



# THE LITTLE DUKE

RICHARD THE FEARLESS

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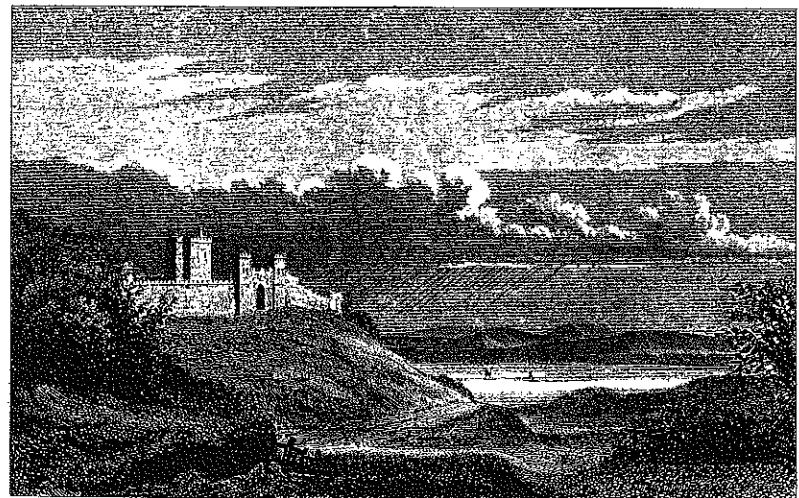
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## CHAPTER I

ON a bright autumn day, as long ago as the year 943, there was a great bustle in the Castle of Bayeux in Normandy.

The hall was large and low, the roof arched, and supported on thick short columns, almost like the crypt of a Cathedral; the walls were thick, and the windows, which had no glass, were very small, set in such a depth of wall that there was a wide deep window seat, upon which the rain might beat, without reaching the interior of the room. And even if it had come in, there was nothing for it to hurt, for the walls were of rough stone, and the floor of tiles. There was a fire at each end of this great dark apartment, but there were no chimneys over the ample hearths, and the smoke curled about in thick white folds

in the vaulted roof, adding to the wreaths of soot, which made the hall look still darker.

The fire at the lower end was by far the largest and hottest. Great black cauldrons hung over it, and servants, both men and women, with red faces, bare and grimed arms, and long iron hooks, or pots and pans, were busied around it. At the other end, which was raised about three steps above the floor of the hall, other servants were engaged. Two young maidens were strewing fresh rushes on the floor; some men were setting up a long table of rough boards, supported on trestles, and then ranging upon it silver cups, drinking horns, and wooden trenchers.

Benches were placed to receive most of the guests, but in the middle, at the place of honour, was a high chair with very thick crossing legs, and the arms curiously carved with lions' faces and claws; a clumsy wooden footstool was set in front, and the silver drinking-cup on the table was of far more beautiful workmanship than the others, richly chased with vine leaves and grapes, and figures of little boys with goats' legs. If

that cup could have told its story, it would have been a strange one, for it had been made long since, in the old Roman times, and been carried off from Italy by some Northman pirate.

From one of these scenes of activity to the other, there moved a stately old lady: her long thick light hair, hardly touched with grey, was bound round her head, under a tall white cap, with a band passing under her chin: she wore a long sweeping dark robe, with wide hanging sleeves, and thick gold ear-rings and necklace, which had possibly come from the same quarter as the cup. She directed the servants, inspected both the cookery and arrangements of the table, held council with an old steward, now and then looked rather anxiously from the window, as if expecting some one, and began to say something about fears that these loitering youths would not bring home the venison in time for Duke William's supper.

Presently, she looked up rejoiced, for a few notes of a bugle-horn were sounded; there was a clattering of feet, and in a few moments there

bounded into the hall a boy of about eight years old, his cheeks and large blue eyes bright with air and exercise, and his long light-brown hair streaming behind him, as he ran forward flourishing a bow in his hand, and crying out, "I hit him, I hit him! Dame Astrida, do you hear? 'Tis a stag of ten branches, and I hit him in the neck."

"You, my Lord Richard! You killed him?"

