

THE NINE MONTHS OF HAROLD'S REIGN.

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ACCORDING to Florence of Worcester, Harold son of Godwine reigned nine months and nine days,¹ and reckoning from the death of his predecessor, which occurred on Thursday the 5th day of January, to Saturday the 14th of October, 1066, the day of his own death, this chronological statement appears to be correct.

The shortness of the time during which Harold II occupied the throne of England may have been the reason why he has been so far ignored by some historians, that by them he is scarcely included among our sovereigns. In their pages we pass from the reign of Edward the Confessor to that of Norman William, and bestow but a glance on him whose fall at the head of the Saxon host at the Battle of Hastings was the most momentous event in Europe of the eleventh century. More recently, however, Harold has been reinstated in the place which he held with contemporary chroniclers. In the pages of Turner, Lingard, and Lappenberg, he appears as he lived among his countrymen—their hero and leader against the invader, and every inch a king.

The primary authorities for Harold's reign are the Norman writers, Wace, William of Poitiers, Ordericus Vitalis, and the false Ingulph, with William of Malmesbury, who, although professing to record dispassionately, has evidently a Norman bias; but against these may be set the Saxon Chronicles and Florence of Worcester. When the assertions of Norman non-contemporaries run counter to these, to Saxon charters, or the *Domesday Survey*, they deserve little credence.² The amplifications of later annalists, such

¹ "Regnavit autem Haroldus mensibus ix et diebus totidem." (Flor. Wigorn.)

² Although one main object of the Bayeux Tapestry is, doubtless, to represent Harold as usurping the crown of England, it is observable that it always portrays him with due respect. He appears first as "*dux anglorum*"; and after his coronation, when he is seated on the throne, the superscription is "*hic residet Harold rex.*" In the expedition against Conan it also testifies to his courage.

as Bromton and Knyghton, are only curious as showing how monastic writers could make a story grow.

The most trustworthy account of Harold's accession¹ is that of Florence. The chronicler thus commences the *annus mirabilis*, 1066: "King Edward the Pacific, son of King Æthelred, died in London on Thursday the eve of the Epiphany, in the fourth indiction, after having filled the royal throne of the Anglo-Saxons twenty-three years, six months, and twenty-seven days. He was buried the next day with royal pomp amidst the tears and lamentations of the crowds who flocked to his funeral. After his interment, Harold, the *vice-king*, son of Earl Godwine, *whom the king before his death had chosen for his successor*, was elected king² by the leading men of all England, and the same day was crowned by Ealdred, Archbishop of York."

Edward long before his death was aware that there would be a disputed succession. As early as 1057 he had sent for Eadward, called Eadward the Outlaw, the undoubted heir to the crown, as the son of Eadmund Ironside; but soon after his arrival in England he died. His son Eadgar Ætheling was too young in 1066 to be elected king, when a strong hand was needed at the helm, and to him was then given the Earldom of Oxford. The Norman writers assert that the Confessor promised the crown to William the Bastard, but the Saxon annalists record that he nominated Harold. A formidable competitor also appeared in the person of Hardrada, King of Norway, who represented the Danish interest, and thought that the day had come when the Norsemen might regain England as their own. Like many of his predecessors, it is certain that Harold was elected king by the Witan, and as the principle of

¹ It is apparent that, during a considerable period, Harold's course of action had obtained favour with the Saxon people. As early as the reign of Harthacnut he was in possession of power; and, in striking contrast with the other sons of the great and popular Earl Godwine, in his government of East Anglia, and afterwards of Wessex, he was just, kind, and considerate. By his conquest of the Welsh king, Gruffydd, and the subjugation of Wales, in 1063, he shewed himself an able commander, and delivered his country from its then most troublesome enemies. As the end of the imbecile Confessor approached, it became evident to the Anglo-Saxons that Harold, the king's brother-in-law, and the ruler of the most powerful earldom in England, was, both from his position and his experiences in war, the only leader under whom they could hope to make a stand against the long-anticipated Norman aggression.

² The *Saxon Chronicle* has only this brief but expressive entry, evidently made *after* the Conquest, "This year was Harold consecrated king; and he, with little quiet, abode therein the while that he wielded the realm."

hereditary succession had not then been established, this constituted his best right to the crown.

