

WULF THE SAXON



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Chapter 1 - A QUARREL.

The great Abbey of Westminster was approaching its completion; an army of masons and labourers swarmed like bees upon and around it, and although differing widely in its massive architecture, with round Saxon windows and arches, from the edifice that was two or three generations later to be reared in its place,—to serve as a still more fitting tomb for the ashes of its pious founder,—it was a stately abbey, rivalling the most famous of the English fanes of the period.

From his palace hard by King Edward had watched with the deepest interest the erection of the minster that was the dearest object of his life. The King was surrounded by Normans, the people among whom he had lived until called from his retirement to ascend the throne of England, and whom he loved far better than those over whom he reigned. He himself still lived almost the life of a recluse. He was sincerely anxious for the good of his people, but took small pains to ensure it, his life being largely passed in religious devotions, and in watching over the rise of the abbey he had founded.

A town had risen around minster and palace, and here the workmen employed found their lodgings, while craftsmen of all descriptions administered to the wants both of these and of the nobles of Edward's court.

From one of the side doors of the palace a page, some fifteen or sixteen years of age, ran down the steps in haste. He was evidently a Saxon by his fair hair and fresh complexion, and any observer of the time would have seen that he must, therefore, be in the employment of Earl Harold, the great minister, who had for many years virtually ruled England in the name of its king.

The young page was strongly and sturdily built. His garb was an English one, but with some admixture of Norman fashions. He wore tightly-fitting leg coverings, a garment somewhat resembling a blouse of blue cloth girded in by a belt at the waist, and falling in folds to the knee. Over his shoulders hung a short mantle of orange colour with a hood. On his head was a cap with a wide brim that was turned up closely behind, and projected in a pointed shovel shape in front. In his belt was a small dagger. He wore shoes of light yellow leather fastened by bands over the insteps. As he ran down the steps of the palace he came into sharp contact with another page who had just turned the corner of the street.

"I crave your pardon, Walter Fitz-Urse," he said hurriedly, "but I was in haste and saw you not."

The other lad was as clearly Norman as the speaker was Saxon. He was perhaps a year the senior in point of age, and taller by half a head, but was of slighter build. The expression of his face differed as widely from that of the Saxon as did his swarthy complexion and dark hair, for while the latter face wore a frank and pleasant expression, that of the Norman was haughty and arrogant.

"You did it on purpose," he said angrily, "and were we not under the shadow of the palace I would chastise you as you deserve."

The smile died suddenly out from the Saxon's face. "Chastise me!" he repeated. "You would find it somewhat difficult, Master Fitz-Urse. Do you think you are talking to a Norman serf? You will please to remember you are in England; but if you are not satisfied with my apology, I will ride with you a few miles into the country, and we will then try with equal arms where the chastisement is to fall."

The Norman put his hand to his dagger, but there was an ominous growl from some men who had paused to listen to the quarrel.

"You are an insolent boor, Wulf of Steyning, and some day I will punish you as you deserve."

"Some day," the Saxon laughed, "we shall, I hope, see you and all your tribe sent across the Channel. There are few of us here who would not see your backs with pleasure."

"What is this?" an imperious voice demanded; and turning round, Wulf saw William, the Norman Bishop of London, who, followed by several monks and pages, had pushed his way through the crowd. "Walter Fitz-Urse, what means this altercation?"

"The Saxon ran against me of set purpose, my lord," Walter Fitz-Urse said, in tones of deep humility, "and because I complained he challenged me to ride with him into the country to fight, and then he said he hoped that some day all the Normans would be sent across the Channel."

"Is this so?" the prelate said sternly to Wulf; "did you thus insult not only my page, but all of us, his countrymen?"

"I ran against him by accident," Wulf said, looking up fearlessly in the prelate's face. "I apologized, though I know not that I was more in fault than he; but instead of taking my apology as one of gentle blood should do, he spoke like a churl, and threatened me with chastisement, and then I did say that I hoped he and all other Normans in the land would some day be packed across the Channel."

"Your ears ought to be slit as an insolent varlet."

"I meant no insolence, my Lord Bishop; and as to the slitting of my ears, I fancy Earl Harold, my master, would have something to say on that score."

The prelate was about to reply, but glancing at the angry faces of the growing crowd, he said coldly:

"I shall lay the matter before him. Come, Walter, enough of this. You are also somewhat to blame for not having received more courteously the apologies of this saucy page."

The crowd fell back with angry mutterings as he turned, and, followed by Walter Fitz-Urse and the ecclesiastics,

made his way along the street to the principal entrance of the palace. Without waiting to watch his departure, Wulf, the Saxon page, pushed his way through the crowd, and went off at full speed to carry the message with which he had been charged.

"Our king is a good king," a squarely-built man,—whose bare arms with the knotted muscles showing through the skin, and hands begrimed with charcoal, indicated that he was a smith,—remarked to a gossip as the little crowd broke up, "but it is a grievous pity that he was brought up a Norman, still more that he was not left in peace to pass his life as a monk as he desired. He fills the land with his Normans; soon as an English bishop dies, straightway a Norman is clapped into his place. All the offices at court are filled with them, and it is seldom a word of honest English is spoken in the palace. The Norman castles are rising over the land, and his favourites divide among them the territory of every English earl or thane who incurs the king's displeasure. Were it not for Earl Harold, one might as well be under Norman sway altogether."

