

CHAPTER III.

WILLIAM the Conqueror was succeeded by his son, William Rufus, to whom on his deathbed he had bequeathed the kingdom.¹ Knowing that beyond doubt his death must occur in a very few days, he ordered Rufus to set out for England at once, so that he would arrive there in ample time to meet any emergencies that might arise, and Rufus did, in fact, according to Malmsbury, arrive in England before he had received the news of his father's death.

When he arrived in England, knowing that all the claim he had to the throne was the devise of it to him by his father, he endeavored to win the allegiance of the English themselves through fair promises and plenteous gifts, and thus was started a new era for England. He promised them,

¹ Malmsbury, 327.

if they would support him in his claim to the throne, that he would give them better laws, that he would forbid unjust taxation, and would allow them to hunt in the forests. And he also promised them that such land as his father had taken from them he would return.¹ These were fair and pretty promises, and, of course, had their expected effect upon the English, who, upon learning of them, immediately flocked to his support, with the result that he was, in due time, crowned and recognized as the King of England.

Rufus was possessed of a very strong character and will, and was, withal, a very brilliant man, and was also in many respects much like unto his father. He was always shrewd enough to placate those whom he could not control by force, and rule with power and domineering strength those who exercised little authority and could cause him but little trouble.

He was tactful and expedient, especially

¹Saxon Chron., 466.

so during the early portion of his reign. William of Malmsbury says of him (page 327) that "he would no doubt have been a prince incomparable in our time had not his father's greatness eclipsed him."

During the early portion of his reign he did, in a measure, carry out some of the promises he had made. Some of the lands his father had taken he returned to its original owners, and for a time he allowed the people to hunt in the forests.

But when he came to feel that he was securely settled on his throne, he wavered in his kindly acts, and gradually withdrew these privileges. He regretted that he had allowed hunting in the forests, and so prohibited it. When his orders in this respect were disobeyed by those who had considered his former promises to be in good faith, he had them put to death.¹ He made it, practically, a capital offence to kill a stag.

His character seems to have undergone a

¹ Malmsbury, 339.

decided change during the time he held his kingly office. He started out rightly, and tried to rule in a manner not only to gain the confidence of his subjects, but their love. He did, in many instances, grant many privileges unsolicited on their part, and was doing apparently all in his power to make his reign a success, but whether or not the trouble he experienced later caused him to regret and repent of his former kindness, or whether it was the association of evil-minded advisers, is hard to say. His uncle Odo, formerly Bishop of Bayeux, whom William I. had imprisoned, he liberated and restored in a measure to influence and power. This he did against the advice of his father, given when on his deathbed.¹ But Odo, upon obtaining his release, expected he would wield more power and command more influence than was allowed to him. His counsels were listened to by Rufus, but they did not carry that weight and that power that Odo had wished for. Accordingly he headed a con-

¹ Ordericus Vitalis, 2-417.

spiracy against Rufus.¹ He solicited the aid of some of the most powerful Norman Barons, and by his pleadings and promises of grants to them on behalf of Robert, Rufus' brother, whom they were to recognize as king, he secured their aid in rebelling against Rufus. This conspiracy, well-planned and beautifully executed, had its result in open and defiant rebellion, and Robert was accordingly declared by the insurgents to be their king. The conspiracy grew with such rapidity and such force that Rufus had opposed to him nearly all the Norman Barons and their followers. He was in such sore straits that he was again compelled to curry favor with the English and to seek their aid. His reign up to this time having been wise, just and rather good, they supported him, and he defeated, in all the battles that were fought, the combination at work against him. He promised the English again that he would enact for them beneficial, good and just laws, and promised

¹ Florence of Worcester, 186.

them anew the privilege of hunting in the forests.¹ From this time on his character and his actions changed. He was no longer the good and generous king as formerly. He was not striving to do what was best for his subjects and to appease their wants. He seems rather to have assumed those traits of his father's which made his reign so much dreaded and feared. Having defeated and put down the conspiracy against him, he did not resume the peaceful condition of the nation as might have been expected of him. He engaged his army in war in France and in Scotland and in Wales, but during these wars and their many battles, Rufus did nothing in particular to entitle him to much credit.² A love of conquest seems to have possessed him, and a spirit craving for fight, and he later, through his sternness and his love for fight, came "to fear God little and man not at all."³

¹ Malmsbury, 329; Florence of Worcester, 191; Saxon Chron., 465; Huntingdon, 223.

² Malmsbury, 333.

³ Malmsbury, 334.

Having possessed himself of those lands formerly belonging to the barons who had conspired against him, and whom he had banished from the country, he commenced to crave money and riches and to desire to possess more land. This greed at first had for its object the oppression of the clergy. He neglected to care and provide for the religious offices, so as to have them in his own hands. When Bishops died he assumed control of their sees, and those that were a source of revenue to him he left unfilled.¹ He also desired now to revenge himself upon his brother Robert, so he invaded Normandy and there created havoc, and took many castles.²

Robert, seeing the way things were going with him, solicited of Philip, king of France, his aid, and together they attacked Rufus. Rufus, however, feeling the combination would be too much for him, did not risk battle when it could be avoided, but through generous bribes of money induced Philip to

¹ Malmesbury, 336.