“Tall, open-handed and handsome”, and, as he has been described, “the first man of the age”,¹ Harold, as soon as he assumed the reins of government, began to exert himself with vigour. “He made it his business”, says the *Chronicles*, “to revoke unjust laws and establish good ones”; and, as a late historian observes, “the grievous customs and taxes which his predecessors had raised he abolished, whilst the ordinary wages of his servants and men of war he increased”. Even Orderic extols his admirable qualities, “*Erat enim magnitudine et elegantia viribusque corporis, animique audacia et lingua facundia multisque facetiis et probitationibus admirabilis*”; but, while pleasant and agreeable, the king was also mindful of the requirements of his position. It is mentioned that he became the protector of the churches and monasteries, and shewed himself kind and courteous to all good men, but to malefactors he used the utmost rigor, since he gave orders to his earls, ealdormen, vice reeves, and all his officers to correct all thieves, robbers, and disturbers of the peace, and he labored himself for the defences of the country by land and sea.²

Seated on the throne, Harold at once instituted a complete return to the national customs of the Saxons. To the charters of the late reign, seals had been appended after the Norman fashion; these were replaced by the cross or signature as before. Yet foreigners were not expelled, an act of lenity which they reciprocated by intriguing against him.

In his own dominions, Northumbria alone gave Harold cause for alarm. Disliking a southron, the men of the north would have preferred a chieftain from that district; but after Siward's decease no fitting representative could be found. Harold attempted conciliation, and with success. He journeyed northwards, not with the troops whom he had led to victory in Wales, but in the company of Wulfstan, the popular and venerable Bishop of Worcester. Malmesbury informs us that they gained access, *ad abditissimos gentes*, and that even these were won by the Saint to

¹ “*Virtute corporis et animi in populo præstabat*,” says the author of the *Vita Æduardi Regis*, published by the Record Commission. It is much to be regretted that this contemporary writer does not enter on Harold's reign.

² Flor. Wigorn.

Harold's cause. A circumstance is also added which illustrates the manners of the time. The long hair of the Northumbrians was regarded by Wulfstan as a mark of effeminacy and greatly excited his displeasure. At length, however, they submitted the flowing locks in which they delighted to be cropped by the saint's penknife, although, as the writer gravely observes, that instrument was not intended for such a purpose, but for paring his nails and erasing blots in his manuscripts.¹

Harold riveted the affections of his northern subjects by his marriage with Eadgyth, daughter of Ælfgar, and sister of the Earls Eadwine and Morkere, but from the day of his coronation his thoughts were chiefly directed towards a most formidable adversary abroad.

Comets, by the ignorant, have often been held to portend war and disaster, and the comet of 1066 is mentioned by every annalist of the period. The words of the Saxon Chronicle are these, "There was over all England such a token seen in the heavens as no man ever before saw. Some men said it was *cometa*, the star, which some men called the haired star, and it appeared first on the eve of Litanía Major, the 8th before the Kalends of May, and so shone seven nights."² It is described by a Norman writer as having three tails; and Thierry, improving the circumstance, adds that it was visible in England nearly a month, producing upon every mind an extraordinary impression of wonder and fear. The people collected in the streets and public places of the towns and villages to contemplate the phenomenon. Duke William was soon informed of Harold's accession. His reception of the tidings is thus graphically related by Wace. "The duke was in his park at Rouen. He held in his hand a bow, which he had strung and bent, making it ready for the arrow, . . . when a serjeant appeared who told him privily that King Edward was dead, and that Harold was raised to be king. When the duke had listened to him . . . he became as a man enraged, and left the craft of the woods. Oft he tied his mantle, and oft he untied it again, and spoke to no man, neither

¹ *Anglia Sacra*, ii, 253.