"Nay, nay, neighbour Ulred, matters are not so bad as that. I dare say they would have been as you say had it not been for Earl Godwin and his sons. But it was a great check that Godwin gave them when he returned after his banishment, and the Norman bishops and nobles hurried across the seas in a panic. For years now the king has left all matters in the hands of Harold, and is well content if only he can fast and pray like any monk, and give all his thoughts and treasure to the building of yonder abbey."

"We want neither a monk nor a Norman over us," the smith said roughly, "still less one who is both Norman and monk I would rather have a Dane, like Canute, who was a strong man and a firm one, than this king, who, I doubt not, is full of good intentions, and is a holy and pious monarch, but who is not strong enough for a ruler. He leaves it to another to preserve England in peace, to keep in order the great

Earls of Mercia and the North, to hold the land against Harold of Norway, Sweyn, and others, and, above all, to watch the Normans across the water. A monk is well enough in a convent, but truly 'tis bad for a country to have a monk as its king."

"There have been some war-loving prelates, Ulred; men as ambitious as any of the great earls, and more dangerous, because they have learning."

"Ay, there have been great prelates," the smith agreed. "Look at Lyfing of Worcester, to whom next only to Godwin the king owed his throne. He was an Englishman first and a bishop afterwards, and was a proof, if needed, that a man can be a great churchman and a great patriot and statesman too. It was he rather than Godwin who overcame the opposition of the Danish party, and got the Witan at last to acquiesce in the choice of London and Wessex, and to give their vote to Edward.

"Well was it he did so. For had he failed we should have had as great a struggle in England as when Alfred battled against the Danes. We of London and the men of Wessex under the great Earl were bent upon being ruled by a prince of our own blood. The last two Danish kings had shown us that anything is better than being governed by the Northmen. It was Lyfing who persuaded the Earl of Mercia to side with Wessex rather than with Northumbria, but since Lyfing, what great Englishman have we had in the church? Every bishopric was granted by Edward to Norman priests, until Godwin and his sons got the upper hand after their exile. Since then most of them have been given to Germans. It would seem that the king was so set against Englishmen that only by bringing in foreigners can Harold prevent all preferment going to Normans. But what is the consequence? They say now that our church is governed from Rome, whereas before Edward's time we Englishmen did not think of taking our orders from Italy.

"There will trouble come of it all, neighbour. Perhaps not so long as Edward reigns, but at his death. There is but one of the royal race surviving, and he, like Edward, has lived all his life abroad. There can be no doubt what the choice of Englishmen will be. Harold has been our real ruler for years. He is wise and politic as well as brave, and a great general. He is our own earl, and will assuredly be chosen. Then we shall have trouble with the Normans. Already they bear themselves as if they were our masters, and they will not give up their hold without a struggle. Men say that William, their duke, makes no secret of his hope to become master of England, in which case God help us all. But that won't come as long as Harold lives and Englishmen can wield sword and battle-axe. As for myself, I have patched many a Norman suit of armour, but, by St. Swithin, I shall have far more pleasure in marring than I have ever had in mending them."

"Know you who were the boys who had that contention just now?"

"The Norman is a page of William, our Norman bishop; I know no more of him than that. The other is Wulf, who is a ward and page of Earl Harold. His father was thane of Steyning in South Sussex, one of Godwin's men, and at his death two years ago Harold took the lad into his household, for he bore great affection for Gyrth, who had accompanied him in his pilgrimage to Rome, and fought by his side when he conquered the Welsh. It was there Gyrth got the wound that at last brought about his death. Wulf has been to my smithy many times, sometimes about matters of repairs to arms, but more often, I think, to see my son Osgod. He had seen him once or twice in calling at the shop, when one day Osgod, who is somewhat given to mischief, was playing at ball, and drove it into the face of a son of one of the Norman lords at court. The boy drew his dagger, and there would have been blood shed, but Wulf, who was passing at

the time, and saw that the thing was a pure mishap and not the result of set intention, threw himself between them.

"There was a great fuss over it, for the boy took his tale to his father, who demanded that Osgod should be punished, and would doubtless have gained his end had not Wulf spoken to Earl Harold, who intervened in the matter and persuaded the Norman to let it drop. Since then the boys have been great friends in their way. Osgod is a year older than the young thane, and has already made up his mind to be his man when he grows up, and he has got me to agree to it, though I would rather that he had stuck to my handicraft. Still, the prospect is not a bad one. Harold will be King of England, Wulf will be a powerful thane, and will doubtless some day hold high place at court, and as he seems to have taken a real liking to Osgod, the boy may have good chances.

"Wulf will make a good fighting man one of these days. Harold sees that all his pages are well instructed in arms, and the two boys often have a bout with blunted swords when Wulf comes to my smithy; and, by my faith, though I have taught Osgod myself, and he already uses his arms well, the young thane is fully a match for him. You would hardly believe that the boy can read as well as a monk, but it is so. Earl Harold, you know, thinks a good deal of education, and has founded a college at Waltham. He persuaded Wulf's father to send him there, and, indeed, will take none as his pages unless they can read. I see not what good reading can do to most men, but doubtless for one who is at court and may hold some day a high post there, it is useful to be able to read deeds and grants of estates, instead of having to trust others' interpretation."

