

## **V ST. EDWARD AND THE NORMAN KINGS**

The reader may be surprised at the disproportionate importance given to the name which stands first in the title of this chapter. I put it there as the best way of emphasizing, at the beginning of what we may call the practical part of our history, an elusive and rather strange thing. It can only be described as the strength of the weak kings.

It is sometimes valuable to have enough imagination to unlearn as well as to learn. I would ask the reader to forget his reading and everything that he learnt at school, and consider the English monarchy as it would then appear to him. Let him suppose that his acquaintance with the ancient kings has only come to him as it came to most men in simpler times, from nursery tales, from the names of places, from the dedications of churches and charities, from the tales in the tavern, and the tombs in the churchyard. Let us suppose such a person going upon some open and ordinary English way, such as the Thames valley to Windsor, or visiting some old seats of culture, such as Oxford or Cambridge. One of the first things, for instance, he would find would be Eton, a place transformed, indeed, by modern aristocracy, but still enjoying its mediæval wealth and remembering its mediæval origin. If he asked about that origin, it is probable that even a public schoolboy would know enough history to tell him that it was founded by Henry VI. If he went to Cambridge and looked with his own eyes for the college chapel which artistically towers above all others like a cathedral, he would probably ask about it, and be told it was King's College. If he asked which king, he would again be told Henry VI. If he then went into the library and looked up Henry VI. in an encyclopædia, he would find that the legendary giant, who had left these gigantic works behind him, was in history an almost invisible pigmy. Amid the varying and contending numbers of a great national quarrel, he is the only cipher. The contending factions carry him about like a bale of goods. His desires do not seem to be even ascertained, far less satisfied. And yet his real desires are satisfied in stone and marble, in oak and gold, and remain through all the maddest revolutions of modern England, while all the ambitions of those who dictated to him have gone away like dust upon the wind.

Edward the Confessor, like Henry VI., was not only an invalid but almost an idiot. It is said that he was wan like an albino, and that the awe men had of him was partly that which is felt for a monster of mental deficiency. His Christian charity was of the kind that borders on anarchism, and the stories about him recall the Christian fools in the great anarchic novels of Russia. Thus he is reported to have covered the retreat of a common thief upon the naked plea that the thief needed

things more than he did. Such a story is in strange contrast to the claims made for other kings, that theft was impossible in their dominions. Yet the two types of king are afterwards praised by the same people; and the really arresting fact is that the incompetent king is praised the more highly of the two. And exactly as in the case of the last Lancastrian, we find that the praise has really a very practical meaning in the long run. When we turn from the destructive to the constructive side of the Middle Ages we find that the village idiot is the inspiration of cities and civic systems. We find his seal upon the sacred foundations of Westminster Abbey. We find the Norman victors in the hour of victory bowing before his very ghost. In the Tapestry of Bayeux, woven by Norman hands to justify the Norman cause and glorify the Norman triumph, nothing is claimed for the Conqueror beyond his conquest and the plain personal tale that excuses it, and the story abruptly ends with the breaking of the Saxon line at Battle. But over the bier of the decrepit zany, who died without striking a blow, over this and this alone, is shown a hand coming out of heaven, and declaring the true approval of the power that rules the world.

The Confessor, therefore, is a paradox in many ways, and in none more than in the false reputation of the "English" of that day. As I have indicated, there is some unreality in talking about the Anglo-Saxon at all. The Anglo-Saxon is a mythical and straddling giant, who has presumably left one footprint in England and the other in Saxony. But there was a community, or rather group of communities, living in Britain before the Conquest under what we call Saxon names, and of a blood probably more Germanic and certainly less French than the same communities after the Conquest. And they have a modern reputation which is exactly the reverse of their real one. The value of the Anglo-Saxon is exaggerated, and yet his virtues are ignored. Our Anglo-Saxon blood is supposed to be the practical part of us; but as a fact the Anglo-Saxons were more hopelessly unpractical than any Celt. Their racial influence is supposed to be healthy, or, what many think the same thing, heathen. But as a fact these "Teutons" were the mystics. The Anglo-Saxons did one thing, and one thing only, thoroughly well, as they were fitted to do it thoroughly well. They christened England. Indeed, they christened it before it was born. The one thing the Angles obviously and certainly could not manage to do was to become English. But they did become Christians, and indeed showed a particular disposition to become monks. Moderns who talk vaguely of them as our hardy ancestors never do justice to the real good they did us, by thus opening our history, as it were, with the fable of an age of innocence, and beginning all our chronicles, as so many chronicles began, with the golden initial of a saint. By becoming monks they served us in many very valuable and special capacities, but not notably, perhaps, in the capacity of ancestors.

