altar, were but rebels, and that the monks who had blessed them were schismatics.

Hence the Normans in their hour of victory had cleared out laymen and monks alike, root and branch, and the French tongue had superseded the good old Anglo-Saxon dialect in the district.

It was a fine May evening, and the country was lovely in the foliage of early summer.

A boat was descending the Isis, rowed by six stout rowers; it was evidently from Oxenford, for the men bore the badges of Robert D'Oyly, the Norman lord of that city, who had just built the tower which yet stands, gray and old, beside the mound raised on Isis banks by Ethelfleda, lady of Mercia, daughter of the great Alfred, and sister of Edward the Elder.

In the stern of the boat sat Etienne de Malville.

He had journeyed first to Warwick, where he met the fugitives from Aescendune, and heard their story; burning with revenge, he had sought the aid of Henry de Beauchamp, the Norman governor of the city; but that worthy, seeing the whole countryside in rebellion, bade Etienne repair to the king for further aid, while he himself shut his gates, provisioned his castle, and promised to hold out against the whole force of the Midlands, until the royal banner came to scatter the rebels, like chaff before the winds.

Page 86

Then Etienne repaired to Oxenford, where he was the guest of the new governor, Robert D'Oyly, for the night, who sent him on by boat to meet the king at Abingdon, whither William was daily expected to arrive to keep Ascensiontide, for he was still observant of such duties.

The servitors, seeing a boat arrive thus manned, were sensible at once it must contain a traveller or pilgrim of some importance— probably the latter; for, as we have already hinted, they had a wonder-working relic, in the shape of a cross, said to have been given to the abbey by the Empress Helena, and to contain a fragment of the true cross itself.

True, it had failed to prosper the poor English, who knelt before it, ere they went to die at Senlac; but of course that was because the Pope was against them, and had suspended the flow of spiritual benediction.

At least, so said the Normans, and they extolled the Black Cross as much as their predecessors.

"Pax vobiscum, domine," said the chamberlain, who happened to be at the quay; "thou art come, doubtless, to bewail thy sins before the cross of St. Mary's Abbey?"

"When my leisure permits, reverendissime pater; at present I seek an immediate audience of the abbot, for whom I bear sad news."

"He is riding to meet the king. Listen, dost thou not hear the trumpets?—that blast tells of their return together."

"Wilt thou grant me a chamber, that I may don meet apparel for the presence?"

"It is my duty; but of thy grace—tell me whom I entertain."

"The Lord of Aescendune, and patron of your branch house there."

The chamberlain bowed low, and turned to lead his guest within the precincts. The rowers cried "largesse," and the young noble threw them a handful of coin.

Soon Etienne was alone in a comfortable cell, and was attiring his person, a duty a Norman seldom neglected; nor did he despise the luxury of a bath, to the scorn of the un-laving natives. The Norman was the gentleman of the period, alike in etiquette, attire, and food.

And likewise, some of the most beautiful of the animal creation are the fiercest carnivora.

The abbot had put off his riding attire; he had clothed his feet in dainty slippers instead of sandals, and had thrown a soft robe around his monastic garb—contrasting strongly with the stern attire prescribed by St. Benedict, and he was about to descend to the hall, when the chamberlain in person told him of the arrival of Etienne.

“Bid him share our poor meal; we will hear no bad news till we have broken our fast; they sit ill on an empty stomach.”

The chamberlain retired.

And there at the guest table in the refectory sat Etienne, and marvelled to see how well the ascetics fared. Yet there was refinement in their dishes; and there was little or no excess; they drank the light wines of France, not the heavier ale and mead of their predecessors.

Page 87

The Latin grace said, they fell to. The joints of meat were passed round, the game, the fish, and each used his fingers in the place of forks, and then washed them in the finger glasses, which had some purpose then to serve, ere they waved them in the air, and then wiped them on delicate napkins.

The meal over, the abbot retired to his chamber, a pleasant room, overlooking the river, and there he took his seat in a cosy chair near the Gothic window, and sent for the visitor.

Etienne appeared; bent with the grace of youth, kissed the abbot's hand, and then standing before him, with all due modesty, waited to be addressed.

Such etiquette was exacted of those who had not yet won their spurs.

The abbot gave him a short benediction, a brief "Dens te custodiat fili," and quickly added, "I am told thou hast news for me of our little patrimony at Aescendune."

"The wolves have ravaged it, father; our own pious brethren are ejected; English swine root in its precincts."

The abbot coloured.

"Who has dared to do this impiety?" he thundered.

"The English rebels and outlaws, who have long lain hidden in the woods, led by the son of the rebel lord who fell at Senlac."

"The brethren—are they safe?"

"They are on their journey hither; the saints have protected them—no thanks to the English."

"And how dared the stripling thou namest to do such deeds; where was thy father, the Baron?"

"He was foully slain in an ambush:" and Etienne, who strove to keep cool, could not restrain a strange quivering of the lips.

"Come, tell me all, my son; God comfort thee."

Etienne began his tale, and the reader will easily guess that Wilfred's character fared very badly at his hands—that without any wilful falsehood, of which indeed this proud young Norman was incapable, so distorted a version of the facts known to our readers was presented, that the abbot shuddered at the daring bloodthirstiness and impiety of one so young as this English lad.

“It is enough—thou shalt have audience with the king at once. I can obtain it for thee; God’s justice shall not ever sleep, and William is His chosen instrument. Hark!”

The compline bell began to ring.

“William attends the service tonight. I will crave an audience for thee; meanwhile, compose thy thoughts for God’s holy house. Come, my son, this is the way to the chapel.”

If the reader has visited the old colleges in Oxford or Cambridge, he will easily conceive a fair idea of the general appearance of the abbey of Abingdon.

There were the same quadrangles (vulgarly called “quads”), the same cloisters, open to the air, but sheltered from sun and rain; which find their fairest modern example, perhaps, in Magdalene College, Oxen. The cells of the monks resembled in size and position the rooms of the undergraduates at the olden colleges, although they were far less luxuriously furnished.

Page 88

Nor was the element of learning wanting. The Benedictines were indeed the scholars of Europe, and some hundred boys were educated, free of cost, at Abingdon—the cloisters in summer serving as their classrooms. And let me tell my schoolboy readers, the fare and the discipline were alike very hard.

But the chapel in great abbeys—like the one we are writing about—resembled a cathedral rather than a college chapel. And he who has the general plan of a cathedral in his mind can easily imagine the abbey church of St. Mary's at Abingdon.

The choir was devoted to the monks alone; the nave and aisles apportioned to the laity; the side chapels contained altars dedicated to special saints, and occasional services.

Such was the building into which Etienne de Malville entered, not without religious awe, as the pealing organ—then recently introduced by the Normans—rolled its volume of sound through the vaulted aisles.

The monks were all in the choir, which was lighted by torches and tapers. In the nave a few laity of the town were scattered—here a knight or soldier, there a mechanic.

Suddenly, as Etienne took his place, the tread of many armed heels broke the silence, and penetrated up the aisle.

The sound ceased; those who caused it were already in their chosen places, and the monks had begun the Psalms, when Etienne heard a peculiarly stern and deep voice near at hand taking up the sacred words of Israel's royal singer, with which the worshipper seemed familiar.

Then, for the first time, he perceived that the Conqueror—the mightiest of earth's warriors—was he from whom the voice proceeded, kneeling without state in the midst of his subjects, lords and vassals, to join in the late evening service of the church {xix}.

CHAPTER XIX. AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CONQUEROR.

The mighty Conqueror of England was the central figure of the age in which he lived—the greatest soldier of an age of soldiers, and not less statesman than warrior.

Born to a life of warfare, the Conquest had been but the culminating point of a career spent in the tented field—but on that one event he staked his all.

For had he been vanquished at Senlac there was no hope of flight; the English commanded the sea, while his suzerain of France, ever on the watch to regain those Norman dominions which Rollo had won, would have taken instant advantage of the

loss of its military leaders to re-annex Normandy to the French crown, and must have succeeded.

Had William fallen in England the Norman name and glory would have perished at Hastings.

Doubtless, he felt how great was the stake he had placed at the hazard of the die, and having won it, he used it as his own.

Yet he was not all of stone. The Anglo-Saxon chronicler says of him—"He was mild to those good men who loved God, although stern beyond measure to those who resisted his will."

Page 89

Hence the power which men like Lanfranc or Anselm had over him; and it must be added that his life was exemplary as a private individual, his honour unsullied, his purity unstained.

Stern was the race of which he was the head and the ruling spirit. Well does the old chronicler, Henry of Huntingdon, say:

“God had chosen the Normans to humble the English nation, because He perceived that they were more fierce than any other people.”

And we modern English must remember that we are the descendants of old English and Normans combined. They came to “high mettle” the blood of our race, and when the conquerors and the conquered were moulded into one people, the result was the Englishmen who won Crecy and Agincourt against overwhelming odds, whose very name was a terror to continental soldiery, as Froissart abundantly testifies.

Grieve as we may over the tyranny and wrong of the Conquest, England would never have been so great without it as she afterwards became.

Etienne knelt in the abbey chapel until the last worshippers had gone out, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a gentle voice said:

“The King awaits thee, my son, in the abbot’s audience chamber.”

In spite of his boldness, Etienne felt a strange tremor as he passed through the cloisters and approached the dreaded monarch.

But he himself belonged to the same stern race, and when the folding doors opened, and he saw the King seated in the abbot’s chair, he had perfectly recovered his composure. With winning grace he bent the knee before his liege, and gazed into that face whose frown was death.

But it was not frowning now; the expression was almost paternal, for the Conqueror loved a gallant youth.

“Rise up, my son,” he said; “the holy father here tells me you bear stirring news.”

“My liege, he hath spoken rightly. I have to tell of rebellion and sacrilege; our English vassals have risen against us, and my brave father has fallen by their hands; our castle is in their holding, and they have driven the brethren of St. Benedict homeless from their monastery.”

“And who has dared this deed?”

“Wilfred, son of the rebel who fell at Senlac.”

“Wilfred of Aescendune! I remember the stripling when he sought his father’s corpse on the battlefield, but had heard that he had lost his life in the fire which consumed the monastery.”

“Nay, sire, he had fled to the rebels, and we doubt not now that he and the outlaws, with whom he found a home, fired the monastery, themselves, to cover his flight.”

“Tell me, then, what could have driven him to so violent a course, and tell me truly; for some cause there must have been.”

It must be remembered that, at this period, William had not given up all hope of reconciling the English to his rule.

“I know no cause, sire, save—”

“Save what?” said he sternly, for Etienne hesitated.

Page 90

“My liege, the lad, whom your royal will made the heir to the lands my father had won by his services on the field of battle, never lost his sympathy with the rebel rout around, or all had perhaps been well; he struck me in defence of a churl whom I found stealing game, and I challenged him to fight.”

“And did he shirk the contest? I should not have thought it of him.”

“He ran away, sire, and was brought back; was sent to the monastery by my father for a time of penance as a punishment; the same night the building was burnt by the outlaws, as we have every reason to think by his connivance, since he joined them and became their head, while we all thought him dead.”

“And how didst thou learn he yet lived?”

“By his actions; the outlaws under his command burnt our farms, slew our men in the woods, and not our common men only, whose loss might better be borne, but they murdered a noble youth, my fellow page, entrusted to my father’s care, Louis de Marmontier; and finally, by the help of a false guide, they entrapped my father and his retainers into a marsh, which they set on fire, and all perished.”

Etienne spoke these words with deep emotion, but still firmly and distinctly.

“Fear not, my son, thy father’s death shall be avenged, or my sword has lost its power. Weep not for the dead—women weep, men avenge wrongs on the wrongdoer; but tell me, art thou certain of these facts? didst thou or any one else see this Wilfred at the head of the outlaws?”

“My liege, I saw him myself; I penetrated their fastnesses in the forest, and but narrowly escaped with life.”

“And saw Wilfred of Aescendune?”

“Distinctly, my liege, almost face to face, in command of the rebels.”

“And then, what happened after the death of thy father?”

“They issued from the woods, seized the castle—the few defenders left had fled to Warwick—and then summoned the whole neighbourhood to arms. The bale fires were blazing on every hill. The Count of Warwick bid me tell you, my liege, that he will hold his castle till aid arrives, but that he is powerless to check the wave of insurrection which is spreading over the country far and wide.”

“It is well; our banner shall be unfurled and these English shall feel the lion’s wrath, which they have provoked. Tomorrow is Ascension Day—the truce of God—on Friday we march. Meanwhile I commend thee to the abbot’s hospitality; he will bring thee to

the banquet tomorrow after the High Mass. Remember, a true warrior should be as devout in church as fearless in the field.”

Etienne left the presence, assured that the death of his father would be speedily avenged, and slept more soundly that night than he had since the fatal fire in the marshes. He loved his father, and it must be remembered that he knew not that father’s crimes. Not for one moment did he suspect that he had been concerned in the burning of the monastery, nor did he dream that there had been aught in the death of the Lady of Aescendune save the hand of nature.

Page 91

The one absorbing passion of his life at this moment was hatred of his successful rival—not so much as his rival, but as the murderer of his father.

All the Norman inhabitants of the neighbourhood crowded the abbey church on the morrow, and were present at the Mass of the day; the poor English were there in small numbers; they could not worship devoutly in company with their oppressors, but frequented little village sanctuaries, too poverty stricken to invite Norman cupidity, where, on that very account, the poor clerics of English race might still minister to their scattered flocks, and preach to them in the language Alfred had dignified by his writings, but which the Normans compared to the “grunting of swine.”

And the service in the church over, how grand was the company which met in the banqueting hall of the palace on the island!

The Conqueror sat at the head of the board; on his right hand the Count d’Harcourt, head of an old Norman family, which still retained many traces of its Danish descent, and was as little French-like as Normans of that date could be; De le Pole, progenitor of a fated house, well-known in English history; De la Vere, the ancestor of future Earls of Oxford; Arundel, who bequeathed his name to a town on the Sussex coast, where his descendants yet flourish; Clyfford, unknowing of the fate which awaited his descendants in days of roseate hue; FitzMaurice, a name to become renowned in Irish story; Gascoyne, ancestor of a judge whose daring justice should immortalise his name; Hastings, whose descendant fell the victim of the Boar of Gloucester in later days; Maltravers, whose name was destined to be defiled at Berkeley Castle in Plantagenet times; Peverel, a name now familiar through the magic pen of Scott; Talbot, whose progeny, in times when the Normans’ children had become the English of the English, burnt the ill-fated “Maid” at Rouen {xx}.

There was a bishop present who blessed the meats, but Etienne could have spared the presence of Geoffrey of Coutances, whom he knew as the friend of Wilfred, and the author of many inconvenient (and, as Etienne thought, impertinent) inquiries about that young unfortunate, after the burning of the old priory.

Who shall describe the splendour of that feast? We will not attempt it, nor will we try to analyse the feelings of the country youth so suddenly introduced into so brilliant an assembly.

But amidst the intoxication of the scene his mind continually wandered to the sombre forests, the blackened marsh, the Dismal Swamp, and his desolated home; and he would almost have given his very soul to stand face to face, foot to foot, with his youthful rival, sword in hand, with none to interfere between them, and so to end the long suspense.

While some such dream was floating before his imagination, and its details were painted vivid as life upon the retina of the mind, a quiet voice, but one not without some authority, whispered in his ears:

Page 92

“My son, I would fain ask thee of a youth in whom I am somewhat interested, and who is, I am told, yet alive, risen, as it were, from the dead—Wilfred of Aescendune.”

Etienne’s face would have made a fine study for a painter, as he encountered the gaze of Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances.

The bishop drew the youth gently into a deep embrasure, where a curtain before the opening veiled a window seat, for the feast was now over, and the guests were mingling in general conversation.

“Father,” said Etienne “am I, whom he has made an orphan, a fit witness?”

“My son,” said Geoffrey, “I respect an orphan’s feelings, yet in justice to the lad whom, as thou sayest, I once befriended, I must ask a few questions. He appeared to me naturally affectionate and ingenuous—one who would love those who treated him well, but who would grievously resent scorn and contempt; tell me honestly, didst thou receive him as a brother, as thou wert bound to do, considering the alliance between thy father and his mother, or didst thou regard him simply as thy rival?”

Etienne hesitated.

“My son, thou cravest knighthood; the true knight is bound to speak the truth.”

“I own, father, that I felt him my rival.”

“And never thought of him as a brother?”

“Never.”

“Then, naturally, this led to injurious words and contemptuous deeds?”

“I cannot deny it; nor do I now regret it, knowing what he is.”

“Perchance, my son, thou hast had much to do with making him what he is. One more thing: of course Wilfred would naturally sympathise with the old retainers of his father. Tell me, didst thou ever ill-use them in his sight?”

“I may have done so sometimes. But, my lord, you, who at the head of an army, recently sanctioned the mutilation of the rebels in Dorsetshire—”

“My child, peace and war are different things, and in the latter, men are compelled to do that, from which in days of peace they would shrink, only that timely severity may prevent further bloodshed, and so save many Christian lives. But I am speaking of what thou didst to thine own father’s vassals in time of peace—didst thou ill-treat them before thy English brother?”

“I may have been sharp sometimes, and used the ashen twig freely.”

“Only the ashen twig? My son, tell me all the story about the ‘young poaching churl’ who was the cause of such deadly enmity between you.”

Etienne told it with reluctance.

“Pray was the lad in any manner dear to Wilfred?”

“He was his foster brother,” said Etienne, covering his face as conscience smote him, for he remembered the death of Eadwin, and the way in which the mother of the murdered boy had returned good for evil.

“Then, my son, thou canst not acquit thyself of blame.”

“But even if I were in fault so far, father, the terrible events which have occurred since do not lie at my door—the burning of the monastery, the death of my poor father.”