"Oh, no, I only struck him. It was Osmond's shaft that took him in the eye, and—Look you, Fru Astrida, he came thus through the wood, and I stood here, it might be, under the great elm with my bow thus"— And Richard was beginning to act over again the whole scene of the deer-hunt, but Fru, that is to say, Lady Astrida, was too busy to listen, and broke in with, "Have they brought home the haunch?"

"Yes, Walter is bringing it. I had a long arrow—"

A stout forester was at this instant seen bringing in the venison, and Dame Astrida hastened



to meet it, and gave directions, little Richard following her all the way, and talking as eagerly as if she was attending to him, showing how he shot, how Osmond shot, how the deer bounded, and how it fell, and then counting the branches of its antlers, always ending with, "This is something to tell my father. Do you think he will come soon?"

In the meantime two men entered the hall, one about fifty, the other, one- or two-and-twenty, both in hunting dresses of plain leather, crossed by broad embroidered belts, supporting a knife, and a bugle-horn. The elder was broad-shouldered, sun-burnt, ruddy, and rather stern-looking; the younger, who was also the taller, was slightly made, and very active, with a bright keen grey eye, and merry smile. These were Dame Astrida's son, Sir Eric de Centeville, and her grandson, Osmond; and to their care Duke William of Normandy had committed his only child, Richard, to be fostered, or brought up.<sup>1</sup>

It was always the custom among the Northmen, that young princes should thus be put un-

der the care of some trusty vassal, instead of being brought up at home, and one reason why the Centevilles had been chosen by Duke William was, that both Sir Eric and his mother spoke only the old Norwegian tongue, which he wished young Richard to understand well, whereas, in other parts of the Duchy, the Normans had forgotten their own tongue, and had taken up what was then called the Languéd'oui, a language between German and Latin, which was the beginning of French.

On this day, Duke William himself was expected at Bayeux, to pay a visit to his son before setting out on a journey to settle the disputes between the Counts of Flanders and Montreuil, and this was the reason of Fru Astrida's great preparations. No sooner had she seen the haunch placed upon a spit, which a little boy was to turn before the fire, than she turned to dress something else, namely, the young Prince Richard himself, whom she led off to one of the upper rooms, and there he had full time to talk, while she, great lady though she was, herself combed

smooth his long flowing curls, and fastened his short scarlet cloth tunic, which just reached to his knee, leaving his neck, arms, and legs bare. He begged hard to be allowed to wear a short, beautifully ornamented dagger at his belt, but this Fru Astrida would not allow.

"You will have enough to do with steel and dagger before your life is at an end," said she, "without seeking to begin over soon."

"To be sure I shall," answered Richard. "I will be called Richard of the Sharp Axe, or the Bold Spirit, I promise you, Fru Astrida. We are as brave in these days as the Sigurds and Ragnars you sing of! I only wish there were serpents and dragons to slay here in Normandy."

"Never fear but you will find even too many of them," said Dame Astrida; "there be dragons of wrong here and everywhere, quite as venomous as any in my Sagas."

"I fear them not," said Richard, but half understanding her, "if you would only let me have the dagger! But, hark! hark!" he darted to the



window. "They come, they come! There is the banner of Normandy."

Away ran the happy child, and never rested till he stood at the bottom of the long, steep, stone stair, leading to the embattled porch. Thither came the Baron de Centeville, and his son, to receive their Prince. Richard looked up at Osmond, saying, "Let me hold his stirrup," and then sprang up and shouted for joy, as under the arched gateway there came a tall black horse, bearing the stately form of the Duke of Normandy. His purple robe was fastened round him by a rich belt, sustaining the mighty weapon, from which he was called "William of the Long Sword," his legs and feet were cased in linked steel chainwork, his gilded spurs were on his heels, and his short brown hair was covered by his ducal cap of purple, turned up with fur, and a feather fastened in by a jewelled clasp. His brow was grave and thoughtful, and there was something both of dignity and sorrow in his face, at the first moment of looking at it, recalling the recollection that he had early lost his young

wife, the Duchess Emma, and that he was beset by many cares and toils; but the next glance conveyed encouragement, so full of mildness were his eyes, and so kind the expression of his lips.

