

CHAPTER X.

Dunstan; attribution to him of miraculous powers.—His elevation to the primacy.—State of the Anglo-Church.—Cathedrals and Churches.—Provision for the Clergy.—The parish-priest.—Dunstan's reforms.—Edgar.—Extravagant praise of his reign.—His licentiousness and ostentation.—Edgar an instrument in the hands of Dunstan.—Edward; his accession and murder.

It is the duty of the historian, however difficult it may be, to endeavour to represent actions "in sequence, as they were; not in the lump as they are thrown down before us." We use Mr. Carlyle's words when he points out the error, with regard to such men as Cromwell, of "substituting the goal of their career for the course and starting-point of it."* For this reason, whatever might have been the early schemes of ambition floating in the mind of Dunstan, we make no attempt to show that it was a consistent plan of his life to degrade a king, to embitter his existence, to hunt him to the death. But men of Dunstan's vigour of character seize upon accidents to shape their speculations into deeds which shall determine all subsequent action. The indiscretion of the king was the opportunity of the monk. When he dragged Edwy from the ladies' bower to encounter the tumult of the banqueting-hall, the moment had come at which the crafty 'ingener' should put the match to the mine. He risked the chance that he might "hoist on his own petar." He humiliated one who was his enemy; and in that humiliation he destroyed half the danger of the contest into which he foresaw that he must enter.

There is, we conceive, no evidence which more distinctly shows the formidable nature of this contest, and the mode in which it was carried on, than the attribution to Dunstan of miraculous powers. Abbot first, then bishop, then archbishop, he was not to fight against married presbyters and secular canons with the simple weapons of his strong will and his vast ability; but all terrors and seductions of superstition were to be called in, to hallow his cause in the eyes of the people, whether earls or churls. The records of

* "Heroes and Hero-worship."

these things were not inventions of the monastic writers after his time, but were delivered to them upon the evidence of Dunstan's disciples and his contemporary biographer Osberne. There was nothing too extravagant or too impious to be narrated, which might raise Dunstan to the position of an idol, before whom the ignorant Saxon and the half-converted Dane might fall down and prostrate themselves in slavish adoration. His temptations in the cave at Glastonbury, when he assaulted the evil one with the instrument of his trade (even as Luther did with his great instrument, the ink-stand), by tweaking him by the nose with his red-hot tongs, are ludicrous fables adapted only to the coarsest minds. But they awed the peasant as he listened to the wondrous stories in his smoky hovel; and he trembled to know that the triumphant enemy of the devil and of the married priest was the highest in the land. The noble ladies, as they sat round the fire with their embroidery and their spindles, rejoiced that they were not such as the wicked Elgiva; and that they lived at a time so favoured by Heaven as to send down the holy dove to fight upon the head of the great archbishop when he was performing his first mass. The fierce ealdorman hung up his armour when Edgar became king, for he was solemnly told that at Edgar's birth Dunstan heard an angelic voice saying, "Peace to England so long as this child shall reign and our Dunstan survives." Armed with these instruments of imposture, in addition to his own commanding ability—despising probably, in his inmost heart, the artifices of his partisans, but tolerating them as necessary means for the accomplishment of an important end—Dunstan was indisputable governor of the country through the reign of Edgar. The king was still a mere boy when Edwy was removed. He was only thirteen when the land was divided between him and his brother. Dunstan had then returned from his exile, and there was no formidable barrier to the highest exaltation. He first became bishop of Worcester. He was then allowed to hold the see of London at the same time with Worcester. Men of great talent and learning were his devoted supporters. Odo, the fierce primate, in consecrating him to Worcester, named him as archbishop of Canterbury, as if electing his own successor; and averred that he so spoke under the immediate influence of the Holy Ghost. Upon the death of Odo, which happened within two years of that of Edwy, whom Odo had truly murdered, Dunstan accomplished the audacious anticipation.

To understand the position of the Anglo-Church at this remark-

able period—a period which carried its influence onward through five centuries—we must look back very briefly, upon its past history. The first ecclesiastical establishments were of the monastic character. Certain brethren, with a head or bishop, were planted in populous places, and lands were assigned to them for their support. From these houses were teachers sent forth to collect the people, for prayer and for exhortation, around the holy crosses,* or in convenient buildings. Sometimes these buildings were the temples of rough stones where the Saxons had worshipped Thor and Woden within the sacred boundary of a settled district. As the increase and spread of the population became a consequence of the progressive cultivation of the land, the going forth from the monastery of ministers of religion into surrounding districts became inconvenient; and churches were planted, where a daily service was performed by a resident priest. These, too, had lands assigned for their support. In course of time the piety of kings, and nobles, and rich franklins, raised up numerous endowed churches throughout the land; whilst the collegiate establishments, with bishops at their head, increased in proportion. Of the Saxon cathedrals there are no remains which can give us an adequate notion of plan or decoration. There is, however, a description of the cathedral of Canterbury by Edmer, the singer, before it was rebuilt in 1070; which shows that “it was a double apse cathedral, like those of Germany, with lateral entrances, one on the north, the other on the south side. Behind the eastern apse was a circular baptistery erected by Cuthbert, the eleventh archbishop.” This was for the following purposes, according to Edmer: “that baptisms might be celebrated therein; that certain judicial trials that were formerly carried on in the church might be held there; and lastly, that the bodies of the archbishops might therein be buried, thus departing from the ordinary ancient custom of burial beyond the walls of the city.”† There are many fragments of Saxon churches—a tower, a portion of wall, a door, a window; but amidst some controversy, the general belief is, that there is no complete church which can be satisfactorily ascribed to the period before the conquest. The plain round arches which divide the nave from the aisles of St. Michael’s Church, at St. Albans, are

* The existing crosses at Sandbach, in Cheshire, are held to belong to the first age of Christianity in England.

