

ON THE LEADING EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE EMPRESS
MATILDA, ARISING OUT OF HER ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH
HERSELF ON THE THRONE OF ENGLAND.

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THE leading incidents in the life of Matilda, daughter of Henry I. and mother of Henry II., and more especially those arising out of the great political drama connected with it—her futile attempt to establish herself on the throne of England upon the death of her father, in opposition to the usurpation of her cousin Stephen,—have been very fully pourtrayed by Hume and other historians. Still, resulting from that eventful struggle were many casualties, many hairbreadth escapes and disastrous consequences, to which this ambitious, but ill-advised and ill-fated woman, was doomed to submit, which are full of interest; but which, for brevity's sake, these writers were under the necessity of omitting, or of very shortly noticing. It is my intention to give, in a more enlarged and connected form, a detailed narrative of some of the most interesting of her exploits, during the period of her sojourn in this country, as they are to be gleaned from the Chronicles of those early times.

Her title to the throne of England arose from the fact of her being the only surviving child of her father, the third son of the Norman invader; who, upon the accidental and untimely death of his elder brother, William Rufus, while hunting in the New Forest, usurped the crown to the exclusion of Robert, the rightful heir, at that time engaged in prosecuting the Holy War in Palestine. Her only brother, a youth of great talent and promise, had been cut off, at the early age of eighteen, in an endeavour to rescue his natural sister, the Countess of Perche. They were returning with their father and a large retinue of the junior nobility, from France, after a successful attempt on the part of Henry, to restore peace to that distracted country, and had arrived within a short distance of the British shores, when, ambitious of being the first to land, the prince, at an unguarded moment, was led to offer a liberal reward to the crew of

the ship in which he and the countess were embarked, if they would so urge the vessel forward as to enable him to accomplish the object of his wishes. By this proposal they were induced to make the attempt ; and in doing so, ran the ship on a rock, and totally destroyed her. All on board would probably have perished, had not a boat been secured by some of the sailors, which enabled them to rescue the prince, who, after the vessel had become a wreck, was the first object of their solicitude. He would doubtless have been saved, had not his attention been attracted by the cries of the countess, then struggling with the waves, at no great distance from him. This induced him to return to her rescue. Vain were the remonstrances of his friends to deter him from so hazardous an undertaking ; unavailing their representations of the danger. Sufficient to animate this heroic youth to risk anything, even his own safety, was the consciousness that the life of a beloved sister was in jeopardy ; he was quite resolved to rescue her from the jaws of death, or to perish in the attempt. And perish he unhappily did. Too fully verified were the worst anticipations of the remonstrants. For, floating in the sea by means of the support which broken pieces of the vessel rendered them, were many of the companions of the tender-hearted and adventurous prince ; who, as the boat, in returning to the rescue, approached the countess, recklessly crowded into it ; till, being unable longer to sustain the additional weight, it went down, and all on board perished. By the exertions of the sailors of one of the other vessels, who had observed her perilous situation, as well as her brother's unsuccessful endeavour to save her, she was taken up ; but more than 140 of the younger sons of the leading aristocracy of England are said to have been drowned with prince William on this most melancholy occasion. His father, in whose sight this took place, was so overpowered both in mind and body, that, though he survived the shock fifteen years, he is recorded never again to have smiled, or to have shown his wonted cheerfulness. He died in A.D. 1135. Prior to his decease he appointed Matilda his successor, at the same time taking the prudential measure of calling on the nobility to swear fealty to her. Matilda was then the consort of Geoffrey Plantagenet, by whom she had a son, afterwards Henry II. ; she had previously espoused the Emperor Henry V. of Germany, by whom she had no issue.

