

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

[Illustrated & Engraved & Mapped]



Jacob Abbott

William the Conqueror

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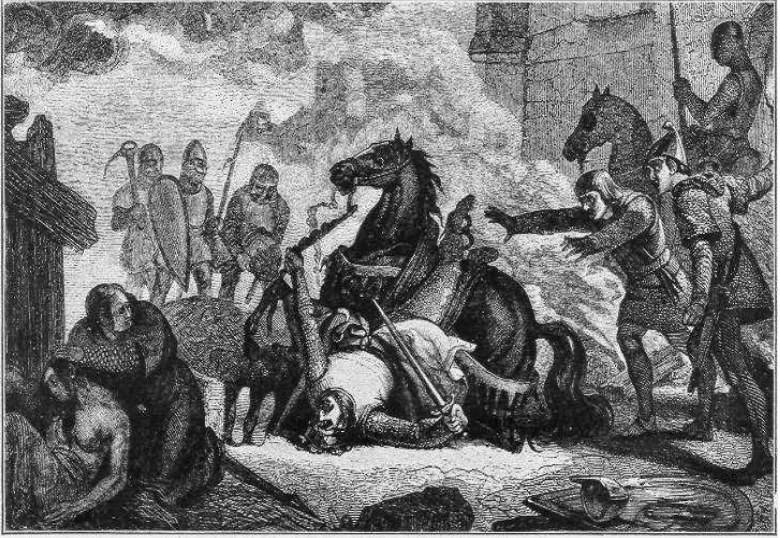
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WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR WOUNDED
AT THE BURNING OF THE CITY OF MANTES.

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PREFACE



IN selecting the subjects for the successive vo-

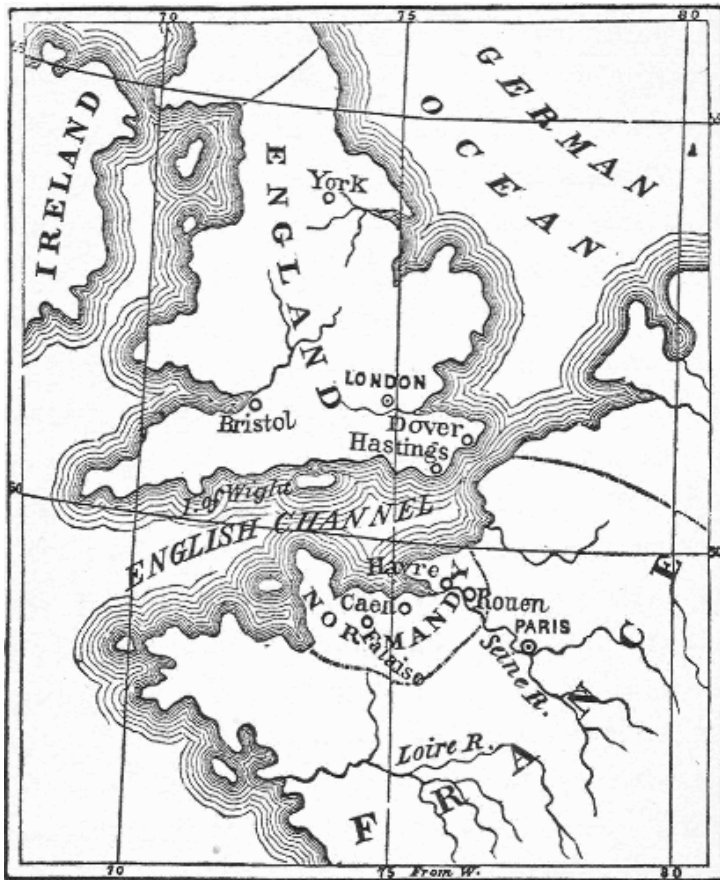
lumes of this series, it has been the object of the author to look for the names of those great personages whose histories constitute useful, and not merely entertaining, knowledge. There are certain names which are familiar, as names, to all mankind; and every person who seeks for any degree of mental cultivation, feels desirous of informing himself of the leading outlines of their history, that he may know, in brief, what it was in their characters or their doings which has given them so widely-

extended a fame. This knowledge, which it seems incumbent on every one to obtain in respect to such personages as Hannibal, Alexander, Cesar, Cleopatra, Darius, Xerxes, Alfred, William the Conqueror, Queen Elizabeth, and Mary Queen of Scots, it is the design and object of these volumes to communicate, in a faithful, and, at the same time, if possible, in an attractive manner. Consequently, great historical names alone are selected; and it has been the writer's aim to present the prominent and leading traits in their characters, and all the important events in their lives, in a bold and free manner, and yet in the plain and simple language which is so obviously required in works which aim at permanent and practical usefulness.

