

EMMA FITZ-OSBORN
BY
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"The King forbids the marriage!"

Raoul de Gael sprang from his seat beside his betrothed, and stared with incredulous astonishment into the face of the bearer of this piece of strange tidings.

The beautiful Emma lifted her head and gazed wonderingly into the dark, stern face of her brother.

"The King forbids the marriage!" repeated Roger Fitz-Osborn, a dark flush gathering upon his cheek, as his anger slowly kindled and rose; "he has sent a special courier across the sea with his Royal mandate, but no word of reason to explain his tyranny. Are we to be the slaves and chattels of the man we have made?"

"The King forbids the marriage?" repeated Emma, in her clear, ringing tones; "and by what right does the King forbid it? Does he not owe to our father the crown that he wears so proudly upon his head? And are we to become the slaves of the man in whose cause our father spent his blood and money, and at last his life itself? Oh, shame!—shame!—shame!"

A thunder-cloud rested on the brow of the bridegroom-elect; that swarthy Breton face was capable of expressing the extreme of haughty passion and resentment. He paced the long apartment to and fro like a wild beast in its cage. Then he went up to Emma and took her hand in his.

"Dost thou fear the anger of this King, who, but a few short years ago, was but the Duke of Normandy? whose title to the broad realm of England would never have been won but for the aid of thy noble father, and of men like ourselves, who have fought and conquered by his side? Dost thou fear his Royal displeasure?"

Emma threw back her head, and looked into her lover's eyes. The blood of a soldier race ran in her veins.

"I fear nothing," she answered, with simple sincerity.

"Spoken like a Fitz-Osborn!" cried her brother, whose pride and self-esteem had been stung to the quick by the haughty mandate from the Conqueror, and who had himself favoured the marriage of his beautiful sister to his brother-in-arms and chiefest friend, and had completed every arrangement for the ceremony, which was to take place almost immediately.

Roger Fitz-Osborn was Earl of Hereford by right of sword, as Raoul de Gael was Earl of Norfolk. Both had distinguished themselves by their bravery in the war which had made William of Normandy King of England, and had received these earldoms in recognition of their services. William the Conqueror was at this time in his own native land, having left the Primate Lanfranc in temporary charge of England. During this breathing space the warriors had had time to think of other matters than the excitement of arms. Raoul had paid a visit to Roger in his new and stately castle, and the beauty and grace of Emma had so completely won his heart that they had become affianced in a few weeks' time, and he was already urging on an immediate marriage.

Such a marriage was entirely to the mind of the brother, and as for Emma, her heart had been won by the attractions and manly beauty of Raoul, whose fierce temperament seemed to find its complement in her lofty courage.

Such a thing as any opposition upon the King's part never once entered the minds of any of the parties concerned. Nor has it ever been made clear why the Conqueror raised this objection, and by his haughty mandate alienated the allegiance of some of his most faithful followers.

Had there been time for the journey to and fro, perhaps the brother might have crossed the sea and returned with the Royal assent, and the subsequent tragedy might have been averted; as it was, the mandate only reached them a few days before the wedding was to be celebrated. They were already assembled at Norwich Castle, where (in spite of its being the bridegroom's home) the ceremony was to take place, guests were even now flocking in to witness the marriage and attend the subsequent feast. To be forced to give out that the bridal could not take place owing to the prohibition of the King was a thing abhorrent to the proud spirits of Roger and Raoul, whilst the equally high spirit and courage of Emma revolted against the imperious intermeddling of the King, who but a short while since had been nothing but a noble himself, and whose recent sudden rise in power was greatly owing to the support of the very families whose happiness he now sought to mar.

It wanted but a little to arouse in many hearts a sense of revolt and anger against the absent William. No man can rise so suddenly to such power without raising up a host of enemies amongst those who begin to feel the iron hand of monarchy, where once was only the clasp of a friend. The genius of the Conqueror had won him a kingdom, supported by the loyal assistance of the Norman and Breton nobles; but he had not always been careful to conciliate his friends, even though he had not been backward in bestowing upon them broad lands and new titles. Sometimes the very wealth and power thus placed within their reach became, in some sort, a snare to them. Dreams of ambition are ever quick to rise when angry men get together, and are heated with wine; and during the days which intervened between the arrival of the King's message and that fixed for the marriage ceremony, there were fierce and eager discussions between hot-headed nobles, young and old; and a wave of rebellious hatred seemed to be sweeping them along as they discussed the tyranny of the newly made monarch, and spoke together in angry, threatening tones, or in still more dangerous whispers of the possibility of bringing about a better state of affairs in the country, and one more distinctly advantageous to themselves. If William had so easily conquered the kingdom and established his own power, perchance that power might again be easily displaced.