† See Mr. Ferguson’s beautiful “Illustrated Handbook of Architecture,” vol. ii. p. 844.

pronounced to be Saxon. The tower of Earl’s Barton, in Northamptonshire, is held to be undoubtedly Saxon; and it has very remarkable characteristics of the Saxon style. We have also the pictorial representation of a Saxon church, in a miniature accompanying a Pontifical in the Public Library at Rouen; which represents the ceremony of dedication. The form of the church is very curious; and, although the perspective, and the proportions of parts, are altogether false, we see that the towers, the ornamental iron-work of the door, and the cock on the steeple, were much the same, eight or nine hundred years ago, as in recent times.*

The clergy were amply provided for. Tithe, at first a free gift, became established as a right by law. There is unquestionable evidence, however, that the tenth part of the produce was not wholly appropriated to the undivided uses of the churchmen, and the repairs of the church; but that the poor were to be assisted out of the tithe; not as a matter of compassion, but as having a direct claim to one-third of the amount collected. The principle was insisted upon by the ecclesiastical rulers in the seventh century; and it was adopted into the secular law early in the eleventh century, in the reign of Ethelred: “And concerning tithe, the king and his witan have chosen and said, as right it is, that the third part of the tithe which belongs to the church shall go to the reparation of the church, and a second part to the servants of God, and a third part to God’s poor and needy men in thralldom.”† But what we now call the voluntary principle entered very largely into the means of the Saxon clergy, in addition to their tithes and their glebe. The oblations of the laity were abundant; and there were other modes of commanding an ample revenue, such as commutations for penance, which appear not quite so honourable to the recipients. But whatever might be the avidity for worldly advantages, either in the conventual establishments or amongst the parish priests, we cannot doubt that without their ministrations the whole fabric of Anglo-Saxon society would have fallen into primitive barbarism. However deplorable were the corruptions of the Church, at any era, between the departure of the Roman, and the coming of the Norman, there was the pure light of the Christian doctrine always shining through the darkness. We may well believe that amongst the vast number of presbyters residing in their own parishes, but under the control of the bishops through their deans,

* There is an interesting description of this MS. in “Archæologia,” vol. xxv.

† Kemble: “Saxons in England,” book ii. chap. 11.

there were many who commanded more sincere respect by their domestic virtues, than the monks could command by their ascetic seclusion. The married priest, surrounded by the cultivators of his parish, was himself a cultivator. He was their spiritual adviser, but he was also their sympathising friend. If they rejoiced when "the Lord crowneth the year with his goodness"—if they wept when the pestilence that walketh unseen came upon them—they rejoiced and they wept together. The servant of the altar did not live apart from the tiller of the earth. The poor did not receive their alms at the gate of the abbey from the stern cellarer, when there was a parish priest nigher to their wants. He was of his neighbours' families, and they of his. His children went out with their children to gather the May blossom, and to bring in the Christmas evergreen for his church. His wife knew the sorrows and the joys of their wives. This state of things Dunstan came to break down. The priest was unskilled in the accomplishments of the cloister. Dunstan would supplant him with one that could paint breviaries, and knew the precise intonation of the Gregorian chaunt. The priest was attached to his home and his village. Dunstan would thrust him forth to make room for one who had no affections but for the discipline which had been newly brought from the Abbey of Fleury. The priest had national feelings, and venerated the zeal of Augustin and the wisdom of Alfred. He should have no country but the church, and no veneration but for Dunstan and the sovereign pontiff. It was the first great battle for a dominant ecclesiastical power in England. That battle has been fought over and over again; but the assailants of religious liberty, however triumphant for a time, never broke down the eternal principles of right which were opposed to their pretensions.

But it would be unjust and uncharitable to affirm that, in disturbing the long-established influence of the seculars in the conventual churches, and of the married priests in their rural parishes, Dunstan and his instruments had no great public good in view. Coming from such a hater of episcopacy as Milton, it is startling to find him saying of Dunstan that he was "a strenuous bishop, zealous without dread of person, and, for aught appears, the best of many ages, if he busied not himself too much in secular affairs." Milton was too well read in our early history not to know that the bishop was an essential administrator of "secular affairs;" and that his superior knowledge necessarily made him a superior administrator to the ealdorman or sheriff. The administration of

Dunstan kept the country free from external attacks, and from domestic disturbance, during the reign of Edgar. But, probably from an honest conviction of the absence of all the higher qualities, except courage, in the ranks of thanes, and of the general disposition to sensual pleasures in the mass of the population, he sought to establish an order that, set apart from the world, should afford models of piety and self-denial. He relied too much on the influences of a body of religious and learned men separated from the people. In the seclusion of the monastery, according to his views, there would be assemblies of earnest devotees, striving for no personal advantages, but wholly dedicated to the welfare of their communities. In their quiet retreats they would furnish examples of the purest lives. They would dedicate the hours spared from the service of religion to the pursuits of learning and the arts. They would preserve a knowledge of the language in which Rome spoke to the whole Christian world. They would multiply copies of the Scriptures in that language, and be the recorders of their country's history, in the same universal tongue. They would be the artists of their time—the architects and the painters. Many industrious and holy men, no doubt, were found in these communities; and many of these things they did, and did them well. To them we owe the greater part of our knowledge of our past history, imperfect and prejudiced as are many of their relations. Their architecture has, to a great extent, perished; but their successful cultivation of the arts of design may still be seen in many a manuscript of their undoubted work. The contemporary of Dunstan, Ethelwold, is called the "father of monks." He left a wonderful specimen of what the monkish artists could do, in his "Benedictional."* But all these accomplishments were not for the people; and they could produce little influence upon the people. The monks handed the torch of knowledge from one to another, as they ran their course. But that was no light to illuminate a nation. Bishop Ethelwold ejected the secular priests from Winchester, and rebuilt the cathedral; and he established monks in every part of England, as his panegyrists record. Oswald drove away all the clerks "who preferred their wives to the church." In this process it is difficult to imagine that the people, whom the seculars and

* This manuscript of the tenth century is in the library of the Duke of Devonshire. The book is described in the 24th volume of the "Archæologia," with thirty beautiful engravings of the wonderful miniatures with which this remarkable volume is adorned.

clerks had taught, were getting wiser or better; or that the monks, with public and private property heaped upon them, were not destroying "the bones," whilst they took "the flesh and fat" of the realm.*