NORMANDY

ONE of those great events in English history, which occur at distant intervals, and form, respectively, a sort of bound or landmark, to which all other events, preceding or following them for centuries, are referred, is what is called the Norman Conquest. The Norman Conquest was, in fact, the accession of William, duke of Normandy, to the English throne. This accession was not altogether a matter of military force, for William claimed a *right* to the throne, which, if not altogether perfect, was, as he maintained, at any rate superior to that of the prince against whom he contended. The rightfulness of his claim was, however, a matter of little consequence, except so far as the moral influence of it aided him in gaining possession. The right to rule was, in those days, rather more openly and nakedly, though not much more really, than it is now, the right of the strongest.

Normandy, William's native land, is a very rich and beautiful province in the north of France. The following map shows its situation:



MAP OF ENGLAND AND PART OF FRANCE,
SHOWING THE SITUATION OF NORMANDY

It lies, as will be seen upon the map, on the coast of France, adjoining the English Channel. The Channel is here irregular in form, but may be, perhaps, on the average, one hundred miles wide. The line of coast on the southern side of the Channel, which forms, of course, the northern border of Normandy, is a range of cliffs,

which are almost perpendicular toward the sea, and which frown forbiddingly upon every ship that sails along the shore. Here and there, it is true, a river opens a passage for itself among these cliffs from the interior, and these river mouths would form harbors into which ships might enter from the offing, were it not that the northwestern winds prevail so generally, and drive such a continual swell of rolling surges in upon the shore, that they choke up all these estuary openings, as well as every natural indentation of the land, with shoals and bars of sand and shingle. The reverse is the case with the northern, or English shore of this famous channel. There the harbors formed by the mouths of the rivers, or by the sinuosities of the shore, are open and accessible, and at the same time sheltered from the winds and the sea. Thus, while the northern or English shore has been, for many centuries, all the time enticing the seaman in and out over the calm, deep, and sheltered waters which there penetrate the land, the southern side has been an almost impassable barrier, consisting of a long line of frowning cliffs, with every opening through it choked with shoals and sand-banks, and guarded by the rolling and tumbling of surges which scarcely ever rest.

It is in a great measure owing to these great physical differences between the two shores, that the people who live upon the one side, though of the same stock and origin with those who live upon the other, have become

so vastly superior to them in respect to naval exploits and power. They are really of the same stock and origin, since both England and the northern part of France were overrun and settled by what is called the Scandinavian race, that is, people from Norway, Denmark, and other countries on the Baltic. These people were called the *Northmen* in the histories of those times. Those who landed in England are generally termed *Danes*, though but a small portion of them came really from Denmark. They were all, however, of the same parent stock, and possessed the same qualities of courage, energy, and fearless love of adventure and of danger which distinguish their descendants at the present day. They came down in those early times in great military hordes, and in fleets of piratical ships, through the German Ocean and the various British seas, braving every hardship and every imaginable danger, to find new regions to dwell in, more genial, and fertile, and rich than their own native northern climes. In these days they evince the same energy, and endure equal privations and hardships, in hunting whales in the Pacific Ocean; in overrunning India, and seizing its sources of wealth and power; or in sallying forth, whole fleets of adventurers at a time, to go more than half round the globe, to dig for gold in California. The times and circumstances have changed, but the race and spirit are the same.

Normandy takes its name from the Northmen. It was the province of France which the Northmen made peculiarly their own. They gained access to it from the sea by the River Seine, which, as will be seen from the map, flows, as it were, through the heart of the country. The lower part of this river, and the sea around its mouth, are much choked up with sand and gravel, which the waves have been for ages washing in. Their incessant industry would result in closing up the passage entirely, were it not that the waters of the river must have an outlet; and thus the current, setting outward, wages perpetual war with the surf and surges which are continually breaking in. The expeditions of the Northmen, however, found their way through all these obstructions. They ascended the river with their ships, and finally gained a permanent settlement in the country. They had occupied the country for some centuries at the time when our story begins—the province being governed by a line of princes—almost, if not quite, independent sovereigns—called the *Dukes of Normandy*.