Page 93

“Only so far as this, that all might have been prevented hadst thou received Wilfred as a brother, for thou didst drive him to the woods—according to thine own account. But depend upon it, there is more behind. A brave youth like Wilfred would not have fled simply for fear of the combat, nor would one who loved his own people, as your story proves, have connived at the burning of an English monastery—monks and all. Nay, my son, the mystery is not solved yet; in God’s own time it will be, and depend upon it, there will be much to forgive on both sides. Think of this when thou repeatest thy paternoster tonight; for the present we will close this conference.”

CHAPTER XX. THE MESSENGER FROM THE CAMP OF REFUGE.

A fortnight only had passed since the scenes described in our last chapter, and we must again take our readers to Aescendune.

It was the hour of the evening meal in the castle hall where so lately Hugo sat in his pride, and in his place sat his youthful rival, Wilfred.

Scarcely of age, the vicissitudes of his life had made a man of him before his time, and a stranger would have credited him with many more years than he really possessed. His face was bronzed with the sun, and his features had assumed all the appearance of early manhood, while there was a gravity in his expression befitting a born leader of men, such as his warlike grandfather, Alfgar, had been in the old Danish wars sixty years earlier.

The accustomed features of an English feast, as distinct from a Norman banquet, have been dwelt upon too often in these Chronicles to need recapitulation here, and we shall only beg our readers to suppose the eating over, the wine and mead handed round, and the business of the evening begun.

The hall was crowded; all the ancient vassals of the house of Aescendune, who yet survived, were present, and many new faces. By the side of Wilfred sat a distinguished guest, an East Anglian, to whom all present paid much attention.

The occasion was one of much gravity; only that evening messengers had arrived, bringing the serious announcement that William the mighty Conqueror, with a force said to be numerous as the leaves of the trees, was at hand, and the gathering had been assembled to discuss the measures expedient in the common danger.

There was deep silence; the summer twilight alone illumined the grave faces of the English guests and vassals of Aescendune, as Wilfred arose to address them.

“Englishmen and brethren,” he began, “we have not invited you all to share our evening meal on an occasion of idle ceremony—many of you have heard the news I have to tell, and more will anticipate them. The usurper, the bloodstained oppressor of our race is at hand; he rests this night at Warwick, with a force far exceeding any that we can gather to meet him; their lances might uphold the skies, their arrows darken the heavens. All the robber barons of note are there; the butcher priest Ode, who smote with the mace at Hastings, because he might not shed blood, the fierce Lord of Oxford, the half Danish Harcourt, Arundel, Talbot, Maltravers, Peveril, Morton—all swell the train which has advanced to the destruction of our faint hope of liberty in the Midlands, our trust that at least old Mercia may defy the despoiler.”

Page 94

“Let us die, then, like brave men,” was the cry of many, “since we cannot live as freemen.”

“And shed our blood in vain, leaving the victory to the oppressors! Nay, we must live for another Senlac, which shall reverse the doom of the former. Leofric of Deeping, our guest from East Anglia, will tell you of one who yet defies Norman tyranny, with whom we may unite, under whose banner victory may yet bless the old flag of England.”

Leofric rose, amidst cheers and demonstrations of applause, somewhat tempered by the gravity of the occasion; nay, a few faint-hearted churls said, “Let us hear what he has to propose before we cheer him.”

“Has the name of Hereward, Lord of Brunn, yet reached your ears?”

A general shout of approbation replied, “Yes!”

“He it was who, while yet but a stripling, stirred up the people of Dover to drive the proud Eustace out of their town, in good King Edward’s time, when he slew with his own hands a French knight. He fought by the side of our Harold when he tamed Griffith, the wildcat of Wales. He was in Flanders, to our great loss, when the Normans invaded England, and there he heard, with grief, of the death of our Harold and the slaughter at Senlac. Now, hearing that many brave men yet defy the tyrant in the Isle of Ely, protected by its bogs and marshes, he has accepted the invitation of the Abbot Thurstan, and has hastened to return home and place himself at their head. Three years have passed since Hastings, and yet England is unconquered; the Normans concentrate their force against Ely in vain; Crowland, Spalding, and many other places are recovered, and the Danes promise their assistance to deliver those who were their brethren under Canute from Norman tyranny.

“Therefore, in the name of the Lord of Brunn and the Abbot Thurstan of Ely, I invite you to repair thither, to take part in the great struggle so nobly begun for the deliverance of England from the hateful yoke.”

There was a dead silence, broken at last by a voice:

“But might we not first strike a blow for our own poor homes?”

“That blow shall be struck in time, and in time not far off; but now it would be a waste, and a sinful waste of English blood, just when every man is wanted. What can ye do against ten thousand Normans, out here in the open country? or what good can ye hope to do in the woods? Nay, come to the Camp of Refuge, the last retreat of England’s noblest sons; there is the noble Archbishop Stigand, the faithful English prelate, who dared to defy the Conqueror to his face; there the Bishops of Lincoln, Winchester, Durham, and Lindisfarne, whose fair palaces are usurped by Norman intruders; there

the patriotic Abbots of Glastonbury and St. Albans; there nobles, thanes—all who yet dare to hope for England's salvation; and thence shall the tide of victory return after the ebb, and sweep the Bastard and his Norman dogs into the sea. England shall be England again, yea, to the latest generations.”

Page 95

Cheer upon cheer arose from the company; it was evident that the envoy had gained his point. Wilfred now stood up.

“There are but two courses open to us, men of Aescendune—to return to our haunts in the woods, to be hunted out in the next dry season like vermin; the other, to repair to the Camp of Refuge. I, for one, have decided; I will no longer hide in the Dismal Swamp like a brock—I will accept the invitation of Abbot Thurstan, and live or die by the side of the brave Hereward.”

“And I,” “and I,” “and I.”

“We cannot all go,” said Wilfred; “some must remain to escort our women and children to the woods, and to defend them there, if need be, till the tide of victory, of which our guest has told us, reaches these parts. This task befits the oldest men amongst us; but let each man make his choice this evening, for by midnight all should be settled, and we who go should be on our way to the east.”

“And are we to leave Aescendune to the foe?”

“Nay, this accursed monument of Norman tyranny, this castle shall fall, the flames shall consume it this night, and we will give every house, barn, and stable to the flames also. The Normans shall find poor lodgings for man and beast when they come tomorrow. Etienne, son of the murderer Hugo, shall enter upon a desolate heritage, and feed his horses with cinders.

“Haga, oldest retainer of our house, wilt thou take the command of those who remain? let them be thy children.”

“I accept the charge,” said the old man, and bowed his head.

“Now, who will remain with him in the woods, and who will go with me? Let those who would ride to the Camp of Refuge hold up their hands on high.”

“Ulf, Sexwulf, Tosti, Wulfgar, Ordgar,”—and so Wilfred went on counting all the younger and more impetuous spirits on his side, his heart swelling with pardonable pride, as he thought he should not go alone, or as a mere fugitive, to the help of the patriotic Hereward.

But the aged men hung their heads; most of them had kindred—some a wife, some children, and even amongst the younger there were those whose love to an aged parent kept them back; the ties of family were ever strong in the English heart.

So there were, after all, only about a hundred gallant youths, who elected to make the dangerous ride across the heart of England, Norman infested, with their young chieftain.

“A hundred such men will be a welcome addition to our numbers; few thanes have joined us more worthily attended,” said Leofric.

The meeting now broke up.

Great was the confusion in the village that night, and sad the partings between friends and kinsfolk. All the beasts of burden were put in requisition; only a hundred of the choicest steeds reserved for the brave band who were to accompany their beloved lord to the Camp.

By midnight these steeds were laden, and all was ready for the exodus.

Page 96

Then a dozen stern men bore brands of fire through the village, and soon every house burst into flames.

It was sad to see their homes burning; it seemed almost a crime to apply the torch; but each man thought it better far, than to leave them for Normans to dwell in.

And soon a brighter blaze startled the neighbourhood—the castle cast its broad banner of flame to the heavens, and thick clouds of smoke blotted out the stars. Then the priory, the short-lived priory, followed the lead of the castle, and the valley was light as in broad day, while the river seemed to run with blood as it reflected the blaze.

And by the light two parties left the village in opposite directions—the last farewells were spoken. Into the woods—gloomy and desolate, dimly lighted up by the glare, which filled the heavens, along the river, glowing as it reflected the blaze—into the woods the two different parties took their way.

The one was led by Wilfred, and Leofric as guide, the other by Haga. And so the forest swallowed them up, and Aescendune knew them no more.

The fire burnt on, but none were there to heed it; tower and rampart came crashing down into the red ruins, but a few affrighted birds were the only living witnesses of the doom of the proud building, which Hugo had erected as the badge of the slavery of his English vassals.

Crash! crash! and the answer came from the priory; down fell the castle towers, down fell the priory bell turrets. Norman count and Norman monk were alike homeless.

The morning sun rose brightly upon the devastation, the birds resumed their matin songs, for it was a lovely morning in June; but as yet no human footfall broke the oppressive silence.

It was the early hour of summer sunrise, and the distant sound of a convent bell varied the monotony of the scene, as it called the faithful to prayer. A sudden sound, as of many riders riding briskly, and a band of lances—the avant garde of a mighty army—drew rein at the verge of the yawning and smoking furnace which had been the castle. There they paused abruptly, and one who seemed almost overwhelmed by surprise and disappointment, gazed as if stupefied upon the wreck of his fortunes.

It was Etienne of Aescendune cum Malville.

As we have seen, the conflagration was yet at its heights when Wilfred of Aescendune and his hundred men left the scene, and took their road to the east, along the reddened waters of the river.

It was not without the deepest sorrow, that the English heir thus abandoned his inheritance, but necessity left no choice; it was plain that the force arrayed against him rendered resistance hopeless, and it was far better to go where his sword was likely to be of use in the struggle for freedom than to hide in the woods, as he said, "like a brock, until the dogs hunt it out."

And he had hope, too, that when it was discovered that he and his bravest men had fled eastward, pursuit would be attracted in that direction, and the poor fugitives in the woods left unmolested, at least for the present.

Page 97

As they rode rapidly and silently along, they saw in the distance, with what bitter feelings may be imagined, the Norman castle of Warwick, where at that moment the Conqueror himself was reposing, and where the Norman heir was perhaps counting the hours, until daylight should arouse him to go and seize upon his inheritance. Onward they rode, conducted with the greatest skill and success by their guide from the Camp of Refuge, Leofric of Deeping, who entertained them by the way, when circumstances permitted, by many a story about Hereward and his merry men, each one of whom he said was a match for three Normans, while Hereward would not turn his back upon seven at once.

When the east grew red with the coming light they were traversing an immense tract of wild forest land, bright with the gorse, then in flower, and tenanted only by myriads of rabbits; here they came upon a grassy dell, with plenty of good grazing for their horses, and a clear stream running through the bottom.

"We shall scarce find a better place than this to rest," said their guide; "I know the spot well. When a boy my grandfather lived in that ruined farmhouse which you can see peeping through the trees; I remember I was just tall enough to look over yon wall."

"Is it in English hands now?" said Wilfred, anxiously.

"It is desolate—waste—ruined. The Normans butchered the inmates long since, God knows why, save that they gave shelter to some proscribed fugitives, who were being hunted like wild beasts. They were not my own kinsfolk; by God's blessing my grandparents died while Edward was yet alive. I often feel grateful that they did not live to see these evil days."

They hobbled the horses, and took their own repast by the side of the stream. Each man had brought rations for two days with him, and there was no lack.

Then, after carefully setting sentinels in each direction, they slept under the shade of the trees. The moss was a delicious couch, the day was warm, and the murmur of the little stream, united to the hum of the insects, lulled them to sleep.

It was not till after midday that Wilfred awoke. He found Leofric already on foot, stretching himself after his nap.

"I am going to look at the old place," said he; "it stimulates my feeling of hatred to the Normans. Will you come with me and see their work?"

They crossed two or three fields lying fallow—indeed, no hand of man had been busy there for more than a year; soon they came upon the blackened ruins of a house, of which, however, some portions had escaped the general conflagration; upon which Leofric observed:

“This was the work of Ivo Taille-Bois {xix}, a Norman woodcutter, whom the duke has manufactured into a noble, and set to tyrannise over free-born Englishmen. Like a fiend he ever loves to do evil, and when there is neither man, woman, nor child to destroy, he will lame cattle, drive them into the water, break their backs, or otherwise destroy them.”

Page 98

“But does not William ever administer justice, according to the oath he swore at his coronation?”

“Not when the case is Englishman against Norman; then these foreigners stick together like the scales on the dragon’s back, one overlapping the other. But we must waste no more time; it is just possible, although unlikely, owing to the unfrequented route we have taken, that your old enemy may be upon our track, with five hundred Norman horse to back him.”

They rejoined their comrades, and all were soon again in the saddle—horses and men alike refreshed by the halt; with great knowledge of the country their guide led them by unfrequented routes towards the fenny country; in the distance they beheld the newly rising castles, and heard from time to time an occasional trumpet; more frequently they passed ruined villages, burnt houses and farms, and saw on every side the evidence of the ferocity of their conquerors.

Nightfall came and still they continued their route; Leofric enlivening the way with many a tale of the exploits of the great hero, whom he looked upon with confidence as the future deliverer of England.

At length they left the woods and entered, just as the east was brightening, into the level plains and marshes of East Anglia, and here for the first time had reason to think they were pursued.

Looking back towards the deep shades of the woods they had left, they caught sight of a dark moving mass, which seemed pursuing them; but even as they looked its movements became uncertain, and appeared to halt.

“The cowards fear to pursue us farther; they have a wholesome dread of Hereward and his merry men, and we may embark in peace: we are near an old manor house belonging to our great captain, and there we may leave the horses in safety, satisfied no Norman will get them—such is the terror of his name; then we will all take boat for Ely.”

The morning, the second of their journey, was already breaking across a vast expanse of water and fenland, and the dawn was empurpling the skies and making the waters glow like burnished metal; so beautiful was the scene that it seemed a happy omen to our tired wanderers.

The face of the country was level as the sea itself; no hillock varied the monotony of the surface; but here and there some sail glistened in the glowing light; and afar off Leofric pointed out the towers of Ely Abbey, white and distinct in the rays of the rising sun, which, just then, rose grandly out of the waters.

They left their horses at the manor house, which was garrisoned by Hereward's retainers, and broke their fast, gladdened by an enthusiastic reception; hope was not yet dead here.

Afterwards, they all embarked in large flat-bottomed boats, which were sluggishly impelled, by oar and sail, towards the distant towers of Ely.

The sweet fresh breeze, the cheerful warmth of the sun, soothed our travellers, wearied with their long night ride; the monotonous splash of the oars assisted to lull them into sleep, oblivious of past fatigue. Wilfred awoke to find himself approaching the wharf of Ely.

Page 99

And here our narrative must perforce leave him for the space of two years, sharing the fortunes of the famous Hereward, until the fall of the last refuge of English liberty: the events of those two years are matters of history {xxii}.

CHAPTER XXI. TWO DOCUMENTS.

Two years had passed away since his last visit, and Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, was again a visitor in England, this time the guest of the new primate of the conquered country, Archbishop Lanfranc, a native of Pavia, and formerly abbot of the famed monastery of Bec in Normandy, to whom the king had been greatly indebted for his services as negotiator with the Court of Rome, while the conquest was in deliberation.

He was a man of deep learning and great personal piety, yet not without some of the faults of the race, under whose auspices he had come to England. Still, in spite of his deep prejudices, he was often, as we shall see in these pages, the protector of the oppressed English.

Lanfranc was seated with his episcopal brother in the embrasure of a deep window, looking out upon the cathedral close of Canterbury.

"It was sad, indeed, my brother," said the archbishop. "I scarcely have known a sadder day than that of my installation. The cathedral which thou seest slowly rising from its ruins yonder, had been destroyed by fire, with all its ornaments, charters, and title deeds. One would think that the heathen Danes had once more overspread the land, instead of our own Christian countrymen."

"And yet we two are answerable to some extent for this conquest. Without thee it had never been; thou didst gain the sanction of the Pope and then preach it as a crusade. I followed the army to Hastings, absolved the troops, and blessed its banners on the day of the great victory."

"Heaven grant we may not have done wrong; but the sheep are scattered abroad, as when a wolf entereth the fold."

"Thou mayest yet be the means of reconciling the conquerors and the conquered—the Church is their natural mediator."

"God helping me, I will do justice between them; but the task is a heavy one—it is hard, nay, terrible, to stand against the will of this Conqueror."

"For this cause, perhaps, thou, who fearest not the face of man, art chosen of Heaven."

A low knock at the door interrupted them.

“Enter,” cried Lanfranc; and a monk of the Benedictine order, who discharged the duty of chamberlain, appeared.

“A brother of our order craves an audience.”

It must be remembered that Lanfranc was the abbot of a Benedictine monastery ere he was called to Canterbury {xxiii}.

“Is he English or Norman? Hath he told thee his errand?”

“English. He hath travelled far, and says that his errand is one of life or death.”

“Let him enter,” said the primate.

A man in a faded Benedictine habit, evidently spent with travel, appeared at the door. His beard was of long growth, his hair was uncombed, and his whole appearance that of a man who had passed through perils of no small difficulty and danger.

Page 100

Lanfranc gazed fixedly at him, and seemed to strive to read his character in his face.

“Pax tibi, frater; I perceive thou art of our order. At what monastery hast thou made thy profession?”

“At the priory of St. Wilfred, Aescendune,” said Father Kenelm, for it was he, as he bent the knee to the primate.

“A pious and learned home, doubtless, but its fame has not reached my ears.”

“But it has mine,” said Geoffrey, who started and listened with great attention.

“It was founded and enriched by Offa, thane of that domain, in the year of grace 940, and burnt in the second year of our misery, now three years ago. In its place stood for a short time the priory of St. Denys.”

“Thou mayest well say ‘stood,’” interrupted Geoffrey, “for I hear that it has also been destroyed by fire.”

