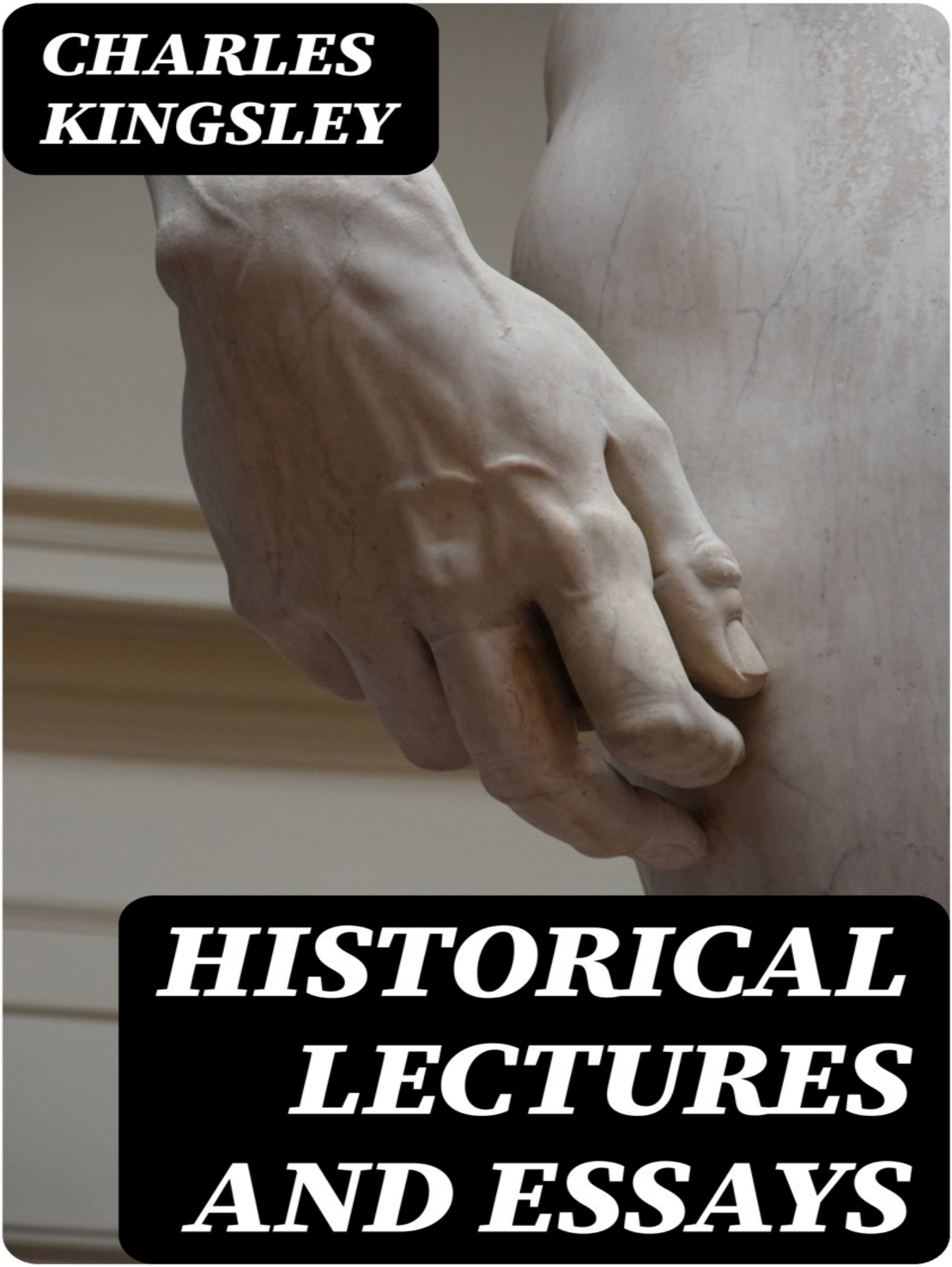
CHARLES KINGSLEY



# HISTORICAL LECTURES AND ESSAYS

**Charles Kingsley**

# Historical Lectures and Essays

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# THE FIRST DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

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Let me begin this lecture {1} with a scene in the North Atlantic 863 years since.