Decisive and satisfactory as this arrangement on the part of Henry was deemed by him, to her who was the principal object, and for whose good it was made, the precautions proved far otherwise. Little did Matilda profit by it. For no sooner had the king's death become generally known, than she found herself deserted by the barons, who, to secure their allegiance and support, had been permitted by Henry to fortify their castles, thereby becoming petty monarchs, each in the district in which he resided; and who by this means, instead of being conciliated, acquired a controlling power, which they were, without difficulty, able to sustain. The barons, upheld by the clergy, who also had become a very powerful body, disregarded, for the most part, the appointment of Henry, and the oath which they had taken to support Matilda, by superseding her claim to the crown, and placing her cousin Stephen on the throne. This the imperious temper of Matilda, at that time with her husband in Normandy, could not brook; availing herself, therefore, of an insurrection in her favour, and of great promises of support which had been held out by her natural brother, Robert of Gloucester, who had come to this country, soon after the usurpation of Stephen, for the express purpose of supporting her cause, she came to England; and having disembarked at the port of Littlehampton,¹ she proceeded direct to Arundel Castle, a distance of about three miles, where she took up her residence; having been induced to do so by the solicitation of her step-mother, Queen Adeliza, the consort of William de Albini,² Earl of Sussex, one of the most powerful barons of his day; by whom she was most gladly received. Her first step after her arrival at Arundel, was openly to lay claim to the crown; and to send from thence messengers into the counties of England known to be favourable to her cause, to excite her friends to arouse themselves in vindication of her right.

¹ Most of the ancient chroniclers state Portsmouth to have been the place of Matilda's disembarkation. Nevertheless, I am disposed to consider with Matthew Paris, the port of Littlehampton—"ad portum Arundel applicans" are his words—as the part of the coast at which she landed. With a harbour so contiguous to Arundel as this, she would scarcely have been carried on to Portsmouth; which would have entailed on her a

journey of thirty miles through a country difficult of passage, before she could have attained the place of her destination. Fabyan and Grafton omit all notice of her visit to Arundel. They state that she went direct from Portsmouth to Bristol.

² Gervase (x. Script. col. 1349), alluding to Adeliza's connection with this Baron, calls her "*Amica vel Uxor Wilhelmi comitis de Arundello.*"

At the time of Maud's arrival, Stephen was actively engaged in opposing the progress of her uncle David, King of Scotland; who, in defence of his niece's title to the throne, had raised a powerful army; and having penetrated as far as Yorkshire, was committing the most barbarous devastations. No sooner, however, had information reached Stephen of the bold and unexpected step which Matilda had taken, and of her proceedings against him, than he abandoned his resistance to the incursion of David, and turned his face towards Arundel. Prompt and determined in all his movements, more particularly when called upon to encounter opposition to his designs, he had, by forced marches, brought up his army under the bulwarks of the castle, before his intentions had become known to the inmates; and consequently before preparations had been made for defence. So unlooked for indeed was the arrival of Stephen, that at the time all was confidence and security within the castle. The voice of mirth and festivity, consequent upon the visit of Matilda, still echoed within its walls; the inmates assembled on the occasion, among whom might be reckoned many of the nobility and influential gentry of the country, little suspecting amid the entertainments which had been prepared for them, and to the full enjoyment of which they had given themselves up, that they should thus be taken by surprise. From revelry their attention was now turned to the consideration of the best means to be adopted for defence. Situate as they then were, Stephen and his army³ already being encamped under its walls, and in possession of all the approaches,⁴ to call in additional aid was manifestly impossible. To make the most then of their resources was all that appeared to be now left to them. They proceeded to arm and dispose their force in the best manner they could. Thus William de Albini, (William with the Stronghand, as he was usually called after the adventure which gave rise to that designation—the slaying of a fierce lion with his own hand) and his guests were enabled to hold out for a fortnight. At length, finding their combined strength wholly inadequate to

³ "Wid mikle folk and gude beseged her"—says Peter Langtoft, an early metrical chronicler, in speaking of Stephen and those engaged with him in this siege.

⁴ The town of Arundel at this early period consisted of but little more than a

single irregular street, situate on the banks of the river Arun, then called "the Tarent"—and from which this street was designated "Tarent Street." A street occupying the same locality, is still known by the same name.

combat the forces brought against them, and that, either by strength or stratagem the king must eventually prevail, a compromise, involving the safe departure of Matilda from the castle, was proposed, and accepted by Stephen ; of which step he was led by the after course of events most sorely to repent.