The reign of Edgar was a reign of sixteen years of peace. With the exception of an invasion of Wales, to enforce the payment of tribute, he carried on no war in this island. The country, too, was unmolested by the rovers of the Baltic. The great settlements which the Northmen had effected were sufficient to absorb, for a little while, all the restless spirits who still remained in the condition of lawless adventurers. Edgar had been educated under the care of a Dane; and he had been raised to the throne by the Danish population. Amongst these he naturally found partisans instead of rebels. They looked upon the sweeping ecclesiastical changes of his reign with less suspicion than the people of the Saxon provinces; for their Christianity was comparatively new, and they were as ready to receive a clergy of monks as a clergy of seculars. But out of this peace of sixteen years were to come fearful wars and bitter humiliations. The great Saxon heart was to be held in subjection to the Danish preponderance, which had been unnaturally fostered by Dunstan for party purposes. In his hand the king was a mere pageant. There is nothing more repulsive than the extravagant praises which the monastic writers have bestowed upon this licentious and ostentatious puppet of a bold and sagacious minister. Whenever we can distinctly see Edgar himself, we find a selfish, arrogant, and cruel prince. To us it is of little consequence that a monkish chronicler tells us "that no king, either of his own, or of former times in England, could be justly and fairly compared to Edgar."† We trace the absurd praise to its source, when the same writer records that "scarcely does a year elapse in the Chronicles in which he did not build some new monastery." But it is important that, even with regard to such a poor atom of past humanity, the great distinctions of right and wrong should not be confounded. The stories which even his panegyrists record of his private actions, and the attributes which they assign to him of regal pomp, would seem rather to belong to a luxurious age of monarchical despotism, than to that of a limited

* "Indeed one may safely affirm that the multitude of monasteries invited the invasion, and facilitated the conquest of the Danes over England, because England had at this time more flesh or fat than bones, wherein the strength of a body consists—more monks than military men." Fuller: "Church History."

† Malmesbury, book ii. chap. viii.

Saxon king. Edgar,—of whom it is written, "He reared up God's honour, he loved God's law, he preserved the people's peace, the best of all the kings that were before in the memory of man,"*—is recorded, in the same pages, to have murdered his friend and foster-brother, that he might marry his widow; and to have torn a nun from her convent to be the victim of his gross appetites. The story of Elfrida was a popular one in Malmesbury's time; and it will hold a place in history, for it belongs to the romance of history. The king heard of the lady's beauty, and he sent his favourite, Athelwold, to report to him if the universal praise was true, of one who lived in seclusion from the court. Athelwold became violently in love with the lady; and upon his return concealed from the king the impression which her charms had made upon himself; spoke disparagingly of her attractions; and subsequently married her. The truth came to the knowledge of the luxurious king; and he announced to his thane that he would visit him and his bride. The terrified Athelwold exhorted his wife to exhibit herself as a slattern, and to conceal her fascinations under a coarse deportment. The ambitious woman had another policy. She put on her gayest adornings and her most encouraging smiles. Edgar and Elfrida came to a perfect understanding. Athelwold was run through by the king with a javelin, when hunting with him. Elfrida became Edgar's queen. To make up the complete picture, Malmesbury records that Edgar extended his protection to an illegitimate son of Athelwold, because the youth, being asked by his royal master how he liked the sport in which his father fell, replied, "I ought not to be displeased with that which gives you pleasure." The duplicity of Athelwold, the profligate ambition of Elfrida, the ferocity of Edgar, and the dastardly coldness of the sycophantic boy, exhibit a state of morals which is not favourable to the cultivation of Saxon sympathies.

To cover the memory of Edgar's crimes we are summoned by his admirers to gaze upon his pomp. Of the most diminutive body, he would challenge any person, however great in stature, to fight with him. Kenneth, king of Scotland, who was a guest at his court, made some offensive remark as to the power which had been established by "such a sorry little fellow." Edgar invited him to a private conference in a wood, and then proposed a duel. The sturdy Scot fell at his feet, say the chroniclers, and tendered his submission. Edgar made kings his watermen. At Chester, Kenneth,

* Quoted in Lingard from the Saxon Chronicle.

king of the Scots; Malcolm, king of the Cumbrians; Maccus, king of the Isles; kings of the Britons; kings of the Irish; do homage to him, and say each, "I become your man." Then the king of Albion, the supreme king, takes his barge, and, sitting at the helm, is rowed down the Dee by his eight royal vassals; and at the banquet he exultantly tells his nobles, that his successors may well call themselves kings, since they will be the inheritors of his honour and glory. His immediate successor will perish at the bidding of his infamous wife; and the son of the guilty marriage will grovel in the dust before the Danish power, and reduce his kingdom to the lowest depth of disgrace.

It is a common mistake to imagine that the corrupt manners of a people, and the mistaken policy of their rulers, produce their instant retribution of national suffering and degradation. During the reign of Edgar we find many proofs of a vigorous administration. Dunstan was his constant director. In his hands the king was made the ready instrument of the ecclesiastical tyranny of his reign. The bulk of the people looked passively on the process; many nobles murmured and plotted. But the nation was corrupted by the conflict. Religion no longer wore an aspect of unity and peace; and the people naturally came to look with indifference on religion. Zealotry, working with obstinate passion for modes of faith rather than for the substance, is the parent of unbelief. Superstition may remain, but religion takes its flight, when her ministers hate and persecute each other with pagan virulence. Such persecution was going on in Saxon England during the rule of Dunstan. He wielded a despotic power; and he preserved a show of tranquillity. Nothing stood in the way of his stern justice. He made his king submit to seven years' penance for one of his outbreaks of licentiousness; and he hung three coiners of money before he would perform mass on a Whitsunday. Under him we recognise in the laws of Edgar a much stronger monarchical tone than Alfred or Athelstan ever ventured to assume. Alfred showed his laws to his witan, and promulgated them when to his council it seemed good. What Athelstan commanded "was established in the great synod." Edgar, according to the same precedent, takes counsel of his witan, but he ordains laws "in praise of God, and in honour to himself," as well as "for the behoof of all his people;" and concludes his ordinance in a strain of high and mighty patronage, which never before proceeded from a Saxon king to a free people:—"I will be to you a very kind lord, the while that my life lasts; and I am ex-