“By fire also?” said the astonished Lanfranc.

“It is a sad and tragical story,” replied Geoffrey, “and it would weary you and sadden me to relate it now. Bloodshed and all the horrors of midnight rapine and warfare are mingled in it, and there is a deep mystery yet unsolved. Tell me, my brother, wert thou an inmate of St. Wilfred’s priory when it was so mysteriously destroyed?”

“I was.”

“And how didst thou escape?”

“Our prior, the sainted Elphege, despatched me to some of our poor flock, who had taken refuge in the woods, that I might commit one deeply loved to their care.”

“His name?”

“Wilfred of Aescendune. It is on his behalf that I have sought his grace the new archbishop, led by his reputation for charity and justice, but hardly expecting to meet any one here who knew the story of our misfortunes and wrongs.”

“Thou wilt wonder less, perhaps, if thou lookest at me a little more closely. Dost thou not remember Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, who married Winifred of Aescendune to Hugo de Malville?”

"I do, indeed; and marvel, my lord," said he, "that I recognised thee not at once; I bear a letter for thee written by hands long since ashes—by our good Prior Elphege, the night before the monastery was burned."

"Tell me, my brother," said Geoffrey, as he took the letter, "dost thou know who burnt the monastery?"

"I do."

"Who, then? All the world names the youth thou didst save."

"Who would accuse the lamb of devouring the wolf? Hugo, sometime baron of Aescendune, did the accursed deed."

"Canst thou prove it?"

"When thou hast read the letter, I have yet another document for thee. I had brought both here to submit to my lord of Canterbury."

It was startling to watch Geoffrey as he read the parchment, the very hairs of his head seemed to erect themselves, and his colour changed from pale to red, from red to pale again.

"My brother," said Lanfranc, "what dost thou read which so disturbeth thee?"

Page 101

"Read it thyself," said he, giving the letter which he had finished to the primate. "It purports to be the copy of a letter addressed to me three years ago, when I was at Oxenford, but which never reached me. Oh, what a story of damnable guilt! Tell me, man, where didst thou obtain this?"

"I saw the original written by him, whose name it bears at the foot, and at his request took this copy, which he has attested by his name, for I was the chief calligrapher of the house of St. Wilfred. It was his last act and deed on earth: within a few hours he perished in the flames which consumed our poor dwelling."

Here Father Kenelm, not without emotion, handed a second parchment to Geoffrey.

"And this?" said he of Coutances, interrogatively.

"Is the confession of a dying Norman, which he has attested by his mark, for he could not write his name. I heard his last confession, when, to remove the stain of guilt from the innocent, he made me write this statement, and signed it as best he could."

"How didst thou get hold of this, brother?" said the Bishop of Coutances, feeling himself, to use the expression of the writer, "sick with horror."

"Thou hast heard, my lord, of the destruction of Baron Hugo in the Dismal Swamp?"

"Surely; I was at Abingdon when his son Etienne brought the news."

"Only one who entered that swamp, so far as I know, escaped. Half burnt, he dragged himself out, on our side, from the awful conflagration, and hid himself till eventide in the woods, suffering greatly.

"That day I had guided young Etienne de Malville from his concealment in our midst, to liberty and safety, and as I returned I heard the groans of a man in severe pain, but which seemed a long distance away, borne on the night winds which swept the forest. Guided by the sound, I found Guy, son of Roger, and tended him as I had tended the son of the wicked baron. He lingered a few days, and then died of his injuries, leaving me this confession, as his last act and deed, with full liberty to divulge it when a fitting day should arrive."

"But why hast thou not done so before?"

"Because it was not needed; nor could I leave my refuge in the woods, where I had my own little flock to attend to, the few poor sheep saved from the Norman wolf. Pardon me, for ye are Normans."

“We are Benedictines,” said Lanfranc, reprovingly; “English or Normans, the children of our father Benedict are brethren, even as there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, in Christ.”

“But why hast thou now come?” said Geoffrey.

“Hast thou not heard that the Camp of Refuge has fallen?”

“And what then?”

“Wilfred of Aescendune was a refugee therein.”

“And is he taken?”

“He was sent, together with Egelwin, Bishop of Durham, as prisoner to Abingdon, and will be brought to trial, when William arrives there next week, and, unless thou savest him, will undoubtedly die the death.”

Page 102

"He shall not die," said Geoffrey, "if we can save him. William must acquit him if he hear all."

"Acquit him, yes," said Lanfranc, "of sacrilege and parricide; but not, I fear, of the guilt of rebellion against his lawful king {xxiv}."

"At least, if he must die, let him die freed from the supposed guilt of such awful sacrilege, and let men know to what kind of father King William committed the innocent English lad."

"Most certainly: if we cannot save him from the consequences of his rash appeal to the sword, we will yet save him from the cord, or worse, the stake, which might be thought the not inappropriate penalty of the destruction of two successive houses of God by fire."

"The stake! it is too horrible to think of!" said the monk; "thank God I have not sought thee in vain. Forgive me, my lord, but the lad is very dear to me."

"Nor is my own interest much less keen in him," said Geoffrey. "I first met him at Senlac, where he sought his father's corpse amidst the slain, and since that time have watched his tragic career not without grief."

"But one question remains," spake Lanfranc. "The documents will be disputed: how shall we prove them genuine?"

"There is much internal evidence; but may not some of the witnesses of the crimes be living? For instance, the Jew, Abraham of Toledo, he who sold the poisons to Hugo?" said Geoffrey.

"He shall be sought for," replied Lanfranc. "Meanwhile, Father Kenelm, thou art my guest, and I must at once commend you to the chamberlain, who will supply all your wants. You need food and rest."

Bowing humbly—his heart full of gratitude—the good old Benedictine followed the chamberlain, who appeared at the summons of the primate, to more comfortable lodgings and better fare than he had known for years.

CHAPTER XXII. THE CHAPTER HOUSE OF ABINGDON.

On the morrow of Michaelmas, in the year of grace 1071, an imposing group of warriors and ecclesiastics was gathered in the chapter house of the ancient Abbey of Abingdon.

The chamber in question was of rectangular form, but terminated at the eastern end in an apse, where, beneath a column with radiating arches, was the throne of the Lord Abbot.

A stone seat encompassed the other three sides of the building, cushions interposing, however, between the person and the bare stone beneath, as was meet.

The walls were arcaded, so as to form stalls, and in the arcades were pictures of the Saints of the order, in glowing colours—St. Benedict occupying the place of honour. Nor was St. Dunstan, the most noted of English Benedictines, unrepresented.

A light burned perpetually in the midst of this chamber, framed so as to image a tongue of fire, emblem of Him, whose inspiration was sought at the gatherings of the chapter for deliberation.

Page 103

Here novices were admitted and monastic punishment administered, while penitential chambers adjoined, to which offenders were taken after sentence had been delivered.

It was just after the chapter mass, and the fourth hour of the day.

William sat in the abbot's chair; on his right hand Lanfranc himself—for the Benedictine order was deeply interested in the investigation about to be made. The abbot and all the elder brethren were present, and sat on the right or northern side of the building. Next the abbot sat Geoffrey of Coutances; amidst the brethren was Father Kenelm.

But on the other side sat William's principal nobles and courtiers, to whom reference has been made in former chapters—De la Pole, Arundel, Clyfford, Fitz-Maurice, Hastings, Maltravers, Peverill, Talbot, Harcourt, and many others—some of then grey-headed—in arms.

Odo of Bayeux and Fitz-Osborne were there likewise, as also Robert of Mortain and Pevensey.

A large coffer, called "the trunk," not unlike the box in which prisoners appear in modern courts of justice, stood in the midst; and therein, pale with illness and worn by mental distress, yet still undaunted in the spirit, stood Wilfred of Aescendune.

Poor Wilfred! he needed all his courage, for he stood almost alone, a mere youth, amidst many enemies. At the most there were but three hearts present which beat with any sympathy for him.

Lanfranc had, however, possessed the king with certain general facts, which disposed William to give the accused a patient hearing, and when his "starkness" was not roused, William could be just.

And so Wilfred, his face pale, his lips compressed, his hands clasped upon the desk before him, gazed into the face of this awful Conqueror, whose frown so few dared to meet—the very incarnation of brute force and mental daring combined.

On his head was the crown of England, which he wore only on state occasions, four times yearly as a rule, at certain great festivals. One of these had just been held at Abingdon, and on this occasion, as we see, he again assumed it. The sceptre was borne beneath by a page who stood by his side.

William's voice first broke the silence—a stern, deep voice.

"Wilfred of Aescendune, we have chosen to hear thy defence in person—if thou hast any defence becoming thee to make and us to hear."

"Of what am I accused?" said the prisoner.

It was noticed that he omitted the royal title.

“Of rebellion, parricide, and sacrilege.”

“I admit that I have fought against the invaders of my country, and am nowise ashamed of it,” said the brave youth, in a tone which, without being defiant, was yet manly; “but I deny, as base and wicked lies, the other charges made against me.”

“Thou ownest thy rebellion?”

“I own that I have fought against thy people and thee; but I have never sworn allegiance. Thou art not my rightful sovereign, and hence I do not acknowledge the guilt of rebellion.”

Page 104

There was a general murmur of indignation, which William repressed.

“Peace, my lords; peace, churchmen. We are not moved by a boy’s rhetoric. The facts lie on the surface, and we need not enquire whether one is truly a rebel who was taken red-handed in the so-called ‘Camp of Refuge;’ nor do we deign to discuss those rights, which Christendom acknowledges, with our subjects. The question is this: Does the youth simply merit the lighter doom of a rebel, or the far heavier one of a parricide and a sacrilegious incendiary?”

“Parricide!” exclaimed the indignant prisoner. “My father, more fortunate than I, died fighting against thee at Senlac.”

“Hugo of Aescendune and Malville was nevertheless thy father by adoption; and by the law of civilised nations, carried with that adoption the rights and prerogatives of a sire. But we waste time. Herald, summon the accuser.”

“Etienne de Malville et Aescendune, enter!” cried the herald of the court.

And Etienne appeared, dressed in sable mourning, and bowed before the throne. He was pale, too, if that sallow colour, which olive-like complexions like his assume when wrought upon, can be called pale. He cast upon Wilfred one glance of intense hatred, and then, looking down respectfully, awaited the words of the Conqueror.

“Etienne de Malville, dost thou appear as the accuser of this prisoner?”

“I do.”

“Take thine oath, then, upon the Holy Gospels, only to speak the truth; my Lord Archbishop will administer it.”

Lanfranc administered the oath, much as it is done in courts of justice nowadays, but with peculiar solemnity of manner.

Etienne repeated the words very solemnly and distinctly. No one doubted, or could doubt, his sincerity.

“Of what crimes dost thou accuse the prisoner?”

“Parricide, in that he hath compassed the death of his adoptive father; sacrilege, in that he burnt the priory of St. Wilfred with all the monks therein, and later the Priory of St. Denys, from which the inmates had happily escaped, and in support of this accusation I am ready to wager my body in the lists, if the King so allow.”

“We do not risk thy safety against one who is already proved guilty of rebellion, and who is not of knightly rank like thyself.”

(Etienne had duly received knighthood after the taking of the Camp of Refuge.)

“This is a question of evidence. State thy case.”

Etienne spake clearly and well; and as he told the story of the destruction of the priory of St. Wilfred, of the subsequent appearance of our hero in the woods at the head of the outlaws, and the later conflagrations, there were few who did not think that he had proved his case, so far as it admitted of proof.

“We will now hear thy story of the destruction of the priory, and the manner in which thou didst escape from it,” said the Conqueror to Wilfred.

Page 105

Wilfred spoke good Norman French, thanks to his early education, in company with Etienne and the other pages, after the Conquest. So he began his story lucidly, but not without some emotion, which he strove in vain to suppress.

“Normans,” he said, “I would not defend myself against this foul charge to save my forfeit life, nor could I hope to save it. Ye have met like wolves to judge a stag, and since ye have taken from me all that makes life dear, I refuse not to die; only I would die with honour, and hence I strive, speaking but the words of truth, to remove the stain which my enemy there” (he turned and pointed at Etienne) “has cast upon my honour, for I am of a house that has never known shame, and would not disgrace it in my person.

“I submitted to the father ye Normans gave me, and bore all the wrongs he and his heaped upon me, until the day when I discovered in that father” (he pronounced the word with the deepest scorn) “the murderer of my own mother.”

A general burst of incredulity, followed by an indignant and scornful denial from Etienne.

“Silence,” said a stern voice, “this is not a hostelry; the prisoner has the right of speech and the ear of the judge; only, Englishman, be careful what thou sayest.”

“I repeat the simple fact, my lord” (this was the only title Wilfred would give the King); “the baron, whom ye are pleased sportively to call my father, poisoned my own mother.”

“Poisoned! poisoned! My liege, can this be endured?”

“Hear him to the end, and then, if he have spoken without proof, it will be time to pronounce his aggravated sentence. *Silence!*”

Wilfred continued, and told the whole story as our readers know it, until his arrival at the Dismal Swamp. He described all that had passed so clearly that his foes became interested in spite of themselves, and listened. He did not charge Hugo with the burning of the priory, for he had no evidence to sustain the charge, being only aware that such was at hand to be produced by others; as he had learnt from Father Kenelm, who had been granted admittance to his cell.

At length he finished in these words:

“And now I have told you all the truth, and if ye will not believe me, but prefer to think I betrayed those to death I loved so dearly, I cannot help myself; but if there be a God, and a judgment day—as ye all profess to believe—I appeal to that God and that day, knowing that my innocence will then be made clear. That I fought with them who slew the baron I freely admit, and hold myself justified, as ye must, if ye believe my story; but I myself protected the monks of your kindred, albeit they had taken the places of better men than themselves, and not one was harmed; and when we fled, we burnt castle,

priory, and village, without distinction, that they might not shelter an enemy. This, too, I hold to be lawful in war.

“I know that Englishmen find scant justice at Norman hands, and that ye will slay me as a rebel. Do so, and I will thank you; only defile not the memory—slay not the reputation as well as the body. If the house of Aescendune, which was planted in this land when ye Normans were but pagan Danes, is to perish, let it at least go unsullied to its grave. I have spoken.”

Page 106

There was strong sensation. His speech had produced some reaction in his favour.

“It is, as we said before, a question of evidence,” said the King. “Is any forthcoming on one side or the other? for as yet neither party has really shown who burnt the priory and the monks therein. We have only assumptions, and they are not facts.”

Lanfranc looked at the King, as if asking permission to speak. The King bent his head, and the Archbishop began, addressing Etienne:

“Amongst the followers of thy father, was there a warrior named Guy, son of Roger, born at Malville?”

“There was.”

“Didst thou know him well?”

“Intimately.”

“What became of him?”

“He was lost when my father perished—faithful, doubtless, to the last.”

“Didst thou ever see his mark as a witness to any charter, or the like?”

“I did; instead of making a cross, he preferred to draw a bow.”

“Wouldst thou recognise it, then?”

“I should, indeed.”

“Then,” said the Archbishop, holding a parchment folded up so as to conceal all but the name and the mark of a bow beside it, “dost thou know this mark?”

“I do; it is the mark of Guy, the son of Roger.”

“Do ye all,” said Lanfranc, turning round, “hear his affirmation?”

“We do—”

“Then hear what the paper contains.”

I, Guy, son of Roger, born at Malville, being a dying man, and about to meet my God, do make this, my last confession, for the safety of my poor soul.

In the summer of the year 1068, in the month of June, I, with twenty other men, who have, so far as I know, perished by fire in the Dismal Swamp, was summoned to wait



upon the Baron of Aescendune in a private chamber. He told us that the honour of his house depended upon us, and asked us whether we were willing to stand by him in his necessity. He had selected us well. We were born on his Norman estates, and trained up from childhood to do his will, and that of the devil. We all promised to do whatever he should ask, and to keep the matter a secret.

Then he told us that we were to burn the Priory of St. Wilfred at midnight, and to allow none to escape.

This we did, we took possession silently of every exit, piled up wood and straw, set it on fire on every side at once, and transfixed all those who tried to break out with arrows or lances, and hurled them back into the flames.

Long has my soul been sick with horror that I slew these holy men, and now that all who were my companions in this deed have perished by God's just judgment—burnt alive even as they burned—I, willing to save my soul from the everlasting flame, do make this my penitent confession, praying God to have mercy upon my soul.

Given in the Dismal Swamp, in the month of June, 1068.

CHAPTER XXIII. "GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY."

Page 107

A dead silence followed the reading of the dying confession of Guy, son of Roger.

The mighty Conqueror looked around, as if he would read men's hearts.

Etienne de Malville was flushed, and seemed ready to sink into the earth for shame, as though he himself were responsible for the guilt of his father.

Wilfred of Aescendune, on the other hand, looked like one whose innocence was vindicated; there was an expression of joy on his face—joy, however, so tempered by other feelings, that it could not be called exultation.

"It is a forgery—a vile and shameful forgery," cried Etienne.

"Thou didst thyself recognise the mark," said the king sternly. "We pardon thine excitement, but do not forget the presence of thine elders."

"Can I sit thus tamely, and hear my dead father accused of the vilest crimes?"

"Justice shall be done his memory—justice, neither more nor less," said the Conqueror sternly.

"I claim, then, my privilege to meet the accuser in knightly combat."

"The accuser is dead. Wilt thou go to purgatory to meet him? for we trust his penitence has saved him from going farther and faring worse. Keep silence, and do not further interrupt the course of justice. We can pity thee, believing thee to be incapable of such deeds thyself."

Then, turning to the court:

"Is there any other evidence, verbal or written, bearing upon this question?"

"There is, my liege," said Bishop Geoffrey.

"What is it?"

"A letter addressed to me by the murdered prior of St. Wilfred's Priory, who perished in the flames on the fatal night of which we have heard so much."

"Its date?"