But though I have given this as the most probable cause of the cessation of hostilities, and the withdrawal of Stephen upon this occasion, still I am bound in fairness to state, that other, and far less honourable, reasons have been assigned for the proposal and acceptance of this compromise ; some, if not all, of which, may have had their weight in bringing it about. Of the early chroniclers who speak of this siege and its discontinuance, some have attributed its termination to a discovery, on the part of Stephen, of disaffection among the troops under his command. He had cause for suspecting that he had in his army men, who, instigated by spies sent among them, secretly favoured the cause of the empress ;— and who, without difficulty, succeeded in persuading the king that the castle was impregnable. Others state that it was brought about by a manœuvre on the part of Queen Adeliza who, disappointed at the number of the supporters that Matilda had brought over with her, amounting only to about 140 knights, while she had been led to expect a much greater force, thereby rendering her ultimate prospect of success very doubtful ; and finding that the provisions with which the castle was supplied were fast coming to an end, so that to hold out longer could only be accomplished at the cost of much personal privation, and at the peril of the noble castle assigned to her upon her marriage with Henry I.,⁵ as a residence in case of his death ; to avoid all these impending dangers, she pleaded with Stephen the deference due to the rights of relationship and hospitality, and thereby induced him to give Matilda a safe passage to Bristol, the castle there being at that time in the hands of her brother Robert. This course Adeliza took treacherously and basely, as has been asserted,⁶ and in violation of the rights which she professed so religiously to respect, urging at the same time upon the king, as an additional inducement for compliance on his part,

⁵ "Dominus Henricus Rex, pater Mathildis imperatricis, tenuit Rapam de Arundel, sicut eschaetum suum" (Testa de Nevil). The deed of grant from Henry I., who

settled the honour and castle of Arundel upon Queen Adeliza, as dower, is supposed not to be extant.

⁶ Holinshed, p. 51.

that the defences of that castle were of such nature, that her step-daughter would there easily fall into his hands, to be disposed of as might appear best to him.

But to whatever cause the compromise between the two contending parties is to be attributed, Stephen not only most willingly consented, but faithfully performed his part of the arrangement, by allowing Matilda to depart unmolested from Arundel to Bristol.⁷ Here she remained but a short time; having been persuaded for greater security, to betake herself to Gloucester, at that time in the possession of Milo, a most powerful baron, who had very ardently embraced her cause, and armed his retainers in defence of her rights.

The intermediate acts between the opening and the closing scenes of this eventful drama can be but slightly noticed; the annals of the times in which they occurred giving us little information beyond the bare fact of their having taken place. All that we can gather from the Chronicles is, that during her residence at Gloucester, there were many skirmishes between the rival parties in different parts of the kingdom which were attended with various success; and as one or other of them prevailed, many fruitless attempts were made to re-establish peace in the realm, which was beginning to suffer from the effects of this protracted struggle. At length an unforeseen event happened, which, by weakening the confidence of the adherents to the king, seemed at first sight to hold out a prospect of final success to Matilda, and of a termination to this civil war. In endeavouring to rescue the castle of Lincoln from some of the favourers of the cause of Matilda, into whose hands it had fallen, Stephen was defeated and taken prisoner. This, with an illness which about the same time greatly endangered his life, incapacitated him, for a while, from farther exertion in defence of his crown.