² Saxon Chron., 467.

withdraw his forces, and so leave Robert to get along as best he could.¹ Robert, being deserted by his ally, could only capitulate, which he accordingly did. This left Rufus practically in possession of Normandy. He agreed with Robert, when they came together, that he would help him recover some of his Norman castles that had revolted against him, and would recognize him as Duke of Normandy.² In return for this Rufus was to receive the Earldoms of Eu and Cherburg, and to keep those castles he had won, and their peaceful occupancy by the English soldiers.

This war was a very expensive one to Rufus. He had to pay vast sums of money to meet its expenses, and to get it he taxed his subjects as usual, and he taxed them very heavily. The taxes were, of course, paid, but not without many and long grumblings and signs of bitterness and opposition.³

¹ Saxon Chron., 467. ² Florence of Worcester, 191.

³ Saxon Chron., 467.

In 1093 Rufus became very sick. While in this condition he became very penitent for his past misdeeds and wanted to make such amends as he could. He disposed of much land to the monasteries and promised he would never sell any of the churches again, and of course he promised better laws.¹

Afterwards when he had fully recovered, he repented of these acts, and took back again the land he had given away. The better laws, being merely promises, of course were not forthcoming.

Rufus's crowning acts of hardness and cruelty, however, occurred during the year 1096. His brother Robert desired to go on the second crusade, and had not sufficient money to defray the expense of the expedition. He therefore applied to Rufus for a loan. He offered to pawn Normandy for sufficient money for his purpose, if Rufus would get it for him. Rufus at this time did not have the money, but agreed to get it (10,000

¹Saxon Chron., 468.

marks) and so levied a most oppressive tax. He taxed everybody and everything. The "Bishops and Abbots in great numbers went to court to complain of the injury, observing that they could not raise so great an impost, and beseeching him to change his mind and remit the tax."¹ Rufus, however, was inexorable and implacable. He was determined to have the money and so declined their pleas, and compelled them to raise it, and to do so they took the gold from the shrines of their saints, robbed "their crucifixes, melted their chalices," and so obtained the money. "These acts, together with his severity, were the cause of many conspiracies among the nobles against him."²

The whole nation, nobles, clergy, and people, seemed to have been disgusted with him. Indiscriminate taxation and oppression, without one mitigating circumstance or need, or without offering to those unduly oppressed any consideration or greater liberties in other

¹ Malmesbury, 339; Florence of Worcester, 202.

² Malmesbury, 339.

ways, caused him to be hated and disliked. He was not feared to the extent his father was. The Conqueror's power and strength of character were respected; but Rufus was despised and loathed by every one. Since the early part of his reign he granted no reforms, yet, on the other hand, he did not interfere with them in the possession of their lands without reason. It is this, in all likelihood, that prevented more open and powerful rebellion against him, such as would surely have driven him from his throne. He never took land from his subjects unless they had rebelled against him, or had committed other acts of hostility. He never took lands from the religious houses, excepting that which he had previously given them during his illness. He seems to have simply taxed and taxed, and in other ways oppressed the people. He did retain in his own possession, unfilled at the time of his death, three bishoprics and twelve abbeys,¹ but he held them only for revenue. He did not take them

¹ Malmesbury, 346; Florence of Worcester, 207.

from their incumbent, but merely neglected to fill them when they became vacant. He did in some instances dispose of them outright for a rental. But the nobles and people were not disturbed in their lands. They held them without fear of molestation. Rufus, in this respect, must have been, beyond doubt, wise and tactful, and used this as a basis for preventing the discord among his people and nobles which would surely have meant his downfall. To the clergy he was very different. As a class they were powerful and strong, but could do absolutely nothing without the aid of the nobles. The nobles, having nothing to gain and much to lose, preferred to submit to taxation rather than risk the loss of their lands. The clergy bore most of the taxation, therefore grumbled most and wailed loud. The following extract, which forms part of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, written by one who was connected with the church, depicts Rufus undoubtedly as he was known to them; but in just what opinion he was held by the nobles and the people we

do not know, as there were no chroniclers among them. Rufus's acts of oppression being felt particularly by the clergy, it is hardly to be expected that they would write of him in an unbiased manner.

"He was powerful and stern over his lands and subjects, and toward his neighbors, and much to be dreaded; and through the concerts of evil men, which were always pleasing to him, and through his own avarice, he was ever vexing the people with armies and cruel taxes—for in his days all justice sank and all unrighteousness arose in the sight of God and the world." "He trampled on the church of God, and as to the Bishoprics and Abbacies, the incumbents of which died in his reign, he either sold them outright or kept them in his own hands and set them out to renters; . . . so that on the day on which he was killed he had in his own hands the Archbishopric of Canterbury, and the Bishoprics of Winchester and Salisbury and eleven Ab-

bacies, and all that was abominable to God and oppressive to men was common in William's (Rufus) time; therefore he was hated by most of his people and abhorred by God."¹

¹ Saxon Chron., 476.