² Among the many notices of comets which appear in our early chronicles, this is especially valuable. Mr. Hinde is disposed to recognise it as Halley's comet, observed also by Apian in 1531 and by Kepler in 1607. It reappeared, in accordance with previous calculations, in 1835.

dared any man speak to him. Then he crossed the Seine in a boat, and came to his hall and entered therein and sat down at the end of a bench, shifting his place from time to time, covering his face with his mantle, and resting his head against a pillar." It is difficult to discover any right which William could have asserted to the English crown. As an alien, he knew that he could not hope for the suffrages of the Saxons; and he therefore represented Harold as perjured, and himself as nominated by the Confessor to the throne. In these statements there was probably some residuum of truth; but when the day of trial came, the Saxons plainly perceived that the main point which they had to consider was, would they submit to be governed by a foreign ruler? The result of William's deliberations was a fixed resolution to fight for the crown of England. He forthwith commenced preparations for invasion, and did his best in every way to damage the cause of Harold his antagonist. Meanwhile, other opponents had been busy. Harold's younger brother, Tostig, had conceived against him a deadly enmity. He had been expelled from his earldom by the Northumbrians, and was exasperated because Harold had not re-imposed him upon them.¹ Tostig hastened to his brother-in-law, Duke William, and urged an immediate attack on England. He formed a compact with the Norman, and, as early as April, appeared off the Isle of Wight with a fleet and some Flemish adventurers. He there levied contributions, and did harm everywhere by the sea coast. On hearing that Harold was advancing to repel him he went "north into Humber and there ravaged Lindsey and slew many good men; but when Eadwine the earl and Morkere the earl understood that, they came thither and drove him out of the land". With the remnant of his fleet he then proceeded to Scotland, where he remained during the summer and obtained some assistance.

The king, now freed for a time from apprehension as to his brother, took active measures for the defence of the south coast. From the experience which he had gained of William's character, during his detention in Normandy, Harold knew well the energetic enemy with whom he had

¹ Harold has been censured as if he had acted in an unfriendly way towards his brother, but the Cottonian MS. of the *Saxon Chronicle* is strongly in his favour. "There was a great gemot at Oxford, and there was Harold the Earl, and would work a reconciliation, if he might; but he could not," etc.



to deal; and soon the tidings came of vast preparations for invasion. Workmen of every kind, it was said, were building and fitting up ships, smiths and armourers were busy making lances, swords, and coats of mail; porters were continually going to and fro, transporting arms to the vessels. "He therefore collected a larger fleet and army than had ever been seen in the country, and kept watch all the summer and autumn to prevent the landing." The Isle of Wight was Harold's headquarters, and he stationed troops at suitable points along the coast; but sufficient attention was not paid to the supplies, "provisions failed towards the time of the Nativity of St. Mary (8th Sept.), and both fleet and army were disbanded. The king himself returned to London."

In considering the conquest of England in 1066 (the last subjugation of this island), we become strongly impressed with the fact that it resulted, not so much from the valour and enterprise of the Normans, as from a concatenation of adverse circumstances. In 1588 the army and fleet of England were ready for the invader, and we know what followed. Harold also had intended to await the Norman on land, and to attack him in the Channel. Had the Norman armada, encumbered as it was by a multitude of horses, been assailed by the Saxon fleet, it would, doubtless, have experienced some confusion during its progress. Not only was the Channel then unguarded by a fleet, but the heavy losses sustained by Harold's forces in the north, rendered him the less able to cope with the southern invaders. The battles of Fulford and of Stamford Bridge had much to do with the issue of the battle of Hastings. As in 1866, Austria was assailed from the north and from the south by Prussia and Italy, similarly in 1066 was England attacked from the north and from the south by the Norwegians and by the Normans, almost simultaneously; and the distraction which ensued in both instances proved fatal.

Tostig wished to acquire the kingdom, or a part of it, for himself, and soon abandoned his alliance with William. He applied for assistance to Svend, the Danish king, but met with a curt refusal. With Harald Hardrada, king of Norway, he was more successful. It was agreed that they should divide England between them, and a Norwegian fleet was fitted out, of three hundred sail.