The favourers of the empress Matilda were by no means backward in availing themselves of these concurrent circumstances to advance by strenuous efforts her unsuccessful and unpromising cause; and to obtain for her a recognition as queen. And for a while an horizon less clouded with difficulties, a path less beset by dangers presented itself to her view. She was proclaimed queen; and having been

⁷ Holinshed says, that Stephen intrusted the removal of Matilda to Bristol to his brother, the Bishop of Winchester.

crowned shortly after, she assumed the reins of government ; thereby not only binding her adherents more closely to her, but inducing many previously wavering friends to declare themselves in her favour, and winning over to her side some who had been opposed to her ; the cause of Stephen having now become to all appearance hopeless. The effect, however, of the success which Matilda had thus unexpectedly attained, and of a feeling of apparent security which had been thus created, was, to make her too confident and independent. Elated by the fulfilment of her wishes, she could not help suffering her over-bearing temper to blind her judgment, and to bias the bent of her decisions. This occasioned the tide of popular favour and opinion to be turned against her. One of her first acts as queen led to her ultimate downfall. The laws established by her father were felt to be very severe and oppressive ; and many reluctantly submitted to them. A request was therefore made to her by the citizens of London, that she would consent to the abrogation of the laws of Henry I., and to the restoration of the mild code of Edward the Confessor, which they had superseded. These Londoners were a very powerful, and previously to her assuming the regal authority, a hostile body, having espoused from the commencement of the struggle, the cause of Stephen, but were at this time disposed to side with Matilda, had she complied with their request. By her, however, conciliation and favour were not to be so purchased. She considered their petition insulting, and therefore strenuously refused to accede to it. The consequence, which might be expected, at once arose out of this refusal. The Londoners were indignant at the rejection of their request, as well as at the contemptuous manner in which they had been treated. Incited, moreover, by the pope's legate, who, though he professed to be sincere in his declaration of attachment to the cause of Matilda, was at heart a well-wisher to Stephen, they armed themselves, and took the field against her, and marched towards Winchester, to which place Matilda had removed for the greater facility of receiving the homage of her subjects. A battle ensued between the Londoners and the army under the command of Robert of Gloucester, in which the former were victorious ; and Robert was so unfortunate as to fall into the hands of the enemy. This led to the release of Stephen, who, after much negociation and some delay, was liberated

from his captivity, in exchange for Robert, who, for safe custody, had been incarcerated in Rochester Castle.

Stephen once more at liberty and in a condition to renew his hostility towards Matilda, had, in seeking the best means of doing so, the mortification of finding that the result of his captivity and confinement was the weakening of his cause by an alienation of the hearts of the people; while that of Matilda was strengthened. She had grown popular, and would doubtless, had she exercised a greater degree of prudence, have daily advanced in the affections of her subjects. At a loss, under circumstances so gloomy and discouraging, to know how to act for the best, he came to the resolution of summoning a parliament of the few of his friends who still adhered to him, to meet at Oxford, for the purpose of devising the readiest and most effectual means of recovering, if possible, the ground he had lost, and of saving himself and his crown.

By the advice of his partisans thus assembled, Stephen again took the field, and led his forces towards Winchester, hoping, by a union with the discontented Londoners, to have sufficient strength remaining to expel Matilda from that place. Nor was he disappointed; for, intimation having been secretly conveyed to her of the king's intentions and approach, she could not for a moment doubt but that the determination of the disappointed Londoners would be to comply with Stephen's wishes. Fearing the result of the united efforts of the forces combined against her, she withdrew, as some of the chroniclers relate, from the castle before he reached Winchester; whilst others affirm that, in contempt of his designs, she resolutely braved the danger before her, remaining where she was till she was compelled, by want of provisions, after a protracted siege, to give way.

Whatever might have been the constraining cause of her leaving the royal residence at Winchester, it is certain that the effect of the renewal of Stephen's hostile intentions towards her was her removal to Oxford, where she took up her residence in the castle; being led to do so partly by the great strength of this fortress, and partly by the manifestation of a kindly feeling in her favour, which the owner, as well as the residents in the town and university, and indeed the whole neighbourhood, had evinced. She is represented as having entered Oxford with much state; many barons

accompanied her, who had promised to support and protect her during the absence of Robert of Gloucester, who, strenuous in his exertions to serve her, and sincerely devoted to her cause, had proceeded to France to bring over her son, the young Prince Henry ; hoping that his presence might be the means of animating the supporters of Matilda to more energetic exertions in her behalf, if not of turning the stream of popular feeling towards her.

