

ETHELRED

978. THE FREEDOM, which England had so long enjoyed from the depredations of the Danes, seems to have proceeded, partly from the establishments, which that pyratival nation had obtained in the north of France, and which employed all their superfluous hands to people and maintain them; partly from the vigour and warlike spirit of a long race of English princes, who preserved the kingdom in a posture of defence by sea and land, and either prevented or repelled every attempt of the invaders. But a new generation of men being now sprung up in the northern regions, who could no longer disburthen themselves on Normandy; the English had reason to dread, that the Danes would again visit an island, to which they were invited, both by the memory of their past successes, and by the expectation of assistance from their countrymen, who, though long established in the kingdom, were not yet thoroughly incorporated with the natives, nor had entirely forgotten their inveterate habits of war and depredation. And as the reigning prince was a minor, and even when he attained to man's estate, never discovered either courage or capacity sufficient to govern his own subjects, much less to repel a formidable enemy, the people might justly apprehend the worst calamities from so dangerous a crisis.

The Danes, before they durst attempt any important enterprize against England, made an inconsiderable descent by way of trial; and having landed from seven vessels near Southampton, 981. they ravaged the country, enriched themselves by spoil, and departed with impunity. Six years after, they made a like attempt in the west, and met with like success. The invaders, having now found affairs in a very different situation from that in which they formerly appeared, encouraged their countrymen to assemble a greater force, and to hope for more considerable advantages. 991. They landed in Essex under the command of two leaders; and having defeated and slain at Maldon, Brithnot, duke of that county, who ventured, with a small body, to attack them, they spread their devastations over all the neighbouring provinces. In this extremity, Ethelred, to whom historians give the epithet of the *Unready*, instead of rousing his people to defend with courage their honour and their property, hearkened to the advice of Siricius, archbishop of Canterbury, which was seconded by many of the degenerate nobility; and paying the enemy the sum of ten thousand pounds, he bribed them to depart the kingdom. This shameful expedient was attended with the success which might be expected. The Danes next year appeared off the eastern coast, in hopes of subduing a people, who defended themselves by their money, which invited assailants, instead of their arms, which repelled them. But the English, sensible of their folly, had, in the interval, assembled in a great council, and had determined to collect at London a

fleet able to give battle to the enemy;^v though that judicious measure failed of success, from the treachery of Alfric, duke of Mercia, whose name is infamous in the annals of that age, by the calamities which his repeated perfidy brought upon his country. This nobleman had, in 983, succeeded to his father, Alfere, in that extensive command; but being deprived of it two years after, and banished the kingdom, he was obliged to employ all his intrigue, and all his power, which was too great for a subject, to be restored to his country, and reinstated in his authority. Having had experience of the credit and malevolence of his enemies, he thenceforth trusted for security, not to his services or to the affections of his fellow citizens, but to the influence which he had obtained over his vassals, and to the public calamities, which, he thought, must, in every revolution, render his assistance necessary. Having fixed this resolution, he determined to prevent all such successes as might establish the royal authority, or render his own situation dependant or precarious. As the English had formed the plan of surrounding and destroying the Danish fleet in harbour, he privately informed the enemy of their danger; and when they put to sea, in consequence of this intelligence, he deserted to them, with the squadron under his command, the night before the engagement, and thereby disappointed all the efforts of his countrymen.^z Ethelred, enraged at his perfidy, seized his son, Alfgar, and ordered his eyes to be put out.^a But such was the power of Alfric, that he again forced himself into authority; and though he had given this specimen of his character, and received this grievous provocation, it was found necessary to entrust him anew with the government of Mercia. This conduct of the court, which, in all its circumstances, is so barbarous, weak, and imprudent, both merited and prognosticated the most grievous calamities.

