

NOVEMBER 20, 1967ROBERT W. ELDER

Hearken now to this heroic tale we here unfold, hoary of age, 'tis more than nine centuries old, of three mighty warriors, the greatest of their day, who strive for England's crown.

Harold, son of Godwin, England's leader even during Edward's reign, is first upon the scene. Then with similar name comes Harold Sigurdsson, bold viking from Norway's northern strand, whose strong arm was felt even in far off Byzantine land. Last of the three is William, Normandy's warlike Duke, strong in rule, though bastard by birth, an acknowledged leader of men.

The struggle of these titans for advantage is now our short tale to tell. We beg your patience and imaginative be, to conjure up courts and armed men in fullsome panoply.

Let us now to England's royal palace and Edward's chamberroom; the Confessor on his death bed lies amid courtiers all agloom. At his feet mourns the noble Queen who to him no heir has given, for lack of which their country with brutish arms will soon be riven. There beside the couch watchfully wait Archbishop Stigand, Earl Harold Godwinsson, and others of the court. But low it appears pious Edward is about to speak: "Eternal Father, to whom I commit my soul, if those matters so lately revealed by dream to me, are truly from Thee spoken, I beseech you for strength these mysterious tidings to relate. Yet if they be but mere phantasy let me to these raging fevers succumb and prompt not my troubled tongue".

Then to his king spoke the Archbishop: "Noble Edward, you spoke of a vision just now. Sometimes these things show us God's will, Our uneasy fears they yet may still".

To the prelate Edward replied: "In my feverish sleep there came to me two monks, who were well known from long years spent in Normandy. Their message this: that since all those who have reached the highest rank in this our realm, earls, bishops and abbots all, are but ministers of hell, therefore Almighty God has seen fit to decree that this my kingdom scourged will be,

and within one year and one day from the date that I expire, foul fiends will harry all the land with bloody sword and searing fire. Then said I to these monks - 'Pray permit me to my people these sad predictions urgently to state. Mayhap if these sinners repentance timely make, our Father will forgive and not them so foresake.' 'Not so, most saintly king', the twain did reply, 'your subjects in His Court have been tried, God's mercy to them is now denied.'"

Then spake Stigand to Harold: "Brave Earl, by this be not concerned. Edward is sore beset by deadly ills and venerable age, his end is now sure to come, as these childish babblings do presage".

Addressing his weeping wife, Edward speaks: "Good my Queen be not filled with such sorrowing cry. May the Holy Father of us all be gracious unto you for the tender and vigilant devotion which you have shown unto me. And Harold, give me now your hand - this queenly woman, your sister, and all the kingdom I commend unto your charge."

The Confessor's last earthly words were spoken, his cheeks flushed pink, then paled, his chaste life ended.

So Edward dies, and with him ends the ancient line of Cerdic, Alfred, Athelstan, and Edgar to sit on England's Throne. The king is dead, but who is now the king? The voices of the Witenagamot, with one accord do ring: "It is Harold, son of Godwin, to whom our knees will bend". The noble wisemen in full assembly thus agree, that England's strongest man their monarch now will be.

As swiftly as the bird flies before the storm, the news of coronation across the channel speeds. Duke William listens, and with darkening face and lowering eye he vows this matter to set aright:

"Almost fifteen years have passed since my kinsman Edward, who had no heir him to succeed, promised to me his crown. This selfsame Harold, who now usurps the throne, was ship wrecked upon my shore a short two years ago. From those who imprisoned and asked for ransom, I did rescue him. Then by his solemn oath, made

upon saintly bones, my right to be England's king he pledged to advance. False and perjured is this ungrateful knave. Before this year is out, foresworn Harold I'll tumble down, conquer the land and seize the crown. But first I'll to Rome for Holy Church's assured blessing upon my rightful cause. England's priests have ever independent been, ignoring and disobeying Mother Church's sacred laws. I'll vow that these abuses I'll bring to a certain end, and with tale of Harold's perjury the Holy ear I'll bend. So, twixt power temporal and spiritual, my ambition will succeed, for the sacred blessed banner my conquering armies soon will lead".

