WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR—THE STORY OF HEREWARD THE WAKE

William of Normandy had won the battle of Hastings, but he had not won England. Harold was dead, but the people would not call William king. For five days after the battle he waited, expecting the English lords to come to do homage to him, as their new master. But not one came. The people were full of grief and anger at the death of Harold, and of sullen hate for the conqueror. They would not own him as king.

After five days, William waited no longer. More soldiers had come from Normandy to replace those who had been killed at the battle of Hastings. With these new soldiers William marched through the land, and so fierce and terrible was he, that he forced the people to own him as king. By December all the south of England was in William's power, and on Christmas Day he was crowned at Westminster.

Scarcely a year before, the people had crowded to the same place to see Harold, and to cheer and welcome him as their king. Now all was changed. The people were sullen and silent, the way was lined with Norman soldiers, and Norman faces and Norman costumes were everywhere to be seen.

Stigand, the archbishop who had crowned Harold, refused to crown William, and William in wrath retorted that he was no true bishop, and that he did not wish to be crowned by him. Yet William forced Stigand to be present at the coronation.

Once again, as so short a time before, the voice of the bishop rang through the great church, "Do you take William of Normandy to be your king?" Once again the answer came, "We do." But this time the question was asked and answered in French, and the English voices were silent.

So the question was asked again in English, and the answer came from unwilling English lips, but not from English hearts, "We do." Then an echoing cry was heard without—not the shout of a glad people, but a cry of agony and despair.

The Norman soldiers, instead of keeping order, had begun to fight and kill. They had set fire to the houses near the church, and were slaying and robbing. Those within the church rushed out, some in fear, others eager to join the robbers. William was left alone with only the bishops and the priests.

Then for the first time in his life the great William was afraid. Through the windows of the church he could see the flicker of flames, and could hear the savage yells of soldiers and the shrieks of frightened women and children. Yet he did not know whether the English had risen in revolt, or whether it was only his own wild soldiers who were attacking the people.

But whatever it might be William meant to be King of England—a king crowned and anointed. So although his cheek was pale and his voice shook, he forced the archbishop to go on with the ceremony.

With trembling hands the archbishop placed the crown upon William's head—not Harold's crown, but a new one glittering with splendid gems—and in a hurried and mumbling voice he finished the service. Then William, kneeling at the altar, promised to fear God, to rule the people well, and to keep the laws of Alfred and Edward, "so that the people be true to me," he added.

As he stood up no shout greeted him, the church was silent and empty. He passed down the aisle in lonely splendour, followed only by the trembling priests, while without was heard the sound of the crackling flames mingled with fierce yells and curses.

William was crowned, but the English rejected him as king. They wanted an English king. But alas! there was no strong man whom they could choose. Harold's brave brothers had all died with him as Hastings.

There, too, had fallen the noblest and the best of the English lords. There was no one left who seemed to have any right to the throne, except the little boy Edgar the Ætheling, Edmund Ironside's grandson. Even he did not seem to be English, for he had lived nearly all his life in Hungary, and could hardly speak his own language. But at least he was not Norman, so the English chose him to be king.

The people of Northumberland rose in fierce rebellion against William, and he in as fierce anger marched against them with his soldiers. From north to south he laid waste to the country, burning towns, destroying farms, killing cattle, murdering the people, till the whole of Northumberland was one dreary desert. So fierce and terrible was his wrath that even the ploughs and farming tools were destroyed, and the land lay untilled and desolate.

Those of the people who were not killed in battle died miserably of cold and hunger. When William marched south again, he left only blackened ruins and dismal waste, where happy homes and smiling fields had been.

From very need, most of English lords now bowed to William and owned him master. Even Edgar came to him to do homage and strange to say William treated him kindly. Perhaps he felt that he was so strong and Edgar so weak, that he had no need to fear him.

Still the English were not all conquered. In the Isle of Ely, in what is called the Fen country, the people made one last stand. There, under the leadership of a brave Englishman called Hereward, they held out against William.

In the time of Edward the Confessor, Hereward had been banished for some reason, perhaps because he had quarrelled with one of Edward's Norman friends. He had lived for many years across the sea in a country called Flanders. But when he heard that Edward was dead, that Harold was also dead, and that William the Norman had seized the crown of England, Hereward came back determined to fight for his own land.

All the noblest and bravest of the English who still resisted William gathered to Hereward and they made their camp in the Isle of Ely. The monks who already lived there shared their monastery with the soldiers. So in the great hall peaceful monks and warlike men sat side by side at meals, and the walls which had been hung with holy relics and pictures of saints were now covered with weapons and armour.

Hereward built a castle at Ely, but it was a wooden one, while all through England the Normans were building strong fortresses of stone, such as the English had never seen before.

Hereward hoped that, from his castle at Ely, he would gradually win all England again. But the hope was vain, for William was too strong. Yet it took him a long time to conquer Hereward. Like Harold, Hereward was a good general, and he was both clever and brave.

After trying vainly to find a way through the marshes and fens to Hereward's camp, William decided at last to build a road strong enough and broad enough to carry his army over.

So the soldiers set to work at once with stones, wood, and skins of animals, to make a strong, broad, solid road. When it was finished William's men marched over it to attack Hereward's men in their own camp, but the English fought desperately, and the Normans were driven back.

In those days people believed in witches. So William next found a poor old woman who was supposed to be a witch. He built a wooden tower, placed it on wheels, and with the witch inside, pushed it along the road, at the head of the Norman army.

This poor old woman was meant to cast a spell over the English soldiers, so that they would not be able to fight any more. Of course she could really do them no harm, and Hereward and his men captured the tower and burned it up, witch and all. Again William had failed.

Hereward had brought large stores of food into the camp, and he and his men hunted wild animals, so that there was always enough to eat, although the fare was plain. But the monks who were used to living a very easy life and to having fine things to eat and drink, grew tired of fighting and of plain food, and they sent a message to William telling him of a secret way through the fens to the camp.

So Hereward who could not be conquered was betrayed.

One evening the Norman soldiers, led by the wicked monks, came stealthily through the thick woods among the marshes. In the gathering dusk they came creeping, silent and eager. Then, when they were close upon the camp, they burst with wild cries upon the unsuspecting English, and, when the sun had set, the sky was red with the flames from burning English homes.

Many lay dead, many were taken prisoners. To the prisoners William was very cruel. He put out their eyes, cut off their hands, and treated them so dreadfully that they cried aloud, "It is better to fall into the hands of God than into those of the Norman tyrant."

Hereward escaped, and with some of his bravest followers continued to fight, although all hope of freedom for England was gone. But he, too, yielded at length and bowed his proud head to the conqueror. William of Normandy was at last master of all England. He was indeed William the Conqueror.