“Bjarne Grimolfson was blown with his ship into the Irish Ocean; and there came worms and the ship began to sink under them. They had a boat which they had payed with seals’ blubber, for that the sea-worms will not hurt. But when they got into the boat they saw that it would not hold them all. Then said Bjarne, ‘As the boat will only hold the half of us, my advice is that we should draw lots who shall go in her; for that will not be unworthy of our manhood.’ This advice seemed so good that none gainsaid it; and they drew lots. And the lot fell to Bjarne that he should go in the boat with half his crew. But as he got into the boat, there spake an Icelander who was in the ship and had followed Bjarne from Iceland, ‘Art thou going to leave me here, Bjarne?’ Quoth Bjarne, ‘So it must be.’ Then said the man, ‘Another thing didst thou promise my father, when I sailed with thee from Iceland, than to desert me thus. For thou saidst that we both should share the same lot.’ Bjarne said, ‘And that we will not do. Get thou down into the boat, and I will get up into the ship, now I see that thou art so greedy after life.’ So Bjarne went up into the ship, and the man went down into the boat; and the boat went on its voyage till they came to Dublin in Ireland. Most men say that Bjarne and his comrades perished among the worms; for they were never heard of after.”

This story may serve as a text for my whole lecture. Not only does it smack of the sea-breeze and the salt water, like all the finest old Norse sagas, but it gives a glimpse at least of the nobleness which underlay the grim and often cruel nature of the Norseman. It belongs, too, to the culminating epoch, to the beginning of that era when the Scandinavian peoples had their great times; when the old fierceness of the worshippers of Thor and Odin was tempered, without being effeminated, by the Faith of the “White Christ,” till the very men who had been the destroyers of Western Europe became its civilisers.

It should have, moreover, a special interest to Americans. For—as American antiquaries are well aware—Bjarne was on his voyage home from the coast of New England; possibly from that very Mount Hope Bay which seems to have borne the same name in the time of those old Norsemen, as afterwards in the days of King Philip, the last sachem of the Wampanong Indians. He was going back to Greenland, perhaps for reinforcements, finding, he and his fellow-captain, Thorfinn, the Esquimaux who then dwelt in that land too strong for them. For the Norsemen were then on the very edge of discovery, which might have changed the history not only of this continent but of Europe likewise. They had found and colonised Iceland and Greenland. They had found Labrador, and called it Helluland, from its ice-polished rocks. They had found Nova Scotia seemingly, and called it Markland, from its woods. They had found New England, and called it Vinland the Good. A fair land they found it, well wooded, with good pasturage; so that they had already imported cows, and a bull whose lowings

terrified the Esquimaux. They had found self-sown corn too, probably maize. The streams were full of salmon. But they had called the land Vinland, by reason of its grapes. Quaint enough, and bearing in its very quaintness the stamp of truth, is the story of the first finding of the wild fox-grapes. How Leif the Fortunate, almost as soon as he first landed, missed a little wizened old German servant of his father's, Tyrker by name, and was much vexed thereat, for he had been brought up on the old man's knee, and hurrying off to find him met Tyrker coming back twisting his eyes about—a trick of his—smacking his lips and talking German to himself in high excitement. And when they get him to talk Norse again, he says: "I have not been far, but I have news for you. I have found vines and grapes!" "Is that true, foster-father?" says Leif. "True it is," says the old German, "for I was brought up where there was never any lack of them."

The saga—as given by Rafn—had a detailed description of this quaint personage's appearance; and it would not he amiss if American wine-growers should employ an American sculptor—and there are great American sculptors—to render that description into marble, and set up little Tyrker in some public place, as the Silenus of the New World.

Thus the first cargoes homeward from Vinland to Greenland had been of timber and of raisins, and of vine-stocks, which were not like to thrive.

And more. Beyond Vinland the Good there was said to be another land, Whiteman's Land—or Ireland the Mickle, as some called it. For these Norse traders from Limerick had found Ari Marson, and Ketla of Ruykjanes, supposed to have been long since drowned at sea, and said that the people

had made him and Ketla chiefs, and baptized Ari. What is all this? and what is this, too, which the Esquimaux children taken in Markland told the Northmen, of a land beyond them where the folk wore white clothes, and carried flags on poles? Are these all dreams? or was some part of that great civilisation, the relics whereof your antiquarians find in so many parts of the United States, still in existence some 900 years ago; and were these old Norse cousins of ours upon the very edge of it? Be that as it may, how nearly did these fierce Vikings, some of whom seemed to have sailed far south along the shore, become aware that just beyond them lay a land of fruits and spices, gold and gems? The adverse current of the Gulf Stream, it may be, would have long prevented their getting past the Bahamas into the Gulf of Mexico; but, sooner or later, some storm must have carried a Greenland viking to San Domingo or to Cuba; and then, as has been well said, some Scandinavian dynasty might have sat upon the throne of Mexico.