The first Duke of Normandy, and the founder of the line—the chieftain who originally invaded and conquered the country—was a wild and half-savage hero from the north, named *Rollo*. He is often, in history, called Rollo the Dane. Norway was his native land. He was a chieftain by birth there, and, being of a wild and adventurous disposition, he collected a band of followers, and committed

with them so many piracies and robberies, that at length the king of the country expelled him.

Rollo seems not to have considered this banishment as any very great calamity, since, far from interrupting his career of piracy and plunder, it only widened the field on which he was to pursue it. He accordingly increased the equipment and the force of his fleet, enlisted more followers, and set sail across the northern part of the German Ocean toward the British shores.

Off the northwestern coast of Scotland there are some groups of mountainous and gloomy islands, which have been, in many different periods of the world, the refuge of fugitives and outlaws. Rollo made these islands his rendezvous now; and he found collected there many other similar spirits, who had fled to these lonely retreats, some on account of political disturbances in which they had become involved, and some on account of their crimes. Rollo's impetuous, ardent, and self-confident character inspired them with new energy and zeal. They gathered around him as their leader. Finding his strength thus increasing, he formed a scheme of concentrating all the force that he could command, so as to organize a grand expedition to proceed to the southward, and endeavor to find some pleasant country which they could seize and settle upon, and make their own. The desperate adventurers around him were ready enough to enter into this scheme. The fleet was refitted, provisioned, and

equipped. The expedition was organized, arms and munitions of war provided, and when all was ready they set sail. They had no definite plan in respect to the place of their destination, their intention being to make themselves a home on the first favorable spot that they should find.

They moved southward, cruising at first along the coast of Scotland, and then of England. They made several fruitless attempts to land on the English shores, but were every where repulsed. The time when these events took place was during the reign of Alfred the Great. Through Alfred's wise and efficient measures the whole of his frontier had been put into a perfect state of defense, and Rollo found that there was no hope for him there. He accordingly moved on toward the Straits of Dover; but, before passing them, he made a descent upon the coast of Flanders. Here there was a country named Hainault. It was governed by a potentate called the Count of Hainault. Rollo made war upon him, defeated him in battle, took him prisoner, and then compelled the countess his wife to raise and pay him an immense sum for his ransom. Thus he replenished his treasury by an exploit which was considered in those days very great and glorious. To perpetrate such a deed now, unless it were on a *very* great scale, would be to incur the universal reprobation of mankind; but Rollo, by doing it then, not only enriched his coffers, but acquired a very extended and honorable fame.

For some reason or other, Rollo did not attempt to take permanent possession of Hainault, but, after receiving his ransom money, and replenishing his ammunition and stores, he sailed away with his fleet, and, turning westward, he passed through the Straits of Dover, and cruised along the coast of France. He found that the country on the French side of the channel, though equally rich and beautiful with the opposite shore, was in a very different state of defense. He entered the mouth of the Seine. He was embarrassed at first by the difficulties of the navigation in entering the river; but as there was no efficient enemy to oppose him, he soon triumphed over these difficulties, and, once fairly in the river, he found no difficulty in ascending to Rouen.

In the mean time, the King of France, whose name was Charles, and who is generally designated in history as Charles the Simple, began to collect an army to meet the invader. Rollo, however, had made himself master of Rouen before Charles was able to offer him any effectual opposition. Rouen was already a strong place, but Rollo made it stronger. He enlarged and repaired the fortifications, built store-houses, established a garrison, and, in a word, made all the arrangements requisite for securing an impregnable position for himself and his army.

A long and obstinate war followed between Rollo and Charles, Rollo being almost uniformly victorious in the combats that took place. Rollo became more and more proud and imperious in proportion to his success. He

drove the French king from port to port, and from field to field, until he made himself master of a large part of the north of France, over which he gradually established a regular government of his own. Charles struggled in vain to resist these encroachments. Rollo continually defeated him; and finally he shut him up and besieged him in Paris itself. At length Charles was compelled to enter into negotiations for peace. Rollo demanded that the large and rich tract on both sides of the Seine, next the sea—the same, in fact, that now constitutes Normandy—should be ceded to him and his followers for their permanent possession. Charles was extremely unwilling thus to alienate a part of his kingdom. He would not consent to cede it absolutely and entirely, so as to make it an independent realm. It should be a *dukedom*, and not a separate *kingdom*, so that it might continue still a part off his own royal domains—Rollo to reign over it as a duke, and to acknowledge a general allegiance to the French king. Rollo agreed to this. The war had been now protracted so long that he began himself to desire repose. It was more than thirty years since the time of his landing.