"I wondered to see you press forward so suddenly into the crowd, neighbour, seeing that you are a busy man, but I understand now that you had an interest in the affair."

"That had I. I was holding myself in readiness, if that Norman boy drew his dagger, to give him such a blow

across the wrist with my cudgel that it would be long before he handled a weapon again. I fear Wulf has got himself into trouble. The bishop will doubtless complain to the king of the language used by one of Harold's pages, and though the earl is well able to see that no harm comes to the lad, it is likely he will send him away to his estates for a time. For he strives always to avoid quarrels and disputes, and though he will not give way a jot in matters where it seems to him that the good of the realm is concerned, he will go much farther lengths than most men would do in the way of conciliation. Look how he has borne with Tostig and with the Earls of Mercia. He seems to have no animosity in his nature, but is ready to forgive all injuries as soon as pardon is asked."

The smith was not far wrong in his opinion as to what was likely to happen. As soon as Wulf returned to the palace he was told that the earl desired his presence, and he proceeded at once to the apartment where Harold transacted public business. It was a hall of considerable size; the floor was strewn with rushes; three scribes sat at a table, and to them the earl dictated his replies and decisions on the various matters brought before him. When he saw Wulf enter he rose from his seat, and, beckoning to him to follow, pushed aside the hangings across a door leading to an apartment behind and went in. Wulf had no fear whatever of any severe consequence to himself from his quarrel with Walter Fitz-Urse, but he was ashamed that his thoughtlessness should have given the slightest trouble to the earl, for, popular as he was among all classes of men in southern England, Harold was an object of love as well as respect to his dependents, and indeed to all who came in close contact with him.

The earl was now forty-one years of age. He was very tall, and was considered the strongest man in England. His face was singularly handsome, with an expression of mingled gentleness and firmness. His bearing was courteous to all.

He united a frank and straightforward manner with a polished address rare among his rough countrymen. Harold had travelled more and farther than any Englishman of his age. He had visited foreign courts and mingled with people more advanced in civilization than were those of England or Normandy, and was centuries ahead of the mass of his countrymen. He was an ardent advocate of education, a strong supporter of the national church, an upholder of the rights of all men, and although he occasionally gave way to bursts of passion, was of a singularly sweet and forgiving disposition.

King Edward was respected by his people because, coming after two utterly worthless kings, he had an earnest desire for their good, although that desire seldom led to any very active results. He was a member of their own royal house. He was deeply religious. His life was pure and simple, and although all his tastes and sympathies were with the land in which he had been brought up, Englishmen forgave him this because at least he was a Saxon, while his predecessors had been Danes. But while they respected Edward, for Harold, their real ruler, they felt a passionate admiration. He was a worthy representative of all that was best in the Saxon character. He possessed in an eminent degree the openness of nature, the frank liberality, the indomitable bravery, and the endurance of hardship that distinguished the race. He was Earl of the West Saxons, and as such had special claims to their fealty.

London, it was true, did not lie in his earldom, but in that of his brother Leofwyn, but Leofwyn and Harold were as one—true brothers in heart and in disposition. The gentleness and courtesy of manner that, although natural, had been softened and increased by Harold's contact with foreigners, was not only pardoned but admired because he was England's champion against foreigners. He had fought, and victoriously, alike against the Norwegians, the Danes of Northumbria, and the Welsh, and he struggled as sturdily,

though peacefully, against Norman influence in England. Already the dread of Norman preponderance was present in the minds of Englishmen. It was no secret that in his early days Edward had held out hopes, if he had not given an actual promise, to William of Normandy that he should succeed him. Of late the king had been somewhat weaned from his Norman predilections, and had placed himself unreservedly in Harold's hands, giving to the latter all real power while he confined himself to the discharge of religious exercises, and to the supervision of the building of his abbey, varied occasionally by hunting expeditions, for he still retained a passionate love of the chase; but men knew that the warlike Duke of Normandy would not be likely to forget the promise, and that trouble might come to England from over the sea.

Harold, then, they not only regarded as their present ruler, but as their future king, and as the national leader and champion. Edward had no children. The royal house was extinct save for Edward the Atheling, who, like the present king, had lived all his life abroad, and could have no sympathy with Englishmen. There being, then, no one of the royal house available, who but Harold, the head of the great house of Godwin, the earl of the West Saxons, the virtual ruler of England, could be chosen? The English kings, although generally selected from the royal house, ruled rather by the election of the people as declared by their representatives in the Witan than by their hereditary right. The prince next in succession by blood might, at the death of the sovereign, be called king, but he was not really a monarch until elected by the Witan and formally consecrated.

It had been nine months after he had been acclaimed to the throne by the people of London that King Edward had been elected king by the Witan, and formally enthroned. Thus, then, the fact that Harold did not belong to the royal family mattered but little in the eyes of Englishmen. To them

belonged the right of choosing their own monarch, and if they chose him, who was to say them nay?

Wulf felt uncomfortable as he followed the stately figure into the inner room, but he faced the Earl as the door closed behind him with as fearless a look as that with which he had stood before the haughty prelate of London. A slight smile played upon Harold's face as he looked down upon the boy.