ceedingly well disposed towards you all."* In Edgar's charters the king's titles are set out in the most inflated style. Malmesbury speaks of the rigour of his justice. It appears that the most horrible punishments were inflicted upon offenders. We may judge of their severity when we find in a law of the unfortunate Ethelred, the son of Edgar, the following merciful relaxation: "And the ordinance of our lord and his witan is, that Christian men for all too little be not condemned to death; but in general let mild punishment be decreed, for the peoples' need; and let not for a little God's handywork and his own purchase be destroyed, which he dearly bought."† The payment of dues to the Church was enjoined with a severity almost beyond belief. They are exacted in the names of "I and the archbishop." A day was appointed for a man to pay his tithes; and if they were not paid he was to forfeit nine-tenths of his tithable property. The interference of the archbishop with the social customs of the people is one of the stories told to his honour. They were in the habit of quarrelling about the quantity that each man should drink out of the common cup; and he enacted that pegs should be put in the vessels, that no thirsty soul should take more than his just proportion. The legend shows two things—that the Saxons were very sensual and selfish; and that the restraint was sought in arbitrary power, instead of enforcing improved habits by the spread of knowledge and true religion. Malmesbury says that the people learned drunkenness from the Danes. It was not necessary that a people, under such circumstances as the Saxons under Edgar, should be taught any vices. They would spread, naturally enough, in a condition of society where the obligations of a holy life were merged in the superstitions incident to a fierce polemical controversy. In that controversy the ordinary social ties were loosened. There was nothing in its conditions to raise the laity to that enthusiasm which begets public virtue, whilst it too often casts aside the domestic affections. It was an iron domination, in which a sullen obedience was enforced by the genius of one man, for a generation, but which ultimately broke out into violent persecution and as fierce resistance. Then that principle of nationality was destroyed which had been growing up from the days of Alfred. Then came the time when no one could lift the wine-cup to his lips without a pledge for his safety required and given.‡ Then the peace between Saxon

* "Ancient Laws and Institutions," p. 118.

† Id. p. 129.

‡ Strutt, who, in his "Manners and Customs," first engraved the ancient representation of a Saxon feast in the Cotton MS., points out that "the middle figure is addressing himself to his companion, who tells him that he pledges him, holding up his knife in token

and Dane was obliterated in a horrible butchery. Then the Dane won the land which had been long kept from foreign attack and internal outrage by the wisdom and courage of the line of Wessex. The talent of Dunstan was preparing the final fall of the kingdom, even whilst he retarded the instant catastrophe.

There is a curious circumstance in the reign of Edgar, of which no adequate explanation has been offered by any historian. He had been king fourteen years before he was consecrated. We have mentioned the tradition that he was forbidden by Dunstan to wear his crown for seven years, as a portion of the penance for the abduction of a nun. So writes Malmesbury. But this penance will not account for the suspension for fourteen years of that ceremony which was held essential to the recognition of the Saxon king. The ceremony was at last performed at Bath, with great pomp. Within two years Edgar died. He left two sons. Edward, the child of his first wife, Ethelfleda, was thirteen years old at his father's death. Ethelred, the son of Elfrida, was only seven. The question of succession to the vacant throne was immediately raised. A strong party of the nobles demanded that the choice between Edward and Ethelred should be determined by election. Dunstan, by one of his vigorous movements, quelled the dispute; and presenting Edward to the assembled thanes and ecclesiastics at Winchester, consecrated him on the spot. The question between an Edward and an Ethelred, was the question, not of one brother, or the other, but of a secular or a monastic church. The reaction of violence now commenced. The Benedictines had expelled the secular clergy from the conventual churches; the married priests had been ejected from their parishes. Now one ealdorman expelled the monks from the monasteries, whilst another upheld them in their possessions. Many of the secular clergy had fled to Scotland during the reign of Edgar. They now returned. At their head was a bishop named Beornhelm, a Scottish or Irish bishop. "The choice of this advocate," says Sir F. Palgrave, "is a remarkable fact in ecclesiastical history, because it tends to prove that, at this period, the Church of the Scots, probably in Ireland, was not entirely subject to Rome."* The great parties were headed by the most powerful nobles and ecclesiastics. At Calne, in Wiltshire, a witen-

of his readiness to assist and protect him." It is usual to refer the pledge to the period of Danish tyranny in the time of Ethelred. "The custom of pledging healths, still preserved amongst Englishmen, is said to be owing to the Saxons' mutual regard for each other's safety, and as a caution against the treacherous inhospitality of the Danes." Wise; quoted in Brand's "Popular Antiquities."

* "History of England," chap. xiii.

gemot was assembled to debate the points which divided the Church, and threatened the kingdom with civil war. There spoke Beornhelm. He spoke with no diminution of power because a voice had previously spoken from a crucifix at Winchester, to determine the controversy in favour of the monks. He was not satisfied when, on that occasion, Dunstan exclaimed, "What wish ye more?" He was a daring unbeliever, and punishment was in store for him and his adherents. The assembly at Calne was held in an upper chamber. Dunstan rose. He was an aged man, he said, and would no longer contend with his opponents. He would commit the cause of the Church to the decision of Christ. The floor of the room gave way. But its strength was miraculously proportioned so as to destroy some, whilst others, including Dunstan, were saved. "This miracle," says Malmesbury, "procured the archbishop's peace, on the score of the canons."

The year of the catastrophe at Calne, 978, presented another proof of the terrible spirit of mutual hatred which had been engendered by these contentions. Dunstan had a struggle to hold his power—a struggle to which he had long been unfamiliar. It would be unjust to attribute the fall of the building at Calne to his devices. But it is clear that the enemies of his system were becoming desperate. He was the adviser and controller of the young king Edward, as he had been of his father. The innocent boy was to be sacrificed as a party victim by those opposed to the monastic domination; and his abandoned step-mother, who hated him for standing in the way of her son's elevation, was included in the plot. At Corfe, a royal manor, resided Elfrida and Ethelred. Edward had been hunting at Wareham, and became separated from his companions. A dwarf appears out of the forest coverts, and proposes to guide him to a place of rest and refreshment. He reaches the home of the widowed queen, who meets him at the door with a betraying kiss. She brings out wine to the wearied boy; and as he lifts the goblet to his lips, sitting on his horse, he is stabbed in the back. He spurs his steed from the fatal porch; faints and falls; is dragged in the stirrups; and is traced by his blood. We may well believe that the guilty woman, as the chroniclers record, suffered the most fearful terrors of an evil conscience; and we may also believe that many a less innocent saint has been canonized than this poor boy "Edward the Martyr."