Charles had a daughter named Giselle, and it was a part of the treaty of peace that she should become Rollo's wife. He also agreed to become a Christian. Thus there were, in the execution of the treaty, three ceremonies to be performed. First, Rollo was to *do homage*, as it was called, for his duchy; for it was the custom in those

days for subordinate princes, who held their possessions of some higher and more strictly sovereign power, to perform certain ceremonies in the presence of their superior lord, which was called doing homage. These ceremonies were of various kinds in different countries, though they were all intended to express the submission of the dependent prince to the superior authority and power of the higher potentate of whom he held his lands. This act of homage was therefore to be performed, and next to the homage was to come the baptism, and after the baptism, the marriage.

When, however, the time came for the performance of the first of these ceremonies, and all the great chieftains and potentates of the respective armies were assembled to witness it, Rollo, it was found, would not submit to what the customs of the French monarchy required. He ought to kneel before the king, and put his hands, clasped together, between the king's hands, in token of submission, and then to kiss his foot, which was covered with an elegantly fashioned slipper on such occasions. Rollo would do all except the last; but that, no remonstrances, urgencies, or persuasions would induce him to consent to.

And yet it was not a very unusual sign or token of political subordination to sovereign power in those days. The pope had exacted it even of an emperor a hundred years before; and it is continued by that dignitary to the present day, on certain state occasions; though in the

case of the pope, there is embroidered on the slipper which the kneeling suppliant kisses, a *cross*, so that he who humbles himself to this ceremony may consider, if he pleases, that it is that sacred symbol of the divine Redeemer's sufferings and death that he so reverently kisses, and not the human foot by which it is covered.

Rollo could not be made to consent, himself, to kiss King Charles's foot; and, finally, the difficulty was compromised by his agreeing to do it by proxy. He ordered one of his courtiers to perform that part of the ceremony. The courtier obeyed, but when he came to lift the foot, he did it so rudely and lifted it so high as to turn the monarch over off his seat. This made a laugh, but Rollo was too powerful for Charles to think of resenting it.

A few days after this Rollo was baptized in the cathedral church at Rouen, with great pomp and parade; and then, on the following week, he was married to Giselle. The din of war in which he had lived for more than thirty years was now changed into festivities and rejoicings. He took full and peaceable possession of his dukedom, and governed it for the remainder of his days with great wisdom, and lived in great prosperity. He made it, in fact, one of the richest and most prosperous realms in Europe, and laid the foundations of still higher degrees of greatness and power, which were gradually developed after his death. And this was the origin of Normandy.

It appears thus that this part of France was seized by Rollo and his Northmen partly because it was nearest at

hand to them, being accessible from the English Channel through the River Seine, and partly on account of its exceeding richness and fertility. It has been famous in every age as the garden of France, and travelers at the present day gaze upon its picturesque and beautiful scenery with the highest admiration and pleasure. And yet the scenes which are there presented to the view are wholly unlike those which constitute picturesque and beautiful rural scenery in England and America. In Normandy, the land is not inclosed. No hedges, fences, or walls break the continuity of the surface, but vast tracts spread in every direction, divided into plots and squares, of various sizes and forms, by the varieties of cultivation, like a vast carpet of an irregular tessellated pattern, and varied in the color by a thousand hues of brown and green. Here and there vast forests extend, where countless thousands of trees, though ancient and venerable in form, stand in rows, mathematically arranged, as they were planted centuries ago. These are royal demesnes, and hunting grounds, and parks connected with the country palaces of the kings or the chateaux of the ancient nobility. The cultivators of the soil live, not, as in America, in little farm-houses built along the road-sides and dotting the slopes of the hills, but in compact villages, consisting of ancient dwellings of brick or stone, densely packed together along a single street, from which the laborers issue, in picturesque dresses, men and women together, every morning, to go miles, perhaps, to the scene of their daily toil. Except these villages, and the

occasional appearance of an ancient chateau, no habitations are seen. The country seems a vast solitude, teeming every where, however, with fertility and beauty. The roads which traverse these scenes are magnificent avenues, broad, straight, continuing for many miles an undeviating course over the undulations of the land, with nothing to separate them from the expanse of cultivation and fruitfulness on either hand but rows of ancient and venerable trees. Between these rows of trees the traveler sees an interminable vista extending both before him and behind him. In England, the public road winds beautifully between wails overhung with shrubbery, or hedge-rows, with stiles or gateways here and there, revealing hamlets or cottages, which appear and disappear in a rapid and endlessly varied succession, as the road meanders, like a rivulet, between its beautiful banks. In a word, the public highway in England is beautiful; in France it is grand.

