ABBOTT JACOB

KING ALFRED OF ENGLAND

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King Alfred of England / Makers of History:

Содержание

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Chapter I
The Britons

Alfred the Great figures in history as the founder, in some sense, of the British monarchy. Of that long succession of sovereigns who have held the scepter of that monarchy, and whose government has exerted so vast an influence on the condition and welfare of mankind, he was not, indeed, actually the first. There were several lines of insignificant princes before him, who governed such portions of the kingdom as they individually possessed, more like semi-savage chieftains than English kings. Alfred followed these by the principle of hereditary right, and spent his life in laying broad and deep the foundations on which the enormous superstructure of the British empire has since been reared. If the tales respecting his character and deeds which have come down to us are at all worthy of belief, he was an honest, conscientious, disinterested, and far-seeing statesman. If the system of hereditary succession would

always furnish such sovereigns for mankind, the principle of loyalty would have held its place much longer in the world than it is now likely to do, and great nations, now republican, would have been saved a vast deal of trouble and toil expended in the election of their rulers.

Although the period of King Alfred's reign seems a very remote one as we look back toward it from the present day, it was still eight hundred years after the Christian era that he ascended his throne. Tolerable authentic history of the British realm mounts up through these eight hundred years to the time of Julius Cæsar. Beyond this the ground is covered by a series of romantic and fabulous tales, pretending to be history, which extend back eight hundred years further to the days of Solomon; so that a much longer portion of the story of that extraordinary island comes before than since the days of Alfred. In respect, however to all that pertains to the interest and importance of the narrative, the exploits and the arrangements of Alfred are the beginning.

The histories, in fact, of all nations, ancient and modern, run back always into misty regions of romance and fable. Before arts and letters arrived at such a state of progress as that public events could be recorded in writing, tradition was the only means of handing down the memory of events from generation to generation; and tradition, among semi-savages, changes every thing it touches into romantic and marvelous fiction.

The stories connected with the earliest discovery and

settlement of Great Britain afford very good illustrations of the nature of these fabulous tales. The following may serve as a specimen:

At the close of the Trojan war,[1] Æneas retired with a company of Trojans, who escaped from the city with him, and, after a great variety of adventures, which Virgil has related, he landed and settled in Italy. Here, in process of time, he had a grandson named Silvius, who had a son named Brutus, Brutus being thus Æneas's great-grandson.

One day, while Brutus was hunting in the forests, he accidentally killed his father with an arrow. His father was at that time King of Alba—a region of Italy near the spot on which Rome was subsequently built—and the accident brought Brutus under such suspicions, and exposed him to such dangers, that he fled from the country. After various wanderings he at last reached Greece, where he collected a number of Trojan followers, whom he found roaming about the country, and formed them into an army. With this half-savage force he attacked a king of the country named Pandrasus. Brutus was successful in the war, and Pandrasus was taken prisoner. This compelled Pandrasus to sue for peace, and peace was concluded on the following very extraordinary terms:

Pandrasus was to give Brutus his daughter Imogena for a wife, and a fleet of ships as her dowry. Brutus, on the other hand, was

[1] For some account of the circumstances connected with this war see our history of Alexander, chapter vi.]

to take his wife and all his followers on board of his fleet, and sail away and seek a home in some other quarter of the globe. This plan of a monarch's purchasing his own ransom and peace for his realm from a band of roaming robbers, by offering the leader of them his daughter for a wife, however strange to our ideas, was very characteristic of the times. Imogena must have found it a hard alternative to choose between such a husband and such a father.

Brutus, with his fleet and his bride, betook themselves to sea, and within a short time landed on a deserted island, where they found the ruins of a city. Here there was an ancient temple of Diana, and an image of the goddess, which image was endued with the power of uttering oracular responses to those who consulted it with proper ceremonies and forms. Brutus consulted this oracle on the question in what land he should find a place of final settlement. His address to it was in ancient verse, which some chronicler has turned into English rhyme as follows:

> "Goddess of shades and huntress, who at will
> Walk'st on the rolling sphere, and through the deep,
> On thy *third* reign, the earth, look now and tell
> What land, what seat of rest thou bidd'st me seek?"

To which the oracle returned the following answer:

> "Far to the west, in the ocean wide,
> Beyond the realm of Gaul a land there lies—

Sea-girt it lies—where giants dwelt of old.
Now void, it fits thy people; thither bend
Thy course; there shalt thou find a lasting home."