"You are a troublesome varlet, Wulf, and the Lord Bishop has been making serious complaint of you to the king. He says that you brawled with his page, Walter Fitz-Urse; that you used insolent words against his countrymen; and that you even withstood himself. What have you to say to this?"

"The brawling was on the part of the bishop's page and not of mine, my lord. I was running out to carry the message with which you charged me to Ernulf of Dover when I ran against Fitz-Urse. That was not my fault, but a pure mischance, nevertheless I expressed my regret in fitting terms. Instead of accepting them, he spoke insolently, talked of chastising me, and put his hand on the hilt of his dagger. Then, my lord, I grew angry too. Why should I, the page of Earl Harold, submit to be thus contemptuously spoken to by this young Norman, who is but the page of an upstart bishop, and whom, if your lordship will give permission, I would right willingly fight, with swords or any other weapons. Doubtless, in my anger, I did not speak respectfully of Walter's countrymen, and for this I am sorry, since it has been the ground of complaint and of trouble to you."

"In fact, Wulf, you spoke as a quarrelsome boy and not as the page of one who has the cares of this kingdom on his shoulders, and whose great desire is to keep peace between all parties," the earl put in gravely.

For the first time Wulf hung his head:

"I was wrong, my lord."

"You were wrong, Wulf; it is not good always to say what we think; and you, as my page, should bear in mind that here at court it behoves you to behave and to speak not as a headstrong boy, but as one whose words may, rightly or wrongly, be considered as an echo of those you may have heard from me. And now to the third charge, that you withstood the prelate; a matter that, in the king's eyes, is a very serious one."

"The bishop would give ear to nought I had to say. He listened to his own page's account and not to mine, and when I said in my defence that though I did use the words about the Normans, I did so merely as one boy quarrelling with the other, he said I ought to have my ears slit. Surely, my lord, a free-born thane is not to be spoken to even by a Norman bishop as if he were a Norman serf. I only replied that before there was any slitting of ears your lordship would have a say in the matter. So far, I admit, I did withstand the bishop, and I see not how I could have made other reply."

"It would have been better to have held your peace altogether, Wulf."

"It would, my lord, but it would also surely have been better had the bishop abstained from talking about slitting ears."

"That would have been better also, but two wrongs do not make a right. I was present when the bishop made his complaint, and upon my inquiring more into the matter, his version was somewhat similar to yours. I then pointed out to him that if holy bishops lost their tempers and used threats that were beyond their power to carry into effect, they must not be too severe upon boys who forget the respect due to their office. Nevertheless, I admitted that you were wrong, and I promised the king, who was perhaps more disturbed by this incident than there was any occasion for, that I would take you to task seriously, and that to avoid any further brawl between you and young

Fitz-Urse, you should for a time be sent away from court. I did this on the agreement that the bishop should, on his part, admonish Walter Fitz-Urse against discourteous behaviour and unseemly brawling, and had I known that he had put his hand on his dagger, I would have gone further. Have you any witnesses that he did so?"

"Yes, my lord; I saw the smith Ulred among those standing by, and doubtless he would see the action."

"That is well," Harold said. "I shall acquaint the bishop with the fact when I tell him that I have ordered you to leave for your estate at Steyning, and that if his page denies it, I have witnesses to prove the truth of your assertions. I think in that case he will be glad to drop the matter, for were I to mention the fact to the king, he, who has a horror of the drawing of weapons, would order Walter Fitz-Urse to be sent back to Normandy. So your exile is not likely to be of long duration. You understand, Wulf, that I am not seriously angered with you in this matter. You are but a boy, and one cannot expect that you will behave as a prudent man; but remember, lad, even a boy's words may do mischief, especially when placed as you are. There may come a time when you shall show by deeds and not by words your feelings against the Normans, but till then bear yourself prudently. We Saxons are over given to hasty words, and this is a fault. I myself, as all men know, have no love for the Normans, but no one has heard me speak against them. The king loves them, as is but natural, seeing that he was brought up amongst them, and I have not withstood his wishes in the matter, trying only that a certain amount of preferment in the land should be bestowed upon those who are its owners and not strangers to it and its tongue. You will ride this afternoon for Steyning, Wulf, but I hope it will not be long before you are back again. If I had my own way in the matter, I should think that sufficient had already been said and done in so trifling a matter as a boys' quarrel; but as it has been brought before our king by a

bishop, it is in the king's eyes a serious business, for assuredly he himself would have borne a reproof from William of London more meekly than you did, and having therefore become a church matter, it is altogether beyond my power to interfere. At any rate, a short sojourn on your estate will do you no harm; it is sometime since you were there, and it is a good thing that the lord of the soil should be well known by those over whom he is placed."

Wulf bowed deeply and withdrew. The prospect of a visit for a few weeks or even months to Steyning was not a terrible one. It was some years since he had stayed there for any time. He had been two years at Waltham, and since his father's death had been for the most part with Harold, and the thought of an unrestricted life and of spending his time as he chose, hunting and hawking, and going about among his tenants, was by no means unpleasant. He was quite satisfied that Harold was not seriously angered with him, and for anything else he cared little.