And now, how bright a smile beamed upon the little Richard, who, for the first time, paid him the duty of a pupil in chivalry, by holding the stirrup while he sprang from his horse. Next, Richard knelt to receive his blessing, which was always the custom when children met their parents. The Duke laid his hand on his head, saying, "God of His mercy bless thee, my son," and lifting him in his arms, held him to his breast, and let him cling to his neck and kiss him again and again, before setting him down, while Sir Eric came forward, bent his knee, kissed the hand of his Prince, and welcomed him to his Castle.

It would take too long to tell all the friendly and courteous words that were spoken, the greeting of the Duke and the noble old Lady Astrida, and the reception of the Barons who had come in the train of their Lord. Richard was bidden

to greet them, but, though he held out his hand as desired, he shrank a little to his father's side, gazing at them in dread and shyness.

There was Count Bernard of Harcourt, called the "Dane,"<sup>2</sup> with his shaggy red hair and beard, to which a touch of grey had given a strange unnatural tint, his eyes looking fierce and wild under his thick eyebrows, one of them misshapen in consequence of a sword cut, which had left a broad red and purple scar across both cheek and forehead. There, too, came tall Baron Rainulf of Ferrières, cased in a linked steel hauberk, that rang as he walked, and the men-at-arms, with helmets and shields, looking as if Sir Eric's armour that hung in the hall had come to life and was walking about.

They sat down to Fru Astrida's banquet, the old Lady at the Duke's right hand, and the Count of Harcourt on his left; Osmond carved for the Duke, and Richard handed his cup and trencher. All through the meal, the Duke and his Lords talked earnestly of the expedition on which they were bound to meet Count Arnulf of

Flanders, on a little islet in the river Somme, there to come to some agreement, by which Arnulf might make restitution to Count Herluin of Montreuil, for certain wrongs which he had done him.

Some said that this would be the fittest time for requiring Arnulf to yield up some towns on his borders, to which Normandy had long laid claim, but the Duke shook his head, saying that he must seek no selfish advantage, when called to judge between others.

Richard was rather tired of their grave talk, and thought the supper very long; but at last it was over, the Grace was said, the boards which had served for tables were removed, and as it was still light, some of the guests went to see how their steeds had been bestowed, others to look at Sir Eric's horses and hounds, and others collected together in groups.

The Duke had time to attend to his little boy, and Richard sat upon his knee and talked, told about all his pleasures, how his arrow had hit the deer to-day, how Sir Eric let him ride

out to the chase on his little pony, how Osmond would take him to bathe in the cool bright river, and how he had watched the raven's nest in the top of the old tower.

Duke William listened, and smiled, and seemed as well pleased to hear as the boy was to tell. "And, Richard," said he at last, "have you nought to tell me of Father Lucas, and his great book? What, not a word? Look up, Richard, and tell me how it goes with the learning." 3

"Oh, father!" said Richard, in a low voice, playing with the clasp of his father's belt, and looking down, "I don't like those crabbed letters on the old yellow parchment."

"But you try to learn them, I hope!" said the Duke.

"Yes, father, I do, but they are very hard, and the words are so long, and Father Lucas will always come when the sun is so bright, and the wood so green, that I know not how to bear to be kept poring over those black hooks and strokes."

"Poor little fellow," said Duke William, smiling and Richard, rather encouraged, went on more boldly. "You do not know this reading, noble father?"

"To my sorrow, no," said the Duke.

"And Sir Eric cannot read, nor Osmond, nor any one, and why must I read, and cramp my fingers with writing, just as if I was a clerk, instead of a young Duke?" Richard looked up in his father's face, and then hung his head, as if half-ashamed of questioning his will, but the Duke answered him without displeasure.

"It is hard, no doubt, my boy, to you now, but it will be better for you in the end. I would give much to be able myself to read those holy books which I must now only hear read to me by a clerk, but since I have had the wish, I have had no time to learn as you have now."

"But Knights and Nobles never learn," said Richard.

"And do you think it a reason they never should? But you are wrong, my boy, for the

Kings of France and England, the Counts of Anjou, of Provence, and Paris, yes, even King Hako of Norway,<sup>4</sup> can all read.

"I tell you, Richard, when the treaty was drawn up for restoring this King Louis to his throne, I was ashamed to find myself one of the few crown vassals who could not write his name thereto."