It is scarcely necessary to say that this meant Britain. Brutus, following the directions which the oracle had given him, set sail from the island, and proceeded to the westward through the Mediterranean Sea. He arrived at the Pillars of Hercules. This was the name by which the Rock of Gibraltar and the corresponding promontory on the opposite coast, across the straits, were called in those days; these cliffs having been built, according to ancient tales, by Hercules, as monuments set up to mark the extreme limits of his western wanderings. Brutus passed through the strait, and then, turning northward, coasted along the shores of Spain.

At length, after enduring great privations and suffering, and encountering the extreme dangers to which their frail barks were necessarily exposed from the surges which roll in perpetually from the broad Atlantic Ocean upon the coast of Spain and into the Bay of Biscay, they arrived safely on the shores of Britain. They landed and explored the interior. They found the island robed in the richest drapery of fruitfulness and verdure, but it was unoccupied by any thing human. There were wild beasts roaming in the forests, and the remains of a race of giants in dens and caves—monsters as diverse from humanity as the wolves. Brutus and his followers attacked all these occupants of the land.

They drove the wild beasts into the mountains of Scotland and Wales, and killed the giants. The chief of them, whose name was Gogmagog, was hurled by one of Brutus's followers from the summit of one of the chalky cliffs which bound the island into the sea.

The island of Great Britain is in the latitude of Labrador, which on our side of the continent is the synonym for almost perpetual ice and snow; still these wandering Trojans found it a region of inexhaustible verdure, fruitfulness, and beauty; and as to its extent, though often, in modern times, called a little island, they found its green fields and luxuriant forests extending very far and wide over the sea. A length of nearly six hundred miles would seem almost to merit the name of continent, and the dimensions of this detached outpost of the habitable surface of the earth would never have been deemed inconsiderable, had it not been that the people, by the greatness of their exploits, of which the whole world has been the theater, have made the physical dimensions of their territory appear so small and insignificant in comparison. To Brutus and his companions the land appeared a world. It was nearly four hundred miles in breadth at the place where they landed, and, wandering northward, they found it extending, in almost undiminished beauty and fruitfulness, further than they had the disposition to explore it. They might have gone northward until the twilight scarcely disappeared in the summer nights, and have found the same verdure and beauty continuing to the end. There were broad and undulating

plains in the southern regions of the island, and in the northern, green mountains and romantic glens; but all, plains, valleys, and mountains, were fertile and beautiful, and teeming with abundant sustenance for flocks, for herds, and for man.

Brutus accordingly established himself upon the island with all his followers, and founded a kingdom there, over which he reigned as the founder of a dynasty. Endless tales are told of the lives, and exploits, and quarrels of his successors down to the time of Cæsar. Conflicting claimants arose continually to dispute with each other for the possession of power; wars were made by one tribe upon another; cities, as they were called—though probably, in fact, they were only rude collections of hovels—were built, fortresses were founded, and rivers were named from princes or princesses drowned in them, in accidental journeys, or by the violence of rival claimants to their thrones. The pretended records contain a vast number of legends, of very little interest or value, as the reader will readily admit when we tell him that the famous story of King Lear is the most entertaining one in the whole collection. It is this:

There was a king in the line named Lear. He founded the city now called Leicester. He had three daughters, whose names were Gonilla, Regana, and Cordiella. Cordiella was her father's favorite child. He was, however, jealous of the affections of them all, and one day he called them to him, and asked them for some assurance of their love. The two eldest responded by making the most extravagant protestations. They loved their

father a thousand times better than their own souls. They could not express, they said, the ardor and strength of their attachment, and called Heaven and earth to witness that these protestations were sincere.

Cordiella, all this time, stood meekly and silently by, and when her father asked her how it was with her, she replied, "Father, my love toward you is as my duty bids. What can a father ask, or a daughter promise more? They who pretend beyond this only flatter."

The king, who was old and childish, was much pleased with the manifestation of love offered by Gonilla and Regana, and thought that the honest Cordiella was heartless and cold. He treated her with greater and greater neglect and finally decided to leave her without any portion whatever, while he divided his kingdom between the other two, having previously married them to princes of high rank. Cordiella was, however, at last made choice of for a wife by a French prince, who, it seems, knew better than the old king how much more to be relied upon was unpretending and honest truth than empty and extravagant profession. He married the portionless Cordiella, and took her with him to the Continent.

