

# Canute the Great

from Famous Men of the Middle Ages

by John H. Haaren, LL.D. and A. B. Poland, Ph.D.

1014 - 1035 AD

The Danes, you remember, had the eastern and northern parts of England in the time of Alfred. Alfred's successors drove them farther and farther north, and at length the Danish kingdom in England ended for a time.

But the Danes in Denmark did not forget that there had been such a kingdom, and in the year 1013 Sweyn (swane), King of Denmark, invaded England and defeated the Anglo-Saxons. Ethelred, their king, fled to Normandy.

Sweyn now called himself the king of England. But in a short time, he died, and his son Canute succeeded to the throne. Canute was nineteen years old. He had been his father's companion during the war with the Anglo-Saxons, and thus had had a good deal of experience as a soldier.

After the death of Sweyn, some of the Anglo-Saxons recalled King Ethelred and revolted against the Danes.

Canute, however, went to Denmark and raised one of the largest armies of Danes that had ever been assembled. With this powerful force, he sailed to England. When he landed, Northumberland and Wessex acknowledged him as king. Shortly after this Ethelred died.

Canute now thought he would find it easy to get possession of all England. This was a mistake.

Ethelred left a son named Edmund Ironside who was a very brave soldier. He became, by his father's death, the king of Saxon England and at once raised an army to defend his kingdom. A battle raged, and Edmund was victorious. This was the first of five battles fought in one year. In none of them could the Danes do more than gain a slight advantage now and then.

However, the Saxons were at last defeated in a sixth battle through the act of a traitor. Edric, a Saxon noble, took his men out of the fight. His treachery so weakened the Saxon army that Edmund Ironside had to surrender to Canute.

But the young Dane had greatly admired Edmund for the way in which he had fought against heavy odds, so he now treated him most generously. Canute took certain portions of England, and the remainder, he gave to Edmund Ironside.

Thus for a short time, the Anglo-Saxon people had at once a Danish and a Saxon monarch.

Edmund died in 1016, and after his death, Canute became sole ruler.

He ruled wisely. He determined to make his Anglo-Saxon subjects forget that he was a foreign conqueror. To show his confidence in them, he sent back to Denmark the army he had brought over the sea, keeping on a part of his fleet and a small body of soldiers to act as guards at his palace.

He now depended on the support of his Anglo-Saxon subjects, and he won their love.

Although a king—and it is generally believed that kings like flattery—Canute is said to have rebuked his courtiers when they flattered him. On one occasion, when they were talking about his achievements, one of them said to him, "Most noble king, I believe you can do anything."

Canute sternly rebuked the courtier for words and said, "Come with me, gentlemen."

He led them from the palace grounds to the seashore where the tide was rising and had his chair placed at the edge of the water.

"You say I can do anything," he said to the courtiers. "Very well, I who am king and the lord of the ocean now command these rising waters to go back and not dare wet my feet."

But the tide was disobedient and steadily rose and rose, until the feet of the king were in the water.

Turning to his courtiers, Canute said, "Learn how feeble is the power of earthly kings. None is worthy the name of king but He whom heaven and earth and sea obey."

During Canute's reign, England had peace and prosperity, and the English people have held his memory dear.



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**Model Practice 1**

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## Model Practice 3

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## Before the Diet of Worms

by Martin Luther

from The World's Famous Orations

edited by William Jennings Bryan

edited by Francis W. Halsey

1520

Born in 1483, died in 1546; became a Monk at Erfurt in 1505; published, at Wittenberg in 1517, his thesis against indulgences; excommunicated and his writings burned in 1520; proscribed at Worms in 1521; published a translation of the Bible in 1534.

MOST SERENE EMPEROR, AND YOU ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCES AND GRACIOUS LORDS:—I this day appear before you in all humility, according to your command, and I implore your majesty and your august highnesses, by the mercies of God, to listen with favor to the defense of a cause which I am well assured is just and right. I ask pardon, if by reason of my ignorance, I am wanting in the manners that befit a court; for I have not been brought up in king's palaces, but in the seclusion of a cloister.

Two questions were yesterday put to me by his imperial majesty; the first, whether I was the author of the books whose titles were read; the second, whether I wished to revoke or defend the doctrine I have taught. I answered the first, and I adhere to that answer.

As to the second, I have composed writings on very different subjects. In some I have discussed Faith and Good Works, in a spirit at once so pure, clear, and Christian, that even my adversaries themselves, far from finding anything to censure, confess that these writings are profitable, and deserve to be perused by devout persons. The pope's bull, violent as it is, acknowledges this. What, then, should I be doing if I were now to retract these writings? Wretched man! I alone, of all men living, should be abandoning truths approved by the unanimous voice of friends and enemies, and opposing doctrines that the whole world glories in confessing!

I have composed, secondly, certain works against popery, wherein I have attacked such as by false doctrines, irregular lives, and scandalous examples, afflict the Christian world, and ruin the bodies and souls of men. And is not this confirmed by the grief of all who fear God? Is it not manifest that the laws and human doctrines of the popes entangle, vex, and distress the consciences of the faithful, while the crying and endless extortions of Rome engulf the property and wealth of Christendom, and more particularly of this illustrious nation?