The northern invaders,⁹⁹³ now well acquainted with the defenceless condition of England, made a powerful descent under the command of Sweyn, king of Denmark, and Olave, king of Norway; and sailing up the Humber, spread on all sides their destructive ravages. Lindesey was laid waste; Banbury was destroyed; and all the Northumbrians, though mostly of Danish descent, were constrained either to join the invaders, or to suffer under their depredations. A powerful army was assembled to oppose the Danes, and a general action ensued; but the English were deserted in the battle, from the cowardice or treachery of their three leaders, all of them men of Danish race, Frena, Frithegist, and Godwin, who gave the example of a shameful flight to the troops under their command.

Encouraged by this success, and still more by the contempt which it inspired for their enemy, the pirates ventured to attack the center of the kingdom; and entering the Thames in ninety-four vessels, laid siege to London, and threatened it with total destruction. But the citizens, alarmed at the danger,

and firmly united among themselves, made a bolder defence than the cowardice of the nobility and gentry gave the invaders reason to apprehend; and the besiegers, after suffering the greatest hardships, were finally frustrated in their attempt. In order to revenge themselves, they laid waste Essex, Sussex, and Hampshire; and having there procured horses, they were thereby enabled to spread, through the more inland counties, the fury of their depredations. In this extremity, Ethelred and his nobles had recourse to the former expedient; and sending ambassadors to the two northern kings, they promised them subsistence and tribute, on condition they would, for the present, put an end to their ravages, and soon after depart the kingdom. Sweyn and Olave agreed to the terms, and peaceably took up their quarters at Southampton, where the sum of sixteen thousand pounds was paid to them. Olave even made a journey to Andover, where Ethelred resided; and he received the rite of confirmation from the English bishops, as well as many rich presents from the king. He here promised, that he would never more infest the English territories; and he faithfully fulfilled the engagement. This prince receives the appellation of St. Olave from the church of Rome; and notwithstanding the general presumption, which lies, either against the understanding or morals of every one, who in those ignorant ages was dignified with that title, he seems to have been a man of merit and of virtue. Sweyn, though less scrupulous than Olave, was constrained, upon the departure of the Norwegian prince, to evacuate also the kingdom with all his followers.

997. This composition brought only a short interval to the miseries of the English. The Danish pirates appeared soon after in the Severne; and having committed spoil in Wales, as well as in Cornwall and Devonshire, they sailed round to the south-coast, and entering the Tamar, completed the devastation of these two counties. They then returned to the Bristol-channel; and penetrating into the country by the Avon, spread themselves over all that neighbourhood, and carried fire and sword even into Dorsetshire.

They next changed the seat of war; 998. and after ravaging the Isle of Wight, they entered the Thames and Medway, and laid siege to Rochester, where they defeated the Kentish-men in a pitched battle. After this victory the whole province of Kent was made a scene of slaughter, fire, and devastation. The extremity of these miseries forced the English into counsels for common defence both by sea and land; but the weakness of the king, the divisions among the nobility, the treachery of some, the cowardice of others, the want of concert in all, frustrated every endeavour: Their fleets and armies either came too late to attack the enemy, or were repulsed with dishonour; and the people were thus equally ruined by resistance or by submission. The English, therefore, destitute both of prudence and unanimity in council, of courage and

conduct in the field, had recourse to the same weak expedient, which by experience they had already found so ineffectual: They offered the Danes to buy peace by paying them a large sum of money. These ravagers rose continually in their demands; and now required the payment of 24,000 pounds, to which the English were so mean and imprudent as to submit.^b The departure of the Danes procured them another short interval of repose, which they enjoyed as if it were to be perpetual, without making any effectual preparations for a more vigorous resistance upon the next return of the enemy.