CHAPTER XI.

Ethelred.—Dunstan's hatred of the young king.—Renewed attacks of the Danes.—Payment of tribute to the Danes.—Corruption and treachery of the chieftains.—Exactions and sufferings.—Massacre of the Danes.—Sweyn, king of Denmark.—Flight of Ethelred.—Death of Sweyn, and Ethelred's recall.—Canute.—Edmund Ironside.—Division of the kingdom.—Death of Edmund.—Canute sole king.

It is recorded by the historians of the Abbey of Ely that, during the short reign of Edward, the mother of Ethelred went in solemn procession to the shrine of Saint Ethelreda, and that there the boy solemnly devoted himself to the service of the virgin patroness of that famous church. It would have been well for England if Ethelred "the unready" had been destined to become the drowsy head of a monastery rather than "the sleeping king" that he afterwards became. Malmesbury says of him that, "obtaining the kingdom, he occupied rather than governed it for thirty-seven years." It was a fatal reign, but its calamities had a deeper root than the personal character of the king. We have looked with great suspicion upon the monkish accounts of the eminent virtues of Edgar. We may be justified in similar doubts of some of the flagrant demerits of Ethelred. Malmesbury goes on to tell us, "The career of his life is said to have been cruel in the beginning . . . in the murder to which he gave his concurrence he was cruel." He was only ten years old when this murder took place. Dunstan hated him; and when, as primate, he placed the crown upon his head, he pronounced this curse: "Even as, by the death of thy brother, thou didst aspire to the kingdom, hear the decree of Heaven. The sin of thy wicked mother, and of her accomplices, shall rest upon thy head; and such evils shall fall upon the English as they have never yet suffered, from the days when they first came into the isle of Britain, even until the present time."* As Edward was murdered by the cruel policy of one party, so was Ethelred inducted into an unhappy reign by this vindictive prophecy of the chief of another party. Dunstan well knew the distractions of the country, and how much of the coming evils of re-

* Malmesbury; quoted in Palgrave.

newed wars, of domestic treasons, of social profligacy, were to be attributed to his own counsels, and the fiery zeal of his adherents. His most unpatriotic predictions was made in the same spirit of haughty self-will which had distinguished all his rule. His power was sliding away; and he would render any other government difficult. Sir F. Palgrave says, "The calamities and miseries which ensued, and which in fact opened the way for the entire subjugation of the country by the Normans, if not occasioned by the very words of Dunstan, were yet extremely enhanced by the effect of his denunciations." These calamities, we believe, may be traced to the deeds of Dunstan much more clearly than to his words. When he dragged Edwy to the banqueting-hall, he was the same stern enthusiast as at the coronation of Ethelred. A quarter of a century had not taught him moderation. In an old play, in which Dunstan is one of the characters, he thus speaks of himself as having "flourished in the reign of seven great kings;" and he adds,

"With all these kings was I in high esteem,
And kept both them and all the land in awe;
And had I lived, the Danes had never boasted
Their then beginning conquest of this land."*

Dunstan lived till the tenth year of Ethelred's reign; but we have no record that he was "in high esteem." He retained his archbishopric; but he appears to have continued his hostility to the king's government up to nearly the time of his death. It was for the aggrandisement of the Church, and not for the peace of the realm, that he went on to denounce and to prophesy. A quarrel arose between the Crown and the Bishop of Rochester, in which the king asserted a demand by military force. Dunstan threatened him with the vengeance of Saint Andrew; but the payment of a sum of money was more effectual to restrain the king's hostility; and then the arch-priest again prophesied, saying, "The evils which God has pronounced will shortly come upon you; but they will not come while I live, for this also God hath spoken." Malmesbury says, "Soon after the death of this holy man, the predictions began to be fulfilled." It was not difficult to see their approach, without any revelation from on high. There had been no attack of the Danes since the reign of Athelstan. In 980, Sweyn, the banished son of the King of Denmark, was devastating the British

* "Grim, the Collier of Croydon:" Prologue. This curious performance is in Dodsley's Collection.

shores. Where were now the three thousand six hundred ships with which Edgar, according to his absurd panegyrists, made annual progress round the coasts? In 980 Southampton was "ravaged by a ship force, and the most part of the town slain and led captive. And that same year was Tanet-land ravaged." In 981, "was much havoc done every where by the sea-coast, as well amongst the men of Devon as among the Welsh." In 982, "landed among the men of Dorset, three ships of pirates; and they ravaged in Portland. That same year London was burnt." These are the simple notices of the Saxon Chronicle. There was no principle of resistance in the country, even to drive off the three ships that landed among the men of Dorset; for the men of Dorset, as other men, were quarrelling about the occupation of the monasteries, instead of arming for the defence of their homes. There was a noble who held the earldom of Mercia, Alfric, the son of Alfer. The father had been a courageous opponent of Dunstan, and was accused of having participated in the murder of Edward. The son engaged in a conspiracy against Ethelred, and he was banished. But he was soon restored to his former honours; for the government was too weak to restrain or to punish. In a few years the attacks of the Danes became more systematic. In 991, they landed in East Anglia; and here, alone, they found a sturdy resistance, amongst those of their own lineage. Brithnorth, the earldorman, met them with a courage which has been celebrated in Saxon verse; but at Maldon, he fell by the "hassagay"—a weapon of which the fierce Saracens had shown the use to the fiercer pirates. The Danes ravaged Ipswich. "And in that year it was decreed, that tribute, for the first time, should be given to the Danish-men, on account of the great terror which they caused by the sea-coast. That was at first ten thousand pounds: this counsel advised first Archbishop Sidric."* It was a fatal counsel; "an infamous precedent, and totally unworthy the character of men, by money to redeem liberty, which no violence can ever extirpate from a noble mind." So thought, most truly, brave old William of Malmesbury—a chronicler whose prejudices were those of his order, his sense and learning his own.

