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ST. EDWARD'S DEATH.

CHAPTER I.—THE GIFT AT THE ALTAR.

We have already presented our readers with the traditional story of the first consecration of Westminster Abbey, a building whose history is, perhaps, as rich in saintly and supernatural interest as any that could be named.

During that time the progress of the work was often interrupted; but in the autumn of the year 1065 the urgency of the king had caused a rapid advance to be made, and everything seemed to promise that the new church of St. Peter might be opened and dedicated at no distant day.

There was the varied costume of the age, the long-haired Saxons, mingling with the Norman nobles, who crowded the court of Edward, and were already viewed with a certain jealousy and suspicion by the English.

"It is a fair sight," said one of a little group of idlers, who sauntered about the open space, awaiting, as it would seem, the opening of the palace gates; "but methinks that Englishmen could build churches as fair, without the aid of Normans as their masters."

"Hugolin, the chamberlain, is of Norman blood," replied the companion whom he addressed; "it he who gives his countrymen the places on the palace steps, that they may gain the king's ear when he appears, and win what they will out of his royal heart."

"By my faith, Leofstan," said the first speaker, "were all England of my mind, the palace-steps should soon be cleared of foreigners, and the palace too; and we should hear no more of Norman chamberlains to an English king."

"Egelnoth," said a low sweet voice behind him, "thou hast uttered a foolish word, and I pray God the day may never come when England shall call it wisdom."

The Saxon turned as he was addressed, and encountered the mild eye of one who wore the habit of a monk, and who, indeed, formed one of the new community of Westminster; his presence at once seemed to impose something of restraint on the language and murmurs of his companions.

"Good father," said Egelnoth, with the air of one a little abashed by the presence of a superior, "I knew not that you were within earshot; but I would fain know why you call my prating folly; for of a truth, if the rights of England should be dear to any, they should be so to Aldred the Saxon."

"And they are dear," answered Aldred, "and to none dearer. But I deemed that my words betokened something of a spirit which England may one day learn to rue. 'England for the English,' saidst thou? Why, hadst thou lived in the days of Ethelbert, I trow thou wouldst have thrust back the very Cross that Augustine bore, because it was brought to you by a foreign monk."

Where, then, would be the glory of our Saxon fathers, who knew of no such limits to Christian love as may be found in the boundaries of lands, or the difference of tongues, but freely gave the blood of their saints and martyrs to evangelize the world? Had there been the cry of England for the English in the days of Boniface, methinks Germany would have scarce had her apostle from our shores."

"Dost thou, then, condemn the love of country, good father?" said Leofstan, who till now had listened in silence; "and wouldst thou have us tamely endure the taunts of these shaven Normans, who come hither to teach us manners unmasked, and to mock at what they term our clownish ways?"

"I fear me," answered the monk, "there is something in Saxon manners which Norman novelties might mend; and some say the Normans are welcome guests with our noble king, the rather that they have not yet unlearned the temperance which raises man above the brute."

"Thou knowest best, my son, at which banquet-boards the angels are likeliest to be guests." "Why, the heart is grown Norman, father," interrupted Leofstan reproachfully; "it was not thus thou wast used to speak in the cloisters of Winton when, as a boy, I learnt to love the Saxon saints and heroes from hearing their stories from thy lips."

"Leofstan," replied the monk, "there was, as I think, in the days you speak of, less talk of Norman and of Saxon, and of foreign blood and English rights. England hath been, God knows, an isle of saints, and fitly may her children love her name; but yet a Christian man does well to stretch his heart a little wider than her shores, and to think that all lands where the Cross shines beneath the rule of Peter are knit in a bond of brotherhood. The Church is a mighty mother, and her tongue is one; and, in truth, when the gates of the Eternal Palace open to us, there will be small questions of blood or country among those that crowd its steps."

"Well, well, Master Aldred," said Egelnoth, the first speaker, "you talk like a monk, and we as men; it may be, the world is all one land to those who have fore sworn all lands alike; but to me, who have not yet forgotten my Saxon blood, it is a burning shame to see a crowd of foreign foes close about the king, thrusting from him his own brethren; and, for aught I know, shutting his heart against them."

As he spoke, Egelnoth's eyes again turned towards the palace gates, and Aldred followed the direction of his glance. A smile passed over the features of the monk, as, after a moment's inspection of the distant group, he said, in a livelier tone, "Mine eyes are surely sharper than thine own, good Egelnoth; it seems to me that neither Saxon nor Norman will this time claim the first word with holy Edward, but one thou wilt scarcely find it in thine heart to envy. Let us draw a little nearer; and if the Normans succeed in pressing their suit the first to-day, I give thee leave to grumble as thou wilt, and to teach them a lesson of Saxon manners, if thou hast a mind."