As he understood that his duties as a page were at present at an end, he thought he would first call upon Ulred the smith, to ask him if he had seen Walter Fitz-Urse handle his dagger, and also to tell Osgod that he was going away for a time. He found the smith at work.

"Good morning, Master Wulf; though this is not the first time I have seen you today, for I was at hand when you had that quarrel with the Norman page."

"Yes, I caught sight of your face, Ulred. It was about that I have come to you. The bishop has made complaint against me to the king, and Earl Harold has ordered me to go down to Steyning for a time. Of course I acted wrongly in speaking as I did to the bishop, but so far as Walter Fitz-Urse is concerned I maintain that I did no wrong. I told my lord as much, and that the Norman put hand upon his dagger. The earl said that if I could prove that it would benefit my case. I told him that I had seen you close by, but that I did not know whether you saw the page do it."

"Assuredly I did," the smith replied, "and had my cudgel in readiness to tap him on the wrist if he had drawn his dagger. I would testify the same before King Edward himself."

"Thank you, Ulred, I will tell my lord so."

"I am sorry you are to be sent away from court. That is a bad job, Master Wulf, and Osgod here will miss you greatly."

"That shall I," the lad said. "Could you not take me down with you, young master? You could teach me there how to comport myself as your squire, so that when the time comes that you need one, I should know my duties. Besides, you could practise on me with sword and battle-axe."

"I could not do much in the way of teaching you, Osgod, seeing as yet I am myself but a learner, but I should be glad, in truth, to have you with me, and it would be good for me to keep up my practice in arms. I shall feel almost like a stranger there, and should like to have one I know with me. I could ask Earl Harold to let me have a horse for you from his stables, where he has two or three score doing nothing."

"With your favour, sir, I would rather trust to my own feet. I am a stout walker, and though I shall not be able to keep up with you, I think that each night I can get to the hostelrie where you may put up; but, if not, it matters little, I can make my way after you and join you there—that is, if my father will give me permission to go."

"You may as well go sooner as later," the smith said. "Since you have taken into your head that you will be Master Wulf's man, I see not that it will benefit you remaining in the forge. You know enough now to mend a broken rivet and to do such repairs to helm and armour as may be needed on an expedition; therefore, if the young thane is minded to take you I have naught to say against it."

"Then so shall it be," Wulf said, "I shall see my Lord Harold before I start, and will tell him that you are minded to be

my man, and that I am minded so to take you. He will not object, I am sure, but it were best to ask him, since, when I return to court, I shall have you about me."

"When do you start, Master Wulf?"

"I am ordered to go to-day; therefore, as soon as I have seen the earl again I shall be off."

"Where will you sleep to-night?"

"I shall ride to Guildford this afternoon."

"Then you had better lay aside your hammer at once, Osgod," the smith said, "and don fresh clothes, and make your best suit into a bundle and start without delay; it is but ten o'clock, and you may be at Guildford before sunset. 'Tis but thirty miles, and eight hours' walking will take you there. If the young thane tells you that Lord Harold makes objection to his taking you, you can turn your face backward to-morrow and no harm will be done."

"I shall overtake you before you are half-way, Osgod, and can then take you up behind me on my horse; and now I will go back to the palace. I may have to wait some time before I can see Earl Harold. From sunrise to sunset he has but a few moments to himself, and I shall have to watch my time to get a word with him."

It was not, indeed, until two o'clock in the afternoon that Wulf had a chance of speaking to the duke. Then, seeing that he was for the moment alone, he entered the room and stood with bowed head waiting for Harold to address him.

"So you have come to say good-bye, Wulf," the latter said kindly; "it is best so, boy. A time in the country will do you good, and there will be much for you to do down there. I have ordered two of my men to be in readiness to mount and ride with you, for I would not that you should go unattended. One of them will bear a message from me and a letter under my hand to the steward, and will tell him that although you will, of course, remain as my ward until you come of age, you are in all respects to be treated as if you were already my sworn man, and thane. It would be

well if you could gather among your tenants twenty stout men as house-carls. The steward is ordered to pay to you whatever moneys you may require, and to account for them to me when he sends me in his checkers. These house-carls will, of course, be paid. There must be ample store of armour at Steyning for them, for your father was followed by forty house-carls when he went with me to the Welsh wars. One of the men who goes with you is a stout man-at-arms and is one of my own house-carls; he will remain with you and will instruct your men in arms and teach them to fight shoulder to shoulder. There may be bad times ere long, and it is upon trained troops and not upon hasty levies that we must most depend. In time I trust you will be able to place fifty such men in the field, but at present twenty will suffice. Have you aught to say to me before you go?"

"Yes, my lord; first, to thank you for your kindness, and to say that I will carry out your instructions; secondly, to tell you that Ulred the smith saw Walter Fitz-Urse handle his dagger, and was standing ready to knock it from his hand did he draw it. Lastly, that Ulred's son Osgod, who is a stout lad a year older than myself, and for his age well accustomed to arms, desires to be sworn as my man and to serve me in hall and in field. I like him much and have almost daily practised with him in arms, and I should be glad to have him with me if you see no objection."

"Not at all, Wulf; it is well that a man should have at his side one in whom he can altogether trust, be he of gentle blood or simple man-at-arms."

"Then I may take him down with me, my lord?"

"Yes, if it pleases you. Can he ride?"