"The night in Ascensiontide, three years ago, in which the prisoner left his stepfather's protection and made a vain attempt to reach me at Oxenford, striving to bear the missive of which this is a copy."

"And the original?"

“Fell into the possession of the late baron, his stepfather, after Eustace, Count of Blois, had borne the lad back again by force.”

“Hast thou satisfied thyself of the authenticity of the copy?”

“I have; it was attested by Prior Elphege himself, in the presence of the Benedictine from whom I received it.”

“Then read the letter.”

And amidst breathless attention, Geoffrey read:

Elphege, prior of the house of St. Wilfred at Aescendune, to the noble prelate Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, now resident at Oxenford, sendeth greeting.

It will not have escaped thy remembrance, most holy father in God, that on the fatal field of Senlac—fatal, that is, to my countrymen, for I am not ashamed to call myself an Englishman—thou didst favourably notice a youth, who sought and found his father’s dead body, by name Wilfred, son of Edmund of Aescendune.

Nor wilt thou forget that thou didst intercede for the boy that he might retain his ancestral possessions, which boon thou didst only obtain at the cost of his widowed mother’s marriage with Hugo, Lord of Malville, outre mer.

Page 108

It was then settled that the two boys, Etienne de Melville and Wilfred of Aescendune, thereby thrown together, should each inherit the lands and honours of their respective sires; but that, should the latter die, the united estates should fall to Etienne de Malville, did he still survive.

In this arrangement, we naturally saw danger to our own precious charge—for our spiritual child he was—Wilfred of Aescendune.

His mother died the year after the Conquest, and passed, as we thought, happily from a world of sin and sorrow.

The boy, at first disconsolate with grief, recovered his health and spirits after awhile, and if allowed to live, might assuredly grow to man's estate, and perpetuate his ancient line.

If allowed, I say, for we have just received evidence that the mother was poisoned, and we tremble with horror lest the boy should share her fate.

This evidence is in the form of a dying confession, which, at the request of the poor penitent, we have written with pen and ink.

When thou hast read it, for the love of God and of His saints, especially of our father Benedict, stretch forth thine hand and protect the unhappy bearer, the youthful lord of Aescendune.

We commend him with all confidence to thy care.

Given at St. Wilfred's priory, in the octave of Ascension, 1068.

"Hear ye the confession enclosed," said Geoffrey.

It is five years since I fled the face of my lord, Edmund of Aescendune, for I had slain his red deer, and sold them for filthy lucre, and I feared to meet his face; so I fled to the great city, even London, where I was like to starve, till a Jew, who saw my distress, took pity on me, and gave me shelter.

His name was Abraham of Toledo, and he was mighty in magic arts, and in compounding of deadly drugs to slay, or medicines to keep alive. He made me his servant, and I, albeit a Christian man, soon learned to do the bidding of the devil at his command.

One day there came a Norman noble, and bought of my master a liquid, which would cause those who drank but one drop, daily, to die of deadly decline within the year. I heard the bargain made as I was compounding some drugs within a recess of my master's chamber. No sooner was the man gone than Abraham descended the stairs, calling for me. I managed to reach him without raising his suspicions, when he bade me



follow the retreating stranger, not yet out of sight in the gloom, and learn his name. I did so; it was Hugo de Malville, the new lord of Aescendune.

I knew of his marriage, and felt sure whom he wanted to destroy; but I dared not show myself at home. At length an incurable disease seized me, and I determined to unburden my conscience, and dragged myself here, only to learn that the sweet lady of Aescendune had died within the year, with all the symptoms of rapid decline, and upon my sod I charge Hugo de Malville with the murder.

Page 109

Given in the infirmary of the house of St. Wilfred, in the month of May, 1068.

This dying confession was made in our hearing this day.

Elphege, Prior.

Ceadda, Sub-Prior,

Tuesday in Oct., Asc., in the year of grace, 1068.

After a moment's silence, Odo of Bayeux, the Conqueror's half brother, and a hateful oppressor of the poor English, rose up:

"This letter does not afford any absolute proof of the guilt of our departed brother in arms, Hugo of Aescendune. He may have bought the liquid; there is no proof he administered it—people die of decline daily."

"May I produce and question a witness before the court," said Geoffrey, "in the absence of the prisoner?"

"Certainly," replied William.

A signal was given to an expectant usher of the court. Wilfred was led out, and in a few moments two wardens entered in charge of another prisoner.

He was tall and haggard; a long beard descended to his waist. His peculiar nose—the most marked characteristic of his race, long and beak-shaped, yet not exactly aquiline—marked the Jew. He looked anxiously around.

"Thou art Abraham of Toledo?"

The Hebrew bowed submissively.

"A compounder of poisons?"

"Say rather of medicines, lord; for the making of one is the rule—of the other, the exception."

"Thou dost not deny the accusation, which places thy life at the mercy of the court?"

"I will own all, and throw myself on its mercy, trusting that the relief I have oft afforded in bodily anguish, maybe allowed to atone, in its measure, for any aid my fears may have driven me to lend to crime."

"It is thine only chance, Jew, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"I am at your lordship's disposal."

"Didst thou ever deal with Hugo, sometime lord of Malville. and afterwards of Aescendune?"

"Once only."

"On what occasion?"

"He sought a medicine."

"A medicine?" said Geoffrey, sternly; "thou triflest."

"Nay!—a poison, I would have said."

"Of what specific nature?"

"To produce the symptoms of decline—the patient would sink and die."

"What was the appearance of the poison?"

"Dropped in water it diffused at first a sapphire hue, but after exposure to the air the hue of the ruby succeeded."

"Didst thou know the purpose for which he bought the drug?"

"My lord, I did not, nor do I know now; my humble occupations do not lead me amongst the mighty of the land, save when they seek my humble shop."

"Still thine offence, Jew," said the stern voice of the Conqueror, "is a damnable one, and lendest itself readily to the purposes of crime."

"Let the unbeliever be removed in custody."

"My lord of Canterbury, he is a heretic—perchance a sorcerer; let the Church see to him."

Page 110

And so the poor Jew was removed to his dungeon.

“And now with your favour,” said Geoffrey, “I would ask a few questions of the prisoner, in your presence.”

“The permission is given,” said William.

Wilfred was again conducted before the court.

“Thou hast dared to brand thy late stepfather as the poisoner of thy mother; wilt thou state any cause or justification thou mayest have, over and above that indicated by the letter and confession we have read?”

“I did not dream of such guilt before I heard that confession, months after the death of my mother.”

“Hadst thou ever seen medicine administered to her?”

“Frequently, by the baron her second husband himself. He called it the elixir of life, and stated he had obtained it at a high price, from a noted Jewish physician.”

“What was its colour?”

“A drop only was let fall into water, which it tinged with a greenish hue, as of a sapphire.”

“Didst thou mark any peculiarity?”

“On one occasion, when, owing to very sudden sickness, the medicine was not taken, my sister and I marked with surprise, that the medicine thus diluted had changed to a crimson colour.”

General sensation. Etienne hid his face in his mantle; the churchman and nobles conferred together. William spoke:

“Thou hast thy lesson perfect, boy. Didst thou ever see this Jew Abraham?”

“Never; or he had not lived to tell thee.”

“Then there is no possible collusion between the witnesses—I appeal to thee, my lord of Coutances?”

“None; I will answer for it as a bishop. It was a providential thought, which led me to interrogate the Jew respecting the appearance of the medicine, and one utterly unpremeditated.”

“Remove the prisoner,” said the king.

While Wilfred was absent, William conferred with his lords spiritual and temporal. This was no court wherein the popular element found place; the whole issue of the trial lay with the mighty chieftain—the rest were but his consultees.

We will not record the deliberations, only their result.

After half an hour had passed—a time of dread suspense to the prisoner—Wilfred was again summoned to the bar.

William addressed him:

“We have duly considered thy case, Wilfred of Aescendune, and fully acquit thee of the guilt of sacrilege, while we also admit that there were causes, which might go far to justify thy rebellion against thy stepfather, and to mitigate the guilt of armed resistance to thy king.

“We are not met to judge thy stepfather; he has been called to a higher and an unerring tribunal, and there we leave him, satisfied that the Judge of all the earth will do right.

“For thee—the guilt of rebellion and of bearing arms against thy king for three whole years has to be expiated; but if thou art willing to take the oath of allegiance on the spot, and bind thyself to discharge the duties of a subject to his king, we will consider thy case favourably, and perchance restore thee, under certain conditions, to thy ancestral possessions. Speak, what sayest thou—dost thou hesitate?”

Page 111

Every eye was fixed on the prisoner.

He stood there, firm as a rock, and looked bravely into that face whose frown so few could bear.

“My lord of Normandy,” he said, “by birth I owe thee no allegiance, and I cannot acknowledge that thy masterful and bloody conquest of an unoffending people has given thee any right to demand it. I cannot betray the cause for which my father bled and died, or ally myself to my mother’s murderers. You have acquitted me of deeper guilt. I can now die for my country without shame.”

The Conqueror heard him patiently to the end.

“Thou knowest, then, thine inevitable fate?”

“I accept it. Ye have robbed me of all which made life worth living.”

“Thou must die, then: but we spare thee torture or mutilation. Prepare to meet the headsman within the castle yard, at the third sun-rising after this day—

“and, my lord of Coutances, since you have taken so much interest in this young English rebel, we charge thee with the welfare of his soul.”

And the court broke up.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE CASTLE OF OXFORD.

“It is the crime and not the scaffold makes The headsman’s death a shame.”

Wilfred sat alone in an upper chamber of the donjon tower the Conqueror had erected at Oxford, hard by the mound thrown up by Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians and daughter of Alfred. For thither the king had caused him to be removed, unwilling to stain the holy precincts of Abingdon with a deed of blood, and confiding fully in Robert d’Oyly, the governor of his new castle.

The passage up the river had occupied two full hours, under the care of trusty and able rowers; for the stream was swift in those days, before locks checked its course, as we have stated elsewhere.

Under the woods of Newenham, past the old Anglo-Saxon churches of Sandford and Iffley, up the right-hand channel of the stream just below the city, and so to the landing place beneath the old tower {xxv}.

William had given orders to treat our Wilfred with all possible consideration, and to allow him every indulgence, which did not militate against his safe keeping, for he admired, even while he felt it necessary to slay. So he was not thrust into a dungeon, but confined in an upper chamber, where a grated window, at a great height, afforded him a fair view of that world he was about to leave for ever.

“Ah! if I were but in those woods,” sighed the prisoner to himself, “I would give these Normans some trouble to catch me again; but the poor bird can only beat himself against the cruel bars of his cage.”

He counted the hours. It was the evening of his condemnation; two whole days, followed by a feverish night, and then when that next sun arose—

Strange thoughts began to arise—what sort of axe would they use?—who would be there?—would they bind his eyes?—would he have to kneel on the stones?—what kind of block would they use?

Page 112

Little trifling details like these forced themselves upon him, even as an artist represents each humble detail in a finished picture.

Did he repent that he had refused life and Aescendune? No, he hated the Normans with too profound a hatred.

Was he prepared to die? We are sorry to record that he shook off every thought of the future. God had delivered the English into the hands of the Normans—his father and mother had been good religious people, and what had they got by it? If there was a God, why were such cruelties allowed to exist unavenged? He and His saints must be asleep. Such were the wicked thoughts which arose, as we grieve to record, in poor Wilfred's mind.

But now heavy steps were heard ascending the stairs, and soon Lanfranc, conducted by the Norman governor, entered the cell.

Against him Wilfred could not, in reason, feel the enmity he bore to all others of Norman race; it was owing to his exertions, and to those of Geoffrey of Coutances, that he was about to die as a patriot, and not as a sacrilegious incendiary.

It was the object of this worthy prelate to save the soul, where he had failed to save the body, and to direct the thoughts of the condemned one to Him, who Himself hung like a criminal between earth and heaven, that He might save all who would put their trust in Him.

The great obstacle in Wilfred's mind was his inability to forgive. This his visitor soon perceived, and by the example of those dying words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," he gently impressed upon the penitent the duty of forgiving those who had wronged him—however deeply.

"But how can I forgive the murderers of my mother?"

"Thou believest that mother is in Paradise?"

"Indeed I do."

"Dost thou not wish to be with her at last?"

"As the hart desireth the water brooks."

"Then ask thyself what she would have thee do. Canst thou hope for the pardon of thine own grievous sins, unless thou dost first forgive all who have offended thee?"

"I will try. See me again tomorrow, father."

“I will do so: I remain at St. Frideswide’s for—a day or two.”

Wilfred understood the hesitation.

A different scene transpired simultaneously in the dungeons below, which, with their accustomed ruthless policy, the Normans had hollowed out of the soil.

The Jew, Abraham of Toledo, was resting uneasily, full of fears—which experience too well justified—as to his personal safety in this den of lions, when he also heard steps, this time descending the stairs, and Geoffrey of Coutances was ushered in.

“Leave the cell,” said the bishop to the gaoler, “but remain in the passage. Close the door; I would speak with this penitent, as I trust he will prove, in private.”

“Never fear, your holiness,” said the gaoler with somewhat undue familiarity; “I care little for a Jew’s patter, and this fellow will need a long shrift before they make a roast of him—for that, I suppose, will be the end of it.”

Page 113

The door slammed.

It was a miserable cell, composed of rough stones, lately put together, oozing with the moisture from the damp soil around, for the river was close by and the dungeon beneath its level.

“Art thou prepared to meet thy fitting end?”

“What crime have I committed to deserve death?”

“Thou hast knowingly and wilfully abetted, not one but many poisoners, and the stake is the fitting doom for thee and them.”

“Oh! not the stake, God of Abraham. If ye must slay, at least spare the agonising flames; but what mercy can we hope for, we faithful children of Abraham, from Nazarenes?”

“What price art thou willing to pay for thy forfeit life, if thy sentence is commuted to exile from this land?”

“Price? Canst thou mean it? I will fill thy chambers with gold.”

“I seek it not—albeit,” added the worthy bishop, “some were fitly bestowed on the poor—but that thou, whose former crime hast brought a worthy youth to the block, shouldst undo the mischief as far as thou art able.”

“But what can I do? who would heed me?”

“Dost thou not know of a drug, which shall throw the drinker thereof into a trance, so like death that all shall believe him dead?”

“I do indeed.”

“And art thou sure of thy power to revive the sleeper from this seeming death, after the lapse of days—after men have committed him as a corpse to the tomb?”

“I can do so with facility if I have the necessary drugs; but I am stripped of all. Were I in London—”

“Hast thou no brethren in Oxenford?”

“Yea, verily, I remember Zacharias the Jew, who lives hard by the river, in the parish of St. Ebba.”

“Canst thou trust him with thy life?”

“He is a brother.”

“Ye are better brothers than many Christians. I will send him to thee, and he shall supply thee with the necessary medicaments. If the experiment succeed, and absolute secrecy be observed, I will cause thy sentence to be commuted to banishment, with the forfeiture of some portion of thine ill-gotten goods; otherwise there remaineth but the stake.”

And Geoffrey of Coutances departed.

An hour later, Zacharias of St. Ebba’s parish entered; the two conferred a long time—Zacharias departed—returned again—and in the evening of the following day sought the bishop and placed a packet in his hand.

It was the last night on which poor Wilfred was allowed by Norman mercy to live. The archbishop was with him.

He was penitent and resigned; his last confession was made, and it was arranged that on the morrow he should receive the Holy Communion at St. George’s Chapel, within the precincts, from the hands of Lanfranc, ere led forth to die, as now ordered, upon that mound the visitor to Oxford still beholds, hard by that same donjon tower.

“I thank thee, father,” he said to Lanfranc—“I thank thee for the hope thou hast given me of meeting those I have lost, in a better and brighter world.”

Page 114

"Thou diest penitent for thy sins, and forgiving thy foes?"

"I do, indeed; it has been a struggle, but thou hast conquered."

"Not I, but Divine grace;" and the mighty prelate turned aside to hide a tear.

Another visitor was announced, and Geoffrey of Coutances drew near.

"Thou art resigned, my Wilfred?"

"I am, by God's grace."

"Yet thou lookest feeble and ill. Drink this tonic; it will give thee strength to play the man tomorrow."

He emptied the contents of a phial into a small cup of water. Wilfred drank it up.

"And now, my son, hast thou any message to leave behind thee?"

"When thou seest Etienne, tell him I forgive, as I trust he forgives also—we have much to pardon each other—and beg him to be a merciful lord to such poor English as yet dwell in Aescendune."

"I will, indeed, and so second your last appeal that I doubt not to prevail."

"And my sister—Hugo sent her, as he said, to be educated in the convent of The Holy Trinity at Caen; convey her my last love, and a lock of hair as a memento of her only brother. Poor Editha! she will be alone now. Thou wilt care for her future fortunes; she has a claim on the lands of Aescendune. Oh, Aescendune!—bright sky, verdant fields, deep forest glades, pleasant river—thou passest to Norman hands now."

It was the last moment of weakness.

"May I lie there beside my father?"

"Yes, thou shalt," said Lanfranc.

"After many years," muttered Geoffrey to himself, for he had a secret, which he concealed from his more scrupulous brother.

Lanfranc rose to depart.

"Commend thyself to God in prayer; then sleep and dream of Paradise. I will be with thee ere the October dawn."

And Lanfranc departed.



“How dost thou feel, my son?” said Geoffrey.

“Well, but strangely sleepy, as if control were leaving me and my frame not my own. Was it a strengthening dose thou gavest me?”

“One which will, perchance, save thee. Lie on this bed; now sleep if thou wilt—thou wilt arise the better for it.”

And in a few minutes, all anxiety forgotten, Wilfred slept—slept heavily. Geoffrey watched him awhile, then departed.

The morrow, and a great multitude of spectators had arranged themselves around the slopes of the mound, just before sunrise.

On the tower itself stood Etienne de Malville, eager to see the end of his hated rival, and to make sure, by ocular evidence, of his death.