The history of England for the next quarter of a century is, in many respects, the most melancholy of its annals. It has been related in detail by modern historians; but it will be scarcely necessary for us to go through the dreary chapter of bloodshed,

* Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

treachery, cowardice, and imbecility. It is impossible that a martial race should have become suddenly so weak; a free government so incapable; a loyal nobility so traitorous; a Christian people so cruel;—only because a timid and frivolous king had been set up to rule over them. Nor was it because peace, as it was called, had been in the land for an unusual period. There was no real peace, because there was no national concord. Wessex had not been in arms against East Anglia; nor Mercia against Northumbria. But there was enmity in the hearts of West Saxons, East Anglians, Mercians, and Northumbrians, against their own kindred. Foreign mercenaries, too, had been gradually settling under the encouragement of the peaceable king; and foreign ecclesiastics had been filling the religious houses of his ambitious minister. Under Ethelred, the private vices of the great chieftains took a new direction in public corruption. Treachery and rivalry were in the court and the camp. The army was undisciplined. Their "commanders, if ever they met to confer, immediately chose different sides, and rarely or never united in one good plan; for they gave more attention to private quarrels than to public exigencies." This looks like a passage of modern history; but it is from a chronicle of seven hundred years ago. It is well that we cannot ascribe to recent times what is added by the old writer. "If in the midst of present danger they had resolved on any good plan, it was immediately communicated to the enemy by traitors."* The impoverishment of the land was the inevitable result of the weakness and wickedness of its rulers. Again and again came the Danes; for they had found a more certain treasure in the Dane-geld—the tribute which the cowardice of the government levied upon the people—than in any casual plunder of towns and villages. In 991, they were bribed and bought off with ten thousand pounds of silver; in 994, with sixteen thousand; in 1001, with twenty-four thousand; in 1007, with thirty-six thousand; and in 1012, with forty-eight thousand. A pound of silver was worth about three pounds of modern money and would have purchased eight oxen, or fifty sheep. We may estimate the sufferings of the people in the payment of the Dane-geld, during twenty years, when we consider that one hundred and thirty-four thousand pounds were equal to six million seven hundred thousand sheep, or one million and seventy-two thousand oxen. The ordinary price of a hide of land was about five pounds of silver, and thus one hundred and thirty-four thousand

* Malmesbury, book ii. chap. x.

pounds of silver would have purchased twenty-six thousand eight hundred hides, each of which maintained a free man's family. Taking the hide of arable land, with its appurtenances of woods and common lands, at a hundred acres, this Danish tribute was equal to the fee-simple of all the land of Norfolk and Suffolk, or nearly one-tenth of the whole acreage of England. But, wherever they planted their feet, there the invaders would be fed. Famine followed in their steps. There is one unvarying record in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: "The king and his witan desired that they should be sent to, and promised *tribute and food*." This record, which continues year after year, is occasionally varied by some notice of a gleam of public spirit, such as this: "And forces were often gathered against them; but so soon as they should have joined battle, then was there ever, through some cause, flight begun; and in the end they ever had the victory." What a picture does the following brief and simple narrative of this national ruin present of an imbecile government and of a divided people: "Then went they again to their ships with their booty. And when they went to their ships, then ought the forces again to have gone out against them until they should land; but then the forces went home; and when they were eastwards, then were the forces kept westwards; and when they were southwards, then were our forces northwards. Then were all the witan summoned to the king; and they were then to counsel how this land might be defended. But although something might then be counselled, it did not stand even one month. At last there was no head-man who would assemble forces, but each fled as he best might; nor, at the last, would even one shire assist another."

Amidst this misery and disgrace of this "heavy time," as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle calls this period, there is one event more terrible and full of shame than the weakness which yielded tribute, or the cowardice which fled from battle. There were many of the old Danish settlers in England who had become a part of the nation, with homes to protect as much as their Saxon neighbours. Many had intermarried with the older inhabitants. During these new assaults of their terrible countrymen, the Danes had probably become insolent and overbearing; so that "the common people were so of them oppressed, that for fear and dread they called them, in every house as they had rule of, Lord Dane."* In 1002, Ethelred had married Emma, the sister of the Duke of Normandy.

* Fabian's Chronicle, cap. 98.

Immediately after his marriage, on the feast of St. Brice, the king issued orders for a massacre of the Danes within the district over which he had authority. On that terrible 13th of November, as bloody a tragedy was enacted in this country as the history of religious persecution or national hatred can furnish in any country. The old writer we have just quoted says, that, "as common fame telleth, this murder began at a little town in Hertfordshire, within twenty-four miles of London, called Welwynne." This place is not far from the ancient boundary of the Saxon and Danish territory; and it is not unlikely that the people were much intermixed. The poet of the "Night Thoughts," who dwelt in this charming village, could have found no more solemn theme of death and woe than this sad history. Men, women, children, were indiscriminately butchered. The sister of Sweyn, the Northman, who was married in England, and had adopted the Christian faith, was amongst the victims. In the agony of her last hours the heroic Gunhilda warned her murderers that a terrible retribution would come upon England for this national crime. In less than a year Sweyn was in the land with fire and desolation.