"Not as yet, my lord, I will see that he is instructed down at Steyning. He started to walk this morning, understanding that if you refused him permission to be my man he would at once return. We shall overtake him on the road."

"Bid one of your escort take him up behind," the earl said, "I like his spirit. See that he is fittingly apparelled. You shall hear from me ere long."

Half an hour later Wulf mounted, and with his two followers rode from Westminster.

Chapter 2 - COUNTRY LIFE.

Far from being depressed, Wulf felt his spirits rise as he rode away on his banishment from court, for instead of feeling it a disgrace he regarded it as a step forward in life. Earl Harold could certainly, had he been so inclined, have smoothed down the angry prelate, and could have retained him at court; but by the way he had spoken, Wulf was convinced that the earl let him go because he thought that it was good for him to be away. For four years he had been under tutelage, first at Waltham, and then at the court. In the last position his life had indeed been a pleasant one, for as one of Harold's pages he had mixed with all the noble youths of the court, and had had a place at every festive gathering. Still, he had been but a page, and treated as a boy. Now he was to go forth, and to learn his duties as his father's successor.

Harold's steward, who had since the thane's death acted as the earl's agent in the management of the estate, would instruct him doubtless in his civil duties, while the soldier who rode behind him would teach him how to lead men in battle, and how to make the fighting force of the estate efficient. Beyond these duties his time would be his own. He would have responsibilities, but they would be the responsibilities of a thane towards his tenants, and not of a page towards his master. He was going away a boy, but if it pleased Harold that he should remain away for two years he would return a thane. A young one, indeed, but one who had learned the duties of his station, and who, if needs be, could take his place in the field of battle at the head of his followers. For, even putting aside the Normans, from whom the earl seemed to think the greatest danger would come, there was never any long cessation of fighting in England.

There were the Welsh, who were always turbulent; the Danes of Northumbria, who were still a distinct people, although throughout the rest of England their identity was fast being merged into that of the Saxons. There were the Norsemen, still ready to take every opportunity of interfering in the affairs of England, or, if none offered, to plunder and harry the coast. There were the earls of Mercia, who bore no great love to the house of Godwin, and who resented the ascendancy of the West Saxons. Lastly, there was Harold's brother Tostig, a fiery and turbulent noble, now Earl of Northumbria, who was jealous of Harold, ever ready to join in plots, and in close alliance with Norway already; he had several times withstood the royal authority, and would assuredly again become a fomentor of trouble should he see a favourable opportunity. At the king's death, if not before, that opportunity would be sure to present itself. Harold would be certainly chosen king by the people of London and by the West Saxons, but almost as certainly would his claim be disputed by the earls of Mercia on one hand, and by Tostig and the Danes on the other. Wulf was sure, therefore, that the work spent in preparing his tenants to take the field when called upon to do so, would not be wasted.

Full of these thoughts he rode for some miles from Westminster without addressing himself to the two men behind him; then, bethinking him that these were trusted followers of the earl, and had been specially told off by him to accompany and stay with him, he called them up to his side. Wulf had donned a riding suit instead of court attire, which, in deference to the king's partiality for the Normans, was, even among the staunchest opposers of the foreigners, a compromise between Saxon and Norman fashions. He now wore a tunic of a bright green cloth, girded in at the waist and reaching only to the knee. Over this was worn a garment closely resembling the Roman toga, though somewhat less ample. The folds in front fell

below the waist, but it was looped up at each shoulder by a brooch, leaving the arms bare. His legs were clad in tightly-fitting trousers, and his feet in somewhat high shoes. On his head he wore a cap in shape closely resembling the Phrygian bonnet. He was armed with a dagger, and a short sword, which hung by a leather strap, two or three inches long, from his belt. The outer garment had a hood which could in bad weather be drawn over the head.

The man who was the bearer of Harold's orders to the steward wore a civilian dress, not unlike that of Wulf's. He occupied the position of a confidential scribe to Harold. The other wore the garb of a soldier. He was clothed from head to foot in a tight fitting leather suit, upon which were sewn iron rings overlapping each other, and strongly resembling in appearance the chain-armour of later days. His casque, with a curtain of leather similarly covered and affording a protection to the neck, cheeks, and throat, hung from his saddle-bow, and he wore a cap with a long projecting peak, while a cloak was thrown over his shoulders and fell almost to his feet.

"I am afraid you will find it but dull time with me, Leof," Wulf said as they came up abreast of him, "for the earl says that he has charged you to remain with me at Steyning."

"I shall not be sorry for that," the soldier said bluntly, "for I shall be right glad to be away from these Normans who fill every place at court and swagger there as if Englishmen were but dirt under their feet. Moreover, I love not London nor its ways, and shall be glad to be down again among honest country folk, though I would still rather be following my lord the earl in the field."

"And you, Master Gurth, will your stay down at Steyning be a long one?"

"No, indeed. I have but to bear my master's wishes and instructions to the steward, and to stay for a few days to see that they are carried out according to his desires. I am not like Leof, for I prefer life in London, where one meets

with learned monks and others, can obtain sometimes the use of a choice manuscript, and can hear the news from beyond the seas, whereas in the country there is nought to talk about save beeves and sheep. I like the journey well enough, though I would that the animal I bestrode were more gentle in his paces. He has for the last half-hour been fretting on the rein to place himself by the side of yours. Horses are well enough for nobles and fighting men, but for a peaceful scrivener like myself a chair makes a far more comfortable seat."