These stories are well known to antiquarians. They may be found, almost all of them, in Professor Rafn's "Antiquitates Americanæ." The action in them stands out often so clear and dramatic, that the internal evidence of historic truth is irresistible. Thorvald, who, when he saw what seems to be, they say, the bluff head of Alderton at the south-east end of Boston Bay, said, "Here should I like to dwell," and, shot by an Esquimaux arrow, bade bury him on that place, with a cross at his head and a cross at his feet, and call the place Cross Ness for evermore; Gudrida, the magnificent widow, who wins hearts and sees strange deeds from Iceland to Greenland, and Greenland to Vinland and

back, and at last, worn out and sad, goes off on a pilgrimage to Rome; Helgi and Finnbogi, the Norwegians, who, like our Arctic voyagers in after times, devise all sorts of sports and games to keep the men in humour during the long winter at Hope; and last, but not least, the terrible Freydisa, who, when the Norse are seized with a sudden panic at the Esquimaux and flee from them, as they had three weeks before fled from Thorfinn's bellowing bull, turns, when so weak that she cannot escape, single-handed on the savages, and catching up a slain man's sword, puts them all to flight with her fierce visage and fierce cries—Freydisa the Terrible, who, in another voyage, persuades her husband to fall on Helgi and Finnbogi, when asleep, and murder them and all their men; and then, when he will not murder the five women too, takes up an axe and slays them all herself, and getting back to Greenland, when the dark and unexplained tale comes out, lives unpunished, but abhorred henceforth. All these folks, I say, are no phantoms, but realities; at least, if I can judge of internal evidence.

But beyond them, and hovering on the verge of Mythus and Fairyland, there is a ballad called "Finn the Fair," and how

An upland Earl had twa braw sons,
My story to begin;
The tane was Light Haldane the strong,
The tither was winsome Finn.

and so forth; which was still sung, with other "rimur," or ballads, in the Faroes, at the end of the last century. Professor Rafn has inserted it, because it talks of Vinland as

a well-known place, and because the brothers are sent by the princess to slay American kings; but that Rime has another value. It is of a beauty so perfect, and yet so like the old Scotch ballads in its heroic conception of love, and in all its forms and its qualities, that it is one proof more, to any student of early European poetry, that we and these old Norsemen are men of the same blood.

If anything more important than is told by Professor Rafn and Mr. Black {2} be now known to the antiquarians of Massachusetts, let me entreat them to pardon my ignorance. But let me record my opinion that, though somewhat too much may have been made in past years of certain rock-inscriptions, and so forth, on this side of the Atlantic, there can be no reasonable doubt that our own race landed and tried to settle on the shore of New England six hundred years before their kinsmen, and, in many cases, their actual descendants, the august Pilgrim Fathers of the seventeenth century. And so, as I said, a Scandinavian dynasty might have been seated now upon the throne of Mexico. And how was that strange chance lost? First, of course, by the length and danger of the coasting voyage. It was one thing to have, like Columbus and Vespucci, Cortes and Pizarro, the Azores as a halfway port; another to have Greenland, or even Iceland. It was one thing to run south-west upon Columbus's track, across the Mar de Damas, the Ladies' Sea, which hardly knows a storm, with the blazing blue above, the blazing blue below, in an ever-warming climate, where every breath is life and joy; another to struggle against the fogs and icebergs, the rocks and currents of the dreary North Atlantic. No wonder, then, that

the knowledge of Markland, and Vinland, and Whiteman's Land died away in a few generations, and became but fireside sagas for the winter nights.

But there were other causes, more honourable to the dogged energy of the Norse. They were in those very years conquering and settling nearer home as no other people—unless, perhaps, the old Ionian Greeks—conquered and settled.

Greenland, we have seen, they held—the western side at least—and held it long and well enough to afford, it is said, 2,600 pounds of walrus' teeth as yearly tithe to the Pope, besides Peter's pence, and to build many a convent, and church, and cathedral, with farms and homesteads round; for one saga speaks of Greenland as producing wheat of the finest quality. All is ruined now, perhaps by gradual change of climate.