At the time the Empress Maud took up her residence at the castle of Oxford, it was in the hands of Philip, the descendant of Robert D'Oiley, a Norman follower of the Conqueror, in whose estimation he is reported to have stood so high, and he is said to have been so beloved by him, that nothing of any importance was ever undertaken by him which was not first submitted to this baron for his opinion, and in the execution of which he was not afterwards called upon to take a leading part. It was as a reward for services thus frequently and faithfully rendered in the subjugation of this country to the Norman rule, that he received from his master all the lands ceded by the conquered Saxons in and around Oxford. The Chronicles of Oseney, an abbey situate just without the castle walls, and founded by its owner, state that the erection of this fortress was commenced in 1071, and that it was finished in 1073. Allusion, however, must here be made, not to its foundation, but to the alterations which were made in it by its first Norman possessor, amounting almost to a reconstruction, to adapt it to the plan of a Norman castle. King, speaking of this castle, says that it was of Saxon origin, an assertion which will be borne out by a careful examination of the existing remains of the structure. They bear, even now, testimony to its ante-Norman date. It is also stated by King to have been the residence of Offa and Alfred. Its resemblance in all its main features to Arundel castle is very remarkable. The plans of the two are identical. In both the Norman style is developed ; but at Arundel, as at Oxford, it is manifestly the result of Norman adaptation ; for, notwithstanding the alterations which have taken place, it bears evidence of a higher antiquity. Should it be asked where, in Saxon times, is any mention made of Arundel or its castle, I should be compelled to acknowledge, in reply, my inability to point out any Saxon record in which allusion is made to them, or in

which the name occurs; for to refer to Alfred's will would be to adduce authority which has been confidently called in question; still the existence of a castle at Arundel, prior to the Norman conquest, may be deduced from the Domesday Survey. In its construction, too, it possesses herringbone masonry; and this has been advanced in proof of its claim to a Saxon origin, as well as in the castles of Castleton and Guilford, where the same kind of masonry is also to be observed, if not of its belonging to an antecedent age. The present circular keep was perhaps the only inhabited part of the castle at the time it was held by Robert de Belesme, son of Roger, Earl of Shrewsbury and Arundel, against the attacks of Henry I. in 1102, and at the siege of Stephen, about thirty-eight years afterwards. This keep was accessible both from within and without the castle area; and was connected by a long flight of stone steps and a sallyport, with the great gateway,⁸ which still remains, and which consists of a plain circular arch under a square tower, in which are two rooms, those possibly in which the Empress Maud was received. The walls of this keep are very substantial, varying in thickness from eight to ten feet; and it is farther strengthened by ribs and buttresses. According to Camden, the walls of the castle of Oxford also were of great thickness. It was surrounded too by a trench of considerable width and depth, which was filled with water from the river, which flowed at no great distance from it; as well as by a high embattled wall, constructed with towers at its different angles. The approach to it from the city was on the south-east side, where was a large bridge, over which was a passage leading through a court-yard to the principal gate of the castle. On the opposite, or north-west side, was another bridge and gateway, leading to the abbey of Oseney. Each of these gateways was machicolated. Close to the north-west bridge was a high mound, evidently constructed at the foundation of the castle, on which stood a lofty embattled tower, commanding a view of the adjacent country. Two other mounds, each surmounted by a tower, were subsequently raised, one without, and the other within the walls of the castle; one of these is probably that which still remains.

⁸ The keep stands on the summit of a mound thrown up above the level of the trench below 110 feet on one side, and

eighty feet on another. The steps leading to it correspond with the thickness of the connecting wall, which is about ten feet.

Additional security was given to this castle by an external structure, or watch tower, which stood on one side of it. This was situate without the foss, and was sufficiently capacious to admit of its being partitioned into many habitations. Within the walls of this castle was a chapel dedicated to St. George, and coeval probably with its first erection, to which were attached certain secular canons.