Hardrada was one of the most successful adventurers of his time, a master of stratagem, and a scarcely less formidable opponent than Duke William. Of his strategy we have some curious instances on record. He took a Sicilian town by the following expedient. The walls were so strong that he could effect no breach; the inhabitants had plenty of provisions, and every requisite for defence. The besiegers were in despair, when Hardrada ordered some fowlers to catch the small birds which nested in the town, and flew daily to the forest for food for their young. Splinters of inflammable wood, smeared with wax and sulphur, were affixed to their backs, and ignited. The birds flew quickly to their nests under the thatched roofs, and the town began to blaze, on which the horrified townsmen rushed out and surrendered. On another occasion he simulated death, his officers placed him in a coffin, and asked leave for his interment in a city which he wished to take. This was granted. The supposed dead body of Hardrada entered alive; at a given signal his troops followed, and a horrible massacre ensued.¹ For ten years he had commanded in the service of Zoe, the Byzantine empress. In Asia, Africa, and Europe, he had been victorious, having gained no fewer than eighteen pitched battles, and taken eighty fortified places. On returning to the north, he at length became king of Norway, and married Elizabeth, daughter of the Czar. Like Cnut, he now desired the joint sovereignty of Norway and England. Hardrada and Tostig were joined by the Earls of Orkney and some Scottish and Irish vassals. In the beginning of September they landed at Scarborough; and its taking, as described in the Saga, gives an idea of the savage warfare of the Northmen at that time. "The king went up a hill, and made a great pile upon it, which he set on fire; and when the pile was in clear flame, his men took large forks, and pitched the blazing wood into the town, so that one house caught fire after another, and the town surrendered."—Selby² was next besieged.

Harold had prepared to march northwards, but according to a metrical life of the Confessor,³—taking it for what it is

¹ Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, 169.

² Heimskringler.

³ *La Estoire de Saint Ædward*. In lives of Edward the Confessor. ed. Mr. Luard.

worth, and conjecturing a small residuum of truth,—he was assailed by another enemy, unexpected and invulnerable :

“When Harold, king of England, hears it,
Wrath has he in heart, he had not ever more.
He causes to be assembled all his people
Of the kingdom in common ;
But when he sought to advance with his army,
Then he has grief on all sides.
The *gout* in his thigh seizes him
Fiercely, so that he cannot go a step.
King Harold is in anguish ;
He knows not what he can do,
For his thigh is much swollen,
And his leg is now festering.”

When thus suffering, Harold did not apply to the Saxon leeches, or make use of any of the customary remedies of the time, but is represented as beseeching the help of his deceased brother-in-law :

“Devoutly to St. Edward he prays,
That he be his counsel and aid ;
All the night he laments and weeps,
And says, for the kingdom am I anxious ;
No matter if I perish.
At length St. Edward appeared,
Who had regard to his desire ;
Who now fails not at his need,
And makes King Harold entirely well.”

Freed from this detention, Harold, with seven bodies of troops, hastened to the scene of action ; but he did not arrive in time to head the northern army against the Norwegians. On the 20th of September, Eadwine and Morkere hazarded a battle at Fulford on the Ouse, which ended disastrously : “The Northmen,” says the Chronicle, “had the victory. Then was it made known to Harold, king of the Angles, that this had thus happened ; and this battle was on the vigil of St. Matthew.”

York submitted to Hardrada, and its citizens agreed to assist the invaders. The Norwegian army then proceeded to Stamford Bridge on the Derwent to rest after the engagement, and arrange matters before proceeding southwards. There it was surprised by Harold. “Prompt and

