

## Literature, &amp;c.

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## THE RED KING.

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THE lady of Bamborough castle lay upon her couch, still in the sweet tranquillity of the morning slumber. She was dreaming too, for in her sleep a soft, warm smile came dimpling over her mouth, and the snow of her forehead seemed to brighten beneath the dishevelled locks that escaped from her night coif and lay scattered over her arm, bosom and pillow. The dawn was breaking around the castle, rosy and sweet with dewy exhalations, but it only penetrated in fragrant gushes, to the lady's couch, for her chamber was the keep or citadel of her husband's castle, and lighted only by loop hole windows sunk deep in the wall. Thus even at noon day, the massive and rich furniture lay shrouded, as it were in twilight. It was, in truth, a rude sleeping place for so much youth and beauty; but the castle had been in a state of siege two months and the earl of Northumberland selected this grim old chamber for his bride because it was most remote from any chance of attack.

A charge of treason, vague and groundless, against the young and brave earl of Northumberland, had brought William Rufus, the Red King, down into Northumberland with a royal army. This pretence of treason was a shallow covering for the jealousy which the red king felt for a powerful baron who had lately increased his enormous wealth by a union with one of the richest heiresses in England. The owner of two hundred and eighty manors which Northumberland possessed, all teeming with vassals ready to obey their lord's will, was no mean antagonist even to the king.

During a siege of more than two months the earl came off victorious in every skirmish with the besiegers, and at length forced them from the walls. In this condition Rufus found his troops on his return to Northumberland, after a hasty visit to London. Instead of renewing the siege, he instantly dispatched a messenger from his camp, proposing terms of amity to the earl, and offering to surrender into his hands the town of Newcastle-on-Tyne. These propositions were accompanied by a request that Northumberland should come to the royal camp and hold conference with his king touching the subject of dispute between them.

The royal messenger reached Bamborough in the evening, after his lady had retired to rest, and she slept in the morning, calm and sweetly, all unconscious that her noble bridegroom was even then encasing his limbs in armour, preparatory to his interview with a monarch whose offers of amity were a thousand times more apprehended than his arms.

With thirty retainers, mounted and waiting in the court, and clad in splendid armour from head to foot, the young earl sought his lady's chamber. She was still sleeping, but lightly, and the moment her husband's foot touched the floor she started up, drew a fair hand across her eyes and said, in one of those sweet rich voices that makes the heart thrill as nothing else on earth can—

"A, what a sluggard I am! And so you are armed, dear lord, from head to foot, while I have been nursing sweet dreams on my pillow."

Northumberland approached the couch and dropping on one knee, took the beautiful hand upon which the countess had allowed her cheek to fall, and pressed it warmly to his lips.

"Nay, sweet bride, I did not come to frighten my love from her nest at this early hour but only to snatch a single glance before I go to meet the king!"

"The king?" cried the lady, casting one white arm round her lord's neck, but drawing back her head from his proffered kiss, with a look of wonder, not unmingled with affright. "I thought that all this turmoil was ended yesterday, when you beat the king's troops back from these walls. Is Rufus in Northumberland again?"

"His messenger is in the castle. I am now armed and ready to follow him to the king's camp, where Rufus wishes to confer with me."

"Do not go," cried the lady, and a look of keen anxiety came into the dark eyes that were a moment before so full of tenderness. "My heart misgives me. What if this bad king—always false and cruel—should intend this message as a snare?"

"I think not," replied the earl, gazing with a sort of thoughtful tenderness into the earnest eyes uplifted to his, as if he were thinking of her more than any danger that might threaten himself. "Remember, Rufus is a sworn knight and crowned king. He would not stain his honor by treachery so base as this would be, should any peril attend this expedition."

"But you will not go without ample guard," cried the lady, still anxious. "We have troops enough here. If you will go, let it be with plenty of stout soldiers."

"What, to guard my own life from an imaginary risk, must I weaken the garrison that is to protect my lady? Nay! nay! nay! there is no peril in this! Besides I have thirty picked men below; so one kiss, foolish trembler, and I will to the saddle."

"I cannot, I cannot," cried the lady shrinking back to her pillows and burying her face

in them. "My heart sinks within me; it seems as if we were parting forever!"

"This is because we are parting for the first time since you were mine," said Northumberland tenderly; "I, too have something here that half unmans me!"