From England's shore, and while yet during Edward's reign, banished was the Earl Tostig, brother of Harold Godwinsson, and equal in warlike fame. Proud, intemperate and ambitious was this earl of the King's own blood. He blamed his royal brother for his exile from English soil. To regain his lost earldom was now his earnest toil. Hied he then to Norway's great Harald, most renowned warrior of all; strong, brave, and battle tested, he was said to be seven feet tall. Full well listened this son of Sigurd to Tostig's skilled argument, of the weakness of a divided England and the bright diadem to pluck from the firmament.

Ye waves crash upon the shore and other rude elements assault the land. Oh England, before the winter comes, mortal foes will test your warrior band.

From fenland to moorland throughout the length and breadth of Harold's realm, rumors true and half true abound - the Norman threat their country to o'erwhelm. A fiery star, with three pronged tail, flashes through the skies, making darkness light. The peasants fill the air with awestruck cries, they are so afright. Some think this hairy star to be a dragon fire. Others say 'tis an omen of things to come most dire.

King Harold, naught dismayed, gathers round his housecarls true. The noble thegns and shire-levies he groups to form the fyrd.

Throughout the months this army trains, strong ships are built. - All upon his royal word.

Summer's green is ready to turn to autumn's

brown, and still the seaward watch is vain. The long awaited Normans are impeded by Northern winds; their eager preparations blunted by the raging main.

Then Harold, his supplies fast dwindling, dismisses the militia and recalls the channel fleet to shore. Crops are ripe and peasant soldiers must reap, he cannot hold them more.

From out of the North comes an urgent call for help. The Norse host has landed on Northumbria's unsuspecting soil, and with bloody weapons harvests there another kind of store.

Then, no hesitation Harold makes, but summons thegn, housecarl, and militiaman to repel their country's foe. With haste and sweat, through field and fen, they traverse the many leagues to York. So swift is their march that no news of their presence reaches Norway's Harald's camp.

Yet the tidings that come from York are dolorous indeed - the Northern English forces have been decisively defeated at Fulford Gate - to the invader they do accede, and on the morrow, by order of conquering foe, they are to repair to Stamford Bridge, eight miles east, to yield up hostages and swear oaths of loyalty.

The morning mists had blown on that appointed day, and the Norsemen now await the suppliant English there. To his allied Scottish King, Harald Hardrada speaks: "Come Malcolm - your melancholy visage does no credit to our victories lately won. Are all Scots so - to look so dour when enemies from them run?"

To which Malcolm did reply: "Not so, noble laird. It is a strange foreboding that fills my breast. Do you not remember your dream to me related before we sailed from Scapa's Flow? Of how in your sleep you spoke to your sainted brother Oalf, dead these many years, who with dread prediction foretold your bloody end - that upon the corpse of Norway, the crow, the witch wife's steed, would feed?"

Then spake Harald in admonishing tone: "Brave Scot, whose bloody axe has sped many a Saxon to his doom, let not womanly dreams within your breast have room.

These Northern English we routed at Fulford's Gate - their hostages and lendersmen we here at Stamford Bridge await".

With warning word, a brooding Tostig speaks to Norway's king: "Harald Sigurdsson, I trust not these Northumbrians. 'Twas they, backed by my perjured brother Harold, who from these shores exiled me. But for their false claims, I the Earl here would be. Your ancient right to the throne of England have I advanced - that you our rightful monarch are, and so it was ordained by treaty 'twixt Harthacanute, our former king, and Magnus, whose throne you now enhance. With the Scot I do agree - Harald, hard of counsel, beware of treachery".

Heartily laughed Norway's giant: "Still your fears. These pledges from York we'll soon accept, secure the countryside, and then be on our way. Our dragon ships we'll sail to the south, put the land to the torch, and summon usurping Harold to the fray".