"But none is so wise or so good as you, father," said Richard, proudly. "Sir Eric often says so."

"Sir Eric loves his Duke too well to see his faults," said Duke William; "but far better and wiser might I have been, had I been taught by such masters as you may be. And hark, Richard, not only can all Princes here read, but in England, King Ethelstane would have every Noble taught, they study in his own palace, with his brothers, and read the good words that King Alfred the truth-teller put into their own tongue for them."

"I hate the English," said Richard, raising his head and looking very fierce.

"Hate them? And wherefore?"

"Because they traitorously killed the brave Sea King Ragnar! Fru Astrida sings his death-song, which he chanted when the vipers were gnawing him to death, and he gloried to think how his sons would bring the ravens to feast upon the Saxon. Oh! had I been his son, how I would have carried on the feud! How I would have laughed when I cut down the false traitors, and burnt their palaces!" Richard's eyes kindled, and his words, as he spoke the old Norse language, flowed into the sort of wild verse in which the Sagas or legendary songs were composed, and which, perhaps, he was unconsciously repeating.

Duke William looked grave.

"Fru Astrida must sing you no more such Sagas," said he, "if they fill your mind with these revengeful thoughts, fit only for the worshippers of Odin and Thor. Neither Ragnar nor his sons knew better than to rejoice in this deadly vengeance, but we, who are Christians, know that it is for us to forgive."

"The English had slain their father!" said Richard, looking up with wondering dissatisfied eyes.

"Yes, Richard, and I speak not against them, for they were even as we should have been, had not King Harold the fair-haired driven your grandfather from Denmark. They had not been taught the truth, but to us it has been said, 'Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.' Listen to me, my son, Christian as is this nation of ours, this duty of forgiveness is too often neglected, but let it not be so with you. Bear in mind, whenever you see the Cross<sup>5</sup> marked on our banner, or carved in stone on the Churches, that it speaks of forgiveness to us; but of that pardon we shall never taste if we forgive not our enemies. Do you mark me, boy?"

Richard hesitated a little, and then said, "Yes, father, but I could never have pardoned, had I been one of Ragnar's sons."

"It may be that you will be in their case, Richard," said the Duke, "and should I fall, as it may well be I shall, in some of the contests

that tear to pieces this unhappy Kingdom of France, then, remember what I say now. I charge you, on your duty to God and to your father, that you keep up no feud, no hatred, but rather that you should deem me best revenged, when you have with heart and hand, given the fullest proof of forgiveness to your enemy. Give me your word that you will."

"Yes, father," said Richard, with rather a subdued tone, and resting his head on his father's shoulder. There was a silence for a little space, during which he began to revive into playfulness, to stroke the Duke's short curled beard, and play with his embroidered collar.

In so doing, his fingers caught hold of a silver chain, and pulling it out with a jerk, he saw a silver key attached to it. "Oh, what is that?" he asked eagerly. "What does that key unlock?"

"My greatest treasure," replied Duke William, as he replaced the chain and key within his robe.

"Your greatest treasure, father! Is that your coronet?"

"You will know one day," said his father, putting the little hand down from its too busy investigations; and some of the Barons at that moment returning into the hall, he had no more leisure to bestow on his little son.

The next day, after morning service in the Chapel, and breakfast in the hall, the Duke again set forward on his journey, giving Richard hopes he might return in a fortnight's time, and obtaining from him a promise that he would be very attentive to Father Lucas, and very obedient to Sir Eric de Centeville.

## CHAPTER II

ONE evening Fru Astrida sat in her tall chair in the chimney corner, her distaff with its load of flax in her hand, while she twisted and drew out the thread, and her spindle danced on the floor. Opposite to her sat, sleeping in his chair, Sir Eric de Centeville; Osmond was on a low bench within the chimney corner, trimming and shaping with his knife some feathers of the wild goose, which were to fly in a different fashion from their former one, and serve, not to wing the flight of a harmless goose, but of a sharp arrow.

The men of the household sat ranged on benches on one side of the hall, the women on the other; a great red fire, together with an immense flickering lamp which hung from the ceiling, supplied the light; the windows were closed with wooden shutters, and the whole apartment had a cheerful appearance. Two or