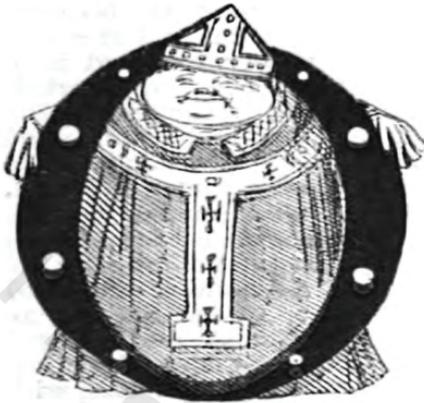


CHAPTER THE SIXTH. FROM KING EDWARD THE ELDER TO THE NORMAN CONQUEST.



IN the death of Alfred, his second s always foremost in a fight, there seems something slyly satirical in giving the name of lady to a person of the most fearfully unladylike propensities. She beat on, Edward, took possession of the throne, when he was served with a notice of ejection by his cousin Ethelwald. Preparations were made for commencing and defending an action at Wimburn, when Ethelwald, intimidated by the strength of his opponent, declined to go on with the proceedings, and judgment, as in case of a nonsuit, was claimed on Edward's behalf. Subsequently, however, Ethelwald moved, apparently with a view to a new trial, towards Bury, where some of the Kentish men had ventured; and an action having come off, he incurred very heavy damage, which ended in his paying the costs of the day with his own existence. Edward derived much aid from Ethelfleda, a sister, who acted as a sister, by assisting him in his wars against his enemies.

This energetic specimen of the British female inherited all the spirit of her father, as well as his mantle, which we find in looking into our own Mackintosh, She is called “The Lady of Mercia” by the old chroniclers; but as she was the Welsh unmercifully, filling their country with wailings as well as covering their backs with wails, and she took prisoner the king’s wife, with whom it may be presumed she came furiously to the scratch before the capture was accomplished. Ethelfleda died in the year 920, and her brother in 925, the latter being succeeded by his natural son, Athelstane, who had no sooner got the crown on his head, than he found several persons preparing to have a snatch at it. He, however, defeated all his enemies, and devoted his time to polishing his throne, adding lustre to his crown, and giving brightness to his sceptre. It was in this reign that England first became an asylum for foreign refugees, to whom Athelstane always extended his hospitality. Louis d’Outremer, the French king, and several Celtic princes of Armorica or Brittany, played at hide-and-seek in London lodgings, while keeping out of the way of their rebellious subjects and tuition of the Saxon monarch.

Athelstane died in the year 940, in his forty-seventh year, and was succeeded by Edmund the Atheling, a youth of eighteen, whose taste for elegance and splendour obtained for him the name of the Magnificent. He gave very large dinner parties to his nobles, and at one of these his eye fell upon one Leof, a notorious robber, returned from banishment, one of the Saxon swell mob who had been transported, but had escaped; and who, from some remissness on the part of the police, had obtained admission to the palace. Edmund commanded the proper officer to turn him out, but Leof—tempted no doubt by the sideboard of plate—insisted on remaining at the banquet. Edmund, who, as the chroniclers tell us, was heated by wine, jumped up from his seat, and forgetting the king in the constable,

seized Leof by his collar and his hair, intending to turn him out neck and crop. Leof still refusing to “move on,” the impetuous Edmund commenced wrestling with the intruder, who, irritated at a sudden and severe kick on his shins, drew a dagger from under his cloak, and stabbed the sovereign in a vital part. The nobles, who had formed a circle round the combatants, and had been encouraging their king with shouts of “Bravo, Edmund!” “Give it him, your majesty!” were so infuriated at the foul play of the thief, and his un-English recourse to the knife, that they fell upon him at once, and cut him literally to pieces.



Edred, the brother and successor of Edmund, though not twenty-three years of age, was in a wretched state of health when he came to the throne. He had lost his teeth, and of course had none to show when threatened by his enemies; and he was so weak in the feet, that he literally seemed to be without a leg to stand upon. Nevertheless he succeeded in vanquishing the Danes, who could not hurt a hair of his head; but, as the chroniclers tell us that every bit of his hair had fallen off, his security in this respect is easily accounted for. The vigour that

marked his reign has, however, been attributed to Dunstan, the abbot, who now began to figure as a political character.