The old king now having given up his kingdom to his eldest daughters, they managed, by artifice and maneuvering, to get every thing else away from him, so that he became wholly dependent upon them, and had to live with them by turns. This was not all; for, at the instigation of their husbands, they put so

many indignities and affronts upon him, that his life at length became an intolerable burden, and finally he was compelled to leave the realm altogether, and in his destitution and distress he went for refuge and protection to his rejected daughter Cordiella. She received her father with the greatest alacrity and affection. She raised an army to restore him to his rights, and went in person with him to England to assist him in recovering them. She was successful. The old king took possession of his throne again, and reigned in peace for the remainder of his days. The story is of itself nothing very remarkable, though Shakspeare has immortalized it by making it the subject of one of his tragedies.

Centuries passed away, and at length the great Julius Cæsar, who was extending the Roman power in every direction, made his way across the Channel, and landed in England. The particulars of this invasion are described in our history of Julius Cæsar. The Romans retained possession of the island, in a greater or less degree, for four hundred years.

They did not, however, hold it in peace all this time. They became continually involved in difficulties and contests with the native Britons, who could ill brook the oppressions of such merciless masters as Roman generals always proved in the provinces which they pretended to govern. One of the most formidable rebellions that the Romans had to encounter during their disturbed and troubled sway in Britain was led on by a woman. Her name was Boadicea. Boadicea, like almost all other heroines, was coarse and repulsive in appearance. She was tall

and masculine in form. The tones of her voice were harsh, and she had the countenance of a savage. Her hair was yellow. It might have been beautiful if it had been neatly arranged, and had shaded a face which possessed the gentle expression that belongs properly to woman. It would then have been called golden. As it was, hanging loosely below her waist and streaming in the wind, it made the wearer only look the more frightful. Still, Boadicea was not by any means indifferent to the appearance she made in the eyes of beholders. She evinced her desire to make a favorable impression upon others, in her own peculiar way, it is true, but in one which must have been effective, considering what sort of beholders they were in whose eyes she figured. She was dressed in a gaudy coat, wrought of various colors, with a sort of mantle buttoned over it. She wore a great gold chain about her neck, and held an ornamented spear in her hand. Thus equipped, she appeared at the head of an army of a hundred thousand men, and gathering them around her, she ascended a mound of earth and harangued them—that is, as many as could stand within reach of her voice—arousing them to sentiments of revenge against their hated oppressors, and urging them to the highest pitch of determination and courage for the approaching struggle. Boadicea had reason to deem the Romans her implacable foes. They had robbed her of her treasures, deprived her of her kingdom, imprisoned her, scourged her, and inflicted the worst possible injuries upon her daughters. These things had driven the wretched mother to a perfect phrensy of hate, and aroused

her to this desperate struggle for redress and revenge. But all was in vain. In encountering the spears of Roman soldiery, she was encountering the very hardest and sharpest steel that a cruel world could furnish. Her army was conquered, and she killed herself by taking poison in her despair.

By struggles such as these the contest between the Romans and the Britons was carried on for many generations; the Romans conquering at every trial, until, at length, the Britons learned to submit without further resistance to their sway. In fact, there gradually came upon the stage, during the progress of these centuries, a new power, acting as an enemy to both the Picts and Scots; hordes of lawless barbarians, who inhabited the mountains and morasses of Scotland and Ireland. These terrible savages made continual irruptions into the southern country for plunder, burning and destroying, as they retired, whatever they could not carry away. They lived in impregnable and almost inaccessible fastnesses, among dark glens and precipitous mountains, and upon gloomy islands surrounded by iron-bound coasts and stormy seas. The Roman legions made repeated attempts to hunt them out of these retreats, but with very little success. At length a line of fortified posts was established across the island, near where the boundary line now lies between England and Scotland; and by guarding this line, the Roman generals who had charge of Britain attempted to protect the inhabitants of the southern country, who had learned at length to submit peaceably to their sway.

One of the most memorable events which occurred during the time that the Romans held possession of the island of Britain was the visit of one of the emperors to this northern extremity of his dominions. The name of this emperor was Severus. He was powerful and prosperous at home, but his life was embittered by one great calamity, the dissolute character and the perpetual quarrels of his sons. To remove them from Rome, where they disgraced both themselves and their father by their vicious lives, and the ferocious rivalry and hatred they bore to each other, Severus planned an excursion to Britain, taking them with him, in the hope of turning their minds into new channels of thought, and awakening in them some new and nobler ambition.

At the time when Severus undertook this expedition, he was advanced in age and very infirm. He suffered much from the gout, so that he was unable to travel by any ordinary conveyance, and was borne, accordingly, almost all the way upon a litter. He crossed the Channel with his army, and, leaving one of his sons in command in the south part of the island, he advanced with the other, at the head of an enormous force, determined to push boldly forward into the heart of Scotland, and to bring the war with the Picts and Scots to an effectual end.