I have been thus circumstantial in my description of this castle, because here it was that Matilda had determined to make her last stand ; because here was the closing scene of a struggle which for more than twelve months had agitated and inflamed the public mind, and involved the nation in much bloodshed and confusion.

The exact time at which Matilda took up her residence in this castle is not known, the chroniclers themselves not agreeing in their opinions upon this point. Some assert it to have happened at the close of the year of her arrival in this country ; while others defer it to the year following. But whatever might have been the exact period—and from a careful examination and comparison with the dates of collateral events, I am disposed to fix it as happening about Michaelmas, 1140—the castle, upon her arrival, was given up to her, so as to be entirely at her command, and one of the first defensive measures which she adopted was to supply it, as well as the city of Oxford, with all the provisions she could possibly collect ; being, the chroniclers tell us, liberally assisted by certain clerks of the university, at the suggestion, it was generally supposed, of some of the bishops and other dignitaries, the greater part of whom were favourable to her claims ; the king not being a promoter of learning or religion. Maud also secured and fortified many of the strongholds of the surrounding country, and among them Woodstock, the favourite resort of her father, as well as many of the villages of the immediate neighbourhood. She also manned with soldiers the towers of some of the churches, and particularly that of Bampton church, which is stated to have been constructed “with great strength and stupendous workmanship.” In this way did Matilda, conscious of the danger of her position and of Stephen’s unwearied hostility, endeavour to provide for his obstruction and annoyance, on whichever side he might approach Oxford.

Stephen, having been informed of Matilda's movements, and of the preparations at Oxford for her defence, "aroused himself," in the language of Wood, "as a man from sleep," and, summoning to his assistance all the forces he could obtain, he proceeded at once to Cirencester, which, being taken by surprise, yielded without opposition to him; and from thence he hastened forward, by forced marches, to Oxford, hoping, by an extraordinary exertion of his accustomed diligence and promptitude, to find the inhabitants equally unprepared for his approach. But in this he was disappointed; for the citizens, in anticipation of his arrival, had not been inactive in their preparations to oppose him. Instead of finding the city unfortified and panic stricken, as he expected, he found it "*tutissime munita, et aquis maxime profunditatis undique profluentibus inaccessa; hinc vallis antimuratis intentissime circumcincta, inde inexpugnabili castello et turri eminentissima pulchre et fortissime roborata.*" These defences of the city at first astonished Stephen. How to pass the immense extent of water here alluded to, and with which the town was encircled, not a little perplexed him. And, in addition to this, he found the citizens, together with the inhabitants of the surrounding district, united in one body, and fully prepared to resist him, should he attempt to enter the city. It was not, however, in Stephen's nature to yield to opposition from whatever quarter it might arise. He had been too accustomed to conquer difficulties by daring attempts, to succumb upon this occasion. He felt also that the empress was within his grasp; and this emboldened him to persevere. In spite then of the depth of the inundation before him, and which lay between him and the city, and of the menacing threats of his opponents—in spite too of the clouds of arrows with which, we are told, they continued to annoy him—seeking out the narrowest path of the flood, and boldly cheering his men, he fearlessly threw himself into the foaming waters, and his men following his example, they reached the opposite side. An adventure, so daring and unexpected, struck, as it could not fail to do, his adversaries with consternation, so that, after a slight skirmish, and but little opposition on the part of its defenders, the city fell into his hands, and, as was too frequently the case with besiegers of towns at this early period, out of revenge for the hostility shown him, the captured city was

set on fire and destroyed. The havoc and slaughter which took place is described by the chroniclers as truly appalling.