Edred soon died, and left the kingdom to his little brother Edwy, a lad of fifteen, who soon married Elgiva, a young lady of good family, and took his wife's mother home to live with them. On the day of his coronation he had given a party, and the gentlemen, including Odo, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Dunstan, the monk, were still sitting over their wine, when Edwy slipped out to join the ladies. Odo and Dunstan, who were both six-bottle men, became angry at the absence of their royal host, and the latter, at the suggestion of the former, went staggering after the king to lug him back to the banquet-room. Edwy was quietly seated with his wife and her mother in the boudoir—for it being a gentlemen's party, no ladies seem to have been among the guests—and the monk, hiccuping out some gross abuse of the queen and her mamma, collared the young king, who was dragged back to the wine-table.

Though this outrage may have been half festive, interlarded with exclamations of "Come along, old boy," "Don't leave us, old chap," and other similar phrases of social familiarity, Edwy never forgave the monk, whom he called upon to account for money received in his late capacity of treasurer to the royal household. Dunstan being what is usually termed a "jolly dog," and a "social companion," was of course most irregular in money matters; and finding it quite impossible to make out his books, he ran away to avoid the inconvenience of a regular settlement.

Dunstan, nevertheless, resolved to pay his royal master off on the first opportunity; and a rising having been instigated by his friend and pot-companion, Archbishop Odo, Edgar, the brother of Edwy, was declared independent sovereign of the whole of the island north of the Thames. Dunstan returned from his brief exile; but, in the mean time, Edwy had been deprived of his wife, Elgiva, by forcible abduction, at the instigation of the odious Odo.

The lovely unfortunate had her face branded with a hot iron, and the most cruel means were taken to deprive her of the beauty which was supposed to be the cause of her ascendancy over the heart of her royal husband. Some historians have attributed this outrage to the designs of Dunstan, and among the many irons that monk was known to have had in the fire, may have been the very irons with which this horrible barbarity was perpetrated. Her scars were, however, obliterated by some Kalydor known at the time, and probably the invention of some knightly Sir Rowland of that early era. She was on the point of rejoining Edwy at Gloucester, when she was savagely murdered by the enemies of her husband, who did not long survive her, for in the following year, 958, he perished either by assassination or a broken heart.

Edgar, a mere lad, of whom Dunstan had made a ladder for his own ambition, now succeeded to his brother's dignities, if a series of nothing but indignities can deserve to be so called. The wily monk had now become Archbishop of Canterbury, and encouraged the new king to make royal progresses among his subjects, in the course of which he is said to have gone up on the river Dee, in an eight-oared cutter, rowed by eight crowned sovereigns. In this illustrious water party Kenneth, king of Scotland, pulled the stroke oar, their majesties of Cumbria, Anglesey, Galloway, Westmere, and the three Welsh sovereigns, making up the remainder of the royal crew, over which Edgar himself presided as coxswain. Though the young king gave great satisfaction in his public capacity, his private character was exceedingly reprehensible. His inconstancy towards the fair got him into sad disgrace, and his friend Dunstan on one occasion administered to him a severe reprimand. The monk, however, finished by fining him a crown, prohibiting him from putting on, during a period of seven years, that very uncomfortable article of the regalia. As the head is proverbially uneasy which wears a crown, the sentence passed upon the king must have been a boon rather than a punishment.

Among the events connected with the reign of Edgar, his marriage with Elfrida must always stand conspicuous. He had heard much of a provincial beauty, the daughter of Olgar, or Ordgar, Earl of Devonshire, and the king sent his favourite, the Earl of Athelwold, to see this rustic belle, with a view of ascertaining whether the flower would be worth transplanting to the palace of the sovereign. Athelwold, on seeing the young lady, fell in love with her himself, from her extreme beauty; but wrote up to Edgar, declaring that she might well be called "the mistress of the village plain," for her plainness was absolutely painful; and indeed he added in a P.S., "She is so disfigured by a squint, as to give me the idea of the very squintes-sence of ugliness." Athelwold attributed her reputation for beauty to her fortune, and declared that her money turned her red hair into golden locks, causing her to be well "worthy the attention of Persons about to Marry."