The morning was clear, after high dawn. The spectator on the tower looked towards the eastern hills, over the valley of the Cherwell, to see the sun arise above the heights of Headington.

It came at last—the signal of death: a huge arc of fire, changing rapidly into a semi-circle, and then into a globe. All the earth rejoiced around, but a shudder passed through the crowd.

Page 115

The headsman leaned upon his axe, but no procession yet approached.

The sun was now a quarter of an hour high, when a murmur passed through the crowd that something had happened. At length the murmur deepened into a report that Wilfred had been found dead in his bed.

“Died,” said some, “by the judgment of God.”

“The better for him,” said others.

And there were even those who murmured bitterly that they were disappointed of the spectacle, which they had left their beds to witness. Such unfeeling selfishness is not without example in modern times.

Etienne left the roof, burning with indignation, suspecting some trick to cheat him of his vengeance.

“Come into this cell,” said the soft voice of Lanfranc.

Etienne obeyed.

There lay his young rival, cold and pale. Etienne doubted no longer; death was too palpably stamped upon the face.

“Canst thou forgive now?” said Lanfranc. “His last message was one of forgiveness for thee.”

“I know not. An hour ago I thought no power on earth could make me; but we have each suffered wrongs.”

“Ye have.”

“I do forgive, then; requiescat in pace.”

“So shall it be well with thee before God,” said the good prelate.

So Wilfred was buried in the vaults of St. Frideswide’s church. The Archbishop Lanfranc celebrated the funeral mass. It was noticed with surprise that Bishop Geoffrey absented himself from the function and the subsequent burial rites.

The week ended, as all weeks come to an end. Lanfranc had gone to Canterbury. The Conqueror, assured by trusty reporters of the death of Wilfred, rejoiced that so satisfactory an accident had befallen, sparing all publicity and shame to one he could but admire, as he ever admired pluck and devotion.

Geoffrey alone remained a guest at a monastic foundation hard by St. Frideswide's.

The midnight bell has struck twelve—or, rather, has been struck twelve times by the sexton, in the absence of machinery.

All is silence and gloom in the church of St. Frideswide, and upon the burial ground around.

Three muffled figures stand in a recess of the cloisters.

"This is the door," said the sexton; "but, holy St. Frideswide, to go down there tonight!"

"Thou forgettest I am a bishop; I can lay spirits if they arise."

The sexton stood at the open door—a group of the bishop's retainers farther off—that iron door which never opened to inmate before.

Geoffrey and the Jew advanced to the grave, amidst stone coffins and recesses in the walls, where the dead lay, much as in the catacombs.

They stopped before a certain recess.

There, swathed in woollen winding sheets, lay the mute form of Wilfred of Aescendune.

"Let him see thee when he arises. The sight of this deathly place may slay him. He will awake as from sleep. Take this sponge—bathe well the brow; how the aromatic odour fills the vaults!"



Page 116

A minute—no result. Another.

“Dog, hast thou deceived me and slain him? If so, thou shalt not escape.”

“Patience,” said the Jew.

A heavy sigh escaped the sleeper.

“Thank God, he lives,” said the bishop.

“Where am I? Have I slept long?”

“With friends—all is well.

“Cover his face; now bear him out to the air.”

.

A barque was leaving the ancient port of Pevensey, bound for the east. Two friends—one in the attire of a bishop, and a youth who looked like a recent convalescent—stood on the deck.

“Farewell to England—dear England,” said the younger.

“Thou mayest revisit it after thou hast fulfilled thy desire to pray at thy Saviour’s tomb, and to tread the holy soil His sacred Feet have trodden; but it must be years hence.”

“My best prayers must be for thee.”

“Tut, tut, my child; thy adventures form an episode I love to think of. See, Beachy Head recedes; anon thou shalt see the towers of Coutances Cathedral across the deep.”

CHAPTER XXV. IN THE FOREST OF LEBANON.

Thirty years had passed away since the events recorded in our last chapter, and the mighty Conqueror himself had gone to render an account of his stewardship to the Judge of all men.

The thoughts and aspirations of all Christian people were now attracted to far different subjects from the woes or wrongs of the English nation. The Crusades had begun. Peter the Hermit had moved all Christendom by his fiery eloquence, and sent them to avenge the wrongs the pilgrims of the cross had sustained from Turkish hands, and to free the holy soil from the spawn of the false prophet.

Since the Caliph Omar received the capitulation of Jerusalem, in 637, and established therein the religion of Mahomed, no greater calamity had ever befallen Christendom than the conquest of Asia Minor, and subsequently Syria, by the Turks.

The latter event, which occurred about nine years after the Norman Conquest of England, transferred the government of Palestine, and the custody of the holy places, from a race which, although Mahometan, was yet tolerant, to a far fiercer and “anti-human” government. The “unspeakable Turk” had appeared on the scene of European politics.

For, under the milder rule of the Fatimite Caliphs, who reigned over Jerusalem from A.D. 969 to 1076, a peculiar quarter of the holy city had been assigned to the Christians; a fair tribute secured them protection, and the Sepulchre of Christ, with the other scenes identified with the Passion, were left in their hands. Greeks and Latins alike enjoyed freedom of worship, and crowds of pilgrims flocked from all the western nations.

Then appeared our Turks on the scene. They first ravished Asia Minor from the weak grasp of the later Roman Empire, and established their capital and worship—the abomination of desolation—where the first great Christian council had drawn up the Nicene Creed, that is, at Nicaea in Bithynia.

Page 117

Then, later on, under the Sultan Malek Shah, they attacked Syria and Egypt, and the Holy Land passed under that blighting rule, which has ever since withered it in its grasp, with a few brief intervals.

And now the scene changed: the pilgrims, who through innumerable dangers had reached the holy city, only entered it to become the victims of contumely and savage insult, and often perished by brutal violence before they reached their goal—the Holy Sepulchre.

The very patriarch of Jerusalem was dragged by the hair and cast into a filthy dungeon, in order to exact a heavy ransom from the sympathy of his flock, and the tale of his sufferings harrowed all hearts.

For twenty years all this was borne.

At length came a pilgrim—then unknown to fame. He was a hermit, named Peter, and came from Picardy in France. He mingled his tears with those of the patriarch, to whom he obtained access.

“What can we do?” said the poor prelate. “The successors of Constantine are no match for the fiery Turk.”

“I will rouse the martial nations of Europe in your cause,” was the reply.

History tells how Peter the Hermit kept his word: how his fiery eloquence aroused and kindled all hearts; how Christendom sent forth her myriads, as under some potent spell.

At the council of Clermont, in November 1095, took place that famous scene in the presence of Pope Urban, when the cry, “God wills it,” thrilled from myriad lips, and became the watchword of the Crusaders.

Men sold their estates for mere trifles; kings and dukes, like Robert of Normandy, mortgaged their very crowns, that they might fight in so holy a cause; and avaricious, cunning, and greedy monarchs, like Rufus, stayed at home and bought cheaply.

And as with the monarch, so with the vassal; land was a drug in the market, and horses and arms went up cent per cent.

The principal leaders of the first great Crusade {xxvi} were Godfrey de Bouillon (duke of the empire), Hugh of Vermandois, Robert of Normandy, Raymond of Toulouse, Bohemond and Tancred of the race of Robert Guiscard, the Norman conqueror of southern Italy.

Under their leadership, Constantinople was reached in safety. Nicea was besieged, and taken from the Turkish Sultan, Soliman.

Then they first met the Turks in battle array at Dorylaeum—an awful conflict which took place on the 4th of July 1097, in which nearly four hundred thousand Moslems were arrayed against the Crusaders.

The Sultan evacuated Asia Minor, and the expedition passed through a wasted land and deserted towns, without meeting a single enemy.

Nine months they were delayed before the city of Antioch, from October 1097 to June 1098, when the city was taken by storm.

Then they were besieged themselves in that city, by nearly half a million of Turks, and though reduced to the shadow of their former strength, they sallied forth and utterly defeated their besiegers, whose camp fell into their hands. Nothing could stand before the enthusiasm of the western warriors, who fancied they saw spectral forms of saints and martyrs fighting by their side.

Page 118

At length, all obstacles removed, in the month of May, in the last year of the eleventh century, they entered the Holy Land.

On this sacred soil the action of our tale recommences.

.

It was a lovely evening in May, and the year was the last of the eleventh century.

The sun had gone down about half an hour, but had left behind him a flood of golden light in the west, glorious to behold—so calm, so transparent was that heavenly after glow, wherein deep cerulean blue was flecked with the brightest crimson or the ruddiest gold.

The moon had risen in the east, and was shining from a deep dark-blue background, which conveyed the idea of immeasurable space, with a brilliancy which she seldom or never attains in our northern sky.

A group of warriors had kindled a fire beneath the wide-spreading branches of an immense cedar tree, which had, perhaps, been planted in the reign of Solomon to supply the loss of those cut down for the temple by Hiram of Tyre.

The landscape was a striking one.

Above them, in the distance, opened a mighty gorge, through which flowed the rushing waters of a mountain torrent, one of the sources of the Jordan, issuing from the snows of Hermon.

Below, the country expanded into a gently undulating plain, studded with cedars, which resembled in no small degree the precincts of some old English park.

Let us glance at the warriors, and we shall speedily learn that they are no natives of the soil.

The armour they have laid aside, the coats of linked mail, with long sleeves of similar material, the big triangular shields, plated gauntlets, and steel breastplates, sufficiently bespoke their western nationality; but the red cross, conspicuous on the right sleeve, told that they were Crusaders.

Their leader appeared to be a young knight who, one would think, had scarcely won his spurs, or had but recently done so; and his retinue was limited to the customary attendance upon a single "lance," a dozen men-at-arms, completely equipped, and twice that number of light archers.

Their horses were picketed at a slight distance, so that they might graze easily, and like their owners, were divested of their armour—for the steeds also were usually loaded with defensive mail covering the more vital parts of their frames.

The flesh of a deer was roasting at the general fire, and diffusing a savoury odour around, and all the members of the company were intent upon rest and enjoyment.

Apart from them stood their solitary sentinel, looking with dreamy gaze over the fair landscape, and musing, perchance, of far-off England—of his distant love, or of wife and children, and wondering, very likely, whether, the war ended, he would live to return, with all the prestige of a warrior of the Cross, and tell of the marvels of Eastern climes to many a rustic audience.

Page 119

Amidst these musings a sound fell upon his ear, which at first he did not recognise, but which rapidly assumed the character of that rumbling, earth-shaking, thunder-like sound which a large body of cavalry, approaching at a gallop, but yet afar off, would make.

He strained his gaze along the desert wastes, beneath the spreading branches of many cedars; but as yet no sight met the eye to support the impressions made already upon the ear.

It was not long, however, before the rapidly approaching sounds became too distinct to suffer him to hesitate, and he gave the alarm.

The merry song ceased; the conversation dropped; and in the awful stillness the senses of each man confirmed the report of the sentinel.

"They may be friends," said the young knight.

"Friends are scarce in the desert," said an aged man-at-arms, the Nestor of the expedition; "permit us to arm, my lord."

The word was given, and each man-at-arms hastened to his steed; the archers—footmen—adjusted their bows, when a troop of wild horsemen, approaching with the speed of the wind, became visible.

They appeared to number a hundred men, so far as they could be discerned and their force estimated amidst the dust which they created, and their ever-changing evolutions. Anon grim forms and wild faces appeared from the cloud; spears glanced in every direction—now whirled around their heads, now thrown and caught with the dexterity of jugglers.

They seemed to manage their horses less by the bridle than by the inflections of their bodies, so that they could spare, at need, both hands for combat—the one to hold the bucklers of rhinoceros skin or crocodile hide, the other to wield spear or scimitar.

Turbans surrounded their heads, and light garments their bodies; but defensive armour had they none.

"Let them come on," said the young knight; "we would not give way, though the desert yielded twenty times such scum."

But they knew too well their own inferiority in the charge to venture upon the steel of their mail-clad opponents. At about a hundred yards distance from their quarry they swerved, divided into two parties, and, riding to the right and left of their Christian opponents, discharged upon them such a storm of darts and arrows that the very air seemed darkened.

“Charge,” shouted the young knight, “for God and the Holy Sepulchre.”

They charged, but might as well have ridden after the mirage of the desert; the speed of the Arab horses seemed incredible, and they eluded the charge as easily as a hare might elude that of a tortoise. The Crusaders returned to their original station around the cedar.

They looked at each other. Ten bodies, dead or wounded, lay still, or writhing on the ground; for they had not had time to cover themselves fully with their defensive armour, ere the storm of arrows came down upon them, and most of the party were bleeding.

Page 120

"They are gone," said the young knight.

"Not they, my lord," replied his Nestor; "a hungry wolf does not so easily satisfy his craving with a mouthful—not they; they will come again, and in such a fashion, I fear, as to try our strength rarely. See, they are wheeling round. Let each man look well to his armour, steady his spear, guard himself well with shield. They may charge this time, seeing our strength so sadly reduced."

"Hourra! hourra!" rang over the desert, and once more the savage horsemen came down like eagles swooping upon their prey.

Again they divided; again they passed at a slight interval of time—just enough to prevent their receiving, on either side, such arrows from their own brethren as found no sheath in English shield or flesh—passed like the wind, and the deadly cloud of death-dealing darts came like the fatal simoon of the desert, upon their helpless foe.

Nay, not quite helpless; for at least a dozen Arab steeds roamed the plain riderless. English archers, for they were from England, were English archers still.

But in so unequal a strife numbers must have finally prevailed.

It was impossible for the English to charge so impalpable an assailant; all they could do was to protect themselves, as far as possible, by shield and coat of mail, while behind the living rampart of steel-clad warriors, the archers returned arrow for arrow, so far as time and numbers suffered them.

"Shall we not charge?" whispered more than once our boyish knight to the old warrior, who had fought thirty years before at Hastings, by whose advice his elders had instructed him to abide in case of emergency.

"Nay, were we separated, they would find out every joint in our mail, and riddle us with arrows till we looked like porcupines, while they would never tarry to abide one honest blow of a battle-axe. Upon our archers depends our chance."

It would be a waste of time to tell in detail how the assailants again and again repeated the same manoeuvre, until their Christian opponents were reduced to a handful, when at length the Turks changed their tactics and suddenly charged with all their force.

All would have been over with the Crusaders, crushed beneath the weight of numbers, in spite of their superior weapons, at close quarters. All seemed ended; the young knight, indeed, protected by his excellent armour, still fought with all the valour of his Norman race—fought like a paladin of romance—when—

A sudden cry, "Holy Cross to the rescue!" and a gallant band of light horsemen charged the Infidels in the rear.

The assailants became the assailed, and fled in all directions.

“Rise up, sir knight—for knight you should be,” said a stern manly voice; and a warrior of noble mien, whose features were yet hidden behind his visor, raised the youthful hero from the ground.

CHAPTER XXVI. “QUANTUM MUTATUS AB ILLO HECTORE.”

Page 121

An hour had passed away since the conflict had ceased, and all was again peaceful and still. The Christian dead were buried; the Moslems yet dotted the plain with prostrate corpses, whose unclosed and glassy eyes met the gazer in every direction.

Of these the Crusaders reckoned little, nor did the ghastly spectacle at all disturb their rest. They sorrowed, indeed, for their own comrades; but when the parting prayers were breathed over their desert graves, they dismissed even them from their thoughts.

"They have given their lives in a noble cause, and the saints will take good care of them and make their beds in Paradise," was the general sentiment.

And now the fire was rekindled, the wine skins passed round, the venison steaks again placed on the glowing embers, and they refreshed the inner man, with appetites sharpened by their desperate exertions in the late struggle.

Close by the side of the young knight sat their deliverer, whose followers mingled with the Englishmen around at one or other of the fires they had kindled.

"A health," said the young knight—"a health to our deliverer. Had he not come so opportunely to our rescue, we were now supping in Paradise.

"What name shall I give to our honoured guest?"

"Men call me the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, but it is too proud a title to be borne by mortal man."

"Art thou he, then, whose fame has filled our ears, of whom minstrels sing, who with a band of stout followers defied the Moslem's rage in these forest fastnesses, before even Peter preached the word of God?"

"Thou hast exaggerated my merits, but be they many, or as I would say few, I am he of whom they speak."

"We are indeed honoured, thrice honoured, to be saved by thee; and these thy followers—of what nation are they?"

"Of all countries which rejoice in the light of the True Faith, but they were Varangians {xxvii}, of the household guard of the Emperor of the East, whose service I left, to avenge the injuries of the pilgrim, and to clear him a path through these robber-infested wastes."

"And may I ask the country which is honoured by thy birth, the nation which claims thee as her worthiest son?"

"I have no nation," said the knight; sadly; "for these thirty years I have been an exile from home."

The young knight asked no further questions, fearing to probe some secret wound. He gave the toast, and all drank it with cheers, which made the solitude ring.

An indefinable interest centred in this knight: rumour made him a noble of the later empire, the "Acolyth" or commander of that famous band of guards, whom the policy of the Caesar gathered around the tottering throne of Constantinople—exiles from all nations, but especially from England—driven by various fortunes from home. Hereward—and before him Norwegian Harold, who perished at Stamford Bridge—had served in their ranks.

Page 122

This knight, whose real name none knew, had been the first to take up the sword in defence of the pilgrims, who sought the Holy Sepulchre, and who, on their passage southward, through these solitudes, were grievously maltreated by robbers, whom the Turkish Government—ever the same—protected, provided they paid the due tithe of their spoils to the Sultan.

In their mountain solitudes, fame reported the knight to have his secret retreat, whence no Turk nor Saracen could dislodge him, and whence he often issued, the protector of the Christian, the dread of his oppressor.

He had thrown aside his visor. Time, and perhaps grief, had marked many a wrinkle on his manly forehead; his hair and beard were grizzled with time and exposure; his age might have been variously estimated: he seemed to bear the weight of half a century at the least, but perhaps toil and trouble had dealt more severely with him than time.