Along the northern coast of France, where the Confessor had passed his early life, lay the lands of one of the most powerful of the French king's vassals, the Duke of

Normandy. He and his people, who constitute one of the most picturesque and curious elements in European history, are confused for most of us by irrelevant controversies which would have been entirely unintelligible to them. The worst of these is the inane fiction which gives the name of Norman to the English aristocracy during its great period of the last three hundred years. Tennyson informed a lady of the name of Vere de Vere that simple faith was more valuable than Norman blood. But the historical student who can believe in Lady Clara as the possessor of the Norman blood must be himself a large possessor of the simple faith. As a matter of fact, as we shall see also when we come to the political scheme of the Normans, the notion is the negation of their real importance in history. The fashionable fancy misses what was best in the Normans, exactly as we have found it missing what was best in the Saxons. One does not know whether to thank the Normans more for appearing or for disappearing. Few philanthropists ever became so rapidly anonymous. It is the great glory of the Norman adventurer that he threw himself heartily into his chance position; and had faith not only in his comrades, but in his subjects, and even in his enemies. He was loyal to the kingdom he had not yet made. Thus the Norman Bruce becomes a Scot; thus the descendant of the Norman Strongbow becomes an Irishman. No men less than Normans can be conceived as remaining as a superior caste until the present time. But this alien and adventurous loyalty in the Norman, which appears in these other national histories, appears most strongly of all in the history we have here to follow. The Duke of Normandy does become a real King of England; his claim through the Confessor, his election by the Council, even his symbolic handfuls of the soil of Sussex, these are not altogether empty forms. And though both phrases would be inaccurate, it is very much nearer the truth to call William the first of the English than to call Harold the last of them.

An indeterminate debate touching the dim races that mixed without record in that dim epoch, has made much of the fact that the Norman edges of France, like the East Anglian edges of England, were deeply penetrated by the Norse invasions of the ninth century; and that the ducal house of Normandy, with what other families we know not, can be traced back to a Scandinavian seed. The unquestionable power of captaincy and creative legislation which belonged to the Normans, whoever they were, may be connected reasonably enough with some infusion of fresh blood. But if the racial theorists press the point to a comparison of races, it can obviously only be answered by a study of the two types in separation. And it must surely be manifest that more civilizing power has since been shown by the French when untouched by Scandinavian blood than by the Scandinavians when untouched by French blood. As much fighting (and more ruling) was done by the Crusaders who were never Vikings as by the Vikings who were never Crusaders. But in truth there is no need of such invidious analysis; we may willingly allow a real value to the Scandinavian contribution to the

French as to the English nationality, so long as we firmly understand the ultimate historic fact that the duchy of Normandy was about as Scandinavian as the town of Norwich. But the debate has another danger, in that it tends to exaggerate even the personal importance of the Norman. Many as were his talents as a master, he is in history the servant of other and wider things. The landing of Lanfranc is perhaps more of a date than the landing of William. And Lanfranc was an Italian--like Julius Cæsar. The Norman is not in history a mere wall, the rather brutal boundary of a mere empire. The Norman is a gate. He is like one of those gates which still remain as he made them, with round arch and rude pattern and stout supporting columns; and what entered by that gate was civilization. William of Falaise has in history a title much higher than that of Duke of Normandy or King of England. He was what Julius Cæsar was, and what St. Augustine was: he was the ambassador of Europe to Britain.