Edgar soon gave his consent to Athelwold's espousing the lady, on the ground of her being a good match for him; but she proved more than a match for him a short time afterwards. Edgar, at the expiration of the honeymoon, proposed to visit his friend, who made excuses as long as he could, inasmuch that he was seldom at home, and that he could not exactly say when his majesty would be sure of catching him. The king, however, good-naturedly promising to be satisfied with pot-luck, fixed a day for his visit; and Athelwold, confessing all to his wife, begged her to disguise her charms, by putting on her shabbiest gown, and to behave herself in such a manner as to make the king believe he had lost nothing in not having married her.

"I should like to see myself appearing as a dowdy before my sovereign," was the lady's feminine reply, and she paid more than usual attention to her toilette in order to attract the favourable notice of Edgar. The monarch finding himself deceived by Athelwold, asked him to come and hunt in a wood, when, without any preliminary beating about the bush, and exclaiming,

“You made game of me, thus do I make game of you,” he stabbed the unfortunate earl, and returned home to marry his widow.

Edgar did not live many years after this ungentlemanly conduct, but died at the early age of two-and-thirty.

Though he had been favourable to priestcraft, and patronised the cunning foxes of the Church, he was an enemy to wolves, and offered so much per head for all that were killed, until the race was exterminated, and the cry of “Wolf” became synonymous with a false alarm of danger.

Edgar was succeeded (a.d. 975) by Edward, his son by his first wife, who was not more than fourteen or fifteen years old; and thus, at that age before which an individual in the present day is not legally qualified to drive a cab, this royal hobbledehoy assumed the reins of government. His mother-in-law, Elfrida, endeavoured to grasp them for her own son Ethelred, an infant of six, but Dunstan having at that moment the whip hand, prevented her from reaching the point she was driving at.

Edward, who acquired the name of the Martyr, was accordingly crowned at Kingston, where coronations formerly came off; but he did not long survive, for hunting one day near Corfe Castle, he made a morning call on his mother-in-law, Elfrida, and requested that a drop of something to drink might be brought to him. As Elfrida was offering him the ale in front, her porter dropped upon him in the back, and inflicted a stab which caused him to set spurs to his horse; but falling off from loss of blood, he was drawn—a lifeless bier—for a considerable distance. Elfrida has been acquitted by some of having been the instigator of this cruel act, but as it is said she whipped her little son Ethelred for crying at the news of the death of his half-brother Edward, we can scarcely admit that there is any doubt of which we can give her the benefit. Both mother and son became so exceedingly unpopular that an attempt was made to set up a rival on the throne, to the exclusion

of Ethelred, and the crown was offered to the late king's natural daughter, whose name was Edgitha.

Edgitha, however, having observed that the regal diadem was looked upon as a target, at which any one might take the liberty to aim, preferred the comfortable hood of the nun—for she was the inmate of a monastery—to the jewelled cap of royalty. The crown was accordingly placed by Dunstan, at Easter, a.d. 979, on the weak head of Ethelred; and it is said that the monk was in such a fit of ill-temper at the coronation, that he muttered some frightful maledictions against the boy-king, while in the very act of crowning him, The youthful sovereign was also indebted to Dunstan for the nickname of the Unready, which was probably equivalent to the term “slow coach,” that is sometimes used to denote a person of sluggish disposition and not very brilliant mental faculties.



Ethelred was wholly incompetent to wear the crown, which was so much too heavy for his weak head, that he appeared to be completely bonneted under the burden. It sat upon him more like a porter's knot than a regal diadem; while the sceptre, instead of

being gracefully wielded by a firm hand, was to him no better than a huge poker in the fragile fingers of a baby.

During the early part of his reign, his mother Elfrida exercised considerable influence, but she at length retired from government, and took to the building business, erecting and endowing monasteries in order to expiate her sins. She became a sort of infatuated female Gubitt, and at every fresh qualm of conscience ran up another floor, which was, familiarly speaking, the "old story" with persons in her unfortunate predicament. The money expended in the erection of religious houses was thought to be an eligible investment in those days for sinners, who having no solid foundation for their hopes, were glad to take any ground to build upon.

The Danes had for some time been tranquil, but their natural fearlessness, made them ready for anything, and seeing Ethelred in a state of utter unreadiness on the throne, they indulged the hope of driving off the "slow coach" in an early stage of his sovereignty.

