

**CHAMBERS'S SUPPLEMENTARY READER,
NO. 3: THE NORMAN CONQUEST; LIFE OF
ALEXANDER SELKIRK; ANECDOTES OF
ELEPHANTS; SELECT POEMS ON INSECTS;
SELECTED FROM MISCELLANY OF
INSTRUCTIVE AND ENTERTAINING TRACTS**

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*(Selected from *Miscellany of Instructive and Entertaining Tracts*)*



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THE NORMAN CONQUEST.

THE most distinctly marked epoch in the history of our island is the conquest of England by the Normans in the end of the eleventh century. This period of British history has recently received much attention from historians; and perhaps the following brief narrative, in which we adopt the spirit, and avail ourselves of the investigations, of these historians, may be of popular service.

At the dawn of history our island was inhabited by different Celtic or Gaelic races. About the commencement of the Christian era the Romans invaded it, and having conquered the greater part of it, kept possession of it for four hundred years, governing and civilising the inhabitants. In the year 410, however, the Roman armies were called out of Britain, their services being required to assist in repelling the invasion of the German or barbarian races, which were pouring in upon the central parts of the Roman empire. Thus abandoned by the Romans, the island was for some time in a state of confusion, owing to the inroads which the Scots and Picts of the north, who had not been softened by intercourse with the Romans, were constantly making upon the Cambrians and Logrians of the south, who, though belonging to the same original stock with themselves, had, in consequence of Roman influence, lost much of their native wildness of character. Not able to defend themselves against the Scots and Picts, the Cambrians and Logrians invited the assistance of Hengst and Horsa, two German corsairs, who,

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roving the seas in quest of booty, chanced to land on the coast of Kent. Hengst and Horsa quickly brought into England an army of their own countrymen from that part of the continent which we now call Denmark; and these being followed by others of the same race from the Netherlands and Gaul, the island, in the course of sixty or seventy years, was overrun by a new population of Angles, Jutes, and Saxons, and the original Celtic inhabitants were pushed before them, and cooped up in a few corners, into which it was difficult to pursue them. The new inhabitants of England were gradually converted to Christianity by missionaries from Rome. For nearly three hundred years they remained broken up into six or seven separate little kingdoms or provinces; but at length, about the end of the ninth century, they were incorporated into one monarchy, called the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons. This kingdom included all that we now call England, except a considerable portion in the north called Northumbria, which had been seized by the Danish and Norwegian pirates or sea-kings, who were then the terror of the north of Europe. The inhabitants of this part of England were called Anglo-Danes, to distinguish them from the Anglo-Saxons. About the year 934, however, Ethelstan, king of the Anglo-Saxons, the grandson of Alfred the Great, gained a great victory over the Anglo-Danish king, and incorporated the whole country, from the Tweed to Land's End, into one kingdom, called *England*, divided no longer into separate states, but into a number of shires or counties, as at present. Still, the animosity between the two populations—the Anglo-Saxon and the Anglo-Danish—continued, and many attempts were made by the Anglo-Danes to obtain the sovereignty of the island. They at last effected it under Sweyn or Sweno, a Danish sea-king, who came across the German Ocean with a large fleet, and, after many battles, succeeded, in 1013, in driving the Anglo-Saxon king, Ethelred, out of the country, and assuming the crown himself. The expelled king, Ethelred, with his two sons, took refuge in the dominions of Richard, Duke of Normandy, in France, whose sister he had married—a step which, as will afterwards appear, was followed by very unforeseen consequences.

The Danish king, Sweyn, dying in 1014, and his son Knut, or Canute, not being able immediately to seize the vacant throne, Ethelred again obtained temporary possession of a part of England. In 1016, however, he too died, and his Anglo-Saxon subjects chose as his successor his natural son, Edmund Ironside, passing over his two legitimate children, Alfred and Edward, who were then at their uncle's court in Normandy. For a while the struggle lasted between the two rivals for the throne—Edmund the Anglo-Saxon, and Canute the Dane—and many battles were fought with various success. In one of these battles, the Danes having been defeated, and forced to flee, one of their principal captains, named Ulf, lost his

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way in the woods. After wandering all night, he met at daybreak a young peasant driving a herd of oxen, whom he saluted, and asked his name. 'I am Godwin, the son of Ulfnoth,' said the young peasant, 'and thou art a Dane.' Thus obliged to confess who he was, Ulf begged the young Saxon to shew him his way to the Severn, where the Danish ships were at anchor. 'It is foolish in a Dane,' replied the peasant, 'to expect such a service from a Saxon; and, besides, the way is long, and the country people are all in arms.' The Danish chief drew off a gold ring from his finger, and gave it to the shepherd as an inducement to be his guide. The young Saxon looked at it for an instant with great earnestness, and then returned it, saying: 'I will take nothing from thee, but I will try to conduct thee.' Leading him to his father's cottage, he concealed him there during the day, and when night came on, they prepared to depart together. As they were going, the old peasant said to Ulf: 'This is my only son Godwin, who risks his life for thee. He cannot return among his countrymen again; take him, therefore, and present him to thy king, Canute, that he may enter into his service.' The Dane promised, and kept his word. The young Saxon peasant was well received in the Danish camp, and rising from step to step by the force of his talents, he afterwards became known over all England as the great Earl Godwin.

After the death of Edmund Ironside, Canute became sole king of England, over which he ruled with firmness and ability till 1035—the stability of his government having been secured by the prudent precaution of marrying the Norman princess Emma or Alfhive, the widow of the deceased Ethelred, and the mother of the two Saxon princes whose claims to the throne he feared. These two princes, still residing in Normandy, were apparently shut out from all hope of ever succeeding to the throne of their ancestors; for their mother having born a son to her new husband Canute, this son, whose name was Hardicanute, was left heir on his father's death. Hardicanute, however, found a rival in Harold, another of Canute's sons, and for some time the two brothers contended for the crown. Alfred, one of the two sons of the Saxon Ethelred, thinking to take advantage of the confusion arising from this contest, landed in England with a number of Norman followers, and gained some successes; but was afterwards abandoned by his party, and treacherously murdered, at the instigation, some said, of Earl Godwin, the peasant's son, now governor of a province. Of the two rival brothers, Harold was at first successful; but when he died, Hardicanute ascended the throne without opposition. His death took place in 1041; and now Earl Godwin, who was the most powerful and popular personage in the kingdom, resolved to free his country from the government of the Danes, and restore tranquillity and order by recalling Edward from Normandy, the remaining son of Ethelred. Godwin might, apparently, with little difficulty, have become king himself; but his