daring in his projects, the Saxon king passed through York on the 24th of September, and on the 25th led his forces against the Northmen." We have the battle of Stamford Bridge vividly described in the *Heimskringler*: "The Norwegians landed in expectation of receiving the hostages from York. The day was fine, and it was hot sunshine; they had laid aside their armour, and taken only their helmets, shields, spears, and swords. Some had bows and arrows, and all were very merry." They were flushed with success, and fancied that the cloud of dust raised by the approaching Saxons was caused by the men of York, whom they were awaiting; a line of steel soon betokened the vanguard of an army. Hardrada was not unequal to the emergency; he sent for succours from his ships; he unfurled his standard, *Landeyda*—the desolation of lands; he drew up his troops in line, and bent back the wings so as best to sustain a charge of cavalry; he rode along the front, to inspect his order, and was himself conspicuous from his unusual size, his bright blue mantle, glittering head-piece, and black charger. According to the *Saga*, Hardrada was five ells, or more than eight English feet in height; handsome, and of noble appearance. He had large, but well made, hands and feet, and wore a short beard and long moustaches. These, with his hair, were yellow. Hardrada's horse stumbled, and he fell. Some characteristic words of Harold are recorded: "Who is that giant," he asked, "who has fallen from his steed?" He was told that it was the King of Norway. "A stately man," he said, "but you see his luck has forsaken him." Tostig was posted at a distance; despite his crimes, he was valorous, and acted up to what he considered his code of honour. An offer was made him of a third of the kingdom if he would submit. His reply was, "What of Hardrada, my friend and ally?" "Seven feet of ground," Harold answered, "shall he have, or a little more, for his height passes that of other men." "Say, then, to my brother," replied Tostig, emphatically referring to his father's reputation, "let him prepare to fight, for none but liars shall ever say that the son of Godwine deserted the son of Ligurd." Hardrada was killed by an arrow, which pierced his throat, at the commencement of the battle. Tostig, after rejecting a second offer, was slain, and the Norwegians, renewing the contest a third time, were defeated with great slaughter.

Heaps of bleached bones remained long after, a memorial to the passer-by of the terrible conflict. Ordericus mentions that they were visible in his day: "*Locus belli, pertranseuntibus evidenter patet, ubi magna congeries opium mortuorum usque hodie jacet.*"

Harold treated the surviving Norwegians with much clemency. Olaf, the son of Hardrada, and Paul, jarl of the Orkneys, with twenty-four ships, after giving hostages, were permitted to return home. Three hundred vessels, and a quantity of gold acquired by Harold Hardrada in his wars in the East, are said to have fallen into the possession of the English king. Of this spoil it is asserted that he made no distribution, and thus alienated some who would have fought for him at Hastings. Rapin supposes that Harold deviated from his usual generosity, that he might not be obliged to levy supplies at such a crisis, when the Normans were upon him. The shortness of the time, however, which intervened between Harold's departure from York and arrival in Sussex, is alone sufficient to account for the scantiness of the force which accompanied him thither, irrespective of the severe losses so recently sustained.

Four days after the battle of Stamford Bridge a Sussex thegn, who had ridden day and night from Hastings, brought intelligence that Duke William had landed. The narrative of Florence appears the most trustworthy: "Thereupon the king led his army towards London by forced marches, and although he was very sensible that some of the bravest men in England had fallen in the two (recent) battles, and that one half of his troops was not yet assembled, he did not hesitate to meet the enemy in Sussex without loss of time."

On the 13th of October, Harold arrived within sight of the Norman position. It can scarcely be supposed, with some, that he designed to surprise the southern as he had the northern invader. The Saxon king probably underrated the Norman army, when he hastily marched from the metropolis. Had he adopted Fabian tactics, as Gyrrh counselled, the issue might have been otherwise; but he determined on fighting. The conqueror of Gruffyd and of the king of Norway shewed good generalship. He intercepted William's march on London and strongly fortified the advantageous post he had secured. Unless the Normans could

storm the Saxon barricades they would be driven towards the south-coast to certain destruction. Had Harold's directions been implicitly followed, it is difficult to perceive how the result could have been otherwise. On St. Calixtus day, 1066, was fought one of the decisive battles of the world—that of Senlac or Hastings. In Wace we have the verbal description, whilst the Bayeux tapestry supplies the illustrations. Comment on it in this paper would be superfluous. No struggle, for life and liberty and all that men hold dear, could have been more desperately contested. Until their king was disabled the Saxons shewed no sign of giving way. An arrow, shot upwards, struck Harold above the left eye and put it out. The Saxon army still fought on, until lured from its vantage ground by Duke William, when its experienced leader could no longer issue his commands.

Finally, the defences were stormed and the last Saxon king fell, having done all that man could do, with his face to the foe, and whatever opinion may be formed as to the results of that decisive day, it is certain that no one more energetic, truer hearted, or more thoroughly identified with the real interests of the Saxon nation could then have headed the Saxon host than Harold, son of Godwine.