"Oh, listen to it, sweet lord, and trust not this recreant king! The mission must speed ill that is pursued against the clamor of a strong heart. Go not into the power of this Norman my Northumberland!"

"Tush, tush," cried the earl, raising her forehead from the pillow and smiling with a sort of forced playfulness, as her eyes so full of trouble met his. "Is this the heroism of an English baron's wife? By my knighthood I must not let our soldiers see this miserable face; they would swear the saints were all against this morning's ride? Come—come—look up and smile upon me before I go; I am anxious to put an end to this unthrifty warfare. It irks me to see my bride couched among the rough wall of a citadel chamber."

The countess glanced around the room, whose rude stone work was but scantily concealed by the glowing tapestry brought from her own more commodious apartments, and cast roughly over it on the first sound of an attack. Then turning her eyes on the noble face of her husband with one of those soul-beaming smiles that burst from a full heart to the face, as light shines over a flower, she cast herself on his bosom.

"You have been with me here; I felt no lack of comfort; we shall never, never, be so happy again!"

Northumberland felt the heart-dew breaking into his eyes; his own presentiments echoed the fears that filled the bosom of his wife, for intense love for that noble young creature had softened his brave nature, as only brave natures can soften, for there is no tenderness so touching and so beautiful as that of a strong spirit subdued by the affections. A moment more and that lovely pleader might have prevailed; but Northumberland felt his weakness and straining her to his bosom tore himself away.

"Northumberland, my lord—oh my dear lord—come back! One word more—a single word," cried the young wife, starting from her couch and stretching forth her arms towards the door through which he had passed. But he was gone. She heard his mailed step ringing on the stone floor—fainter—fainter—fainter, then came the jingling of spurs, the tramp of hoofs, and the hollow sound of a cavalcade galloping over the drawbridge, then the slow creaking of chains as the bridge was raised again, and all was still, even the lady's heart for she had fainted on her couch.

It was but for a moment—scarcely had the color left the exquisite mouth when it flowed back again touching it with a vivid scarlet, and her eyes flashed with renewed life. She would see him again, if it were but one precious glance; there must be time for that! She started up, hurried on her robe, and thrust her snowy feet into a pair of embroidered sandals, while she flung a long crimson upper tunic over her garments to conceal the deficiencies of her toilet from the guard, and then she hurried forth to the rampart, breathless and half wild with fear that he should be out of sight. No, he had checked the headlong speed of his little cavalcade the moment that he felt safe from the pleadings of his own heart, in the open country. He saw her there, bending over the ramparts, holding the crimson robe to her bosom with one hand, and stretching forth the other as if that mute appeal might draw him back. He took off his scarf—that which her own fair hands had embroidered—and cast it to the winds, then gathering its azure folds in his hands he pressed them to his lips, drew it over his shoulders again and put spurs to his horse. The ground was thickly wooded—twice she caught sight of his form galloping through the trees, still she watched for one more glance of the azure scarf, but no—the deep emerald hue of the forest, waving on and on, a vast wild ocean of foliage, alone met her eye.

She waited half an hour on the battlements, hoping that some vista in the trees might give her another glance of the beloved one; then she turned away, heavy-hearted and with tears standing in those superb eyes.

Ill and dispirited, the countess sought the gloom of her chamber again. There she sat down in the dim light, with the crimson mantle falling in masses around her, her hair all unbraided and her uncovered feet reposing loosely in their sandals. Her grief seemed deep and poignant beyond any apparent cause. But affection is sometimes endowed with an intuitive sense deep and holy as the prophetic spirit. From the moment her last glance had rested on the bridegroom, to whom she had been wedded only three happy months there was a settled conviction at her heart that some terrible evil would befall him before they met again.

Weary of waiting for a summons, her tiring women, at length, came into the chamber. She suffered them to robe her in the costly garments with which he had best loved to see her person adorned; but all the while they were plaiting the raven tresses of her hair and smoothing the purple folds of her robe, she stood among them sad and painfully abstracted—tears standing in her eyes and a sharp tremor now and then agitating her lips, as a rose bud trembles when overcharged with storm drops.

At length her women went out and the countess was left alone. She sat down by an embroidery frame, but her hands shook and the gorgeous silks blended in confused masses of

colour beneath her eyes; she arose and walked the room. She knelt upon the oaken floor before an emblem of our Saviour's agony, and prayed, but still the force of her apprehensions grew stronger and more insupportable. She could neither work nor pray. Amid all the terrors of a fierce siege the lady had been calm, almost cheerful, for he was by her side. But now left in walls peopled by her husband's vassals, but lacking that dear sense of protecting love, her very soul grew faint.