If I were to revoke what I have written on that subject, what should I do.... but strengthen this tyranny, and open a wider door to so many and flagrant impieties? Bearing down all resistance with fresh fury, we should behold these proud men swell, foam, and rage more than ever! And not merely would the yoke which now weighs down Christians be made more grinding by my retractation—it would thereby become, so to speak, lawful,—for, by my retractation, it would receive confirmation from your most serene majesty, and all the States of the Empire. Great God! I should thus be like to an infamous cloak, used to hid and cover over every kind of malice and tyranny.

In the third and last place, I have written some books against private individuals, who had undertaken to defend the tyranny of Rome by destroying the faith. I freely confess that I may have attacked such persons with more violence than was consistent with my profession as an ecclesiastic: I do not think of myself as a saint; but neither can I retract these books. because I should, by so doing,

sanction the impieties of my opponents, and they would thence take occasion to crush God's people with still more cruelty.

Yet, as I am a mere man, and not God, I will defend myself after the example of Jesus Christ, who said: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness against me." (John 18:23) How much more should I, who am but dust and ashes, and so prone to error, desire that everyone should bring forward what he can against my doctrine.

Therefore, most serene emperor, and you illustrious princes, and all, whether high or low, who hear me, I implore you by the mercies of God to prove to me by the writings of the prophets and apostles that I am in error. As soon as I shall be convinced, I will instantly retract all my errors, and will myself be the first to seize my writings, and commit them to the flames.

What I have just said I think will clearly show that I have well considered and weighed the dangers to which I am exposing myself; but far from being dismayed by them, I rejoice exceedingly to see the Gospel this day, as of old, a cause of disturbance and disagreement. It is the character and destiny of God's word. "I came not to send peace unto the earth, but a sword," said Jesus Christ. God is wonderful and awful in His counsels. Let us have a care, lest in our endeavors to arrest discords, we be bound to fight against the holy word of God and bring down upon our heads a frightful deluge of inextricable dangers, present disaster, and everlasting desolations.... Let us have a care lest the reign of the young and noble prince, the Emperor Charles, on whom, next to God, we build so many hopes, should not only commence, but continue and terminate its course under the most fatal auspices. I might cite examples drawn from the oracles of God. I might speak of Pharaohs, of kings of Babylon, or of Israel, who were never more contributing to their own ruin than when, by measures in appearances most prudent, they thought to establish their authority! "God removeth the mountains and they know not." (Job 9:5)

In speaking thus, I do not suppose that such noble princes have need of my poor judgment; but I wish to acquit myself of a duty that Germany has a right to expect from her children. And so commending myself to your august majesty, and your most serene highnesses, I beseech you in all humility, not to permit the hatred of my enemies to rain upon me an indignation I have not deserved. (2)

Since your most serene majesty and your high mightinesses require of me a simple, clear and direct answer, I will give one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is as clear as noonday that they have fallen into error and even into glaring inconsistency with themselves. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be right for a Christian to speak against his country. I stand here and can say no more. God help me. Amen.(3)

**Note 1.** From the version given in D'Aubigny's "History of the Reformation"—the American edition of 1845. This speech was delivered at Worms on April 18, 1520, in response to a summons from the emperor, Charles V., who had assured Luther of a safe conduct to and from Worms. When the chancellor had demanded of Luther, "Are you prepared to defend all that your writings contain, or do you wish to retract any part of them?" it is stated in the "Acts of Worms," that Luther "made answer in a low and humble voice, without any vehemence or violence, but with gentleness and mildness and in a manner full of respect and diffidence, yet with much joy and Christian firmness." D'Aubigny says he took this speech, word for word, from an authentic document.

**Note 2.** D'Aubigny says that after Luther had pronounced these words in German, "with modesty, yet with much earnestness and resolution he was desired to repeat them in Latin," the emperor being not fond of German. The splendid assembly which surrounded Luther, its noise and excitement, had exhausted him. ("I was bathed in sweat," said he, "and standing in the center of the princes.") But having taken a moment's breathing time, Luther began again "and repeated his address in Latin, with undiminished power." The chancellor spokesman of the Diet, then said, "You have not given any answer to the inquiry put to you. You are not to question the decisions of the councils—you are required to return a clear and distinct answer. Will you or will you not retract?" Luther then proceeded with the answer given in the final paragraph.

**Note 3.** A detailed report of this memorable scene describes how, at this point, Luther, after going out of the room, was again summoned, and asked whether he actually meant to say that councils had erred, to which he answered, they had erred many times, mentioning the Council of Constance.

Luther was then told if he did not retract, the emperor and the States of the Empire would proceed “to consider how to deal with an obstinate heretic,” to which he answered, “May God be my helper, but I can retract nothing.” Pressed once more, and reminded that he had not spoken “with that humility which befitted his condition,” he said, “I have no other answer to give than that I have already given.” The emperor then made a sign to end the matter, rose from his seat, and the whole assembly followed his example.



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**Model Practice 1**

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## **Model Practice 3**

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