Besides receiving this sum, the Danes were engaged by another motive to depart a kingdom, which appeared so little in a situation to resist their efforts: They were invited over by their countrymen in Normandy, who at this time were hard pressed by the arms of Robert, king of France, and who found it difficult to defend the settlement, which, with so much advantage to themselves and glory to their nation, they had made in that country. It is probable, also, that Ethelred, observing the close connexions thus maintained among all the Danes, however divided in government or situation, was desirous of forming an alliance with that formidable people: For this purpose, being now a widower, he made his addresses to Emma, sister to Richard II. duke of Normandy, and he soon succeeded in his negotiation. The princess came over this year to England,^{1001.} and was married to Ethelred.^c

In the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century;*Settlement of the Normans.* when the north, not yet exhausted by that multitude of people or rather nations, which she had successively emitted, sent forth a new race, not of conquerors, as before, but of pirates and ravagers, who infested the countries possessed by her once warlike sons; lived Rollo, a petty prince or chieftain in Denmark, whose valour and abilities soon engaged the attention of his countrymen. He was exposed in his youth to the jealousy of the king of Denmark, who attacked his small, but independant principality; and who, being foiled in every assault, had recourse at last to perfidy for effecting his purpose, which he had often attempted in vain by force of arms:^d He lulled Rollo into security by an insidious peace; and falling suddenly upon him, murdered his brother and his bravest officers, and forced him to fly for safety into Scandinavia. Here many of his ancient subjects, induced partly by affection to their prince, partly by the oppressions of the Danish monarch, ranged themselves under his standard, and offered to follow him in every enterprize. Rollo, instead of attempting to recover his paternal dominions, where he must expect a vigorous resistance from the Danes, determined to pursue an easier, but more important undertaking, and to make his fortune, in imitation of his countrymen, by pillaging the richer and more southern coasts of Europe. He collected a body of troops, which, like that of all those ravagers, was composed of

Norwegians, Swedes, Frisians, Danes, and adventurers of all nations, who, being accustomed to a roving, unsettled life, took delight in nothing but war and plunder. His reputation brought him associates from all quarters; and a vision, which he pretended to have appeared to him in his sleep, and which, according to his interpretation of it, prognosticated the greatest successes, proved also a powerful incentive with those ignorant and superstitious people.^e

The first attempt, made by Rollo, was on England, near the end of Alfred's reign; when that great monarch, having settled Guthrun and his followers in East-Anglia, and others of those freebooters in Northumberland, and having restored peace to his harassed country, had established the most excellent military as well as civil institutions among the English. The prudent Dane, finding that no advantages could be gained over such a people, governed by such a prince, soon turned his enterprizes against France, which he found more exposed to his inroads;^f and during the reigns of Eudes, an usurper, and of Charles the Simple, a weak prince, he committed the most destructive ravages both on the inland and maritime provinces of that kingdom. The French, having no means of defence against a leader, who united all the valour of his countrymen with the policy of more civilized nations, were obliged to submit to the expedient practised by Alfred, and to offer the invaders a settlement in some of those provinces, which they had depopulated by their arms.^g

The reason why the Danes for many years pursued measures so different from those which had been embraced by the Goths, Vandals, Franks, Burgundians, Lombards, and other northern conquerors, was the great difference, in the method of attack, which was practised by these several nations, and to which the nature of their respective situations necessarily confined them. The latter tribes, living in an inland country, made incursions by land upon the Roman empire; and when they entered far into the frontiers, they were obliged to carry along with them their wives and families, whom they had no hopes of soon re-visiting, and who could not otherwise participate of their plunder. This circumstance quickly made them think of forcing a settlement in the provinces, which they had over-run; and these barbarians, spreading themselves over the country, found an interest in protecting the property and industry of the people, whom they had subdued. But the Danes and Norwegians, invited by their maritime situation, and obliged to maintain themselves in their uncultivated country by fishing, had acquired some experience of navigation; and in their military excursions pursued the method practised against the Roman empire by the more early Saxons: They made descents in small bodies from their ships or rather boats, and ravaging the coasts, returned with the booty to their families, whom they could not conveniently carry along with them in those hazardous enterprizes. But

when they increased their armaments, made incursions into the inland countries, and found it safe to remain longer in the midst of the enfeebled enemy, they had been accustomed to crowd their vessels with their wives and children, and having no longer any temptation to return to their own country, they willingly embraced an opportunity of settling in the warm climates and cultivated fields of the south.