The massacre of the Danes on the feast of St. Brice has some resemblance to the massacre of the French in the thirteenth century, which is known as the Sicilian Vespers. They were each the result of a sudden and cowardly vengeance under insult and oppression. When William the Conqueror desired to excite his Normans against the Saxons, he called upon them to remember St. Brice's day. Yet, in spite of the atrocious character of this event, the national dislike of the Danes was cherished in Saxon England for centuries after the days of Ethelred and Sweyn. In the famous visit to Kenilworth of Queen Elizabeth, the people of Coventry came to her with a petition* that "they might renew now their old storial show; of argument how the Danes whilom here in a troublous season were for quietness borne withal and suffered in peace; that anon, by outrage and unsupportable insolency, abusing both Ethelred the king, then, and all estates every where besides; at the grievous complaint and counsel of Huna, the king's chieftain in wars, on Saint Brice's night, anno Dom. 1002, (as the book says, that falleth yearly on the thirteenth of November,) were all despatched and the realm rid. And for because that the matter mentioneth how valiantly our English women, for love of their country, behaved themselves, expressed in action and rhymes after

* Laneham's Letter, 1575.

their manner; they thought it might move some mirth to her Majesty the rather. The thing is grounded in story, and for pastime wont to be played in our city yearly." It was a strange pastime for a queen to look on, who knew something of the real history of her country. The people, probably, were little aware that they were celebrating a great disgrace of their ancestors. They exhibited a fight between the Danish lance-knights and the English spearmen, with Danes subdued and led captive by English women. The traditions upon which their storial show was founded were a mixture of truth and falsehood. They knew of the outrage and insolency of a troublous season long past. The treacherous revenge had faded out of the popular legends.

From the year 1003 to 1007, the retribution which Gunhilda had foreseen was going on. Devastation came after devastation, and tribute was exacted after tribute. The people in a brief time would pay no longer; and a bolder and wiser policy was adopted. A man in harness was to be provided upon every eight hides of land, and a vessel from every three hundred and ten hides. Out of the latter contribution came the precedent for that claim for "ship-money," to the resistance of which claim we probably owe the power yet to build ships, and to man them, and to feel more secure through these bulwarks than if every landing-place were covered with walls of granite. But vessels of war, and men in harness, are worthless without brave and faithful leaders. A vast naval force in 1009 was assembled at Sandwich. There were so many ships as were never before, according to the Chronicle. But there was a quarrel amongst the commanders, and a great wind cast the ships upon the land. "Then was it as if it had been all hopeless; and the king went his way home, and the ealdormen and the high witan, and thus lightly left the ships; and then afterwards, the people who were in the ships brought them to London; and they let the whole nation's toil thus lightly pass away." At this period there was treachery on every side. There were minor traitors who were punished; but the great traitor, Alfric, who again and again betrayed his country, retained all his ancient power. There was another traitor, the king's favourite, Edric; who after a series of intrigues against his weak master, finally joined the Danish forces with a large body of men, and assisted in the ravage of Canterbury. The one true and bold heart was to be found in Alphege, the archbishop of Canterbury. He exhorted the people to defend their city; and for twenty days there was a vigorous defence. But

another traitor, by name Elfmarr, secretly admitted the enemy. The Danes burnt the city, and carried off the inhabitants as slaves. They demanded ransom if they spared the life of the primate; but he nobly said, that he had no goods of his own to offer for ransom, and that the goods of the Church should not be given up for his own life. They dragged him from his squalid prison, and setting him in the midst of a company of drunken revellers, they threw their weapons at him, and the bones of their coarse banquet; and amidst the cries of "Gold, bishop, Gold," he was struck to the earth, and the blow of an axe ended his sufferings.

There came, at last, a fleet from Denmark—not for plunder or tribute, but for conquest. The chief devastator had been Thurkill, who, for three years, had been carrying on a predatory war on his own account. But in 1012, having received a vast sum from Ethelred, he became a mercenary under the English. The King of Denmark came with his great fleet, decorated with all the tawdry devices of barbaric pomp, to carry on a war of extermination. His commands were to ravage the fields, to burn the houses, to put every male to the edge of the sword. Lighting his war-beacons wherever he went on his march from the Humber, he was at length under the walls of London. Ethelred and his Danish officer, Thurkill, successfully defended the city. Sweyn retreated to Bath, and there proclaimed himself king of England, and received homage from all the western nobles, and from those of the north. Ethelred now fled to the Isle of Wight, and London surrendered. All the misfortunes of the country are imputed to the unhappy king. But he appears to have come nigher to the truth, in the address which he made to his few faithful adherents. He imputed his misfortunes to the treachery of his generals. The country was subdued; the coast was watched. They had more to apprehend from their own countrymen than from their enemies. He should send his wife and children to Richard of Normandy. If he could not with him find an honourable asylum, he should not want spirit to die where he was, undishonoured. To Richard of Normandy the king went. He had been a faithless husband, but he was received with kindness. In 1014, Sweyn died. His army proclaimed his son Canute as king; but Ethelred was recalled by "all the witan who were in England, clergy and laity." They recalled him upon terms—"that no lord were dearer to them than their natural lord, if he would rule them rightlier than he had done before." This condition (in which it is held "we may discern the germ of Magna Charta, and of all

the subsequent compacts between the king and the people of England."*) was accepted by Ethelred, in these words: "He would be to them a loving lord, and amend all those things which they all abhorred; and each of those things should be forgiven which had been done or said to him, on condition that they all, with one consent, would be obedient to him without deceit." Ethelred came home; and it was declared that "every Danish king should be an outlaw from England for ever." But there was a Danish king in England who made little of empty words. The recall of Ethelred was, most probably, the act only of a part of the nation. Canute held possession of a large portion of the land. Edric, the ancient traitor, kept his old power with his old guile. Edmund, the son of Ethelred, was well qualified by his bodily strength, which gave him the name of "Ironside," and by his energetic valour, to be that leader which the Saxon race had so long needed. Edric was circumventing Edmund at every step. In the meantime Canute was establishing his full claim to sovereignty. In the April of 1016, Ethelred died. The citizens of London proclaimed Edmund king. A council sitting at Southampton, which had previously decreed that every Danish king should be an outlaw, took the oaths to Canute. There was instant preparation for war on both sides. Canute had a great fleet in the Thames. Edmund marched boldly into Wessex, and was there accepted as king. He then raised the siege of London. Battle after battle ensued; and the Ironside would have cleared the land of his enemies, but for that false confidence which had ruined his father. He trusted once more to Edric; and in the moment of victory, the betrayer, who had a command in the Saxon army, suddenly cried out, "Flee, English, flee; dead is Edmund." The English fled. Edmund and Canute agreed to divide the sovereignty. In a very short time Edmund died, and his death is attributed, reasonably enough, to the hand of Edric. Whether or not Canute had given greater "warrant" than "the winking of authority," it is recorded that when Edric came to urge rewards for service, Canute told him that a new lord could expect little fealty from one who had murdered his old lord; and that, upon this hint, Eric of Northumbria slew the traitor with his battle-axe.

