

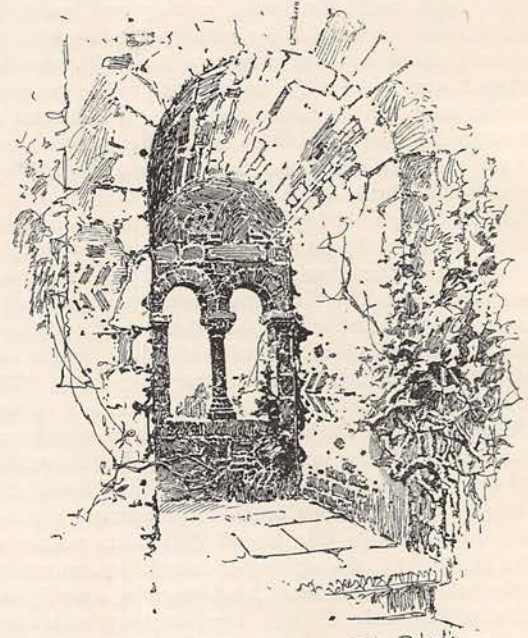
THE HOME OF THE CONQUEROR.

BY M. BETHAM-EDWARDS.

THE traveller approaching Falaise from Caen will be reminded of England. We see large, well-cultivated, hedged-in corn-fields and apple orchards, spacious farm buildings—everywhere signs of farming on a large scale. The birthplace of the great Duke of Normandy is a most picturesque, characteristic, and taking little place, with ancient walls and terraced gardens, the grey stone and greenery in beautiful contrast—far and wide wooded slopes, amid which peep country houses and cottages. Not a beggar met our gaze here.

From the back windows of the old-fashioned and homely, but clean and comfortable little Hôtel du Grand Cerf we get a wide, charming prospect, line upon line of low grey wall tapestried with green; deep down, built on different ledges, little grey cottages, each with its clinging vine and hanging garden. In view also are the park-like domains of two handsome chateaux. Immediately under our windows is a bright flower-garden; abutting on it, high above, an old grey tower; for background, verdant, open country, with abundant foliage of lime, poplar, acacia, and elm.

A wide, airy street winds upward to the



Duke Robert's
Window

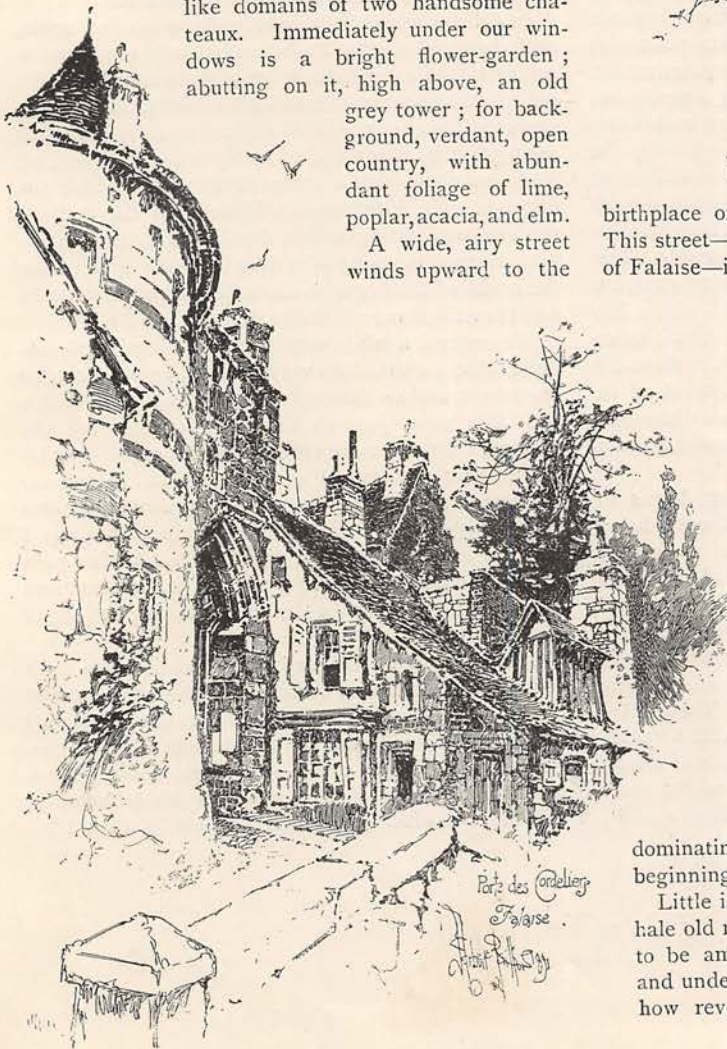
birthplace of the Conqueror. This street—the principal one of Falaise—is chiefly made up