The spirit of anger and discontent is easily aroused, and Raoul and Roger resolved to defy the King; yet, half afraid of the consequences of their defiance, knowing well the implacable nature of the man with whom they had to deal, they were eager to win to their way of thinking all those nobles who were assembling to do honour to bride and bridegroom; and certainly it seemed as though the spirit of disaffection were not hard to wake.

"If Waltheof would but join us we might rouse all England against the Conqueror!" whispered Raoul into the ear of his betrothed upon the night before their nuptials, as he spoke his fond farewell; and Emma's eyes glowed, for she knew Earl Waltheof well as a great and warlike man, whose popularity with his own countrymen would render him an invaluable ally, supposing that this sudden wave of rebellious impulse were to break forth into actual insurrection. Girl though she was, she had lived in an atmosphere of strife, and the sound of battle or the clash of arms had no terrors for her. Anger was in her heart against the King, and she cared little if her brother and her future lord chose to take up arms against him. Sooner than submit to his tyrannous decree, she would fight with her own hands, and shed the last drop of her blood. For what was life without Raoul?

Very lovely was the face of the young bride beneath its drooping veil, as, in the midst of a stately gathering, she plighted her troth to the man of her choice.

The deed was done. The King's mandate had been defied. A subject was in open revolt. The realisation of this came home to all those present as the fatal words were spoken. William

was not a man either to forget or to forgive. The gauntlet had been thrown down—what next?

The wedding guests sat at the long tables in the great banqueting hall. Bride and bridegroom, together with all the nobles and men of high degree, sat at the table on the raised dais, the others of lesser degree at the tables in the body of the hall. Normans and Bretons were there, together with a sprinkling of English, Earl Waltheof, who had married the Conqueror's niece, the afterwards infamous Judith, being one of them. But his wife was not with him, else perchance even the boldest had not dared to speak so openly.

It was as if (after the wine cups had gone round many times, and men's hearts were inflamed by good cheer and by the whispers that had been circulating with the cups) some sudden impulse came upon them, for a murmur arose, and the murmur waxed louder and more fierce, and suddenly a cry seemed to shake the rafters of the hall:

"Down with the Usurper! Who is he that he should reign over us? What is he better than others? Down with him! Let us divide the realm, and choose Kings of our own!"

Then came isolated voices crying fierce questions:

"Did he not poison Conon, our brave Count of Brittany?"

"What has he done for us, who shed our blood for him?"

"Has he fulfilled the promise he made?"

"He gave us barren lands for our wounds, and what does he do when we have made them of some value? Does he not take them from us by force, to give them to some new favourite?"

"Down with him!—Down with him!—Shall we call such a man our King?"

The deed was done! The die was cast. The banner of revolt was raised. The assembled company knew that already they had gone too far to draw back. The King would hear of this thing, and would never forgive. Action must now follow hard upon words. The Conqueror was absent; much might be done ere the news of insurrection reached him. Not one of those precious days must be lost.

With the first light of the new day the bride stood watching the departure of her brother and her lord. Roger was to travel night and day with all speed to Hereford and beat up his followers and the hardy Welsh on his borders, with whom he had maintained friendly relations. Raoul was to collect forces nearer at hand in his own earldom; but he must needs go in person, and to his girl-wife he left the care of the grim castle which had been the scene of yesterday's wedding and feast, and which was garrisoned with black-browed Bretons, devoted to the service of their master, and ready to lay down their lives for his beautiful bride.

Did her heart fail her as she saw the departure of her husband, her brother, and their noble guests, together with the armed followers which they had brought? Did she feel fear in the knowledge that she and they were now accounted rebels, and that any day might bring an armed force before the walls of Norwich?

No; there was no spark of fear in her heart, though there was for one moment a glint of tears upon her long lashes as she saw her lord and master ride away, and knew that peril threatened him and his comrades in arms, so soon as it should become known that they were in revolt.

She set herself, as a true soldier's daughter and bride, to see to the defences of the castle. The Breton garrison were true as steel. They had no love for Norman or English; but they loved their lord, and for his sake, as well as her own, they loved his sweet young bride; the sight of her courage and devotion kindled new ardour in their breasts day by day, and they

toiled with all the energy in their power to strengthen the stone walls, to obtain supplies of food and such munitions of war as were needed in those days, and to prepare themselves for whatever might betide.

Rumours were flying hither and thither, rumours of strife and of disaster. It was said that Roger of Hereford was cut off from returning, and was penned in behind the broad waters of the Severn; and again there was a whisper nearer at home that Odo, the warlike Bishop of Bayeux, was in the vicinity with a force of finely equipped men. On hearing this Emma's cheek grew pale; not with fear for herself, but lest some hurt should befall her lord, whom she had as yet scarcely learned to speak of as "husband."