A billowing cloud of dust to the west appears, and the steady drum of hooves is heard. To all the question is: would hostages come in so great a force?

Then spake Tostig to his lord: "Those men of York seem more warlike than conquered, my liege. Above their heads pennons wave and the sun upon their arms does shine. What's this? They do bear my brother Harold's battle flags. The Dragon of Wessex and Warrior of Gold upon those banners gleam".

With surprise, Norway makes reply: "And Harold here? We thought he guarded the southern shore 'gainst the Norman bastard's threat. No matter - he rushes headlong to his fate. His crown I'll wear before this day is done, and through our halls skalds will sagas sing of the battle that here was won".

Then with cautious voice the Scot does speak: "Proud Norway, our forces are now divided by Derwent's stream. Our men not fully armed. We should in expedient haste, to our longboats retreat, unite with Eystein Orre's men, and there the English in full array prepare to meet".

And answer made bold Harald: "What - Norsemen

from Saxons weakly flee? No - here we make our stand and England's king we'll be. Assemble the warriors in the shielded wall upon that hilly rise. We'll soon see who lives or dies. Before my banner, The Landraviger, we'll heap a mound of bloody bodies there".

Then drew near a score of mounted Englishmen to parley with the foe, and Tostig, given leave by Sigurdsson because he knew their tongue, went boldly to them to entertain their purpose. The English leader's first words were these: "Tostig, I bring you greetings from your brother Harold. He bids me relate to you this generous offer - that if you foresake your present alliance and allegiance with England make, you shall be restored as Earl here and joint ruler be throughout one third of the realm".

Tostig's only reply was a question: "And what shall King Harald Sigurdsson have?"

The Englishman, straightening in his saddle said: "Seven feet of English ground, or as much more as he may be taller than other men".

Then tersely spake the Earl: "Go tell your King this offer I do now refuse. I'll not lightly my pledge to Norway so abuse". And, so saying, Tostig returns to the Viking lines to report to Harald Sigurdsson all that had just transpired. Scornfully Hardrada asks: "Who was this churlish knave who thus would speak and beg us destruction upon his head to wreak?"

With quiet reply Tostig answering said: "It is my brother Harold".

Then with anger Norway's leader dries: "Now did we miss our chance. Without Harold the Saxon host would be lost. And yet I do admire that man. That Harold of yours be not so great of frame, but he does sit his horse right royal".

Now Scotland's Malcolm hoarsely shouts: "Here come the English in full assault upon our ranks. Let fleet arrow fly and barbed spear be thrown. Norway's Harald we'll place today upon the throne".

So, England's and Norway's forces clash, sharp

sword on shield and burnished axe on helm do ring. The issue of battle lies oft in doubt as the Saxons their furious power 'gainst the enemy fling. Lo, there's a Norse who defends the bridge alone, tall of body and strong of bone, a true berserker he. His axe he wields so bright that full forty English fall before his might. But see the Saxon who creeps beneath the span, thrusting through the boards his spear to kill that man. Derwent's crossings the English then do gain; not without many foemen on both sides slain.

Now Norway's warriors form solid rings of shields with vows that to the English they ne'er will yield. The outer ring sets spear butts to the ground, while those behind thrust their spears between. Thus a bristly hedge of steel confronts the English force, with keen bowmen inside to speed sharp arrows on their course.

England's men now advance with cries of "Holy Cross" and "God Almighty", and their horsemen swiftly ride the shield wall round and at it javelins hurl. The attackers no headway make against the vaunted Northern host. To fling these invaders into the sea was then the Saxon's vain boast. Fierce Norway's command was to hold the shield wall fast, until aid from their Viking ships was sure to come at last. The Norsemen see the English flee, which is but Harold's stratagem. The berserks thinking their foes cowardly, open their fortress of shields, streaming after them. Swiftly turn England's valiants then, and upon pursuers strike and strike again. Forth from his serried ranks comes Harald Sigurdsson. The mighty Viking, raises his wound scarred arms, and with surging tones cries out: "Here we will stand and here we will die, if die we must. The death-bed, a dog's death, 'tis a coward's true wish; happier we to be swept by the Valkyries from battles remembered when our bones are but dust; Odin will keep us and direct our sword thrusts; with hone sharpened axes we'll slaughter the English and heap their hot corpses in memory of us".