of fine houses with massive iron gates; here and there one stands open, and we catch sight of the front garden, kept up in thoroughly French style, with numerous rows of handsome flowers in pots. This flower-pot gardening is peculiar to France, and is very effective. A yard bare as a prison wall may thus be turned into a blooming parterre.

Here and there, too, we discern relics of the ancient Falaise; carven outer stone staircases; stone or wooden balconies, always full of flowers; old-world interiors. We then reach the fine bronze equestrian statue of the Conqueror standing in front of the Hôtel de Ville, an artistic work creditable alike to modern art and public spirit. Then we come to the entrance of the noble ruin so closely

dominating the town so keenly associated with the beginnings of our history.

Little is seen of the chateau from this point. A hale old man with quite an English face—we seem to be among kinsfolk here—brings out his keys, and under his escort we are admitted. As we see how reverently and scrupulously these precincts





between meadows. We next come in sight of the fine keep, dating from William's time, of course restored and re-restored; then to Talbot's tower—a later addition, or rather excrescence. Beyond the vast *enceinte* of the castle rises the lofty cliff or *falaise* from whence the town has its name, its grey sides clothed with verdure, on either side a wide well-wooded landscape. Looking back, we see the town at our feet, and beyond it the suburb of Guibray, still famous for its fair instituted by the Conqueror, and which Arthur Young visited. Next we are led to a point whence we can best see the famous breach made by Henry Quatre when storming the town. The walls are here 15 feet thick.

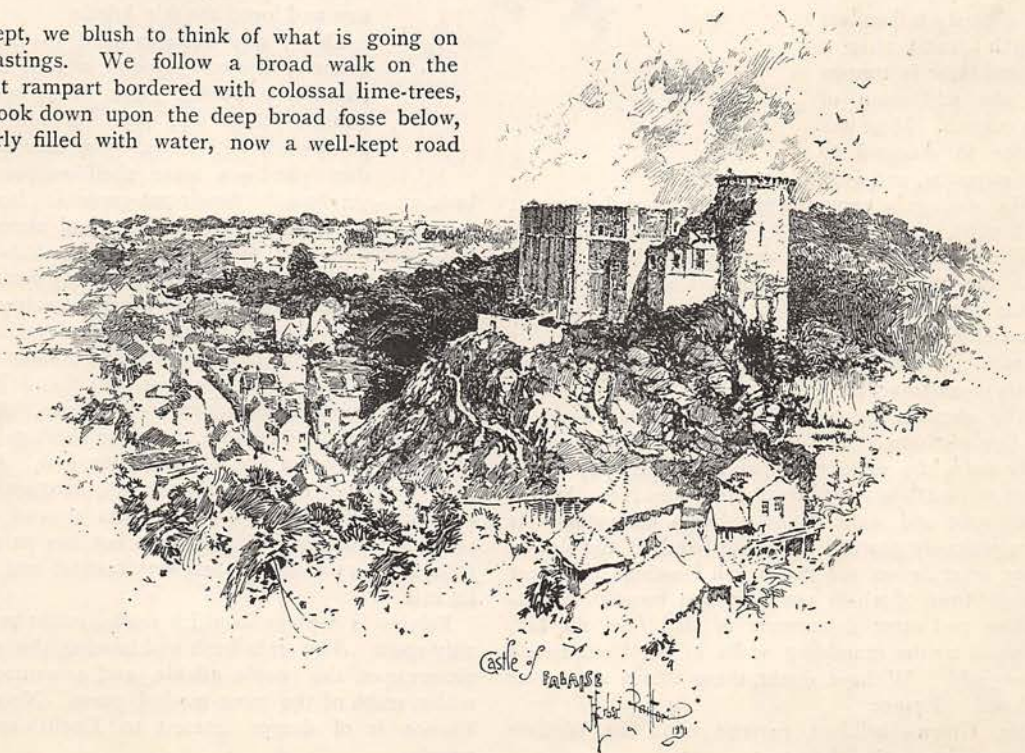
Whilst the form has been everywhere retained, the immense pile before us must in great part be regarded as the work of conscientious and necessary restoration. The foundations have come down to us intact.