The greatest city in Normandy in modern times is Rouen, which is situated, as will be seen by referring to the map at the commencement of this chapter, on the Seine, half way between Paris and the sea. At the mouth of the Seine, or, rather, on the northern shore of the estuary which forms the mouth of the river, is a small inlet, which has been found to afford, on the whole, the best facilities for a harbor that can be found on the whole line of the coast. Even this little port, however, is so filled up with sand, that when the water recedes at low tide, it leaves

the shipping all aground. The inlet would, in fact, probably become filled up entirely were it not for artificial means taken to prevent it. There are locks and gateways built in such a manner as to retain a large body of water until the tide is down, and then these gates are opened, and the water is allowed to rush out all together, carrying with it the mud and sand which had begun to accumulate. This haven, being, on the whole, the best and most commodious on the coast, was called *the harbor*, or, as the French expressed it in their language, *le havre*, the word *havre* meaning harbor. In fact, the name was in full *le havre de grace*, as if the Normans considered it a matter of special good luck to have even such a chance of a harbor as this at the mouth of their river. The English world have, however, dropped all except the principal word from this long phrase of designation, and call the port simply Havre.

From Rollo the line of Dukes of Normandy continued in uninterrupted succession down to the time of William, a period of about a hundred and fifty years. The country increased all the time in wealth, in population, and in prosperity. The original inhabitants were not, however, expelled; they remained as peasants, herdsman, and agriculturists, while the Norman chieftains settled over them, holding severally large estates of land which William granted them. The races gradually became intermingled, though they continued for many centuries to evince the superior spirit and energy which was infused

into the population by the Norman stock. In fact, it is thought by many observers that that superiority continues to the present day.

BIRTH OF WILLIAM

ALTHOUGH Rouen is now very far before all the

other cities of Normandy in point of magnitude and importance, and though Rollo, in his conquest of the country, made it his principal head-quarters and his main stronghold, it did not continue exclusively the residence of the dukes of Normandy in after years. The father of William the Conqueror was Robert, who became subsequently the duke, the sixth in the line. He resided, at the time when William was born, in a great castle at Falaise. Falaise, as will be seen upon the map, is west of Rouen, and it stands, like Rouen, at some distance from the sea. The castle was built upon a hill, at a little distance from the town. It has long since ceased to be habitable, but the ruins still remain, giving a picturesque but mournful beauty to the eminence which they crown. They are often visited by travelers, who go to see the place where the great hero and conqueror was born.

The hill on which the old castle stands terminates, on one side, at the foot of the castle walls, in a precipice of rocks, and on two other sides, also, the ascent is too steep to be practicable for an enemy. On the fourth side there is a more gradual declivity, up which the fortress could be approached by means of a winding roadway. At the foot of this roadway was the town. The access to the

castle from the town was defended by a ditch and draw-bridge, with strong towers on each side of the gateway to defend the approach. There was a beautiful stream of water which meandered along through the valley, near the town, and, after passing it, it disappeared, winding around the foot of the precipice which the castle crowned. The castle inclosures were shut in with walls of stone of enormous thickness; so thick, in fact, they were, that some of the apartments were built in the body of the wall. There were various buildings within the inclosure. There was, in particular, one large, square tower, several stories in height, built of white stone. This tower, it is said, still stands in good preservation. There was a chapel, also, and various other buildings and apartments within the walls, for the use of the ducal family and their numerous retinue of servants and attendants, for the storage of munitions of war, and for the garrison. There were watch-towers on the corners of the walls, and on various lofty projecting pinnacles, where solitary sentinels watched, the livelong day and night, for any approaching danger. These sentinels looked down on a broad expanse of richly-cultivated country, fields beautified with groves of trees, and with the various colors presented by the changing vegetation, while meandering streams gleamed with their silvery radiance among them, and hamlets of laborers and peasantry were scattered here and there, giving life and animation to the scene.