Canute the Dane is in 1017 sole king of England. He calls upon the witan to annul the division of the kingdom by declaring that Edmund had reserved no right of succession, and that Canute was

* Palgrave, History of England, chap. xiii.

to be the guardian of his children. This guardianship consisted in outlawing them. The infant boys were sent to the king of Sweden, with such intimation of the usurper's wishes as an unscrupulous prince would have readily acted upon. But the king of Sweden removed them to a safe asylum in Hungary. The children grew to manhood; and the younger, Edmund, became the father of Edgar Atheling, and of Margaret, the queen of Malcolm of Scotland. Edwy, the brother of the heroic king Edmund, was slain by command of Canute. There were two other claimants to the English throne, Edward and Alfred, the sons of Ethelred by his wife Emma of Normandy. Their rights were asserted by their uncle Richard; but Canute settled the dispute by marrying their mother. His proscriptions of English nobles had no limit but his own will; and their forfeited property was bestowed upon his Danish instruments. Then was that tyranny at its height which so long rankled in the Saxon heart; and another day of St. Brice was dreaded by the lordly Northmen. A law imposed a fine upon any township where a Dane was killed. A Saxon might be murdered without such penalty. The Danish thanes were surrounded by their countrymen in the great cities. London, which had so stoutly resisted the intruders, received their yoke. We find many indelible traces of their presence in the land. A place of public assembly became the Danish "husting." The Northmen's saint, St. Olave, has given his name to London churches. "Knuts'-delfe" is the dyke near the Peterborough marshes. The little sand-piper of the fen counties is the 'knot,'—

"Canutus' bird of old,
Of that great king of Danes, his name that still doth hold,
His appetite to please that far and near was sought,
For him, as some have said, from Denmark hither brought."*

As we look upon the noble towers of Ely, we still associate them with the song that tradition has ascribed to Canute, as he rowed upon the Nene, and the choral hymn burst from the old minster:—

"Merrily sang the monks within Ely
When that Canute, king, rowed thereby;
Row, my knights, row near the land,
And hear we these monkes' song."

The tide, even, that comes rippling up to the feet of the lingerer by the sea-beach recalls to his memory the well-known legend of

* Drayton, Polyolbion.

Canute and his courtiers. The king plants his chair on the sands, commanding the waves to retire, but the waters will not obey; and Canute moralizes upon the vanity of earthly rule, compared with that of the Power who alone could say to the sea, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed."

The impression of his character which Canute has left upon the English mind is not that of the barbarous conqueror. We cannot say of him, as one of our great masters of English said of Alfred, "He left learning where he found ignorance; justice, where he found oppression; peace, where he found distraction."* But he came, with a powerful will, to make a foreign domination endurable by a show of impartiality and to substitute the strength of despotism for the feebleness of anarchy. When he ceased to be an enemy of England he became a real friend. His power was too strong to be disputed; and he therefore wielded it with moderation, after the contest for supremacy was fairly over. He, the emperor of the Anglo-Saxons, as he chose to be called, was also king of Swedes, and Danes, and Norwegians. He was an unmitigated despot in his own half-Christian lands; but he adapted his English rule to the higher civilisation of his most important kingdom. In 1030 he made a pilgrimage to Rome, with his staff and wallet; and amidst the passes of the Alps, or beside the ruins of the Cæsars, he thought humbly of his past life, and made new resolves for his future career. His letter to "all the nations of the English," which he sent from Denmark after his return from Rome, has one passage which may make us believe that power and prosperity are not always corrupting: "And now, be it known to you all, that I have dedicated my life to God, to govern my kingdoms with justice, and to observe the right in all things. If, in the time that is past, and in the violence and carelessness of youth, I have violated justice, it is my intention, by the help of God, to make full compensation. Therefore I beg and command those unto whom I have entrusted the government, as they wish to preserve my good will, and save their own souls, to do no injustice either to poor or rich. Let those who are noble, and those who are not, equally obtain their rights, according to the laws, from which no deviation shall be allowed, either from fear of me, or through favor to the powerful, or for the purpose of supplying my treasury. I want no money raised by injustice." Canute died in 1035.

* Fuller, Worthies, vol. i. p. 64.

CHAPTER XII.

Saxon and Danish races.—Harold and Hardicanute.—Murder of Alfred.—Death of Hardicanute.—Election of Edward the Confessor.—Earl Godwin.—Influence of the Normans.—Banishment of Godwin and his sons.—Triumph of the Norman party.

CANUTE, who died at Shaftesbury, was buried at Winchester. The Danish conqueror found his last resting-place amidst the old Saxon kings. A northern antiquary draws the following inferences from the contemplation of the chest in the choir of the present cathedral, in which the bones are collected, according to an inscription, of Kings Canute and Rufus, of Queen Emma, and of two archbishops: "An immense change had taken place with regard to the Danes in England, since their first appearance there as barbarous heathen vikings. Instead of their kings seeking renown by the destruction of churches and convents, and by murdering or maltreating the clergy; instead of their despising any other kind of burial than that in the open fields, or hills under large caverns or monumental stones; their successors were now regarded as the benefactors and protectors of the Church, and, as such, worthy to repose in the most important ecclesiastical edifices,—even in the principal district of their former mortal enemies."* Canute, he adds, "had happily broken through the strong barrier which had hitherto separated Saxon south England from Danish north England."† From this period, indeed, it would be useless to attempt to draw distinctions between the Saxon and Danish races. The ingenious author we have quoted, with a laudable patriotism, endeavours to show that many of the names and customs which we ordinarily call Saxon are Danish. He has probably carried his theory much too far, by looking at such matters "from the Danish point of view."‡ In regard to language, we may well believe that the dialect of the later settlers of Northumbria and East Anglia became blended with that of the earlier settlers of Wessex and Mercia. In the same way the several races became gradually intermixed. Thomas

* "The Danes in England," by J. J. A. Worsaae, p. 29.

† See an able article in "Gentleman's Magazine," March, 1852.

1014