

WILLIAM MALET

The Conqueror and His Companions

by J.R. Planché, Somerset Herald. London: Tinsley Brothers, 1874.

Here again is a memorable personage of whose origin and family little is known. Wace mentions him as "Guillaume ki l'en dit Mallet," but why so called has not even been guessed at. Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, is popularly said to have received his name of Martel from the horseman's hammer, which is assumed to have been his favourite weapon; but this, like many such stories, is unsupported by any substantial evidence, and is contested by the French antiquary, M. de la Mairie, who asserts that Martel is simply another form of Martin, and the well-known charge in heraldry, Martlet, Martelette, or little Martin, or Swallow, appears to corroborate that assertion. Therefore, although the "maillet," a two-headed hammer, was as early known to the Normans as the "martel de fer,"

"L'un tient une épée sans fourre,
L'autre une maillet, l'autre line hache."

Guiart, v. 6635.

if, indeed, it were not the same weapon, I have no belief in such a derivation, the name being, moreover, borne by the whole family. Whether the companion of the Conqueror was the first so called is unknown. Le Prevost simply says he was the source of a noble race still existing in France, that of Malet de Graville.

The author of "Carmen de Bello" tells us he was partly Norman and partly English, and "Compater Herald," which would seem to signify joint sponsor with Harold, compère, as the French have it (vide Ducange in voce).

It would be interesting to discover whose child they stood godfathers to, and why we find him in the ranks of his fellow-gossip; (From the Saxon God-syb, a relation in God. There was formerly a spiritual kinship supposed to exist between a child and its sponsors expressed by the word gossiprede.) the knowledge of that fact might reveal to us many others. Was it in England or in Normandy that he stood at the font with Harold? If in the latter, it must have been in 1062, during the enforced visit of Godwin's son to Duke William, the year in which Adela was born. Is it possible that Harold and William Malet were her godfathers? Guy, of Amiens, Matilda's almoner, would certainly be cognizant of that fact.

His name, however, is not met with, I believe, either in Saxon or Norman annals previous to the invasion, when we hear of his valour and his peril. "Guillaume, whom they call Mallet, also threw himself boldly into the midst. With his flaming sword he terrified the English. But they pierced his shield and killed his horse, and he would have been slain himself, when the Sire de Montfort and William de Vez-Pont (Vieuxpont) came up with a strong force, and gallantly rescued him, though with the loss of many of their men, and mounted him on a fresh horse" (Roman de Rou, l. 13,472-85).

We next hear of him as the person appointed by the Conqueror to take charge of the body of Harold, which had been discovered by the swan-necked Eadgyth, and to bury it on the sea-shore; his selection for that purpose would seem to have some connection with the curious statement of Bishop Guy, as from his previous knowledge of the Saxon King, and the spiritual brotherhood which is said to have existed between them, he may have been considered by William to have the best claim to the melancholy honour after the mother, to whom it had sternly refused.

After this we find him mentioned as accompanying the newly-seated sovereign in his expedition to the North, and the reduction of Nottingham and York (1068), in which year Malet was rewarded with the shrievalty of Yorkshire, and large grants of land in the county. He was in York the following year, and governor of the castle (newly built by the Conqueror) when it was besieged by the Northumbrians, led by the Saxon prince Edgar. The citizens having joined the insurgents, William Malet, sorely pressed, sent to the King for assistance, without which he assured him he should be compelled to surrender. The King arrived with a powerful force in time to raise the siege and take fearful vengeance on the besiegers, as well as on the city and its inhabitants. Again, with Gilbert de Ghent he was in command in York when the Danes assaulted it in 1069 and in conjunction with the Earls Waltheof and Gospatric burnt the city, slew three thousand Normans, and took prisoners Gilbert de Ghent and William Malet, with his wife and two of their children.

How long he remained in captivity does not appear, nor where or at what time or under what circumstances he died. Lucia, widow of Roger Fitz Gerald, and subsequently Countess of Chester, is stated, in a grant of King Henry II, to have been niece of Robert Malet and of Alan of Lincoln; and this Robert is said to have been the son of a William Malet, slain in 1069, the period at which our William Malet was taken prisoner at York. Another William Malet, set down as the son of Hesilia Crispin, died an old man in the Abbey of Bec; but there is no identifying either with the companion of the Conqueror, though each has a claim to the distinction, for our William, the

sheriff of Yorkshire and compère of Harold, certainly had a son and heir named Robert, and a sister of William Crispin, named Hesilia, is variously asserted to have been the mother or wife of the William Malet who fought at Senlac.

He was a witness to a charter of King William to the Church of St. Martin-le-Grand in London, and is therein styled "Princeps." He also gave Conteville in Normandy to the Abbey of Bec, ("De dono Gulielmi Malet manerium de Conteville cum ecclesia et omnibus ejusdem ecclesiæ et manerii pertinentiis suis " (Neustria Pia, p. 484) which indicates some connection with Herluin and Herleve. How came he possessed of Conteville? We know that Herluin had been previously married, and had by his first wife a son named Ralf. Was that first wife an Englishwoman, and had she a second son named William, heir eventually to Conteville? Glover, in his invaluable collections, has jotted down the subscribing witnesses to a charter by a Gilbert Malet, who styles himself "Dapifer Begis," and we find amongst them William Malet, his heir "hærede meo," Robert, and Ralph, brothers of William, and another William, grandson or nephew of the grantor ("nepote meo"). Unfortunately it is without date; but I am inclined to consider Gilbert a brother of the sheriff, and the William he calls his nephew, the youngest of the two sons of the sheriff, who were taken prisoners with him at York; the other being Robert, who succeeded him, obtained the honour of Eye in Suffolk, and at the compilation of Domesday was found to possess two hundred and sixty-eight manors in England, Eye being the chief. His father was then dead, and that is all we at present know for a certainty. If not slain in 1069, he might well be the old man who died in the Abbey of Bec, to which he was a benefactor, for we have no means of guessing his age at the time of the invasion. The smallest contribution to his history would be gratefully received.