“My son,” he said, as he marked the intent gaze of the youth, who was excited by finding himself the companion of one so distinguished by feats of arms, “I have told thee my own vain designation; now, let me be anon the catechist. Of what country art thou?”

“Hast thou heard of a fair island across the sea men call England?”

“Have I not?”

“That is then my home.”

“Thou art an Englishman? or do I not rather see one of the blood of the conquerors of that fair land.”

And here he suppressed what might have been a sigh.

“I am indeed Norman by my father’s side—a race none need blush to own, and received but recently knighthood from the hands of Robert of Normandy, after the battle of Dorylaeum; but by my mother’s side I am of English blood.”

“And thou blushest not to own it?”

“Why should I? Norman and English have long been peacefully united on my father’s lands, and we know no distinction.”

“Such, I have heard, is not yet everywhere the case in thine island; but thou hast not told me thy name.”

“Edward of Aescendune, son of Etienne, lord of Aescendune in England, and Malville in Normandy.”

The stranger started as if an arrow had suddenly pierced him. The young knight looked on him with amazement.

“A fit to which I am subject—it is nothing,” said he, regaining his composure and drinking a goblet of wine. “May I ask thy mother’s name? Thou saidst she was English.”

“Edith, daughter of Edmund, the English lord of Aescendune, and Winifred his wife.”

The knight was still evidently unwell—a deadly pallor sat on his face.

“I fear me thou art hurt.”

“Nay, my son; one who like myself has lain for weeks in unwholesome caverns, with but scanty fare sometimes, contracts a tendency to this kind of seizure. It will pass away.”

“Art thou interested in England? Perhaps thyself English by birth?”

“I have said I have no country,” replied he, sadly.

Page 123

The young lord of Aescendune remembered his designation of himself as an exile, and forbore to inquire, lest he should unawares renew some ancient wound.

The manner in which the knight addressed his young companion had something in it of tender interest; his voice sounded like that of one who spake with emotion forcibly suppressed.

"Thy mother is yet living?" said he, with forced calmness.

"She mourns our absence in the halls of Aescendune, yet she could not grudge us to the Cross, and methinks she finds consolation in many a holy deed of mercy and charity."

"Hast thou any brethren, or art thou her only child?"

"Nay, we are four in number—two boys and two girls. My brother Hugh is destined to be the future lord of Malville, and I, if I survive, shall inherit Aescendune."

"Thy mother, my boy, must miss thee sadly. How bore she the pain of separation?"

"Religion came to her aid, and does still. I can fancy her each morning as she kneels before the altar of St. Wilfred, and wearies heaven with prayer for her absent lord and her boy, and perhaps those prayers sent thee to my deliverance this night."

"Thrice blessed they who have so pious a mother. The Priory of St. Wilfred didst thou say? Methinks he was an English saint."

"It is the third building which has existed within the century on the spot. The first was burnt in the troubles which followed the Conquest; the second, dedicated to St. Denys, shared the same fate, and when the present priory was built, my father, who had brought his English wife from the convent of the Holy Trinity at Caen, where she received her education, restored the old dedication, as I imagine to give her pleasure."

"Thy father, thou sayest, is with thee in this land?"

"He has gone forward with the host to the siege of the Holy City. I was wounded on that glorious day when we scattered half a million followers of Mohammed, who had penned us within the walls of Antioch; and he left me with this faithful squire, Osmund—an old man who fought with my grandsire at Hastings—to tarry in the city till I should be fit to travel. Now we are journeying southward in haste, fearing we shall be too late for our share in the holy work. Dost thou not travel thitherward—thou of all men?"

"Even now I hasten, lest my unworthy eyes should fail to behold the deliverance of that Holy Sepulchre whence my designation is taken. We will travel together, so will thy journey be safer, for these Turks hang like carrion upon the skirts of the grand army."

“Blithely do I accept thine offer. I would not willingly perish in some obscure skirmish when the gates of Jerusalem are as the gates of heaven before me, and I shall present my preserver to my father. Are you ill again—I fear me—”

“It is nothing. Earthly feelings must not be permitted to mingle with our sacred call.”

Page 124

“But I may introduce you to him?”

“When our work is done—thou mayest. The hill of Calvary will be the fitting place, where—”

Here the knight paused, and was silent for awhile, then said—“It is night, and night is the time for rest; we must sleep, my young brother in arms, if we would be fit for travel tomorrow. See, we alone are watchers; our companions are all wrapped in slumber—save the sentinels, I will but assign the latter their posts and hours, and seek nature’s greatest boon to man.”

Edward of Aescendune would fain have joined in this duty, but the older soldier bade him rest, in a tone of gentle authority which he could not resist. And the stern warrior drew the embers of the fire, so as to warm the feet of the youth, while he cast a mantle over him to protect him from the heavy dew.

The Knight of the Holy Sepulchre departed upon his rounds, and assigned to the sentinels their posts, after which he returned and lay amidst the sleeping forms beneath the cedars, the branches of which were ever and anon fitfully illumined as some brand fell and caused a flame to arise. He gazed intently, nay, even fondly, upon the ingenuous face of the sleeping youth.

“How like his mother he is—what a load his simple tale has removed from my breast! God, I thank thee! the old house of my fathers yet lives in this boy—worthier far than I to represent it.”

CHAPTER XXVII. THE FRIENDS WHO ONCE WERE FOES.

The remainder of the journey of Edward of Aescendune to the camp of the Crusaders before Jerusalem was uneventful. With such an escort as the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre and his well-known band, there was little occasion to dread the onslaught of any of those troops of Turks or Saracens, who hung on the skirts of the Crusading hosts, to cut off the stragglers.

They skirted the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, crossed the Jordan at the fords below, and travelled southwards along its eastern bank.

The reason of this detour was twofold.

First, it was the route taken by the Saviour of mankind, on His last journey to the guilty city which crucified Him; and the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre felt a spiritual satisfaction in tracing the steps of the Redeemer.

Secondly, the direct route had been taken by the host, and, like locusts, they had devoured all the provisions on the way, and scared from their track every edible beast.

From time to time the elder knight pointed out some venerable ruin which tradition—ever active, if not always truthful—identified as a resting place of the Divine Wayfarer; but there was little doubt that they crossed the Jordan at the same fords which had been in use in those far-off days, shortly before they entered and passed through the city of ruins, which had once been Jericho.

Then followed the ascent of the rocky way, familiar to the readers of the parable of the “Good Samaritan;” and let me remind my younger friends that even in the days when there were few readers and fewer books, all the leading episodes of our Lord’s life, including His miracles and parables, were oft-told tales {xxviii}.

Page 125

It was a day of feverish excitement when they drew near Bethany and the Mount of Olives. All the followers of the young English knight, who had never been in Palestine before, looked forward to the moment when the Holy City would first meet their gaze with an intense expectation which even rendered them silent; only as they pressed onward they sometimes broke out into the Crusading hymn—familiar to them as some popular song to modern soldiers.

And this was the song:

“Coelestis urbs, Hierusalem
Beata pacis visio,”

It was hardly to be a vision of peace to them.

At length they stood on the slope of the same hill where the Redeemer had wept over the guilty city; and—will my readers believe me?—many of these men of strife—familiar with war and bloodshed—did not restrain their tears of joy, as they forgot their toils past, and dangers yet to come, ere they could enter the holy walls.

This had been their longing expectation—this the goal of their wearisome journey; they had oft doubted whether their eyes would ever behold it—and now—It lay in all its wondrous beauty—beautiful even then—before them; but, the banners of the false prophet floated upon the Hill of Zion.

Across the valley of the Kedron rose the Mosque of Omar, on the site of the Temple of Solomon; farther to the left lay the fatal Valley of Hinnom, once defiled by the fires of Moloch; but on neither of these sides lay the object of the greatest present interest—the Christian Host.

Their attack was directed against the northern and western sides of the city, where the approach was far more easy.

“There is the standard of Godfrey de Bouillon, on the first swell of Mount Calvary,” said the elder knight; “there on the left, where the Jewish rabble erst stoned St. Stephen, Tancred and Robert of Normandy conduct the attack; there, between the citadel and the foot of Mount Zion, floats the banner of Raymond of Toulouse.”

“And there, amidst the banners which surround the ducal lion of Normandy, I see our own,” cried young Edward. “Oh! let us charge through that rabble and join them.”

“Thine is a spirit I love to see; come, it shall be done—St. George for merry England—Holy Sepulchre—en avant;” and the whole galloped madly down the descent, first bringing the news of their own arrival to a mixed crew of Saracens and Turks—an irregular corps of observation which had got in their way.

They cleft their way to the very centre, as a wedge driven by a powerful mallet cleaves its way to the heart of the tree. The followers of Mohammed scattered in all directions, and then, like wasps, clustered around in hope to sting.

Their fleet horses enabled them to keep near the Christian cavalry, and to annoy them by countless flights of arrows, darts, and spears, while, as usual, they avoided close contest, as a hunter would avoid the hug of the bear. When they could not do so, it was wondrous to see how limbs flew about, and bodies were cleft to the very chine before the ponderous battle-axes of Western Christendom.

Page 126

Still, it was with lessened numbers that our heroes fought their way through, and had it not been that a body of Crusading cavalry, attracted by the tumult, came prancing down the hill to their rescue, in all the pomp and panoply of mediaeval warfare, they might have fared worse.

There was a smart engagement when the succours arrived, ending in the complete disappearance of all the Saracens and Turks from the scene, while the victors rode together to the camp, exchanging news, as if such a small affair was not worth talking about.

When they reached the camp, Edward of Aescendune exerted his powers of persuasion in vain to induce the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre to accompany him to his father's tent, there to receive the paternal thanks.

"When the city is taken, and the Holy Sepulchre free, and the army (bareheaded and barefooted) accomplishes its vow on Calvary—then, but not before—we shall meet—Etienne de Malville and—" he paused, then continued, "and I shall meet once more."

"Once more? have you ever met before?"

"We have, but long ago—let it pass, my son. God's blessing rest upon thee and protect thee on the morrow, when thou wilt, I fear, have scant care for thyself."

"It is for Jerusalem or Paradise. I shall rest in one or the other by tomorrow night at this time. I leave which to God."

"Good youth; the saints keep thee, dear boy, for thy fond mother's sake."

At that word mother, a tear stood in the warlike stripling's eye. An embrace fonder than seemed usual with the stern knight of many deeds, and they parted.

If our tale had not protracted itself to such an extravagant length already, it would delight us to tell of the feats of valour performed respectively, by the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, by Etienne de Malville, and by Edward his son; but it must suffice to narrate in as few words as may be, the oft-told history of that eventful day.

On the fortieth day of the siege the city was carried by assault, and on Friday, at three in the afternoon, the day and even the hour of the death of the Son of God, Godfrey de Bouillon planted his standard on the walls, the first of the noble army of Crusaders.

Thus, four hundred and sixty years after the conquest of Christian Jerusalem by the Mahometan, Caliph Omar, it was delivered from the yoke of the false prophet.

Seventy thousand Moslems were slain by the sword; for three whole days the massacre continued, until each worshipper of Mahomet had been sought out amidst the hiding places of the city—full of secret nooks and corners—and put to death.

And now, after this bloody sacrifice—the fruit of mistaken zeal—the Christians proceeded to accomplish their vow, with every mark of penitence. With bare heads and bleeding feet they mounted the Via Dolorosa (the sorrowful way) and wept where the great sacrifice had been offered for their sins. They literally bedewed the sacred soil with their tears.

Page 127

So strange a union of fierceness and piety may well astonish us, but our office is to relate the facts.

It was over, this strange but touching act of devotion, and the sacred hill was partially deserted. Here and there a group of weeping penitents lingered, and on the spot where tradition asserted the cross to have been raised, many were seen yet waiting their turn to salute the ground reverently with their lips.

Two knightly warriors, a father and a son, who had just performed this act of devotion, arose together, and as they gained their feet, observed their immediate predecessor in the pious act, awaiting them, as if he wished to accost them.

They were all, as we have seen, bareheaded, neither did they wear any armour or weapons—all resistance had ceased, and with it all warfare, before the ceremony of the day had begun.

“Father,” said young Edward, “it is my deliverer.”

The Knight of the Holy Sepulchre beckoned them to follow, and together they gained the outskirts of the crowd.

Etienne de Malville has greatly changed since we last beheld him. In the place of the sprightly, impetuous youth, our readers must imagine a warrior, past the middle age; one whose scanty hair was already deeply tinged with gray. Thirty years had left many wrinkles on his brow; but where impatience and fiery temper had once sat visible to all, age and experience had substituted self-control and wisdom.

“I have to thank thee, my valiant brother in arms, for the life of my son. To whom do I render my thanks? Well do I know thy fame as the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre; but our vow accomplished, we may lay aside our incognitos and assume our names once more.”

“We may indeed, and I will utter the name of one—long since numbered with the dead in the records of men, and re-assume it upon this sacred mount.”

Etienne gazed intently upon the open face, but no look of recognition followed.

“I crave thy pardon, if I ought to recognise thee, yet truth compels me to say I do not.”

“Nor can I wonder; didst thou recognise me, thou wouldst think me a ghost permitted to revisit the land of the living—one whom thou didst actually behold wrapped in the cere cloth of the tomb!—whose funeral thou didst witness with thine own eyes! Yet he lives, and feels sure that thou wilt not revoke, upon this holy hill, that pardon from the living, thou didst bestow upon the seeming dead.”

Etienne trembled.

“Art thou then? nay, it cannot be!”

“Etienne de Malville, I am Wilfred of Aescendune.”

For a moment Etienne turned pale, and gazed as if to make sure he did not behold a ghost or a vampire—gazed like one startled out of his self possession, and the first emotion which succeeded was sheer incredulity; there was small trace of the once fair-haired English boy in the sunburnt, storm-beaten warrior of fifty to assist his memory.

Page 128

"Nay, my brother, it cannot be; thou art jesting;—not, at least, the Wilfred of Aescendune I once knew, and by whom I fear I dealt somewhat hardly; he died, and was buried at Oxenford thirty years ago. I saw his dead body; I beheld his burial; I have joined in masses for his soul; I have prayed for his repose; nay, it cannot be!"

But when in few words, but words to the purpose, Wilfred explained the device of Geoffrey of Coutances—when he reminded Etienne of facts, which none but he could have known—conviction gradually, but firmly, seized the mind of his ancient enemy.

"I believe that thou art he," said the latter, with trembling voice; "believe, though I cannot yet realise the fact, and I thank God."

He extended his hand gravely, and Wilfred grasped it with equal solemnity.

"Thou art, then, my uncle Wilfred I have so long been taught to think dead, for whom I have prayed many a time, for whom countless masses have been offered at St. Wilfred's shrine," said young Edward.

"Thou hast not, then, been taught to hate me?"

"No, indeed," said the boy; "why should I?"

"He knows nought of the quarrel between us, save what it is fitting that Edith's child should know," said Etienne. "It is well that upon this holiest spot on earth, whence the Prince of Life uttered the words which have floated through the ages—'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'—that Etienne de Malville and Wilfred of Aescendune should become friends."

"It is, indeed."

"I have long been conscious that thou wast not alone to blame—that thou hast to forgive as well as I; but thou, like myself, hast long since, I am sure, earned the right to breathe the prayer, 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.'"

Once more they grasped hands—Etienne still like one in a dream.

"Come now to my tent. There thou mayst tell me all the details of thy story, and I will tell thee news, unless this boy, my son and thy nephew, has anticipated me, of those thou didst leave behind thirty years ago in England. Thy sister Edith is my beloved wife, and in this boy Norman and Englishman meet together, the merits of each combined, the faults obliterated, if a father may be trusted."

And the friends, who once were foes, entered the tent of Etienne.

CHAPTER XXVIII. AESCENDUNE ONCE MORE.

“Last scene of all,
Which ends this strange eventful history.”

Once more we must ask our readers to accompany us to Aescendune—it is for the last time—to witness the final scenes recorded in these veracious Chronicles.

Thirty-four years have passed since the battle of Hastings; and our tale has now advanced to the autumn of the last year of the eleventh century.

The face of the country is little altered since we last beheld it, so far as the works of God are concerned: the woods, His first temples, and the everlasting hills stand, as when Elfric and his brother hunted therein with Prince Edwy, or the sainted Bertric suffered martyrdom in the recesses of the forest, at the hands of the ruthless Danes {xxix}.

Page 129

But the works of man are more transitory, and in them there is a great change. The Norman castle rebuilt by Etienne stands where erst stood the Anglo-Saxon hall; the new Priory of St. Wilfred's resembles that of St. Denys in architecture, although it bears the name of the old English saint, to whose honour the first sacred pile, erected by Offa of Aescendune was dedicated; the houses which dot the scene are of a more substantial character; stone is superseding wood. Whatever were its darker features, the Norman conquest brought with it a more advanced civilisation, especially as expressed in architecture {xxx}.

Within her bower, as the retiring apartments of the lady of the castle were termed, sat Edith of Aescendune, not the first who had borne that name. She had now passed middle age, and her years would soon number half a century, yet time had dealt very kindly with her, and but few shades of grey appeared amidst her locks. The traces of a gentle grief were upon her, but men said she mourned for the absence of her lord and her eldest son, and her thoughts seemed far away from the embroidery at which she worked with her maidens—an altar frontal for the priory church.

She thought of the far East—of the sandy wastes of Syria. Or her fancy painted the holy city, with her dear ones as worshippers in its reconquered shrines.

For she had not found an unkind lord in Etienne. The scenes which he had passed through, as related in the earlier pages of this Chronicle, had produced fruit for good, which Lanfranc (under whose spiritual guidance he placed himself) had zealously tended and fostered.

He dared not think of his father, of whose guilt he could not but be unwillingly convinced; nor was it true in his case:

“He who's convinced against his will
Is but an unbeliever still.”