It happened that young Sweyn, a scapegrace son of the king of Denmark, had been turned out of doors by his father, and having become by the injudicious step of his parent a gentleman at large, amused himself by occasional attacks upon the kingdom of Ethelred. This sovereign, who, instead of being born with a silver spoon in his mouth, appears to have been born one entire spoon of the real fiddleheaded pattern, commenced the dangerous practice of paying the foe to leave him alone, which was of course holding out the prospect of a premium to all who took the trouble to bully him. He paid down £10,000 in silver to the sea-kings, on condition of their retiring from his country, which they did until they had spent all the money, when they returned, threatening to pay him off, or be paid off themselves, an arrangement that Ethelred three times mustered the means of carrying into operation.

Others think this royal spoon was not fiddle headed, but that he was the earliest specimen of the king's pattern, of his enemy. Emma, who was called the "Flower of Normandy," consented to

transplant herself to England, and became the acknowledged daisy of the British Court. Young Sweyn had now become king of Denmark, and had made friends with Olave, king of

Norway, the son of old Olave, a deceased pirate, who had made his fortune by sweeping the very profitable crossing from his own country to England. These two scamps ravaged the southern coast in 994, and Ethelred, the unready king, was obliged to buy them off with ready money. In the year 1001, they made another demand of £24,000, which left the sovereign not a single dump, except those into which he naturally fell at the draining of his treasury.

Ethelred, who, if he was unready for everything else, appears to have been always ready for a quarrel, had contrived to fall out with Richard the Second, Duke of Normandy, and he was on the point of taking up arms, when he laid his hand at the feet of Emma.

We would willingly take an enormous dip of ink, and letting it fall on our paper, blot out for ever from our annals the Danish massacre, which occurred at about the period to which our history has arrived. Unfortunately, however, were we to overturn an entire inkstand, we should only add to the blackness of the page, which tells us that the Danes were savagely murdered at a time when they were living as fellow-subjects among the people.

It was on the feast of St. Brice, soon after his marriage with Emma, that the order to commit this sanguinary act was given by Ethelred. It is true that the Danish mercenaries had given great provocation by their insolence. They had, according to the old chroniclers, sunk into such effeminacy that they washed themselves once a week and combed their heads still more frequently. We cannot perhaps accuse the chroniclers of being over nice in their objections to the Danish habits of cleanliness, but we really are at a loss to see the effeminacy of taking a bath every seven days, and preventing the hair from becoming in appearance little better than a quantity of hay in a state of unraked roughness. It was on the 15th of November, 1002, which hap-

pened to be one of their weekly washing days, that the Danes were surprised and treated in the barbarous manner we have alluded to. The Lady Gunhilda, the sister of Sweyn, and the wife of an English earl of Danish extraction, was one of the victims of the massacre, and died fighting to the last with that truly feminine weapon, the tongue, predicting that her death would be followed by the downfall of the English nation.

This act of ferocity naturally exasperated Sweyn, who resolved on invading England, and he prepared a considerable fleet, the vessels belonging to which appear to have been got up much in the same style as the civic barges on the Thames, for they were gaily gilded, and had all sorts of emblematical devices painted over them. Sweyn himself arrived in the Great Dragon, a boat made in the inconvenient form of that disagreeable animal. Had the patron saint of England been at hand to do his duty at that early period, the great dragon would have been speedily overcome, but it is a familiar observation, that people of this-sort are never to be found when they are really wanted, The invaders landed at Exeter, which was governed by a Norman baron, a favourite of the queen; but, as frequently happens in the course of events as well as on the race-course, the favourite proved deceptive when the enemy took the field, and resigned the place to pillage.

The Danish foe marched into Wiltshire, and in every town they passed through they ordered the best of everything for dinner, when, after eating to excess of all the delicacies of the season, they had the indelicacy to settle their hosts when the bill was brought to them for settlement.

To prevent even the possibility of old scores being kept against them, which they might one day be called upon to pay off, they burned down the houses, thus making a bonfire of all the property, including account books, papers, and wooden tallies that the establishment might contain. The entertainers or landlords had no sooner presented a bill; than it was met by a sav-

age endorsement on their own backs; and, though drawing and accepting may be regarded as a very customary, commercial transaction, still, when the drawer draws a huge sword the acceptor is likely to get by far the worst of it.