Strongly hews the giant Harald with his brain-biter left and right. Neither helm nor shield, nor mail can withstand him. With mighty rage and bold he slays every mother's son or puts to flight. His towering frame a broad target makes and showers of arrows upon

him rain. Their deadly stings his body rake. The brave King falls and with him Norway's fame. In but short time Tostig, too, will die, his high revenge unsated. Upon the field Norwegians and their allies lie, their power there abated.

Now from the dragon ships comes Eystein Orre leading the last of Norway's men. His forces are all but spent as they arrive upon the field. Courageous they be, but no match for England's valiant force. With true Viking spirit they slay and are slain rather than weakly yield.

England's noble king, the victor's laurels his, to the vanquished is now most gentle. The fallen giant's body to his few remaining warriors is entrusted. Safe conduct to them is given. And so for home the defeated Vikings set their sails, their sorrowing course to take through heavy seas and gales.

Harold Godwinsson's great triumph is but a few days past when comes a breathless horseman with unwelcome news at last. This anxious messenger seeks out the king his tidings to relate: "The Norman Duke has landed at Pevensey, on Sussex's shore, of late. With strong force now harry they the southern countryside, burning the rude thatches, and slaying those who there abide".

And sorrowing Harold muses: "I would to God I had been in the South when William came, and assaulted his forces as they sought to come ashore. But then it pleased The Heavenly King I could not everywhere, be. Oh, Tostig, your brotherly hate may from my crown unloosen me".

Then to his trusted aides, the King slowly turns and says: "What's done, 'tis done and no time is there to think on what might have been. Still, the Viking host we did surprise with a sudden march; mayhap the Norman, too, will taste our steel before his plans are fully laid. We will to London and post haste, nor tarry 'til William in like coin is paid. You, Edwin of Mercia and Northumbria's brave Morkere, patch up your dented arms which have been so valorous here, and follow swiftly as you can our Southern folk to cheer. My lords, know we all, what awful loss we have sustained and how many

here have died, but send now our couriers fast ahead to proclaim the news and summon fresh levies to our side".

Now marched the Saxon force to that last rendezvous on Southern shore. To Harold's banners came those who cherished their warm hearthsides but loved their country more. From Kent, Hertford and Essex, from Suffolk, Surrey and Sussex, came the loyal peasant and thegn. From Huntingdon, Northampton and Buckingham, from Bedford, Cambridge and Nottingham, came Saxon, Angle and Dane. From Lindsey, London and Lincoln, from Hampshire, Gloucester and Worcester, came this warrior strain, albeit most were untested, none were timid nor tame.

But a short while in London spent Harold and that to consolidate his force. Resolved he was to clash with William before the week had run its course. Some tried to dissuade him from this reckless plan, advising different action: "await the arrival of the army from the grateful north, blockade the Normans by sea, and then sally forth".

All unheeding, Harold bade his lords be still: "Our victorious banners lately waived on York's stark battlements, we must southwards hasten, our destiny to fulfill; that peasants be slain and our land be scourged is not our royal will. To protect my subjects and defend our lands is but my bounden duty. In quiet peace, and free from fear, men their soil shall safely till".

Then pressed Harold towards Hastings with all his motley host, and spies were ordered to the Norman Camp to judge what strength and gear the invaders boast. Back they came and related a tale by William's followers told, of how the Duke, slipping when he stepped ashore, fell upon his hands. His soldiers cried out: "An evil omen is here", but William swiftly answered: "By the Splendor of God, I have taken England with both my hands - what is mine is yours as I have promised you!" And hearing, Harold thought: "A nimble mind this bastard has, to turn adversity to his own advantage so". And on they did relate that the opposing host had many mounted men, but that there were more priests than soldiers there. Harold then laughed and said: "you do mistake, 'tis their Norman custom to shave their chins and cut their hair; they are warriors brave enough,

you will see, when the battlefield you both do share".