So saying, he approached the palace, followed by his two companions; and the crowd, which had now considerably increased in numbers, giving way as he advanced, the three soon found themselves close within the circle which had gathered about the gates. Aldred's person indeed, was known to all; and at his appearance, the whisper which rang among the strangers of "the king's confessor," explained the secret of the respect so universally displayed.

It was the hour when the king was usually accustomed to ride abroad; and whilst an idle curiosity had brought many to the spot, others had come, as was the habit in those days, to present some suit, or ask a favor, from the royal lips; or, it may be, only to pay their court, and remind King Edward, by their presence, of their claims to notice. As Aldred and the two Saxons arrived in the midst of the group which stood closest to the steps leading to the palace, it seemed as if those who had formed the subject of their conversation a few minutes before were occupied with some matter of entertainment, on which they were by turns exercising their wit and ridicule.

"It is a barbarous island, my Roland," said one, who was evidently the exquisite of the party; "but of the many strange sights my eyes have rested on, this passeth all; thinkest thou the thing is human?"

"It is a question more learned heads than mine must answer," replied Roland, "and happily," he added, as he perceived the approach of Aldred, "here is one at hand that will solve the riddle; see here, good father, we would crave of your reverence to tell us if it is the custom of your English monarchs to adorn their palace courts with grotesque images, after the manner of the Greeks?" and as he spoke he drew back a little, and pointed towards a strange and hideous object which occupied the lower step.

It was that of a human being, so deformed

and misshapen by disease, that the Norman might well have been excused for doubting of its reality. The muscles of his legs were contracted, so that the soles of his feet adhered to his thighs; and the only manner in which the unhappy creature could move, was by means of a kind of wooden roller, which he grappled with his hands; thus dragging himself with pain and difficulty along the ground.

"It is the Irish cripple," said the monk, in a tone of compassion: "thou hast not yet made pilgrimage to the shrine of Peter noble count, or thine eye would have learnt a familiarity with such sufferers as these, who crowd about the holy places for relief, and, I doubt not, do much to move the hearts of the faithful with the touch of charity. But why art thou here Murodac?" he continued; "knowest thou not that the king's nobleness is shortly expected? and thou art indeed but a strange quarry to hold his stirrup."

"Even therefore am I come," answered the cripple, without attempting to move from the position he had taken; "I have a message for the king, and must deliver it to him face to face, nor know I where the beggar Murodac can better hope to meet him than on his own door-step; wherefore, by your leave, good father, I will abide where I am, and the noble gentlemen can make merry with me as they please."

At that moment the wide door of the entrance-hall was thrown open, and Hugolin, the royal chamberlain, appeared on the steps, to prepare the way for his masters approach. As he did so, the form of the Irish cripple at once arrested his eye. "What foolery is this, Murodac?" he asked, in an angry tone. "It is many a day since thou wert seen at the gate; thou shalt be cared for, man, another time; but now hobble off at thy fastest pace, for the royal retinue is at hand."

"Hugolin, Hugolin," cried the miserable being, in his shrill and unnatural voice, as some of the servants were about to enforce the chamberlain's command with some degree of violence, "has thou no pity on me! I have crawled many a weary mile to reach this step, and now they are thrusting me away before thine eyes, and the sight moves thee not to compassion."

"Why, what wouldst thou have of me?" asked Hugolin, to whom the cripple was indeed an old friend; "I will listen to thee another day, but now—"

"But now I say," interrupted the other; "now is the hour for which I came. I have a message for the king, and have borne it from Rome, being charged to deliver it to him face to face, at his palace door; and now that I have reached my journey's end, thou wilt surely for once befriend me, and suffer me to do my errand."

There was something so earnest and positive in the beggar's tone, that Hugolin hesitated; beggars were no strange sights in those times at the doors of monarchs, and Edward was known to have singular tenderness and love towards those poor outcasts, from whom the refinement of modern days is wont to shrink; moreover, it did not seem quiet impossible that it was even as he had said, and that some secret of importance might have been committed to this strange ambassador, whose very rags and misery would secure him from suspicion on the way.