Having thus secured and disposed of the city, the king turned his attention to the reduction of the castle, hoping to be able to take this and the empress without further difficulty. But here again he was disappointed. For, after many fruitless attempts to gain an entrance into it, by incessantly battering its walls with all the military engines then in use, he was compelled to abandon the attempt, and to plan how he might effect by stratagem that which he was unable to accomplish by force. Finding the bulwarks of the castle too strong for any power he could bring to bear upon them, he came to the determination of subduing the garrison by starvation. With this view, he so arranged his forces as to cut off all communication between the town and the castle, on the one side, and all chance of Maud's escape on the other. But though thus closely blockaded, the empress was enabled to hold out for some weeks against all Stephen's efforts. Still she could not be regardless of the fact that the time was fast approaching when it would be no longer possible for her to bear up under the consequences of this last manœuvre of her persecutor. The siege of the castle, which was commenced in September, had now extended itself far into the month of December, at which time Maud was reduced to the mortification of finding the provisions fast coming to an end. In a few days, she plainly saw, the means of subsisting in their present situation would have entirely failed them. What then, she asked herself in an agony of despair—her haughty, and hitherto indomitable spirit beginning at length to give way at the hopelessness of the prospect before her—what, as matters stood, was to be done? Should they give themselves up to Stephen, or perish under the combined effects of cold and hunger, which must shortly happen to them if they remained where they were? For, in addition to all the painful consequences arising from want of food with which they were threatened, weather intensely cold had set in, and they were without the means of alleviating it. One thing Maud had firmly resolved; to die the miserable death before her, rather than to fall into the hands of the king. As the festive season of Christmas drew near, they found themselves with only two days' provision. The health too of the garrison was now beginning to give way.

From a castle then so strictly guarded, and from such appalling evils as those by which they were surrounded, was it possible for them to escape? The idea was no sooner conceived by Matilda than she determined to act upon it. For she and her companions in distress felt that they might as well sacrifice their lives in the attempt, should such be God's will, as to perish by remaining where they were. But in the present position of things, how was such escape to be effected? Watched as all the approaches to the castle were, night and day, what prospect of deliverance had they? Many were the tedious hours consumed by the despondent Matilda and her companions in seeking a favourable opportunity. Still none offered itself till the arrival of Christmas, when fortune seemed to favour their design. For, in addition to a severe frost which had set in—a frost which the chroniclers have recorded as of more than usual intensity and duration—a heavy fall of snow had taken place, and was then lying thick on the ground. The inmates of the castle had observed that the sentinels, deeming perhaps the state of the weather sufficient security against escape, had relaxed in their accustomed vigilance, till at length, regardless of their prisoners, they gave themselves up to the enjoyment of their Christmas revels. Here was a combination of fortuitous circumstances not to be disregarded: here a seeming opportunity of deliverance not to be neglected. Nor did they overlook the opportunity, for, dressing themselves hastily in white garments, to pass unobserved in the snow, and availing themselves of a time when, from the boisterous mirth of the soldiers, which reached them as if from a distance, and from which they were led to infer that they were no longer on guard,—Matilda had been too often driven to avail herself of artifice to save her life to permit her heart to fail her on the present occasion; she had, on one emergency, effected her escape on a swift horse, under the cover of a pretended truce, granted for the sake of enabling her to perform the religious ceremonies of the festival of St. Cross; and, on another, in a coffin, being thus conveyed through a part of the country then in possession of Stephen, as a corpse on a bier: what will not the instinct of self-preservation prompt us to contrive and submit to?—Matilda, with her small band of faithful adherents, availing themselves of the

darkness of the night, of the absence of the watch, and of the inclemency of the weather, which, though it had been heretofore grievous to them, by adding materially to their sufferings, was now hailed as a special interposition of Providence to relieve them from their difficulties, lowered themselves from a window into the frozen trench, unobserved by any save one soldier, who, overpowered partly by feelings of humanity, and partly by admiration of the intrepidity displayed by Matilda and her companions upon this occasion, could not bring himself to frustrate a design so boldly conceived. Thus far favoured, then, in their hazardous undertaking, they were not long in quitting the castle precincts; and, hastening to the nearest part of the river, which they were happily enabled to cross by means of the ice, they walked on, regardless of fatigue and suffering, to Abingdon, where they arrived about break of day, and where they lay concealed till night, when they were conveyed to Wallingford castle. There they remained unmolested, until Matilda, abandoning the hope of establishing herself on the throne, and yielding at last to the advice of her friends, was able to effect her return to Normandy.