But they had richer fields of enterprise than Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroes. Their boldest outlaws at that very time—whether from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, or Britain—were forming the imperial life-guard of the Byzantine Emperor, as the once famous Varangers of Constantinople; and that splendid epoch of their race was just dawning, of which my lamented friend, the late Sir Edmund Head, says so well in his preface to Viga Glum's Icelandic Saga, "The Sagas, of which this tale is one, were composed for the men who have left their mark in every corner of Europe; and whose language and laws are at this moment important elements in the speech and institutions of England, America, and Australia. There is no page of modern history in which the influence of the Norsemen and their conquests

must not be taken into account—Russia, Constantinople, Greece, Palestine, Sicily, the coasts of Africa, Southern Italy, France, the Spanish Peninsula, England, Scotland, Ireland, and every rock and island round them, have been visited, and most of them at one time or the other ruled, by the men of Scandinavia. The motto on the sword of Roger Guiscard was a proud one:

Appulus et Calaber, Siculus mihi servit et Afer.

Every island, says Sir Edmund Head, and truly—for the name of almost every island on the coast of England, Scotland, and Eastern Ireland, ends in either *ey* or *ay* or *oe*, a Norse appellative, as is the word “island” itself—is a mark of its having been, at some time or other, visited by the Vikings of Scandinavia.

Norway, meanwhile, was convulsed by war; and what perhaps was of more immediate consequence, Svend Fork-beard, whom we Englishmen call Sweyn—the renegade from that Christian Faith which had been forced on him by his German conqueror, the Emperor Otto II.—with his illustrious son Cnut, whom we call Canute, were just calling together all the most daring spirits of the Baltic coasts for the subjugation of England; and when that great feat was performed, the Scandinavian emigration was paralysed, probably, for a time by the fearful wars at home. While the king of Sweden, and St. Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway, were setting on Denmark during Cnut’s pilgrimage to Rome, and Cnut, sailing with a mighty fleet to Norway, was driving St. Olaf into Russia, to return and fall in the fratricidal battle of Stiklestead—during, strangely enough, a total eclipse of

the sun—Vinland was like enough to remain still uncolonised. After Cnut's short-lived triumph—king as he was of Denmark, Norway, England, and half Scotland, and what not of Wendish Folk inside the Baltic—the force of the Norsemen seems to have been exhausted in their native lands. Once more only, if I remember right, did "Lochlin," really and hopefully send forth her "mailed swarm" to conquer a foreign land; and with a result unexpected alike by them and by their enemies. Had it been otherwise, we might not have been here this day.

Let me sketch for you once more—though you have heard it, doubtless, many a time—the tale of that tremendous fortnight which settled the fate of Britain, and therefore of North America; which decided—just in those great times when the decision was to be made—whether we should be on a par with the other civilised nations of Europe, like them the "heirs of all the ages," with our share not only of Roman Christianity and Roman centralisation—a member of the great comity of European nations, held together in one Christian bond by the Pope—but heirs also of Roman civilisation, Roman literature, Roman Law; and therefore, in due time, of Greek philosophy and art. No less a question than this, it seems to me, hung in the balance during that fortnight of autumn, 1066.

Poor old Edward the Confessor, holy, weak, and sad, lay in his new choir of Westminster—where the wicked ceased from troubling, and the weary were at rest. The crowned ascetic had left no heir behind. England seemed as a corpse, to which all the eagles might gather together; and the South-English, in their utter need, had chosen for their

king the ablest, and it may be the justest, man in Britain—Earl Harold Godwinsson: himself, like half the upper classes of England then, of the all-dominant Norse blood; for his mother was a Danish princess. Then out of Norway, with a mighty host, came Harold Hardraade, taller than all men, the ideal Viking of his time. Half-brother of the now dead St. Olaf, severely wounded when he was but fifteen, at Stiklestead, when Olaf fell, he had warred and plundered on many a coast. He had been away to Russia to King Jaroslaf; he had been in the Emperor's Varanger guard at Constantinople—and, it was whispered, had slain a lion there with his bare hands; he had carved his name and his comrades' in Runic characters—if you go to Venice you may see them at this day—on the loins of the great marble lion, which stood in his time not in Venice but in Athens. And now, king of Norway and conqueror, for the time, of Denmark, why should he not take England, as Sweyn and Canute took it sixty years before, when the flower of the English gentry perished at the fatal battle of Assingdune? If he and his half-barbarous host had conquered, the civilisation of Britain would have been thrown back, perhaps, for centuries. But it was not to be.