The watchman upon the tower had blown a warning blast. Something was in sight; the horn sounded forth again and yet again.

There was hurrying within the walls of the castle, archers hastening to their loopholes, and men at arms buckling on their helmets and breastplates, and seizing their good broad-swords in readiness for the word of command.

Emma, breathless and dishevelled, raced to the tower herself, and, as she looked, she beheld a scattered band of fugitives, flying, as it were, towards the castle; and so forlorn and woe-begone was the aspect they bore that her heart seemed to die within her.

"Bretons, to the rescue of your brethren!" she suddenly cried aloud, and the cry was taken up and passed from mouth to mouth. Wide swung the great gates, down sank the drawbridge; the soldiers streamed forth to meet the flying Bretons and Saxons, who came in crowds for the protection of those strong walls, bringing with them the gloomy tale of death and disaster.

Late in the day, conducting a ghastly company of maimed and mutilated men, who had been bold stalwart soldiers a few days before, rode Raoul into the courtyard, the blackness of night upon his brow; and Emma rushed forth to clasp her husband to her heart, scarce knowing yet what was the meaning of the things she saw and heard.

"It means ruin to our hopes of life and liberty, if we cannot yet change defeat into victory," said the young Earl, as he let his bride divest him of his heavy armour, whilst he told the tale of his overthrow at the hands of Bishop Odo.

"Many died of their wounds; but some few I rescued, and have brought them hither to thee, my sweet bride. But for myself I may not linger. Our only hope now lies in getting help from beyond the sea. I must take ship with all speed to mine own domains in Brittany, and there, when this tale is told, methinks they will rise to a man in the defence of their brethren, in answer to my call, in the hope of vengeance and plunder! I will return with an army at my back, and William, the so-called Conqueror, shall yet learn to quake at the names of Raoul de Gael and Roger Fitz-Osborn!"

"And my brother?—what of him?" asked Emma, "will he go with thee? And wilt thou take me too?"

"Nay, my life, I must leave thee here to hold this fortress for me. Roger is penned in the west; albeit he will break loose I doubt not ere long, and march day and night to thine assistance. But our Breton garrison must needs serve under one they can trust and love. Sweet, my bride, hast thou the courage for the task? Though thou art so young in years, thou hast the heart of a soldier. Wilt thou hold the castle here against proud William's forces, till I or Roger come to thine aid?"

She looked him full in the face.

"Thou dost think that they will follow and lay siege?"

"They are so close behind me, that with the first dawn of the morning I must be gone, else I shall be too late to escape them!" answered Raoul; and his eyes rested with anxious questioning upon Emma's face. "Our poor Bretons are treated with savage ferocity by the English," he added. "If I lead them forth hence, and they fall into the Bishop's hands—well, thou hast seen with thine own eyes how their brethren have fared."

The fire flamed in Emma's eyes; she threw back her head with her own queenly gesture.

"Go, then, my husband, and I will guard thy castle for thee. I will keep safe those thou dost leave with me. Go! fly over the water, and return with the friends of the cause. Thou shalt find thy castle here, safeguarded as though thou thyself wert at the head of thy soldiers. The pitiless Bishop shall not lay hands on one of our Breton boys!"

So the brave young bride was left for the second time alone in the grim castle, to hold it for her lord till he should arrive with succour. But this time she was quickly ringed round with foemen, who, in the King's name, bade her surrender; and when she fearlessly refused, they laid close siege to the castle, vowing to serve every Breton they should henceforward take as those hapless creatures had been served, some of whom she was tending now with her own hands within the walls of the grim old keep.

Emma had grown up inured to perils, to hardships, to the sights and sounds of warfare, and warfare is always cruel. But her soul revolted against needless cruelties; and the sufferings of the poor maimed followers of her husband, who had been rescued and brought back by him, nerved her to every effort to keep from a like fate those who served her faithfully here, and looked to her to save them from it.

Parted from her husband upon their very wedding day, wife only in name as yet, the brave daughter of William Fitz-Osborn played the hero's part during those three long months of siege. Every day she made the circuit of the fortifications, careless of the flights of arrows that often made such exposure of her person a perilous matter; she spoke words of encouragement to the archers and watchmen; she devised ingenious methods of frustrating the various attempts made by the wily and determined foe for cutting off supplies, and for forcing an entrance into the castle.

When it was known that a woman was in command, many devices were practised for intimidating her and her soldiers; but all in vain; and free promises of pardon for herself if she would but betray her trust were answered with indignation and scorn.