The royal camp was only a few miles from Bamborough, and the conference between Rufus and his puissant baron need not occupy much time, so the countess might reasonably expect his coming some hours before night. But the sun sank nearer and nearer to the horizon, and the West was breaking into ridges of faint purple and gold; and no indication of his coming.

She had been upon the ramparts already four weary hours, and as the first rosy flush of coming night appeared upon the sky, the apprehensions that had made the day so full of trial became insupportable, tears gushed to her eyes, her white hands were intertwined in a convulsive clasp, and, leaning against a rude abutment of stone, she still kept her eyes, blinded and wet with tears, upon the forest path which Northumberland had taken.

What was that? The forest peopled with human beings? Were those red flashes among the trees beams of the rich sunset, or war pennants streaming to the air? She dashed the blinding tears from her eyes. The breath came, pantingly, through her open lips—the white fingers, as tightly enlinked, clung together pale and cold as ice, and over her features fell a purple tinge from the robe, that rendered their pallor deathly.

The woods were in commotion—trembling with the rush of human life, that seemed heaving, wave after wave, through their dense foliage. They came forth in battalions—archers—spearmen—and ranks of rude men with pikes and battle-axes gleaming in the sunset—like torches, bursting into flame—file after file, column following column—the royal army surged on from the dark forest. Like a cloud of foul insects they swarmed around the fortress in silence and with rude military precision. When the castle was belted in with armed men, and the forest yet teeming with hostile beings, as if the very leaves had started into human existence, a party of some ten persons came through a vista in the woods, conspicuous for their rich armor and their magnificently housed war steeds. A single trumpet blast heralded the approach of these horsemen. The ranks fell back, leaving a lane walled in by pikemen, through which the party came in a sharp gallop toward the draw-bridge.

The countess turned her eyes, now clear and sharp with a certainty of evil, upon these horsemen. The first was a powerful man in jet black armour, studded richly with gold, a crimson plume floated from his helmet and masses of bright red hair flowed over his shoulders. His helmet was down and the features entirely concealed; but a sharp thrill ran through the lady's frame as she saw those locks, so deep in their warm hue, so remarkable for profusion and length. "It is the king!" broke from her white lips, and still her eyes turned with fearful earnestness on the cavalcade.

Next to William Rufus came another figure, mounted on a large white steed, but diminutive in person and so slender that the weight of his silver scaled armor seemed bending his shoulders to a curve. His white plume was of unusual length, and the housing of his steed, heavy with golden fringes, were more superb by far, than those of the king's charger.

The countess knew this man also, and the thrill of pain which the sight of Rufus had produced deepened into a shudder. That diminutive horseman was Ralph Flambard; the base chaplain of the tyrant king and the most hated man in England. With these came many leaders and nobles forming the red king's retinue, all plunging after him toward the barbarian with headlong speed, while the army swarmed up closer and closer to the moated walls.

A trumpet blast, loud and prolonged, with a valorous flourish, fired all the proud old Saxon blood in the gentle heart of the countess. She stood firmly up an moving across the battlements met her husband's lieutenant, who was advancing toward her.

"I know it is the king," she said; with forced composure; "let us go to the donjon tower and hear what he would say to us. In Northumberland's absence, good lieutenant, we must take authority upon ourselves; summon some of my maidens. It is but seemly that they should accompany us on this warlike mission."

The summons was all uncalled for. While the countess was speaking, her maidens came upon the battlement in great terror and breathless from the haste with which they had left the halls below.

"The king, lady; the king is here in person!" cried one of the girls, glancing with affright at the array of armed men that surrounded the fortress.

"Well, pretty Marion, why should Northumberland's wife tremble at the sound of a monarch's trumpet?" said the lady, striving to smile. "Is not the castle well guarded? Have we not kept this Norman at bay two months already, though his trumpet has clamored at our gate full often during the whole time?"

"It may be that our lord is with the king, and that this is but the summons to admit him with his royal guest," suggested the lieutenant.

The lady's pale cheek glowed again with

the rich bloom it had lost, her eyes flashed joyfully an instant, and then her features sank back to the fond but anxious expression they had previously worn.