Affairs were in this situation with Rollo and his followers, when Charles proposed to relinquish to them part of the province formerly called Neustria, and to purchase peace on these hard conditions. After all the terms were fully settled, there appeared only one circumstance shocking to the haughty Dane: He was required to do homage to Charles for this province, and to put himself in that humiliating posture, imposed on vassals by the rites of the feudal law. He long refused to submit to this indignity; but being unwilling to lose such important advantages for a mere ceremony, he made a sacrifice of his pride to his interest, and acknowledged himself in form the vassal of the French monarch.^h Charles gave him his daughter, Gisla, in marriage; and that he might bind him faster to his interests, made him a donation of a considerable territory, besides that which he was obliged to surrender to him by his stipulations. When some of the French nobles informed him, that, in return for so generous a present, it was expected, that he should throw himself at the king's feet, and make suitable acknowledgments for his bounty; Rollo replied, that he would rather decline the present; and it was with some difficulty they could persuade him to make that compliment by one of his captains. The Dane, commissioned for this purpose, full of indignation at the order, and despising so unwarlike a prince, caught Charles by the foot, and pretending to carry it to his mouth, that he might kiss it, overthrew him before all his courtiers. The French, sensible of their present weakness, found it prudent to overlook this insult.ⁱ

Rollo, who was now in the decline of life, and was tired of wars and depredations, applied himself, with mature counsels, to the settlement of his new-acquired territory, which was thenceforth called Normandy; and he parcelled it out among his captains and followers. He followed in this partition the customs of the feudal law, which was then universally established in the southern countries of Europe, and which suited the peculiar circumstances of that age. He treated the French subjects who submitted to him, with mildness and justice; he reclaimed his ancient followers from their ferocious violence; he established law and order throughout his state; and after a life spent in tumults and ravages, he died peaceably in a good old age, and left his dominions to his posterity.^k

William I. who succeeded him, governed the dutchy twenty-five years; and during that time, the Normans were thoroughly intermingled with the French, had acquired their language, had imitated their manners, and had made such progress towards cultivation, that, on the death of William, his son, Richard, though a minor,^l inherited his dominions: A sure proof, that the Normans were already somewhat advanced in civility, and that their government could now rest secure on its laws and civil institutions, and was not wholly sustained by the abilities of the Sovereign. Richard, after a long reign of fifty-four years, was succeeded by his son of the same name in the year 996;^m which was eighty-five years after the first establishment of the Normans in France. This was the duke, who gave his sister, Emma, in marriage to Ethelred, king of England, and who thereby formed connections with a country, which his posterity was so soon after destined to subdue.

The Danes had been established during a longer period in England than in France; and though the similarity of their original language to that of the Saxons invited them to a more early coalition with the natives, they had hitherto found so little example of civilized manners among the English, that they retained all their ancient ferocity, and valued themselves only on their national character of military bravery. The recent, as well as more ancient atchievements of their countrymen, tended to support this idea; and the English princes, particularly Athelstan and Edgar, sensible of that superiority, had been accustomed to keep in pay bodies of Danish troops, who were quartered about the country, and committed many violences upon the inhabitants. These mercenaries had attained to such a height of luxury, according to the old English writers,ⁿ that they combed their hair once a day, bathed themselves once a week, changed their cloaths frequently; and by all these arts of effeminacy, as well as by their military character, had rendered themselves so agreeable to the fair sex, that they debauched the wives and daughters of the English, and dishonoured many families. But what most provoked the inhabitants, was, that, instead of defending them against invaders, they were ever ready to betray them to the foreign Danes, and to associate themselves with all stragglng parties of that nation. The animosity, between the inhabitants of English and Danish race, had, from these repeated injuries, risen to a great height; when Ethelred, from a policy incident to weak princes, embraced the cruel resolution of massacring the latter throughout all his dominions. [NOTE \[D\] 1002](#). Secret orders were dispatched to commence the execution every where on the same day; *Nov. 13.* and the festival of St. Brice, which fell on a Sunday, the day on which the Danes usually bathed themselves, was chosen for that purpose. It is needless to repeat the accounts transmitted concerning the barbarity of this massacre: The rage of the populace, excited by so many injuries, sanctified by authority, and stimulated by example, distinguished not between innocence and guilt,