An Anglo-Saxon army was, however, organised at last, to oppose the Danes; but Alfric the Mercian—an old traitor, who had on a former occasion played the knave against the king—was put at the head of it. Ethelred had punished the first treachery of the father by putting out the eyes of the son; but this castigation of the “wrong boy,” the young one instead of the old one, had not proved effectual. His majesty must have been as blind as he had rendered the innocent youth, to have again entrusted Alfric with command; and the consequences were soon felt, for the old impostor pretended to be taken suddenly ill, just as his men were going into battle.

He called them off at the most important moment; and instead of stopping at home by himself, putting his feet in warm water, and laying up while the battle was being fought under directions which he could just as easily have given from his

own room, he shouted for help from the whole army; and by sending some for salts, others for senna, a cohort here for a pill, and a legion there for a leech, he managed to keep the whole of the forces occupied in running about for him.

Sweyn in the meantime got clear off with all his booty, and by the time that Alfric announced himself to be a little better, and able to go out, the enemy had vanished altogether from the neighbourhood.

An appetite for conquest was not however the only appetite which the Danes indulged, for their voracity in eating was such that they created a panic wherever they showed themselves.

They ravaged Norfolk, and having reduced it to its last

dumpling, they fell upon Yarmouth, whose bloaters they speedily exhausted, when they tried Cambridge, having probably been attracted thither by the fame of its sausages.

Subsequently they advanced upon Huntingdonshire and Lincolnshire, where they continued as long as they could find a bone to pick with the inhabitants. They then crossed the Baltic (a.d. 1004), having been obliged to quit England on account of there being literally nothing to eat; so that a joint occupation with the natives had become utterly impossible.

Those only, who from its being the land of their birth, felt that they must always have a stake in the country, could possibly have mustered the resolution to remain in it.

The vengeance of Sweyn being unsatisfied, he returned in the year 1006, when he carried fire and sword into every part, and it has been said with much felicity of expression, that amidst so much sacking the inhabitants had scarcely a bed to lie down upon.



Unable to offer him any effectual check, the Great Council tried what could be done with ready money, and £36,000 was the price demanded to pay out this formidable “man in possession” from the harassed and exhausted country.

The sum was collected by an income-tax of about twenty shillings in the pound, or even more, if it could be got out of the people by either threats or violence. Such as had paid the Danes directly to save their homes from destruction were obliged to pay over again, like a railway traveller who loses his ticket; and the natives seem to have got into a special train of evils, in which every engine of persecution was used against them.



In 1008 new burdens were thrown upon the people, who for every nine nides of land were bound to find a man armed with a

helmet and breastplate. This would seem no very difficult matter, considering that two or three such men are found annually at the Lord Mayor's show; but in former times they had something more difficult to do than walk in a procession, Though two shillings and his beer will, it is believed, secure the services of an ancient knight, armed cap-d-pie at an hour's notice in our own day, such a person was not to be had so cheap in the time of Ethelred. In addition to this infliction, every three hundred and ten hides of land were bound to build and equip a ship for the defence of the country; but it seems, after all, nothing but fair, that the hides should club together to save themselves from tanning. The fleet thus raised was, however, soon rendered valueless, in consequence of the various commanders having refused to row in the same boat, or rather insisting on pulling different ways, to the utter annihilation of their master's interest.

Ethelred had selected for his favourite a low fellow of the name of Edric, who was exceedingly eloquent, and had not only talked one of the king's daughters into accepting his hand, but had even talked the monarch himself into sanctioning the unequal marriage. Edric had obtained for his brother Brightric a high post in the navy, as commander of eight vessels; but the latter got into a quarrel with his nephew, Wulfnoth, who was known by the odd appellation of the "Child of the South Saxons," or the Sussex lad, as we should take the liberty of calling him. The "child" determined on flight; but with a truly infantine objection to run alone, he got twenty of the king's ships to run along with him. Brightric cruised after him with eighty sail, but the tempest rising, and the rudders at the stem refusing to act, he was driven on shore by stem necessity. Wulfnoth, who had done a little ravaging on his own private account along the southern coast, returned to make firewood of the timbers of Brightric, which fortune had so cruelly shivered.