William asserted that the Confessor, in the course of that connection which followed naturally from his Norman education, had promised the English crown to the holder of the Norman dukedom. Whether he did or not we shall probably never know: it is not intrinsically impossible or even improbable. To blame the promise as unpatriotic, even if it was given, is to read duties defined at a much later date into the first feudal chaos; to make such blame positive and personal is like expecting the Ancient Britons to sing "Rule Britannia." William further clinched his case by declaring that Harold, the principal Saxon noble and the most probable Saxon claimant, had, while enjoying the Duke's hospitality after a shipwreck, sworn upon sacred relics not to dispute the Duke's claim. About this episode also we must agree that we do not know; yet we shall be quite out of touch with the time if we say that we do not care. The element of sacrilege in the alleged perjury of Harold probably affected the Pope when he blessed a banner for William's army; but it did not affect the Pope much more than it would have affected the people; and Harold's people quite as much as William's. Harold's people presumably denied the fact; and their denial is probably the motive of the very marked and almost eager emphasis with which the Bayeux Tapestry asserts and reasserts the reality of the personal betrayal. There is here a rather arresting fact to be noted. A great part of this celebrated pictorial record is not concerned at all with the well-known historical events which we have only to note rapidly here. It does, indeed, dwell a little on the death of Edward; it depicts the difficulties of William's enterprise in the felling of forests for shipbuilding, in the crossing of the Channel, and especially in the charge up the hill at Hastings, in which full justice is done to the destructive resistance of Harold's army. But it was really after Duke William had disembarked and defeated Harold on the Sussex coast, that he did what is historically worthy to be called the Conquest. It is not until these later operations that we have the note of the new and scientific militarism from the Continent. Instead of marching upon London he marched round it; and crossing the Thames at Wallingford cut off the city from the rest of the country and

compelled its surrender. He had himself elected king with all the forms that would have accompanied a peaceful succession to the Confessor, and after a brief return to Normandy took up the work of war again to bring all England under his crown. Marching through the snow, he laid waste the northern counties, seized Chester, and made rather than won a kingdom. These things are the foundations of historical England; but of these things the pictures woven in honour of his house tell us nothing. The Bayeux Tapestry may almost be said to stop before the Norman Conquest. But it tells in great detail the tale of some trivial raid into Brittany solely that Harold and William may appear as brothers in arms; and especially that William may be depicted in the very act of giving arms to Harold. And here again there is much more significance than a modern reader may fancy, in its bearing upon the new birth of that time and the ancient symbolism of arms. I have said that Duke William was a vassal of the King of France; and that phrase in its use and abuse is the key to the secular side of this epoch. William was indeed a most mutinous vassal, and a vein of such mutiny runs through his family fortunes: his sons Rufus and Henry I. disturbed him with internal ambitions antagonistic to his own. But it would be a blunder to allow such personal broils to obscure the system, which had indeed existed here before the Conquest, which clarified and confirmed it. That system we call Feudalism.

That Feudalism was the main mark of the Middle Ages is a commonplace of fashionable information; but it is of the sort that seeks the past rather in Wardour Street than Watling Street. For that matter, the very term "mediæval" is used for almost anything from Early English to Early Victorian. An eminent Socialist applied it to our armaments, which is like applying it to our aeroplanes. Similarly the just description of Feudalism, and of how far it was a part and how far rather an impediment in the main mediæval movement, is confused by current debates about quite modern things--especially that modern thing, the English squirearchy. Feudalism was very nearly the opposite of squirearchy. For it is the whole point of the squire that his ownership is absolute and is pacific. And it is the very definition of Feudalism that it was a tenure, and a tenure by military service. Men paid their rent in steel instead of gold, in spears and arrows against the enemies of their landlord. But even these landlords were not landlords in the modern sense; every one was practically as well as theoretically a tenant of the King; and even he often fell into a feudal inferiority to a Pope or an Emperor. To call it mere tenure by soldiering may seem a simplification; but indeed it is precisely here that it was not so simple as it seems. It is precisely a certain knot or enigma in the nature of Feudalism which makes half the struggle of European history, but especially English history.