spared neither sex nor age, and was not satiated without the tortures, as well as death, of the unhappy victims. Even Gunilda, sister to the king of Denmark, who had married Earl Paling, and had embraced Christianity, was, by the advice of Edric, earl of Wilts, seized and condemned to death by Ethelred, after seeing her husband and children butchered before her face. This unhappy princess foretold, in the agonies of despair, that her murder would soon be avenged by the total ruin of the English nation.

Never was prophecy better fulfilled; [1003](#). and never did barbarous policy prove more fatal to the authors. Sweyn and his Danes, who wanted but a pretence for invading the English, appeared off the Western coast, and threatened to take full revenge for the slaughter of their countrymen. Exeter fell first into their hands, from the negligence or treachery of earl Hugh, a Norman, who had been made governor by the interest of Queen Emma. They began to spread their devastations over the country; when the English, sensible what outrages they must now expect from their barbarous and offended enemy, assembled more early and in greater numbers than usual, and made an appearance of vigorous resistance. But all these preparations were frustrated by the treachery of duke Alfric, who was intrusted with the command, and who, feigning sickness, refused to lead the army against the Danes, till it was dispirited, and at last dissipated, by his fatal misconduct. Alfric soon after died; and Edric, a greater traitor than he, who had married the king's daughter, and had acquired a total ascendant over him, succeeded Alfric in the government of Mercia, and in the command of the English armies. A great famine, proceeding partly from the bad seasons, partly from the decay of agriculture, added to all the other miseries of the inhabitants. The country, wasted by the Danes, harassed by the fruitless expeditions of its own forces, was reduced to the utmost desolation; and [1007](#). at last submitted to the infamy of purchasing a precarious peace from the enemy, by the payment of 30,000 pounds.

The English endeavoured to employ this interval in making preparations against the return of the Danes, which they had reason soon to expect. A law was made, ordering the proprietors of eight hydes of land to provide each a horseman and a complete suit of armour; and those of 310 hydes to equip a ship for the defence of the coast. When this navy was assembled, which must have consisted of near eight hundred vessels,^o all hopes of its success were disappointed by the factions, animosities, and dissensions of the nobility. Edric had impelled his brother Brightric to prefer an accusation of treason against Wolfnoth, governor of Sussex, the father of the famous earl Godwin; and that nobleman, well acquainted with the malevolence as well as power of his enemy, found no means of safety but in deserting with twenty ships to the Danes. Brightric pursued him with a fleet of eighty sail; but his

ships being shattered in a tempest, and stranded on the coast, he was suddenly attacked by Wolfnoth, and all his vessels burnt and destroyed. The imbecility of the king was little capable of repairing this misfortune: The treachery of Edric frustrated every plan for future defence: And the English navy, disconcerted, discouraged, and divided, was at last scattered into its several harbours.

It is almost impossible, or would be tedious, to relate particularly all the miseries to which the English were thenceforth exposed. We hear of nothing but the sacking and burning of towns; the devastation of the open country; the appearance of the enemy in every quarter of the kingdom; their cruel diligence in discovering any corner, which had not been ransacked by their former violence. The broken and disjointed narration of the antient historians is here well adapted to the nature of the war, which was conducted by such sudden inroads, as would have been dangerous even to an united and well governed kingdom, but proved fatal, where nothing but a general consternation, and mutual diffidence and dissention prevailed. The governors of one province refused to march to the assistance of another, and were at last terrified from assembling their forces for the defence of their own province. General councils were summoned; but either no resolution was taken, or none was carried into execution. And the only expedient, in which the English agreed, was the base and imprudent one, of buying a new peace from the Danes by the payment of 48,000 pounds.