The soldier gave a contemptuous grunt, and Wulf laughed. "It is well that we have not all the same tastes, but for my part a seat in a chair tires me more than one in a saddle, and I am never more happy than when galloping briskly along," and he shook the reins, a signal which the horse had been expecting for a considerable time, and at once responded to by breaking into a canter.

"Stay you, I pray, Master Wulf," the scrivener cried in great tribulation as his horse followed the example of its companion. "Even if the animal does not break my neck he will jolt the life out of me. I pray you curb him in if you would not see me prone in the dust; and if I am disabled, who is to carry the earl's message to the steward?"

Wulf reined in his horse. "Pardon me, good Gurth. I had forgotten that you are not accustomed to journey on horseback. I was scarce conscious, indeed, that I touched my horse, but he is used to travel more rapidly, and was so eager to be off at the slightest hint that I was willing that he should do so. We will try and journey soberly for the rest of the distance."

Osgod was overtaken, plodding steadily along the road, fifteen miles from town. Leof took him up on his horse, and they reached Guildford just as the sun was setting. The inn, which stood in the principal street of the town, was a low building built with a massive framework filled in with bricks. The ground-floor was occupied by a single room. At

one end was the great fireplace where, over a pile of blazing logs, were hung many cauldrons and pots. Round the room ran a raised bench some six feet wide on which the guests disposed themselves for sleep at night; rough tables and benches occupied the rest of the room. Some twenty or thirty travellers were seated at these. Few were eating, but the greater portion had horns of beer or mead before them. As Wulf and his companions entered, after giving over their horses to one of the helpers, the host, seeing by his attire that he was of condition above the ordinary, came forward and led him to the end of the room nearest the fire, where the floor was raised a foot and a half above the general level, forming a sort of dais where travellers of distinction could take their meals apart from the rest of the guests. Leof was now spokesman.

"We will have supper, and of your best, master host, for we have ridden from London. We are in the service of Earl Harold, and are riding with this young thane, Wulf of Steyning."

The name of Earl Harold was sufficient to gain for them the best attentions of their host, and in twenty minutes supper was served, consisting of trout broiled over the fire, swine's flesh, and a stew of fowls and smoked bacon flavoured with herbs. Wulf took the head of the table, and the other three sat a short distance below him. The dishes were handed round, and each with his dagger cut off his portion and ate it on his wooden platter with the assistance of dagger and fingers only, for the utility of forks was at that time a matter undreamt of. After the meal was over, the host brought a ewer of water with a napkin, and each dipped his fingers into the water, an operation necessary even for the most dainty feeder. Presently a glee singer came in, and for an hour amused the guests with songs, for the most part of a patriotic character.

Wulf was then conducted by the host to a small chamber upstairs, where there was the luxury of a bed stuffed with

straw. The rest of the travellers, including Wulf's companions, merely wrapped themselves in their cloaks and lay down on the raised bench which ran round the room.

On the afternoon of the third day the party arrived at Steyning. It was four years since Wulf had been at home, and he gave a shout of pleasure as his eye fell on the long low house with its background of trees, and touching his horse with his heel he left his companions behind and galloped towards the door. An old servitor came out.

"Why, Cedric, do you not know me? I am Wulf, whom you first taught to play single-stick and to draw a bow."

"Why, surely it is my young master," Cedric said, taking the hand that Wulf held out to him and placing it to his lips; "this is a glad day indeed for us all. We have longed sorely for a sight of you, for though I say nought against Master Egbert the steward, who is well liked by all, it is not the same as having our lord with us. You have come to stay, I trust."

"For a time at any rate, Cedric. Earl Harold wishes me to learn my duties as a thane and to fit myself to lead my people in the field if it be necessary."

"I trust that it never will be so," Cedric said, "but as we fought under your father so will we all be ready to fight under you should it be needful. The men of Steyning were never backward when there was fighting to be done, and in my young days there was no lack of that, though we have had quiet times since King Edward came to the throne."

The house was not built for the purpose of resistance, for, unlike the Normans, the Saxons did not deem it necessary to convert their houses into castles. It was, however, massively framed, the windows on the ground-floor were barred, the door was strong and solid, and after nightfall none could come in or go out without the knowledge and consent of the master. Wulf's companions came up just as the steward himself appeared at the door. He knew both

Gurth and Leof, having himself been in the service of Harold before being deputed by him to manage the estates of Steyning during the earl's guardianship of its thane.

"The earl sends his greetings to you, Egbert," Gurth said, and he has sent us hither with the young thane, who, as the letter I bring from the earl will inform you, has come down to take up his position as lord here, and to learn from you all things connected with his estate."

"Welcome to Steyning, thane," the steward said, doffing his cap; "it is well that you should be here. I have done my best to carry out the earl's commands to keep all things in readiness for your coming, and to be just and fair to the tenants, seeing that they pay their dues, and yet not pressing too hardly upon them if things go not well with them; but it is always best that the master should be in his own place, and right willingly do I give over my authority to you."