England *was* to be conquered by the Norman; but by the civilised, not the barbaric; by the Norse who had settled, but four generations before, in the North East of France under Rou, Rollo, Rolf the Ganger—so-called, they say, because his legs were so long that, when on horseback, he touched the ground and seemed to gang, or walk. He and his Norsemen had taken their share of France, and called it Normandy to this day; and meanwhile, with that docility and adaptability

which marks so often truly great spirits, they had changed their creed, their language, their habits, and had become, from heathen and murderous Berserkers, the most truly civilised people of Europe, and—as was most natural then—the most faithful allies and servants of the Pope of Rome. So greatly had they changed, and so fast, that William Duke of Normandy, the great-great-grandson of Rolf the wild Viking, was perhaps the finest gentleman, as well as the most cultivated sovereign, and the greatest statesman and warrior in all Europe.

So Harold of Norway came with all his Vikings to Stamford Bridge by York; and took, by coming, only that which Harold of England promised him, namely, “forasmuch as he was taller than any other man, seven feet of English ground.”

The story of that great battle, told with a few inaccuracies, but told as only great poets tell, you should read, if you have not read it already, in the “Heimskringla” of Snorri Sturluson, the Homer of the North:

> High feast that day held the birds of the air and the beasts of the field,
> White-tailed erne and sallow glede,
> Dusky raven, with horny neb,
> And the gray deer the wolf of the wood.

The bones of the slain, men say, whitened the place for fifty years to come.

And remember, that on the same day on which that fight befell—September 27, 1066—William, Duke of Normandy, with all his French-speaking Norsemen, was sailing across

the British Channel, under the protection of a banner consecrated by the Pope, to conquer that England which the Norse-speaking Normans could not conquer.

And now King Harold showed himself a man. He turned at once from the North of England to the South. He raised the folk of the Southern, as he had raised those of the Central and Northern shires; and in sixteen days—after a march which in those times was a prodigious feat—he was entrenched upon the fatal down which men called Heathfield then, and Senlac, but Battle to this day—with William and his French Normans opposite him on Telham hill.

Then came the battle of Hastings. You all know what befell upon that day; and how the old weapon was matched against the new—the English axe against the Norman lance—and beaten only because the English broke their ranks. If you wish to refresh your memories, read the tale once more in Mr. Freeman's "History of England," or Professor Creasy's "Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World," or even, best of all, the late Lord Lytton's splendid romance of "Harold." And when you go to England, go, as some of you may have gone already, to Battle; and there from off the Abbey grounds, or from Mountjoye behind, look down off what was then "The Heathy Field," over the long slopes of green pasture and the rich hop-gardens, where were no hop-gardens then, and the flat tide-marshes winding between the wooded heights, towards the southern sea; and imagine for yourselves the feelings of an Englishman as he contemplates that broad green sloping lawn, on which was decided the destiny of his native land. Here, right beneath, rode Taillefer up the slope before them all, singing the song of Roland, tossing his

lance in air and catching it as it fell, with all the Norse berserker spirit of his ancestors flashing out in him, at the thought of one fair fight, and then purgatory, or Valhalla—Taillefer perhaps preferred the latter. Yonder on the left, in that copse where the red-ochre gully runs, is Sanguelac, the drain of blood, into which (as the Bayeux tapestry, woven by Matilda's maids, still shows) the Norman knights fell, horse and man, till the gully was bridged with writhing bodies for those who rode after. Here, where you stand—the crest of the hill marks where it must have been—was the stockade on which depended the fate of England. Yonder, perhaps, stalked out one English squire or house-carle after another: tall men with long-handled battle-axes—one specially terrible, with a wooden helmet which no sword could pierce—who hewed and hewed down knight on knight, till they themselves were borne to earth at last. And here, among the trees and ruins of the garden, kept trim by those who know the treasure which they own, stood Harold's two standards of the fighting-man and the dragon of Wessex. And here, close by (for here, for many a century, stood the high altar of Battle Abbey, where monks sang masses for Harold's soul), upon this very spot the Swan-neck found her hero-lover's corpse. "Ah," says many an Englishman—and who will blame him for it—"how grand to have died beneath that standard on that day!" Yes, and how right. And yet how right, likewise, that the Norman's cry of *Dexaie*!—"God Help!"—and not the English hurrah, should have won that day, till William rode up Mountjoye in the afternoon to see the English army, terrible even in defeat, struggling through copse and marsh away toward Brede, and, like retreating