But there was one act of mercy of which he had been the object, which above all influenced and changed his heart towards the English. And that was the Christian charity he had received from the aged Englishwoman, the nurse of Wilfred, whose son Eadwin he had so cruelly slain in the Dismal Swamp.

Acting under the advice of Lanfranc, he had sought and obtained Edith in marriage, and had thereby, like Henry Beauclerc, united the claims of conquerors and conquered in his person. He had obtained from the king a promise of free pardon to all the refugees yet in the Dismal Swamp, where it will be remembered the poor English had fled, who were unfit to accompany Wilfred to the Camp of Refuge, and had thereupon invited them all to rebuild their old homes and dwell in them.

At first they would not trust him, but through the mediation of Father Kenelm and of poor old Hilda, he succeeded in gaining their confidence, and he did not betray their trust.

So Norman and Englishman were happily united at Aescendune, and in spite of some little difficulties, arising from the airs the conquerors could not help giving themselves, became more like one people daily; and in a few years, so many followed their lord's example, and intermarried with the English, captivated by the beauty of the Anglo-Saxon maidens, that distinction of race became speedily abolished, and hence Aescendune was perhaps the happiest village in the distracted island.

Page 130

The priory was rebuilt, as well as the castle, and occupied by Benedictine monks of both races; but unlike most other monasteries, it had an English prior. Lanfranc had appointed Father Kenelm, at Etienne's earnest request, in gratitude for events in which that good father had borne his part in the Dismal Swamp. This appointment, more than aught else, reconciled the English to Norman rule.

At first Edith feared her new lord, whom she had been compelled to marry, remembering the sadness of her mother's married life; but his persistent kindness won her heart; and after the birth of young Edward, whom we have introduced to our readers, all restraint was removed, and they were as happy a pair as need be.

Their children were taught to converse in both tongues—Old English and Norman French—and to treat all alike, the kinsfolk of father or of mother.

Putting together the details given by Edward of Aescendune to the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, and these few outlines of intervening events, our readers will have little difficulty in understanding the history of the thirty years.

Within her bower (as we have said) was the lady of Aescendune. Seated in an embrasure of the lofty tower in which her rooms were situate, her attention became fixed upon a horseman, who was riding swiftly towards the castle from the direction of Warwick.

"I wonder," thought she, "whether this be a messenger from—" and then she checked the thought, as though it must end in disappointment.

For months she had not heard from the absent ones. She knew Jerusalem was taken; but if any letters had been sent, they had miscarried—no unlikely circumstance in those days.

The messenger reached the castle.

Soon steps were heard ascending the stairs with such precipitate haste, that the lady felt sure that some important tidings had arrived.

Young Hugh—an active, fresh-coloured boy, with his Father's features, tempered by the softer expression of his mother, perhaps—bounded into the room.

"Oh, mother! lady mother!—letters from father, about him and Edward. The man below is old Tristam—you remember Tristam who went to the wars. They have landed, landed, and are upon the road home. Oh! happy day. Tristam was sent forward. Read, —only read."

She was as pale as death, and fainting from the sudden shock. Excess of joy has its dangers.



Her two girls, Margaret and Hilda, had followed their brother, and their gentle care soon restored her: but the shock had been great.

“Read, mother,—read,” said Hugh.

The accomplishments of reading and writing—for they were accomplishments then—were possessed both by husband and wife.

We will give but one paragraph in the letter:

Page 131

We have landed safely at Southampton, my own Edith. God has preserved us from many dangers, doubtless owing to thy many prayers at St. Wilfred's altar. Thou hast, I hope, received safely the letters I sent from Joppa last autumn, and knowest whom I am bringing home with me. How wonderful it all is, and with what strange feelings the exile must approach the home of his boyhood! But he is very composed and quiet in his manner, and we grow in mutual esteem daily. He declares that he will accept no part of his ancient inheritance, but that he finds his highest joy in thinking that, in his sister's children, the descendants of the ancient line yet possess the land of their forefathers.

"What can he mean? Whom is he bringing with him? Send for Tristram. Ah! I see there is the old prior at the gate—he is talking with him;" and Hugh hurried down to fetch them up.

They entered the room: our old friend, Father Kenelm, as hale an old man as one could well find at seventy-five years of age—Wilfred's protector and friend, in the most critical moments of his life—and Tristram—do our readers remember him?

"God bless you, my children, in joy as in sorrow," was his salutation.

"How far are they off?"

"When will they be here?" and Tristram, who stood humbly at the door, found himself the object of universal attraction, and did not know which to answer first.

"Welcome, Tristram, welcome," said his lady; "thou art the morning star, the harbinger of my sun. How far hence are they?"

"They will be here by sunset, my lady."

"I will go and meet them," cried Hugh, and ran down stairs to get his horse ready.

"But whom is he bringing with him?"

"My child," said Father Kenelm, "has he not told thee?"

"Nay, he speaks so mysteriously—read."

Father Kenelm read. Then, looking up, he spoke with deep emotion. Tristram had told him all.

"One long since dead to the world, and as many thought buried. I alone knew of his existence, as a secret which I was absolutely forbidden to disclose; and as many years had elapsed since I last heard of him, I thought him dead—he who was once the hope of Aescendune."



“End our suspense!”

“Thou hadst a brother once—a bright, laughing, fair-haired boy, whom thou didst love whilst father and mother lived. I speak of events long forgotten, save by me.”

“Nay, I have never forgotten him. Hast thou not often commemorated him amongst the faithful departed, at my request?”

“Only as one, whom the world might yet contain in the body, or whose soul heaven might have received—I knew not which. Well, my lady, this thy brother yet lives.”

“Wilfred?”

“And is returning home with thy husband.”

“Wilfred alive!—nay, thou jestest. He died at Oxenford and was buried there, nearly thirty years ago.”

“Geoffrey, then Bishop of Coutances, deceived the lad’s enemies by a fictitious death and burial, but forbade the rescued youth to return home, or make his existence known, save to me.”

Page 132

At this moment, the gleams, the parting beams, of the setting sun shone upon pennon and upon lance, issuing from the wood afar off. The multitude, who had assembled below, saw the sight, and rushed tumultuously forward to meet their kinsfolk.

Hugh forgot the story about his uncle, ran down stairs, and joined the throng, who pressed over the bridge.

Amidst the pomp of banners, the crash of trumpets, and the loud acclamations and cheers of the crowd, the Crusaders reached home, and entered the castle yard.

Edith fell into the arms of her lord as he dismounted, then sought her son. She knew not to which to turn.

A grave personage, who studied hard to maintain his composure, but whose eyes were filled with tears, had also dismounted, and was standing by.

“Edith,” cried Etienne, “behold our brother.”

And she fell upon his neck with a torrent of tears, as all the life of her childhood rushed upon her—“hours that were to memory dear.”

Only a few more lines are needed to dismiss the heroes and personages of our tale to rest.

Wilfred spent a few happy days with his brother-in-law cheered by the society of his sister and her children.

Between him and Etienne all clouds had departed; they had learned, amidst the perils of the return journey, to appreciate each other, and wondered they had ever been such foes.

Once only he visited the Dismal Swamp, the scene of such exciting events in his earlier life. He found it an utter wilderness, not a house had been left standing; Etienne had wished to abolish the very remembrance of the scenes in which, as his conscience told him, he had acted so ill a part, and when he had succeeded in persuading the English to trust him, and return to Aescendune, he had fired the little hamlet and reduced it to ashes.

The brook murmured in solitude and silence, the birds sang undisturbed by the strife of men.

The scene of Edwin’s death from the arrows of Etienne’s followers could hardly be identified; but under the very tree where Pierre had fallen in stern retaliation, Wilfred knelt, and besought pardon for himself and rest for the soul which he had sent so hurriedly before the judgment seat.

“Oh how much we had to forgive each other, Etienne and I,” he said half aloud.

These words caused him to raise his head, and look instinctively over the place where the light wind was bowing down the heads of the tall reeds and sedges, which grew where the fire, that destroyed Count Hugo and his band, had swept over their predecessors.

These remembrances saddened him, he returned to the castle—the prey of conflicting emotions.

But much did Wilfred marvel at the peace and concord that reigned in this happy village, in such contrast to the discord which elsewhere marked the relations between Englishman and Norman, the conquered and the conquerors; and one day he ventured to remark upon the happy change to his old rival and brother-in-law.

Page 133

“Come with me,” said Etienne, “and I will explain it all.”

He led Wilfred to the Priory Church, and they entered the hallowed pale, with its round Norman arches and lofty roof, where the very tread seemed an intrusion upon the silence, which spake of the eternal repose that shall be, after the storms of this troublesome world have their end.

There is something in the Early Norman architecture which appears to the writer awe-inspiring; the massive round column, the bold and simple arch, have a more solemn effect upon his senses than the loveliest productions of the more florid and decorated period.

Such a stern and simple structure was this Priory Church of St. Wilfred of Aescendune.

It was the hour of nones, and the strains of the hymn of St. Ambrose, “Rerum Deus tenax vigor,” were pealing from the Benedictines in the choir: which has been thus paraphrased:

“O strength and stay, upholding all creation:
Who ever dost Thyself unmoved abide,
Yet, day by day, the light, in due gradation,
From hour to hour, through all its changes guide.

“Grant to life’s day a calm unclouded ending,
An eve untouched by shadow of decay,
The brightness of a holy death bed, blending
With dawning glories of the eternal day {xxx}.”

His thoughts full of the ideas suggested by the solemn strain,
Wilfred followed Etienne into the south transept.

There, upon a plain altar tomb of stone lay the effigy of an aged matron, her hands clasped in prayer, and beneath were the words:

Hilda
in pace
BEATI PACIFICI {xxxii}.

The “rival heirs” stood by the tomb, their hands clasped, while the tears streamed down their cheeks. It was she indeed, who by her simple obedience to the Divine law of love, which is the central idea of the Gospel, had reconciled jarring hearts, and brought about, in Aescendune, the reign of peace and love.

“I strove,” said Etienne, at last breaking the long silence, “to be a son to her, in place of the ill-fated boy whom I so cruelly slew; nor were my efforts in vain, or my repentance

unaccepted. We built her a house, on the site of her ancient cottage, and when strife arose, we often submitted the matter to her judgment, and she, who had been the foster mother of one lord, and the preserver from death of the other, reconciled the followers of both.

“When at last the hour came for her to commit her sweet soul to God, I stood by her dying bed.

“‘Mother,’ said I, ‘what can I do when thou art gone to show my love for thy memory?’

“‘Only go on as thou hast begun,’ she replied, ‘be a father to all thy people, Englishman and Norman alike, and their prayers will succour thee at the judgment seat of God—I go into peace.’

“And she left peace behind her—”

Here Etienne could say no more, and the two “rival heirs” stood a long time gazing upon the “cold marble and the sculptured stone,” while tears which were no disgrace to their manhood fell like gentle rain from heaven.

Page 134

Soon after this Wilfred had a long conference with Prior Kenelm. The result was, that he announced his intention of retiring from the world and ending his days in the cloister. His years had been years of strife and tumult—he would give the residue to God.

So he entered the famous order of St. Benedict, and after the death of Father Kenelm became the prior of the monastery dedicated to his patron saint—founded by his own forefathers.

His greatest joy was when surrounded by his nephews and nieces—yea, great-nephews and great-nieces, after the happy marriage of Edward of Aescendune to Lady Agatha of Wilmcote.

Etienne and Edith lived blessed in each other's love to the end. The Norman estates fell to Hugh, the English ones to Edward, who not unworthily represented both English and Norman lines—"a knight without fear and without reproach."

The last years of our hero, Wilfred, were years of tranquil happiness and serene joy, such as Milton wrote of in later ages, in those lines of wondrous beauty:

"Let my due feet never fail
To walk the cloisters hallowed pale,
With storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religions light,
And let the pealing organ blow
To the foil-voiced choir below,
Bring all heaven before mine eyes,
Dissolve me into ecstasies."

In the ruins of the abbey of St. Wilfred the spectator may notice a cross-legged knight, whose feet rest upon a vanquished lion. His whole attitude is expressive of intense action; the muscles seem strained in the effort to draw his sword and demolish a Turk, while the face expresses all that is noble in manly courage.

Hard by lies a prior in his vestments, his hands meekly clasped. The colour has not yet quite faded, which embellished the statue; but the remarkable thing is the face. Even yet, in spite of the broken and mouldering stone, there is a calmness of repose about that face which is simply wonderful.

It has been our task to call them both back to life—knight and prior, and to make them live in our pages. Pardon us, gentle readers, for the imperfect way in which we have fulfilled it.

Thus ends the Third and last Chronicle of Aescendune.

i Ordericus Vitalis, lib. iv. 523.

ii William of Malmesbury.

iii Sassenach equals Saxon.

iv It seems strange how such a misconception could ever have arisen and coloured English literature to so great an extent, for if we turn to the pages of the contemporaneous historians, such as Henry of Huntingdon, William of Malmesbury, Florence of Worcester, Ordericus Vitalis—born within the century of the Conquest—we find that they all describe the Anglo-Saxons as English, not Saxons.

v See the Second Chronicle, chapter *vi*.

vi Genealogy of Aescendune.

The reader may be glad to have the genealogy of the family, in whom it has been the author's aim to interest him, placed clearly before him. The following table includes the chief names in the three Chronicles; the date of decease is given in each case.



Page 135

Offa, 940.

* Oswald, 937.

+ Ragnar, 959.

* Ella, 959.

+ Elfric, 960.

+ Alfred, 998, m. Alfrude.

o Elfric, 975.

o Elfwyn, 1036, m. Hilda.

Bertric, 1006.

Ethelgiva, 1064, m. Alfgar.

@ Edmund, 1066, m. Winifred.

— Wilfred, 1122.

— Edith, 1124, m. Etienne, 1110.

@ Elfleda, 1030.

o Cuthbert, 1034 (Prior).

o Bertha, 1030, m. Herstan.

Winifred, 1067.

+ Edgitha, 990.

vii This Herstan figures largely in "Alfgar the Dane." He married Bertha, daughter of Alfred of Aescendune, the hero of the "First Chronicle." See the genealogical table at the end of the book.

viii

"By Thy Cross and Passion;
Good Lord, deliver her."

ix Poison amongst the Normans.

It may be thought by many readers that the poisoner's art could never have flourished among so chivalrous a people as the Normans; but the contrary was the case; and there are several instances of such foul murders in the pages of the old chroniclers, sufficient to justify the introduction of the scene in our story.

At the plot called the Bridal of Norwich, A.D. 1075, Roger, Earl of Hereford, and Ralph, Earl of Norwich, did not scruple to accuse William himself of the murder of Conan, Duke of Brittany, who, finding that the duke was on the point of withdrawing all his troops for the invasion of England, prepared to take advantage of it by making a raid upon Normandy. It was said that William could think of no other means of meeting the difficulty, than by causing the gauntlets and helmet of the unfortunate Conan to be poisoned by one of his chamberlains, who held lands in Normandy, and was under William's influence. Conan, however, did not die till the 11th of December, after the battle of Senlac, and the accusation is hard to reconcile with the general character of William. Ordericus relates that Walter, Count of Pontoise, and his wife, were murdered

at Falaise, when prisoners, by poison “treacherously administered by their enemies,” A.D. 1064.

x Anglo-Saxon Outlaws.

The true secret of the sympathy of the English people with such noted outlaws as Robin Hood and Little John, and their companions, is, that they were made such by Norman tyranny, and maintained their freedom in the greenwoods, when the usurping barons had reduced the people elsewhere to slavery. Hence their exploits were sung by every minstrel, and received with enthusiasm.

“History,” says Thierry, “has not understood these outlaws; it has passed them over in silence, or else, adopting the legal acts of the time, it has branded them with names which deprive them of all interest—such as ‘rebels,’ ‘robbers,’ ‘banditti.’

“But let us not,” continues the historian, “be misled by these odious titles; in all countries, subjugated by foreigners, they have been given by the victors to the brave men who took refuge in the mountains and forests, abandoning the towns and cities to such as were content to live in slavery.”

Page 136

Such were our refugees in the Dismal Swamp.

xi See “Alfgar the Dane.”

xii “If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.”

xiii Martyrdom of St. Edmund, King of East Anglia.

This saintly king fought against the Danes, under Hinguar and Hubba, in defence of his country. Being defeated, he was taken prisoner by the enemy, who offered him his life, and restoration to his kingdom, if he would renounce Christianity, and become tributary. Upon his refusal he was tied naked to a tree, cruelly scourged, and then shot slowly to death with arrows, calling upon the name of Christ throughout his protracted martyrdom, Who doubtless did not fail His servant in his hour of extreme need.

The strangest part of the story has yet to be told. An old oak was pointed out as the tree of the martyrdom until very recent years. Sceptics, of course, doubted the fact; but when the tree was blown down in a violent storm, a Danish arrowhead was found embedded in the very centre of the trunk, grown over, and concealed for nearly a thousand years—the silent witness to the agonies of a martyr. The martyrdom took place A.D. 870, the year before Alfred ascended the throne. In the churches of Norfolk and Suffolk the picture of St. Edmund, pierced with arrows, is often seen on old rood screens.

xiv Norman Torture Chamber.

We read in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of the barons in Stephen's days.

“They greatly oppressed the wretched people by making them work at their castles, and when the castles were finished they filled them with devils and evil men. Then they took those whom they suspected to have any goods, by night and by day, seizing both men and women, and they put them in prison for their gold and silver, and tortured them with pains unspeakable. They hung some up by their feet, and smoked them with foul smoke; some by their thumbs, or by the head, and they hung burning things on their feet. They put a knotted string about their heads, and twisted it till it went into their brain. They put them into dungeons, wherein were adders and snakes and toads, and thus wore them out. Some they put into a crucet house—that is, into a chest that was short and narrow, and not deep, and they put sharp stones in it, and crushed the man therein so that they broke all his limbs. There were hateful and grim things called Sachenteges in many of the castles, and which two or three men had enough to do to carry. The sachenteg was made thus: it was fastened to a beam having a sharp iron to go round a man's throat and neck, so that he might noways sit, or lie, or sleep, but must bear all the iron. Many thousands they exhausted with hunger. I cannot and I

may not tell of all the wounds and all the tortures they inflicted upon the wretched men of this land.”