As he paused in doubt what course to follow, fortune decided the question in favor of the cripple. A stir was heard in the hall within, and, in another moment, Edward himself was seen descending the steps which had been the scene of the singular dispute. Of the middle height and of admirable figure and proportion, the form of the royal Confessor was full of a kingly dignity that was worthy of his rank and station. But when you glance at his face, you were struck at once with the contrast between that manly bearing and the expression of child-like and extreme simplicity that shone upon his countenance. The extraordinary fairness of his complexion communicated an almost infantine character to features whose delicate and gentle beauty had nothing to betoken the warrior or the chief of a great and semi-barbarous nation. Standing in the midst of his courtiers, with his fair mild face and tranquil eyes, brightened rather than shadowed with hair and eyebrows "as dazzlingly white," says William of Malinesbury, "as the snow-fair feathers of the swan," he floated before the gaze like an angelic vision; and the feeling rose upon the heart that the possessor of that countenance, which already bore the stamp of beatitude on its singular loveliness, must be all unsuited to the harsh contests of the world around him, and ripe for the glory of heaven. And, indeed, it was whispered that some notification of his coming release had been received by the royal saint not long before, and that his increased earnestness in pressing the completion of St. Peter's church and monastery arose from an anxiety to see the solemn fulfillment of his vow before he died. However that might be, it could not be doubted that for many months there had been a visible

change in his conduct and in his appearance.—His prayers and alms, at all times so profuse, had been redoubled; whilst something of unearthly sweetness had mingled with the traces of bodily suffering which at times might be observed upon his face.

Such was the exterior of the Confessor, as he stood in the midst of his retinue, and paused to ascertain the cause of the momentary confusion.

"So please you, my liege," began Hugolin, in some vexation at the arrival of his master in the midst of the disorder, "it is the Irish beggar, Murodac, who would fain thrust himself into your sacred presence, under pretext of some message, and will not be kept back until he hath delivered his suit."

"And wherefore should he, or any of my subjects, be kept from me?" said Edward, with a shade of severity in his tone. "Come hither, Murodac, if thou art able, and tell me what thou seekest; when last I saw thee at the gate, they told me thou wert bound for Rome; the touch of the holy chair hath not, as it seems, restored thy limbs."

"Most gracious lord," answered the beggar, who had meanwhile succeeded in dragging himself to the feet of the king, "six times have I, even as thou seest me, visited the seat of the Apostles, but have not been worthy to have the soundness of my body restored to me; nevertheless, the prince of the Apostles hath not absolutely refuse my prayer, he hath deferred its accomplishment, because he desires that thou, O king, shouldst be his associate in the miracle.—Wherefore, with his own lips, he hath commanded me to seek thy presence, in order that thou, bearing me on thy sacred shoulders, mayest carry me from the palace to the church yonder, which thing if thou wilt do, health and strength shall be given to these crippled limbs."

An indignant exclamation burst from the bystanders at the in-olent proposal of the beggar, and some advanced to lay hands on him and eject him from the court; but, with a motion of his hand, Edward kept them back. "I give thanks to God," he said, "that He hath not denied me the choicest of his gifts. For thy cure, good Murodac, thou must look to God; nevertheless, the bidding of the Apostle shall be surely done."

As he spoke he descended the steps, and approached the cripple, he stooped meekly down and raised him on his shoulders. "Then," said his biographer Aldred, "there might be seen hanging around the person of this illustrious king a wretched sordid beggar, whose squalid arms and loathsome hands embraced his neck, and were clasped together on that truly royal breast.—Some of those who were present laughed outright at what they saw; others gazed and mocked, and declared that the king had been ejected by a beggar-man; while others esteemed it but the utter simplicity and extreme folly of virtue."

Little regarding their murmurs, however, the king walked on, bending under his burden, in the direction of the abbey church. He himself was absorbed in prayer; but he had not advanced many steps when Murodac felt a sudden and wonderful change within him. The contracted muscles simultaneously relaxed, the bones knitted together, the diseased and mortified flesh was warmed with health, the feet that had till then adhered to the thighs, lost their hold, the joints moved freely, and, as he stretched his legs in their recovered freedom, the bystanders perceiving that the royal robes were stained with the blood which flowed from his open wounds. At this sight a fresh cry rose from the crowd of spectators; but the king did not heed it, and perhaps it did not even reach his ears.

"Surely enough hath been done," exclaimed Count Roland, whilst a strong expression of disgust passed across his features; "let the king free himself from the miserable creature, now that the will of St. Peter hath been accomplished; his royal robes are scarce the linen to bind a leper's wounds!"

"I doubt not," answered Aldred, to whom the indignant noble lord had turned whilst he spoke, as if to secure his interference with the king, "I doubt not our noble master will count his dress more richly adorned with yonder leper's blood than if it sparkled with a thousand gems. See, they are even now at the abbey doors; let us follow, gentlemen, if indeed we be not unworthy to behold the glory of God."