As the English pushed ever south, there came an emissary from William, one Hughes Maigrot by name, a Monk. His purpose, to convey to Harold the Duke's stern command: either to promptly relinquish to William the usurped seat of majesty, or to submit the matter to the Holy Father for his lawful decree, or, failing these, to determine by single combat which of them the King shall be.

Then replied Harold with anger, ill concealed: "As your master should know, mine is not the choice whether or not I wear the crown. My people chose me their ruler - not to gainsay them was my coronation vow. Neither will I submit to Rome a case prejudged ere now. Nor have I the right, though William knows my skill in arms, to hazard in mortal duel, all England's cities, woods and farms.

Undismayed the Monk in solemn tone continues on: "My gracious lord has instructed me to tell you, Harold, that if you will but abide by your former oath to him, you may rule all land beyond the Humber. But, if you this do refuse, he does call you perjured, and by Papal Bull, you, and all who follow you, are held excommunicate, that destruction now and hellfire later shall surely be your fate".

And many were troubled hearing this threat of hell, 'twas as though each foreheard his own death knell. "Once and for all, let it be known", the rising Harold said, "that this so-called oath made to William was subtly forced from me. Not of my own will, but to secure my freedom, with your Duke's demands I did agree. That this promise, wrested by duress, was made on holy bones, was but another Norman trickery. Sirrah, get you to your base-born lord, and inform him of our swelling rage. He is to leave our realm, quicker than a word, or bear the blame for the war we here will wage".

And when the monk had left, the Earl Gyrth urged his brother Harold in these words: "Your brother Leofwine and I have nothing to William sworn, let us lead the fight, and he will be victorious who has the right". Harold, not persuaded, answering said: "And am I then to cringe in my tent, while others fight for

me? It is not my custom to take the coward's role. On the morrow, before his banners, the English King will be. God send me William's head upon a pointed pole. These Normans slyly try to make theirs a holy cause, with papal pennants flying and prating monks decrying - Sweet Jesu, it would give you pause".

Then brother Leofwine did exclaim: "To the Bastard's barons our lands have been assigned. We have no choice, with honor, but to fight this war. If sue for peace we did and return to York again, 'twould be yet a little while, his appetite would crave more. So now round our campfires sing, and with hearty wassailing, drain our meadhorns dry. Tomorrow we'll be heroes, even though we die".

Both hosts passed the night in fitful, anxious sleep. Thoughts of coming battle and of families far away, troubled peasant and lord alike until the break of day.

The early rays of morn were nowhere to be seen, when in the Norman camp the soldiers heard the holy mass. Quickly they donned their armor and with weapons keen, ready in body and spirit for what might come to pass.

Harold roused his men and grouped them on Senlac Hill, and based on ancient privilege, which was the custom still, he placed the men of Kent upon his army's right, that they might strike first 'gainst the foe in the coming fight. About the King stood the Londoners in the center of the host. 'Twas their right to guard him and there they took their post.

Harold to his soldiers said: "Axe-men, spear-men, put on your armor, be ready, but neither strike nor throw until I give you word. To conquer here we must hold our shield-wall steady".

And there across that verdant valley came on the invader's awesome might; Normans in the middle, Bretons on the left, French and Flemish on the right. Then coming face to face, these armies fill the air with trumpet calls and stirring shouts.

Exhorting his men, Duke William says: "Soldiers,

be brave, we have nowhere to fly, so with courage, we must now conquer or die. Our cause has been blessed, let your arms not rest, until you hear our victorious cry".