[1011](#). This measure did not bring them even that short interval of repose, which they had expected from it. The Danes, disregarding all engagements, continued their devastations and hostilities; levied a new contribution of 8000 pounds upon the county of Kent alone; murdered the archbishop of Canterbury, who had refused to countenance this exaction; and the English nobility found no other resource than that of submitting every where to the Danish monarch, swearing allegiance to him, and delivering him hostages for their fidelity. [1013](#). Ethelred, equally afraid of the violence of the enemy and the treachery of his own subjects, fled into Normandy, whither he had sent before him Queen Emma, and her two sons, Alfred and Edward. Richard received his unhappy guests with a generosity that does honour to his memory.

[1014](#). The King had not been above six weeks in Normandy, when he heard of the death of Sweyn, who expired at Gainsborough, before he had time to establish himself in his new-acquired dominions. The English prelates and nobility, taking advantage of this event, sent over a deputation to Normandy; inviting Ethelred to return to them, expressing a desire of being again governed by their native prince, and

intimating their hopes, that, being now tutored by experience, he would avoid all those errors, which had been attended with such misfortunes to himself and to his people.

But the misconduct of Ethelred was incurable; and on his resuming the government, he discovered the same incapacity, indolence, cowardice, and credulity, which had so often exposed him to the insults of his enemies. His son-in-law, Edric, notwithstanding his repeated treasons, retained such influence at court, as to instil into the king jealousies of Sigefert and Morcar, two of the chief nobles of Mercia: Edric allured them into his house, where he murdered them; while Ethelred participated in the infamy of the action, by confiscating their estates, and thrusting into a convent the widow of Sigefert. She was a woman of singular beauty and merit; and in a visit which was paid her, during her confinement, by prince Edmond, the king's eldest son, she inspired him with so violent an affection, that he released her from the convent, and soon after married her, without the consent of his father.

Meanwhile the English found in Canute, the son and successor of Sweyn, an enemy no less terrible than the prince, from whom death had so lately delivered them. He ravaged the eastern coast with merciless fury, and put ashore all the English hostages at Sandwich, after having cut off their hands and noses. He was obliged, by the necessity of his affairs, to make a voyage to Denmark; but returning soon after, he continued his depredations along the southern coast: He even broke into the counties of Dorset, Wilts, and Somerset; where an army was assembled against him, under the command of prince Edmond and duke Edric. The latter still continued his perfidious machinations; and after endeavouring in vain to get the prince into his power,¹⁰¹⁵ he found means to disperse the army; and he then openly deserted to Canute with forty vessels.

Notwithstanding this misfortune, Edmond was not disconcerted; but assembling all the force of England, was in a condition to give battle to the enemy. The king had had such frequent experience of perfidy among his subjects, that he had lost all confidence in them: He remained at London, pretending sickness, but really from apprehensions, that they intended to buy their peace, by delivering him into the hands of his enemies. The army called aloud for their sovereign to march at their head against the Danes; and on his refusal to take the field, they were so discouraged, that those vast preparations became ineffectual for the defence of the kingdom. Edmond, deprived of all regular supplies to maintain his soldiers, was obliged to commit equal ravages with those which were practised by the Danes, and after making some fruitless expeditions into the north, which had submitted entirely to Canute's power, he retired to London, determined there to maintain to the last extremity the small remains of English liberty. He here found every thing in confusion by the death of the king,¹⁰¹⁶ who expired after an unhappy and inglorious reign of thirty-five years. He left two sons by his first marriage, Edmond,

who succeeded him, and Edwy, whom Canute afterwards murdered. His two sons by the second marriage, Alfred and Edward, were, immediately upon Ethelred's death, conveyed into Normandy by Queen Emma.