Although the church of St. Peter's was not yet entirely completed in every part, yet it had been opened for some time, and the high altar within the choir of the monks had been daily in use more than a year previously for the celebration of the Divine mysteries. Thither Edward now bent his steps, nor did he pause or relinquish his precious burden till he reached the altar steps; but bearing the beggar as though he was a holy holocaust, he laid him down before the altar, and there resigned him to the care of God and of St. Peter. Then, kneeling reverently by his side, with his hands clasped before his breast, he lifted up his streaming eyes to the figure of

the crucifix and said: "Many gifts and offerings has Thou suffered me, O Lord, to lay before Thy feet, but none so dear and precious as that which I offer Thee to-day. Go, Murodac," he added, turning to the cripple, "and if God hath heard thy prayer through the merits of His apostle, fail not to use the strength He hath restored to thee in making a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to his shrine."

At the words of the holy confessor, Murodac rose and stood before the multitude erect and without a vestige of deformity or disease upon him; and as the astonished spectators broke out into praises of God and St. Peter, and the crowd without mingled with their exclamations the name of their saintly monarch, Edward hastily retired that he might escape from the observation of the people and from the admiration that was painful to his humility.

The scene of this miracle, performed in the eyes of hundreds and attested by many witnesses is still among us; but it is marked by no monument or wayside cross; it lies in the busy thoroughfare half way between the Abbey Church of Westminster and the Houses of Parliament; and amid the countless crowds who daily pass, not one, perhaps, has dreamed that in the eyes of God and His angels, that path has once been made holy and beautiful by the humility of a royal saint.

CHAPTER II.—THE PROPHECY.

Weeks had passed since the incident we have described above, and the festival of Christmas was being kept in the court of Westminster with unusual splendor. The building which had been the object of so much solicitude was at length completed, and its solemn dedication was fixed for the feast of the Holy Innocents. To do honor to the sacred festival, and, at the same time, to celebrate the consecration of the church with extraordinary magnificence, the entire nobility of England had been summoned to the court, and Westminster had never displayed a more brilliant or more august assemblage.

It was the 27th of December, the preparations for the ceremony were rapidly advancing, and all hearts were filled with the expectation of to-morrow's gorgeous spectacle. Apart from the gay and noble throng Edward sat in a distant chamber of his palace, and the monk Aldred was his only companion. The room exhibited a strange confusion, and the royal inmate bore the signs of weariness and care. On the table and covering the floor beside him were papers and parchments without number; deeds of gifts and endowments, rent rolls of the crown lands about to be made over to the new abbey; whilst standing apart, arranged by his own hands, were the vessels and sacred ornaments which were to be his dedication offering at the altar.

"It is well nigh over now, Aldred," said the king, as he sank back in his chair, with an unusual languor in his look and tone. "I will give the papers to thy keeping, and thou wilt see that the sacred vessels are carried to the church."

"The festivities have fatigued your grace," observed the monk, as he took the papers from King Edward's hand. "You will surely need rest after this ceremony is brought to an end."

"And I shall have it, father," answered the king. "I am tired, as you say; for, of a truth, three successive days to bear the weight of crown and sceptre, and all this pomp of royalty, with the voice whispering in my heart that it is the closing scene, and the gates of eternity opening on my soul, has been a toilsome labor, and I shall be glad of rest; and the rest," he added, "will be, I humbly trust, with God."

"My liege," said Aldred, "I had trusted that the fever which threatened you on Christmas night had passed away; I have watched you with anxious eyes during the banquet scenes of these three days, nor have I been able to trace a return of the attack; and can it be possible that your grace is suffering still?"

"Only in the body, Aldred," replied the king; "think not because I speak thus wearily, that the languor is in my heart, for, I thank God, never has my soul been filled with a more abundant joy than during the sacred solemnities with which we have celebrated the sweet mysteries of Bethlehem. But it is hard to keep down nature; and though I would not sadden my people by yielding to the sickness whilst they were keeping holiday it had been preying on my heart. Even therefore was it that I hastened the dedication; for know, Aldred, that if God grant me mercy the Epiphany which these eyes are to behold will be in heaven and not on earth."

"My lord," said Aldred, "with something of remembrance in his tone, "bethink you that God's times are in His own hand; it is well for us to be ready when he calls, yet scarcely wise to reckon so surely on the day of our visitation."

"Father," replied Edward, whilst his voice sank almost to a whisper, and a blush passed over his pale cheek, as though he hesitated to speak of some cherished secret, "canst thou recall the day when the two palmers from Pales-