The hard part of it to the brave young chatelaine was the uncertainty of what was passing elsewhere. Penned within the four walls of her eastern fortress, she knew nothing as to the fate of her brother in the west, nor how the rebellion against the Conqueror was spreading in the ranks of the disaffected Norman barons and the dispossessed Saxons. It had seemed to her, upon their wedding feast, as though all the realm was weary of the rule of "the Norman." Yet if that were so, if the revolt were ready to break forth all over the kingdom, why did none come to her aid? Surely her brother and others must know of the peril in which she stood. Why did not some of them seek to raise the siege? Why did not Raoul himself return with his Breton reinforcements?

As the long summer days went by, one after another, and weeks dragged on to months, brave Emma's cheek grew pale, and her eyes took a wistful yearning gaze, as of one whose heart is sick with hope deferred. But her vigilance was never for a moment relaxed. Her courage never faltered. Day by day she was to be seen upon the ramparts, speaking brave words to the weary soldiers, hurling lightning glances of defiance at the lines of the besiegers, and gazing with eager, expectant eyes in the direction of the sea, asking of the

birds of the air whether they had seen the white sails of the coming vessels that should bring relief to her.

At last the voice of rumour reached even this beleaguered castle. First it was an isolated whisper, then other whispers followed. Bit by bit the story of woe was pieced together, and a fugitive from the west, who had been sent with dispatches for the Lady Emma, contrived to gain entrance, and to tell all the tale.

It was said that the treacherous Judith, wife of Earl Waltheof, had learned the secret from her husband and had instantly betrayed it. The rebellion had been quelled almost ere it broke out. In the west the son of Fitz-Osborn had been taken captive, and was awaiting his doom on the return of the King. Others had been taken or slain; Norwich alone was holding out. Raoul had sent word that to return from Brittany was now impossible. It would be but to fall into the hands of an implacable foe. His word to his bride was to secure such terms as she could for herself and her garrison, and to make her way across the sea with all speed to join her husband there.

With whitening cheek and sinking heart Emma heard and read all this evil news. Her brother a captive, her husband an exile, their friends scattered and dispersed. Surrender inevitable! But what was she to surrender? This very messenger brought horrid tales of mutilation and cruelties of all sorts inflicted on hapless prisoners by their bloodthirsty conquerors. Was she to give up to such a fate the brave men who had learned to look to her and trust in her? For the castle she cared little. Where her husband was, there was her home. But her soldiers and servants, were they to be given up? Never! Never! Never!

"I will go forth and die at their head, fighting to the last, sooner than that!" she cried.

The Bishop had many times sought to open negotiations with the brave Emma, but hitherto fruitlessly. Now, with her own hand, she penned him a missive, offering to surrender to him the castle and its munitions of war, but only on the condition that every living creature within its walls went forth unharmed, and that they should be permitted to take ship unmolested for the shores of Brittany.

"Else will I never give up whilst one stone remains upon another. You shall see how long the daughter of William Fitz-Osborn can bid defiance to the man whom her father made England's King."

Was it chivalry, was it admiration for the spirit of the brave woman, or was it the policy of a soldier wearied by a long three months' siege of a fortress that seemed no nearer falling now than it had done upon the first day?

Whatever was the motive for the concession, the answer that came back was courteously, even generously worded. The brave young wife rode forth at the head of her whole garrison, and the Norman soldiers who had fought against the rebels in other places raised a shout of admiration as she appeared. She sat her horse like an Amazon, and returned the salutation with a dignity worthy of her name and race.

Saluting and being saluted by the Bishop, and lustily cheered by the soldiers, she passed through the town on her way to the coast, where vessels were awaiting her, while her men marched boldly behind her, singing the songs of their native land to which they were about to return, and chanting aloud the praise of the beautiful Emma to whose courage and resolution they owed their lives.

She and her band of devoted Bretons were thus permitted to march to the coast with all the honours of war, and to take ship for her husband's domains in Brittany without receiving insult or violence of any kind.

How high her heart was beating as she sighted the shore, and knew that her lord was awaiting her there, in that home which she had never yet seen! True, she was sad for her brother, and for the cause which had been lost in England; but after all, was not her husband safe, and waiting for her to rejoin him? and might not the tide turn some day, and they return to England in triumph, to help to overthrow the rule of Norman William, against whom they had sought to incite this rebellion?

These were fond hopes not destined to be realised. The courage and state-craft of William the Conqueror carried him safely through all the plots which assailed him during his stormy reign. Raoul de Gael knew where he was safe, and abandoned his claims upon English soil.

"I did well indeed to entrust my castle to the keeping of my bride!" cried the proud husband, when he held her in his arms once more; and the answer that went up from a thousand throats was a shout of admiration and praise in honour of their lord's fair young wife, the brave Emma Fitz-Osborn.

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