In reaching the entrance to what was formerly the inhabited part of the chateau, we pass an *oubliette*, or rather its lid. A circular stone is lifted up by a ring, showing a deep hole in the ground, unlighted, unventilated—much, I should suppose, like the horrible Roman dungeon into which Jugurtha was cast to die of starvation.

The chamber in which Duke William is said to have first seen the light is a tiny room with one narrow opening in the wall for window—rude stone floor and alcove for a bed. There was a fireplace, tradition says.

The towers may be ascended, and a well is shown

are kept, we blush to think of what is going on at Hastings. We follow a broad walk on the ancient rampart bordered with colossal lime-trees, and look down upon the deep broad fosse below, formerly filled with water, now a well-kept road





of almost fathomless depth; into this a lighted taper is thrown for the edification of the curious. Most will prefer to descend to the ramparts, and look again and again upon the grand ruins and pleasant landscape.

The chateau belongs to the town, and is preserved with the utmost care. During the summer—so our guide informed us—from fifty to sixty visitors present themselves a-day, more than nine-tenths of them being French. Yet it is supposed that our French neighbours never travel!

The question arises—Is Duke William a French or an English hero? The good folks of Falaise naturally claim him as their own, and certainly pay much more respect to his memory than we ourselves. Whilst every spot and stone connected with his memory is here jealously guarded from the hand of the devastator, what do we see in English Hastings, the most historic town of which our land can boast? A tunnelling and utter defacement of that fine old hill, crowned by the crumbling walls of the Conqueror's stronghold! Without doubt, these things are better ordered in France.

Mr. Green's brilliant portrait of Duke William may well be recalled here :—

“The full grandeur of his indomitable will, his large and patient statesmanship, the loftiness of aim which lifts him out of the petty incidents of his age, had still to be disclosed (1047). But there was never a moment from his boyhood when he was not among the greatest of men. His life was a long mastery of difficulty after difficulty. In the young duke's character the old world mingled strangely with the new; the pirate jostled roughly with the statesman. The very spirit of the sea-wolves who had so long lived on the pillage of the world seemed embodied in his gigantic form, his enormous strength, his savage countenance, his desperate bravery, the fury of his wrath, the ruthlessness of his revenge. He rose to the greatest heights in moments when other men despaired. ‘Stern man he was, and great awe men had of him,’ was the comment of his subjects after his death. He found society only when he passed from his palace to the loneliness of the woods. Death itself took colour from the savage solitude of his life. Priests and nobles fled as the last breath left him, and the Conqueror's body lay naked and lonely on the floor.”

A fine view of the chateau is obtained from the fosse, noble plane and lime trees forming an avenue. Deep down below the ruins winds a stream, with tanneries clustered on its banks. Here Duke Robert saw and loved the fair Arlette.

Clean, airy suburbs lead to the open country, at every window a rude balcony showing a perfect blaze of flowers—begonias, yellow and pink, in full bloom, geraniums, and roses. The balcony is of the rudest—a mere shelf supported on

brackets—yet how the flower-pot gardening beautifies these humble homes! All is quiet and cheerful on this afternoon, and during our stay at Falaise we failed to discover a beggar or ragged dirty person.

Within an easy walk, at the other extremity of the town, lies the suburb of Guibray, with a quaint Norman church. A hundred years ago Arthur Young visited the celebrated fair here, and found English hardware among the principal importations. A dozen common plates, he tells us, cost three shillings; those of French imitation, and much inferior, four. A salesman predicted that the French manufacture would soon rival the English, and he has proved a true prophet. Hardly a French town but has its special *faïencerie* in these days, and very tasteful and beautiful it is.

Falaise is a place in which weeks might be agreeably spent. The air is fresh and bracing, the scenery picturesque, the people affable, and accommodation within reach of the most modest purse. No spot in France is of deeper interest to English-speaking people.