"This is not the sound of Northumberland's trumpet; I should know its voice," she said, and a tear, spite of her efforts to suppress it, sparkled in her eye at the remembrance of those happy days when the silver-toned clangor of her bridegroom had claimed entrance to her father's castle.

Another impatient blast of the trumpet forced the lady's thoughts to the duties she was called up to perform. "Come, my good lieutenant! Follow me close, maidens!" she added, moving with a firm step across the battlements. "The ladies of our house were not wont to shrink from the angry enemy, though he chanced to be a crowned one. It were a shame to hesitate longer. Let us to the donjon tower!"

"Shall I bring forth your *couvre-chef*, lady?" said the young maiden to whom the countess had most directly addressed herself.

"Yes!" said the lady, and a faint blush shot across her cheek, "the time was when a Saxon dame might stand before an English king with her brow uncovered, without fear or shame, but the times are changed. Bring me the muffler."

The damsel sprang forward and instantly returned with a long scarf of rose colored silk, which she arranged over the glossy braids of her hair, which fell almost to the floor though slightly knotted up with scarlet ribands.

"Now lift my train, thou little trembler," said the lady, forcing a smile, as the shaking hands of the damsel fell from the *couvre-chef*, startled by a more angry blast from the hostile trumpeters. "Nay, let the sleeves sweep the earth as they will," she added, as one of the girls stooped to knot up one of the loose ermine lined sleeves which, in age, were allowed to fall in drapery till they blended with the sweeping train, "we have no time to care for the spoiling of a little velvet and fur. Let us away or this Norman king will tax the wife of Northumberland with fear of his presence."

With a firm but somewhat rapid step the countess left the battlements. Surrounded by her maidens and the officers of her garrison, she crossed the outer bailey, or court, which lay between the citadel and the donjon keep, a strong, square tower of two stories that stood opposite the barbican. While among her own people she threw the *couvre-chef* back upon her shoulders and glanced, from time to time, upon the soldiers that lined her way with a look of calm and sweet encouragement.

Once or twice she smiled as some rude soldier dropped to his knees and pressed his lips upon the flag from which her small foot had been just uplifted. But the smiles were grave, and with them started a few tears that gave lustre to the troubled blackness of her eyes without forming into drops. At length she stood upon the donjon tower in full view of the royal army. The herald was still sounding his clarion, and near him sat King Rufus, striving to check the impatience of his war-horse, whose blood seemed on fire from the constant braying of the trumpet and the sharp control held over him by the impatient monarch, whose strong arm seemed scarcely sufficient to keep the steed from plunging into the moat. A band of noble generals were gathered around the monarch, and beyond was the army standing close together, a compact wall of hostile forces.

As the Countess Matilda appeared upon the tower, every eye was uplifted toward her. She neither shrank back nor trembled, for the Saxon blood was kindled in her veins, exciting her to more than feminine courage. She felt that in her delicate form was centred the custody of her husband's knighthood, and modestly gathering the *couvre-chef* over her features she waited in calm dignity for the herald to proclaim the wishes of his master.

For a moment there was profound silence in the hostile company, the superb beauty of the countess—her queenly figure rendered more imposing by vestments massive in material and flowing around her in rich waves, like the drapery of a Roman matron—the exquisite beauty of a face that could not be at all concealed by the half transparent *couvre-chef*, joined to a dignity that was almost regal, had taken the enemy by surprise. A murmur of admiration ran from lip to lip. Several of the lords lifted the helmets from their foreheads, in chivalric homage to so much loveliness, and the king removed the bars of steel from before his florid and coarse features to fix them with a look of rude admiration on the noble lady. Slowly he turned that glance aside and it rested upon Ralph Flambard; a meaning smile, sensual and treacherous, disturbed his heavy mouth, and it was answered with a look of crafty gratulation by the favourite.

"Is not there beauty enough to justify the advice I gave?" said the parasite in a low voice stooping toward the monarch.

"I would give the best earldom in England for a good view of that face."

"Have patience my liege," cried the favourite softly, "within the fortress, your own hand shall sweep the rosy cloud away from such features as your eyes never dwell upon."

"Hark, her seneschal is answering our herald said the king, returning Flambard's assurance with a quick glance. "Hear what answer the lovely dame renders to our demand."

"That Matilda, countess of Northumberland will never open the gates of her husband's castle to men who claim entrance in hostile guise and with arms in their hands. This is her answer," said Ralph, and his thin lips curled craftily.

"Sound again! Offer life and quarters to