"The authority has been in good hands, I know well," Wulf said, "and right heartily do I thank you for having so well filled my place; but I would not take up my thaneship as yet I am but a boy, and have to learn my duties from you, and shall account myself but as your pupil. I know something of the ways of court, but nothing at all of those of the country, and it will be long before I am fit to take the control of things into my own hands."

They had by this time entered the great hall which formed the common room of the establishment. Its arrangement was similar to that of the room at the inn, with its raised dais for the master, his family, and guests, while the rest of the room was devoted to the retainers and servants. The cooking, however, was carried on in a room apart. There were two fireplaces, one upon the dais and the other in the body of the hall. On the walls hung trophies of the chase and arms of all sorts. The wooden roof was supported by massive beams, and with the exception of the trophies on the walls there was no attempt at decoration of any kind.

During the residence of the family at the house, however, the hangings of tapestry, the work of generations of dames of Steyning, their daughters and maids, hung upon the walls round the dais.

The news quickly spread of the arrival of the young thane, and a score of men and eight or ten women and maids flocked into the hall to welcome him, and as he stood on the dais each in turn came forward to kiss his hand and salute him.

"I think my first order must be," he said to the steward, "that a cask of your best ale be broached."

"That shall be done at once," Egbert replied; "there is never a lack of drink here, but the best is none too good for the occasion. And who is this youth with you?" he went on when he had given the necessary orders, pointing to Osgod, who was standing somewhat shyly apart.

"He is my friend, and is going to be my body attendant and squire," Wulf said. "He, like myself, knows nothing as yet of his duties, but that he will be faithful and trusty I know full well, and the earl himself said that I did wisely to bring him with me."

"I will myself instruct him in his duties," Egbert said, "which indeed are not hard to learn by one of willing mind. He will stand behind you at table, will hand you your cup and take your orders. In the old times it would have been his duty to see that you were not struck down by a traitorous blow while you drank, but those days are passed. When in the field he will carry your helmet till you need to put it on; will keep close to you in the fight and guard you with his shield from arrows, and with his sword from attacks from behind; he will carry your banner, and see that as long as he has strength to hold it, it floats fairly out as a rallying point for your men. In the field indeed his duties are numerous, but at home in peace, beyond seeing that your arms are bright and clean, and that your orders are carried out properly, he will have but little to do. It is well

that you brought him with you, for otherwise you would have had to choose one of the sons of your tenants, and the choice would have been a difficult one, for each would have desired the honour, and whichever you chose there would have been sore jealousy among the others."

The next day there was a great gathering in the hall. The whole of the tenants attended, and took the oath to be Wulf's men, as they had been those of his father, to obey his orders, and to follow him in the field with the due number of men according to the size of their holdings; while Wulf on his part swore to protect them from all wrong and oppression, to be a just master, calling upon them only for such service as he was entitled to demand, and exacting no feus or payments beyond those customary. A bullock had been killed, and after the ceremony was over all present sat down to a banquet at which much ale was drunk and feasting went on till nightfall.

The next morning Wulf, accompanied by Leof and Egbert, rode round the estate, choosing among the sons of the tenants thirty stout young men willing to enrol themselves as house-carls, receiving a regular rate of pay, and ready at all times to give service under arms, and to remain in the field as long as they might be required, whereas the general levy could only be kept under arms for a limited time. He had already gone into the matter with Leof, who pointed out that, as at present he had no wish to keep up any show or to have a body of armed men in the house, it would suffice if the men were exercised every day for a month, and after that merely practised with sword and battle-axe for two or three hours once a week. On these terms he had no difficulty in obtaining considerably more than the number he asked for, and finally fifty men were enrolled.

For those carls helmets were bought and coats of ringed armour made, and for a month they exercised daily. Of manoeuvring there was little indeed. The Saxons and Danes

alike fought in line, with but room enough between them to swing their battle-axes. Each carried a spear as well as an axe, and when repelling the assault of an enemy closed up so that their shields well-nigh touched each other. Their exercise was generally either to engage in combats between chosen pairs, or, dividing into two parties, to fight line against line with blunted poles for spears and with stout cudgels for axes. Leof in these combats acted as judge, decided which side had gained the victory, praised the skilful, and chided the careless and sluggish. He gave lessons in the use of the sword and battle-axe to Wulf and Osgod, sometimes pitting them against each other, sometimes fighting himself against Wulf, and teaching Osgod how to assist his master by covering him with his shield.

Sometimes he would order three or four of the men to shoot with blunted arrows at Wulf, whom he taught to catch them on his shield or to sever the shafts with a blow of his sword, while Osgod standing by helped to cover him when two or three arrows flew at him together. This was a daily exercise, and even after the month's regular work was over some of the men came up every day to shoot, until Wulf had attained such coolness and skill that he could in the great majority of cases cut the shafts in two with his sword.

But the whole day was by no means given up to warlike exercises. Wulf rode out with the steward inspecting the houses and farms, learning what there was to be learned of the rude processes of agriculture, investigating the complaints of the depredations committed by errant herds of swine or by neighbours' cattle and sheep, seeing what was required in the repairs of farmhouses, and learning from Egbert to discriminate between those who were unable to pay their dues owing to misfortune, illness, or murrain among the animals, and those whose Josses were due to their own sloth or carelessness. Upon these visits,