There was a certain unique type of state and culture which we call mediæval, for want of a better word, which we see in the Gothic or the great Schoolmen. This thing in itself was above all things logical. Its very cult of authority was a thing of

reason, as all men who can reason themselves instantly recognize, even if, like Huxley, they deny its premises or dislike its fruits. Being logical, it was very exact about who had the authority. Now Feudalism was not quite logical, and was never quite exact about who had the authority. Feudalism already flourished before the mediæval renaissance began. It was, if not the forest the mediævals had to clear, at least the rude timber with which they had to build. Feudalism was a fighting growth of the Dark Ages before the Middle Ages; the age of barbarians resisted by semi-barbarians. I do not say this in disparagement of it. Feudalism was mostly a very human thing; the nearest contemporary name for it was homage, a word which almost means humanity. On the other hand, mediæval logic, never quite reconciled to it, could become in its extremes inhuman. It was often mere prejudice that protected men, and pure reason that burned them. The feudal units grew through the lively localism of the Dark Ages, when hills without roads shut in a valley like a garrison. Patriotism had to be parochial; for men had no country, but only a countryside. In such cases the lord grew larger than the king; but it bred not only a local lordship but a kind of local liberty. And it would be very inadvisable to ignore the freer element in Feudalism in English history. For it is the one kind of freedom that the English have had and held.

The knot in the system was something like this. In theory the King owned everything, like an earthly providence; and that made for despotism and "divine right," which meant in substance a natural authority. In one aspect the King was simply the one lord anointed by the Church, that is recognized by the ethics of the age. But while there was more royalty in theory, there could be more rebellion in practice. Fighting was much more equal than in our age of munitions, and the various groups could arm almost instantly with bows from the forest or spears from the smith. Where men are military there is no militarism. But it is more vital that while the kingdom was in this sense one territorial army, the regiments of it were also kingdoms. The sub-units were also sub-loyalties. Hence the loyalist to his lord might be a rebel to his king; or the king be a demagogue delivering him from the lord. This tangle is responsible for the tragic passions about betrayal, as in the case of William and Harold; the alleged traitor who is always found to be recurrent, yet always felt to be exceptional. To break the tie was at once easy and terrible. Treason in the sense of rebellion was then really felt as treason in the sense of treachery, since it was desertion on a perpetual battlefield. Now, there was even more of this civil war in English than in other history, and the more local and less logical energy on the whole prevailed. Whether there was something in those island idiosyncracies, shapeless as sea-mists, with which this story began, or whether the Roman imprint had really been lighter than in Gaul, the feudal undergrowth prevented even a full attempt to build the Civitas Dei, or ideal mediæval state. What emerged was a compromise, which men long afterwards amused themselves by calling a constitution.



There are paradoxes permissible for the redressing of a bad balance in criticism, and which may safely even be emphasized so long as they are not isolated. One of these I have called at the beginning of this chapter the strength of the weak kings. And there is a complement of it, even in this crisis of the Norman mastery, which might well be called the weakness of the strong kings. William of Normandy succeeded immediately, he did not quite succeed ultimately; there was in his huge success a secret of failure that only bore fruit long after his death. It was certainly his single aim to simplify England into a popular autocracy, like that growing up in France; with that aim he scattered the feudal holdings in scraps, demanded a direct vow from the sub-vassals to himself, and used any tool against the barony, from the highest culture of the foreign ecclesiastics to the rudest relics of Saxon custom. But the very parallel of France makes the paradox startlingly apparent. It is a proverb that the first French kings were puppets; that the mayor of the palace was quite insolently the king of the king. Yet it is certain that the puppet became an idol; a popular idol of unparalleled power, before which all mayors and nobles bent or were broken. In France arose absolute government, the more because it was not precisely personal government. The King was already a thing--like the Republic. Indeed the mediæval Republics were rigid with divine right. In Norman England, perhaps, the government was too personal to be absolute. Anyhow, there is a real though recondite sense in which William the Conqueror was William the Conquered. When his two sons were dead, the whole country fell into a feudal chaos almost like that before the Conquest. In France the princes who had been slaves became something exceptional like priests; and one of them became a saint. But somehow our greatest kings were still barons; and by that very energy our barons became our kings.