This awful description of the cruelty of the Norman barons under the grandson of the Conqueror may partially apply to the barons of an earlier period, such as Hugo de Malville.

Page 137

xv Destruction of Norman Forces by Fire.

We read that at the instigation of Ivo Taille-Bois (see Note), William had the weakness to employ a sorceress to curse the English in the Camp of Refuge, and by her spells to defeat those of the supposed English magicians. She was placed in a wooden turret at the head of the road, which the Conqueror was labouring to make across the fens, to get at the refugees; but Hereward, watching his opportunity, set fire to the flags and reeds; the wind rapidly spread the conflagration; and the witch, her guards, the turret, and the workmen, all alike perished in the flames, even as in our story, Hugo de Malville in the Dismal Swamp.

xvi State of England in 1069.

In order that the reader may the better comprehend the chances which lay before the insurgents of this year, the third after Hastings, we will briefly summarise the state of affairs.

At the close of the preceding year the Midlands, after several spasmodic struggles, appeared prostrate and helpless at the feet of the Conqueror, who had taken advantage of the opportunity to build strong castles everywhere, and to garrison them with brave captains and trusty soldiers. Warwick Castle was given to Henry de Beaumont, whose lady we have seen at Aescendune, at the dedication of the priory, and the jousts which followed; Nottingham was held by William Peverill; and similar measures were taken at York, Lincoln, Huntingdon, Oxford, Cambridge, and elsewhere.

But ere all this was fully accomplished, the three sons of King Harold—Godwin, Edmund and Magnus—who had been kindly received by Dermot, King of Leinster in Ireland, reappeared in the southwest, and although, after some partial success, they were forced to retreat, yet they aroused anew the spirit of resistance to the Norman yoke, and kindled the expiring embers of patriotism.

In the month of February 1069—at which period the city of York was the extreme limit of the Conquest—one Robert de Comyn was sent to reduce Durham and the banks of the Tyne to subjection. As he approached the city, Egelwin the bishop met him, and begged him not to enter or there would be bloodshed; but he disdained the mild request, and, entering, his soldiers behaved with the utmost insolence, and slew a few inoffensive men “pour encourager les autres,” to intimidate the rest. The soldiers then encamped in the streets of the town, and the general took up his quarters in the bishop’s palace.

When night came on, the gallant countrymen who dwelt on the Tyne lit the beacon fires on all the hills; the country arose, and all hastened to Durham. By daybreak they had forced the gates, which the Normans defended; the soldiers then took refuge from the people they had so cruelly insulted, in the Episcopal palace; thence they had the advantage with their arrows, until the English, unable to storm the place, set it on fire,

and burned the dwelling, with Robert de Comyn, who well deserved his fate, and all his men: twelve hundred horse, and a large number of foot soldiers and military attendants, perished, and only two escaped.

Page 138

A larger body, sent to avenge them, halted between York and Durham, and, seized with an unwonted terror, refused to proceed; the good people said that Saint Cuthbert had struck them motionless by supernatural power to protect his shrine in Durham.

This success stirred up the people of Yorkshire, who, later in the year, besieged William Mallet in York, aided by a Danish force which had landed on the coasts, and took it on the eighth day, when all the garrison was slain—"three thousand men of France," as the Chronicles express it. The Earl Waltheof killed, with his own battle-axe, twenty Normans in their flight, and, chasing a hundred more into the woody marshes, took advantage of the dry season, like our friends at Aescendune, and burned them all with the wood.

All over England the struggle spread. Hereward took the command at the Camp of Refuge, in the Isle of Ely, and crippled the Normans around. Somerset and Dorset rose again; the men of Chester and a body of Welshmen under "Edric the Wild" (sometimes called the Forester), besieged Shrewsbury. The men of Cornwall attacked Exeter, and a large body of insurgents collected at Stafford.

It was in putting down the northern insurrection that William devastated Yorkshire and Northumberland, with such severity that the country did not recover for centuries, while the victims to famine, fire, and sword equalled a hundred thousand. These spasmodic insurrections were only the dying throes of Anglo-Saxon liberty. Everywhere they miscarried, and the Normans prevailed.

xvii The readers of Alfgar the Dane will remember that we gave a brief account of this interesting spot in that chronicle. It was the town to which Edmund Ironside and Alfgar first repaired after their escape from the Danes in the Isle of Wight.

xviii On one of these islands now stands the mill, on the other the Nag's Head Inn; the site of the old abbey is chiefly occupied by a brewery!

xix Monastic Offices.

These were seven in number, besides the night hours. Lauds, before daybreak; Prime, 7 A.M.; Terce, 9 A.M.; Sext, noon; Nones, 3 P.M.; Vespers, 6 P.M.; and Compline, 9 P.M. These were in addition to many daily celebrations of Mass.

Our modern prayer-book Matins is an accumulation and abridgment of Matins, Lauds, and Prime; our Evensong of Vespers and Compline. Terce, Sext, and Nones, which consisted mainly of portions of Psalm 119, with varying Versicles and Collects, are unrepresented in our Anglican office.

If the older reader is curious to learn of what Compline consisted, he may be told that its main features were Psalms 4, 31, 91, and 184; the hymn, *Te Lucis ante Terminum*, "Before the ending of the day."—H. A. & M. 15; and the Collect, "Lighten our Darkness."

xx Roll of the Conquerors.

These names are taken from a charter, long preserved in Battle Abbey, and quoted in the notes to Thierry's *Norman Conquest*. It gives a list of the principal warriors who fought at Hastings, whose names are afterwards found, much to their advantage, in *Domesday Book*. Many names now common, even amongst the poor, make their first appearance in England therein, besides the noble ones quoted in our text. We regret that our space does not allow us to give the roll, which is many columns in length.

Page 139

xxi Ivo Taille-Bois.

This petty tyrant, of infamous memory, was the chief of the Angevin auxiliaries of William, who received as his reward the hand of Lucy, sister of the Earls Edwin and Morcar; and with her also received all the ancient domains of their family in the neighbourhood of the Camp of Refuge, which proximity did not augment his prosperity. The ancient chronicler of the Abbey of Croyland (Ingulf) says:

“All the people of that district honoured Ivo with the greatest attention, and supplicated him on bended knee, bestowed on him all the honour they could, and the services they were bound to render; still he did not repay their confidence, but tortured and harassed, worried and annoyed, imprisoned and tormented them, every day loading them with fresh burdens, till he drove them, by his cruelty, to seek other and milder lords. Against the monastery and the people of Croyland he raged with the utmost fury; he would chase their cattle with dogs, drown them in the lakes, mutilate them in various ways, or break their backs or legs.”

It is pleasing to learn that he met some punishment for his evil deeds. Hereward took him prisoner, very ignominiously, and held him a captive for a long time, to the delight of the poor vassals; he fell under the displeasure of William Rufus, in 1089, as a partisan of Robert and was sent home to Anjou deprived of all his ill-gotten wealth. He was, however, allowed to return under Henry, and died of paralysis in 1114 at his manor of Spalding, where, the old chronicler pithily says, “he was buried amidst the loudly expressed exultation of all his neighbours.”

xxii The Camp of Refuge.

There still exists, in the southeastern district of Lincolnshire and the northern part of Cambridgeshire, a vast extent of flat land, intersected in every direction by rivers and dykes, known as the fen country.

Eight centuries ago, before many attempts had been made to confine the streams within their banks, this country resembled an inland sea, interspersed with flat islands of firm ground.

One portion of this country was called the “Isle of Ely;” another the “Isle of Thorney;” another, partially drained by the monks, the “Isle of Croyland.”

In many parts half bog, it was quite impracticable for heavy-armed soldiers, and hence it offered a refuge to bands of patriots from all the neighbouring districts when worsted by the Normans.

Hither came the true Englishman Stigand, sometime Archbishop of Canterbury, and after the conquest of the north, Egelwin, Bishop of Durham, who found both substantial

entertainment at the board of Abbot Thurstan, abbot of the great monastery of Ely, and one of the stoutest patriots of the day.

At this time Hereward was living in Flanders; but hearing that his father was dead, that a Norman had seized his inheritance, and was grievously maltreating his aged mother, he returned home secretly, and, assembling a band of relations and retainers, expelled the intruder from his house after a sharp but brief conflict.

Page 140

But he could not hope to rest after such an exploit; therefore he waged open war with the Normans around, and by his extraordinary bravery and good fortune soon attracted such universal attention that the patriots in the Camp of Refuge besought him to come and be their leader.

Here, for nearly three years, he defied all the efforts of William. His uncle Brand, Abbot of Peterborough, conferred on him the order of knighthood, for which act William designed adequate punishment. The abbot would doubtless have been expelled, but death anticipated the Conqueror of England. To punish the monks, the King appointed the fighting abbot, Turauld, as the successor of Brand, and in order to conciliate this ruffian-for such he was-the monks of Peterborough prepared their best cheer. But Hereward and his merry men anticipated Turauld's arrival by an hour or two, ate up the dinner prepared for the Normans, and spoiled what they did not eat; carried away, for safe keeping at Ely, all the treasures of the abbey, and left an empty house for the intruder.

Shortly afterwards, that worthy, together with Ivo Taille-Bois, concerted a plan for attacking the English. Hereward entrapped them both, and kept them in captivity, much to the joy of the monks of Peterborough, and the vassals of Ivo, as we have elsewhere noted.

All the valour and nobility of Old England yet surviving, gathered around the great chieftain; thither came Edwin and Morcar, the brothers-in-law of King Harold; and many an earl and knight, fearless as the warriors of the Round Table, fought beneath the banner of Hereward, and banqueted while there was aught left to eat, at the board of the large-hearted Abbot Thurstan.

The Danes, who had been summoned to the aid of the English patriots, were bought off soon after their arrival by the gold of William, but still Hereward fought on.

At length William stationed his fleet in the Wash, with orders to guard every outlet from the fens to the ocean; still he could not reach Hereward, who had retired, with his valiant men, to their stronghold, situate in an expanse of water, which, in the narrowest part, was at least two miles in breadth. Then the king undertook a tremendous task-that of constructing a solid road through the inundated marshes, throwing bridges over the deeper channels, and building a causeway elsewhere. But in the face of an active enemy this was no easy task; and so frequently were the Normans surprised by Hereward that they believed he must be aided by sorcery, and employed the "witch," who perished by fire (as mentioned in another Note), to counteract his magic, with the result already described.

But William was determined that the last refuge of English liberty should fall, and, backed by all the resources of a kingdom, the end came at last. The monks of Ely,

starved out, deposed their abbot, the gallant Thurstan, and betrayed the secret approaches of the camp to the Normans.

Page 141

In the gray dawn of an autumnal morning, in the year 1071, the Normans, guided through the labyrinth by the traitors-the guards having been decoyed from their posts-entered the camp.

Hereward and his men fought like heroes, with all the courage of despair; they did all that men could do; but, assailed from all sides, many of the English lords, dismayed by the hopeless character of the conflict, threw down their swords, and cried for quarter. But their brave chieftain-with a mere handful of men-disdaining to save their lives by submission, cut their way through the foe, and escaped across the marshes, after most doughty deeds of valour, for the assault was led by William in person.

For a long time Hereward maintained the hopeless struggle-for it was now hopeless-till the king sent to offer him his favour, and restoration to his paternal estates, on condition his accepting accomplished facts, and taking the oath of allegiance to the Conqueror. Feeling that all hope of shaking off the Norman yoke was lost, Hereward laid down his arms and accepted "the king's peace."

There are two accounts of his death; the one, which we hope is true, that he ended his days in peace; the other, that his Norman neighbours fell upon him as he was sleeping in the open air; that he awoke in time to defend himself, and slew fifteen men-at-arms and a Breton knight ere he succumbed to numbers-the chief of the troop, named Asselin, swearing, as he cut the head from the corpse, that he had never seen so valiant a man. It was long a popular saying amongst the English, and amongst the Normans that, had there been four such as he, the Conquest could not have been accomplished.

The fate of those who submitted, or were taken in the Camp of Refuge, was pitiable; many had their hands cut off, or their eyes put out, and with cruel mockery were set "free;" the leaders were imprisoned in all parts of England.

Egelwin, Bishop of Durham, was sent to Abingdon, where within a few months he died of hunger, either voluntary or enforced; while Archbishop Stigand was condemned to perpetual imprisonment.

xxiii Lanfranc.

This noted ecclesiastic was a native of Pavia; he was bred up to the law, and, coming to France, established a school at Avranches, which was attended by pupils of the highest rank.

On a journey to Rouen he was robbed and left bound in a wood, where some peasants found him, and brought him for shelter to the Abbey of Bec, recently founded by Herluin. Here he felt himself called to the monastic life, and became a monk at Bec, which sprang up rapidly under him into a school no less of literature than of piety, where



William often retired to make spiritual retreats, and where an intimacy sprang up between them. He became successively Prior of Bec and abbot of William's new foundation of St. Stephen's at Caen. His influence with the Pope procured the papal sanction for the invasion of England; and afterwards, in 1070, the Archbishopric of Canterbury was pressed upon him by William, which he held until his death in 1089, in the eighty-fourth year of his age.

Page 142

In some respects he dealt harshly with the English clergy, and connived at their wholesale deprivation. We must own, in extenuation, that their lives and conduct had not been such as to do honour to God, that they were said to be the most ignorant clergy in Europe; and that the sins of the nation under their guidance were owned, even by the English, to have brought the heavy judgment of the Conquest upon them. Otherwise, Lanfranc was a protector of the oppressed, in which character he is introduced in the tale.

If Englishmen can only forgive him his share in the Conquest, few Archbishops of Canterbury can be named more worthy of our respect.

xxiv It must be remembered that Lanfranc was a firm believer in the right of King William, in the supposed testament of Edward the Confessor; and in the right of Rome to dispose of disputed thrones. Good man though he was, he believed in all this rubbish, as true Englishmen must ever deem it.

xxv Oxford in the Olden Time.

The earliest authentic record in which Oxford finds a place is of the year 912, when we read in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that King Edward took possession of the city, when he took upon himself the responsibility of defending the valley of the Thames against Danish incursions, upon the death of his sister's husband, Aethelred, Ealdorman of the Mercians, to whom the city had formerly belonged.

Then, probably, was that mound thrown up which still exists opposite the old Norman tower of Robert D'Oyly; and from that period the city gradually grew into importance, until it quite superseded the more ancient city, Dorchester. which was situated at the angle formed by the tributary river Tame, fifteen miles lower down the stream, even as Oxford occupied the similar angle formed by the Cherwell.

The charge of Oxford, and the district around, was committed to Robert D'Oyly, aforementioned, who built the lofty tower opposite the mound, deepened the ditches, enlarged the fortifications he found already there; and, about the date of our tale, founded the Church of St. George in the Castle.

He had a ruinous city to preside over. Before the Conquest it contained about three thousand inhabitants; but the number was greatly diminished, for out of seven hundred and twenty-one houses formerly inhabited, four hundred and seventy-eight were now lying waste.

The University was yet a thing of the future. Mr. James Parker (in his pamphlet, on the history of Oxford during the tenth and eleventh centuries, which he kindly presented to the writer.) has clearly shown that its supposed foundation by Alfred is a myth. The passage in Asser, commonly quoted in support of the statement, is an interpolation not

older, perhaps, than the days of Edward *iii*. During the twelfth century the town appears, from whatever causes, to have recovered from the effects of the Conquest, and from that period its growth was rapid, until circumstances brought about the growth of a University honoured throughout the civilised world.

Page 143

xxvi An undisciplined mob had preceded them and perished on the road. We have not space to write their history.

xxvii The Varangians.

Ordericus Vitalis, B. iv., says, "When the English had lost their freedom, they turned themselves eagerly to discover the means of regaining their liberty. Some fled to Sweyn, King of Denmark, to excite him to fight for the inheritance of his grandfather, Canute. Not a few fled into exile in other lands, either to escape the Norman rule, or in the hope of acquiring the means of renewing the struggle at home. Some of these, in early manhood, penetrated into a far distant land, and offered their services to the Emperor of Constantinople, against whom (the Norman) Robert Guiscard had arrayed all his forces. The English exiles were favourably received, and opposed in battle to the Normans, who were far too strong for the Greeks in personal combat.

"The Emperor Alexius began to build a town for the English, a little above Constantinople; but the troubles from the Normans increasing, he soon recalled them to the capital, and intrusted the palace, with all its treasures, to their keeping. This was the way in which the English found their way to Ionia, where they still remain, honoured by the Emperor and his people."

xxviii Particularly those portions found in the Gospels for the different Sundays in the Christian year, which even then (and long before) existed in nearly the same order as in our present Prayer-book, and were read in the vernacular each Sunday at Mass.

xxix See First and Second Chronicles.

xxx Anglo-Saxon and Norman Churches.

Originally, the churches of the Anglo-Saxons were built of wood, with perhaps a foundation of stone; but before the Conquest nobler buildings were introduced. Thus, for instance, the church which Harold built at Waltham was designed in the new style of architecture, of which the earliest specimen in England was Edward's Abbey Church at Westminster. Waltham was sumptuously adorned: the capitals and bases of the pillars were curiously carved; and the ornaments of the altar, vestments, hooks, furniture, most elaborate (see the tract *De Inventione Sanctae Crucis*, edited by Professor Stubbs). But with the advent of a more highly civilised people, the churches generally shared in the revival of architecture, as the many massive remains, still extant, of that early period sufficiently testify.

xxxi H. A. & M. 12.

xxxii "Blessed are the peacemakers."—St. Matthew v.