From the English ranks comes the repeated yell: "Out, out", which the Normans liken to the barking of a dog. With utter contempt they mark the rude weapons of many of Harold's force, and sneeringly say: "with clubs and stones no Saxon churl will a Norman knight unhorse".

Then rode the minstrel Taillefer to his Duke and said: "A boon, sire, a boon, I do crave for me. Faithful service long have I given thee. That I the first blow in battle do strike, and show these dogs what Norman steel is like".

And the minstrel had his answer from his Duke: "Your boon is granted my brave Taillefer today. Speed your swift horse and deadly lance without delay. Our puissant power will follow you close behind; in deadly grips with foe we'll soon be entwined".

Forward surge the arrogant Normans at the Duke's brisk command, with foot and archers in the fore, the knights bring up the rear. Arrows fall upon the English and havelins on them pour. Shield wall greets the invader's foot with swelling, raging roar.

Now up the slope of Senlac Hill comes Williams's proud knighthood, pressing through lines now thinned to assault Harold's solid force. Their horses slip and stumble in the bloodied, tangling grass; lances crash upon shields of wood, they fail to budge that mass.

Then false rumor swiftly spreads through the Norman host: "Our William is slain - we are undone - flee and save yourself". Pell mell down the hill they went with the Saxons close behind. Harold's order the undisciplined levies failed to mind. Bloodlust and revenge filled these errant peasants then. To keep the shield wall fast was England's hope of victory.

And from another quarter, 'tward his fleeing army rides, their Duke with upraised helm, who rallying cries: "I am alive, and with God's help will conquer

still this realm". And so brave William stems the rout and turns his forces round. The sluggish Saxon foot-soldier, outside his wall of shields, no match can be for mounted knights and thus must yield the ground.

Once again the Normans charge and once again they flee. From the shielded wall sally forth the eager English then. This time the flight was feigned; they fall into the trap. Then horsemen cut the pursuers down 'till all are killed or maimed.

The day wears on and still the Saxon line stands firm. Then William commands his bowmen to arch their shafts on high, to slant upon the foe like winter's icy rain. On many a stout defender death falls from the sky. Harold, too, feels the sting, as one puts out his eye. Wrenching the arrow from his head, he breaks the shaft in twain. Sorely wounded leans he upon his shield as his strength does wane.

Spying the stricken Saxon King, the Normans shout their cry: "God help," and swift as hounds upon the trail, scenting their quarry's blood, they hack their way through ring of steel to where the helpless Harold stood. With lance and sword they stab and slash 'till death does claim the King. The end has come and the English flee to the nearby wood. There in the Andredsweald dead Harold's soldiers gamely fight, but with their leaders slain they give before the Norman might.

Dim dusk has turned to dark before the battle's o'er. William's tent he pitches where waved the royal banner, and the rejoicing Duke and lords strong libations pour, to toast their victory and the fame that there was gained.

That night the Conqueror slept on that battle field, where all his ambitious hopes were so bravely won; and on the morning rose, seeking Harold's body, to bury it as he wished, to forestall a martyrdom. But from the English dead their armor had been stripped, and the last of Harold so gashed that none could recognize. None, save Edith the Swan-Neck, Harold's hand-fast wife, who also sought her lord, and seeking found, the love of all her life.

Though William claimed the body as the victor's right, Gytha, Harold's mother, knelt before him and weeping plead: "Four sons have I lost in this last sad dreadful month. For mercy now I pray, yield to me but mine own. Small joy is there for me, still I would have this be, to inter him in his beloved Waltham Abbey".

Remorselessly, William then answered her: "Perjured was your Harold, he does not merit holy ground. But since while he lived he kept watch upon this shore, here we will bury him, to keep his guard once more".

The grieving woman rose, and spake with flashing eye: "Oh, pitiless Norman, conqueror though you be, listen to this mother's curse I call down on thee: "That you spend your years in fighting for that which now you claim; that your children rise against you, and cruel death be your gain".

The tale is told, of those three titans there is now but one. The crown is William's. England's future a new course will run.

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