Ethelred was completely panic-stricken at the news of this reverse, and hurried home as fast as he could to summon a council, but every resolution that was passed no one had the

resolution to execute. To add to the king's embarrassments, "Thurkill's host" came over, comprising the flower of the Scandinavian youth, which planted itself in Kent, and caused a sad blow to the country. Various short peaces were purchased by the Saxons at so much a piece; but, as Pope Gregory would have had it, every arrangement was not a sale, but a sell on the part of Thurkill, who continued sending in a fresh account for every fresh transaction. Ethelred was now in the very midst of traitors, and it was impossible that he should ever be brought round in such a circle. He had not a single officer to whom a commission could be safely entrusted. Edric, his favourite, having taken offence, joined the enemy in an attack upon Canterbury, which had lasted for twenty days, when some one left the gate of the city ajar, either by design or accident.

Alphege, the good archbishop, who had defended the place, was instantly loaded with chains; and though he felt himself dreadfully fettered, he declined to purchase his ransom, for the very best of all reasons, namely, that he had not the money to pay for it. The old man, wisely making a virtue of necessity, proclaimed his determination not to part with a shilling, "and indeed," said he, "I couldn't if I would; for to tell you the truth, I haven't got it."

The venerable prelate turning his pockets inside out, proved that he was penniless, when they offered to release him if he would persuade Ethelred to subscribe handsomely to the Danish rent, as we are fully justified in calling it. The archbishop, however, grew exceedingly saucy, when they pelted him with the remains of the feast, throwing bones, bottles, and bread, in rapid succession at the primate, who meekly bowed his head—or perhaps bobbed it up and down—to the treatment he experienced. The good old man remained for some time unshaken, till a shower of marrow-bones threw him on his knees, and one of the ruffians with a coarse pun exclaiming—"Let us make no more bones about it, but despatch him at once," brutally realised his own ferocious suggestion.



Thurkill now sent in another account of £48,000 as the price of his promised allegiance, which was certainly not worth a week's purchase, but Ethelred somehow or other found and paid the money. Sweyn, on hearing of this proceeding, pretended to be very angry with Thurkill, and fitted out a formidable fleet, with the avowed intention of killing with one stone two birds—namely, the Danish crow, and the Saxon pigeon.

The ships of Sweyn were elaborately carved for show, and consequently not very well cut out for service. Nevertheless they were quite strong enough to vanquish the dispirited

Saxons, who would have been overawed at the sight of a Danish oar, and might have been knocked down with a feather. Sweyn landed at York, and leaving his fleet in the care of his son Canute, carried fire and sword into the north; but as the inhabitants were all favourable to his cause, he had no more occasion to take fire into the north, than to carry coals to Newcastle.

The king had sought refuge in London, which refused to give in until Ethelred sneaked out, when the citizens having been threatened, according to Sir Francis Palgrave, with damage to their "eyes and limbs," threw open their gates to the conqueror. The unready monarch made for the Isle of Wight, but finding apartments

dear and living expensive, he packed off his wife and children to his brother-in-law, Richard of Normandy, who lived in a court at Rouen. The duke made them as comfortable as he could, and the lady Emma having fished for an invitation for her husband, at length succeeded in getting him asked, to the infinite delight of old "Slowcoach," who for once got ready at a very short notice to avail himself of the asylum that was offered him. Sweyn was now king of England, but after a reign of six weeks, entitling him to only half a quarter's salary, he died at Gainsborough, very much lamented by all who did not know him. The Saxon nobles who had so recently sent Ethelred away, now wanted him back again. They despatched a message, however, to the effect that, if he would promise to be a good king, and never be naughty any more, they would be glad to accept him once more as their sovereign. Ethelred turning his son Edmund into a postman, forwarded a letter by hand, promising reform, but stipulating that there should be no "fraud or treachery," or in other words, no humbug on either side. This arrangement, though growing out of mutual distrust, and being little better than a provision which each party thought necessary in consequence of the dishonesty of both, must be regarded as highly important in a constitutional point of view, for it is evidently the germ of those great compacts, which have since been occasionally concluded between the sovereign and the people.



Ethelred, on his arrival at home, found that Canute, the son of Sweyn, having been declared king by the Danes, had coolly set himself up as landlord of the Crown and Sceptro at Greenwich. Ethelred and Canute continued for three years like “the Lion and the Unicorn, fighting for the Crown,” with about equal success, when death overtook “Slowcoach,” after a long and inglorious reign. He died on St. George’s Day, 1016, having been for five-and-thirty years man and boy, on and off the throne of England.