He met, however, with very partial success. His soldiers became entangled in bogs and morasses; they fell into ambuscades; they suffered every degree of privation and hardship for want of water and of food, and were continually entrapped by their enemies in situations where they had to fight

in small numbers and at a great disadvantage. Then, too, the aged and feeble general was kept in a continual fever of anxiety and trouble by Bassianus, the son whom he had brought with him to the north. The dissoluteness and violence of his character were not changed by the change of scene. He formed plots and conspiracies against his father's authority; he raised mutinies in the army; he headed riots; and he was finally detected in a plan for actually assassinating his father. Severus, when he discovered this last enormity of wickedness, sent for his son to come to his imperial tent. He laid a naked sword before him, and then, after bitterly reproaching him with his undutiful and ungrateful conduct, he said, "If you wish to kill me, do it now. Here I stand, old, infirm, and helpless. You are young and strong, and can do it easily. I am ready. Strike the blow."

Of course Bassianus shrunk from his father's reproaches, and went away without committing the crime to which he was thus reproachfully invited; but his character remained unchanged; and this constant trouble, added to all the other difficulties which Severus encountered, prevented his accomplishing his object of thoroughly conquering his northern foes. He made a sort of peace with them, and retiring south to the line of fortified posts which had been previously established, he determined to make it a fixed and certain boundary by building upon it a permanent wall. He put the whole force of his army upon the work, and in one or two years, as is said, he completed the structure. It is known in history as the Wall of Severus; and so solid, substantial, and permanent

was the work, that the traces of it have not entirely disappeared to the present day.

The wall extended across the island, from the mouth of the Tyne, on the German Ocean, to the Solway Frith—nearly seventy miles. It was twelve feet high, and eight feet wide. It was faced with substantial masonry on both sides, the intermediate space being likewise filled in with stone. When it crossed bays or morasses, piles were driven to serve as a foundation. Of course, such a wall as this, by itself, would be no defense. It was to be garrisoned by soldiers, being intended, in fact, only as a means to enable a smaller number of troops than would otherwise be necessary to guard the line. For these soldiers there were built great fortresses at intervals along the wall, wherever a situation was found favorable for such structures. These were called *stations*. The stations were occupied by garrisons of troops, and small towns of artificers and laborers soon sprung up around them. Between the stations, at smaller intervals, were other smaller fortresses called castles, intended as places of defense, and rallying points in case of an attack, but not for garrisons of any considerable number of men. Then, between the castles, at smaller intervals still, were turrets, used as watch-towers and posts for sentinels. Thus the whole line of the wall was every where defended by armed men. The whole number thus employed in the defense of this extraordinary rampart was said to be ten thousand. There was a broad, deep, and continuous ditch on the northern side of the wall, to make the impediment

still greater for the enemy, and a spacious and well-constructed military road on the southern side, on which troops, stores, wagons, and baggage of every kind could be readily transported along the line, from one end to the other.

The wall was a good defense as long as Roman soldiers remained to guard it. But in process of time—about two centuries after Severus's day—the Roman empire itself began to decline, even in the very seat and center of its power; and then, to preserve their own capital from destruction, the government were obliged to call their distant armies home. The wall was left to the Britons; but they could not defend it. The Picts and Scots, finding out the change, renewed their assaults. They battered down the castles; they made breaches here and there in the wall; they built vessels, and, passing round by sea across the mouth of the Solway Frith and of the River Tyne, they renewed their old incursions for plunder and destruction. The Britons, in extreme distress, sent again and again to recall the Romans to their aid, and they did, in fact, receive from them some occasional and temporary succor. At length, however, all hope of help from this quarter failed, and the Britons, finding their condition desperate, were compelled to resort to a desperate remedy, the nature of which will be explained in the next chapter.

Chapter II
The Anglo-Saxons

Any one who will look around upon the families of his acquaintance will observe that family characteristics and resemblances prevail not only in respect to stature, form, expression of countenance, and other outward and bodily tokens, but also in regard to the constitutional temperaments and capacities of the soul. Sometimes we find a group in which high intellectual powers and great energy of action prevail for many successive generations, and in all the branches into which the original stock divides; in other cases, the hereditary tendency is to gentleness and harmlessness of character, with a full development of all the feelings and sensibilities of the soul. Others, again, exhibit congenital tendencies to great physical strength and hardihood, and to powers of muscular exertion and endurance. These differences, notwithstanding all the exceptions and irregularities connected with them, are obviously, where they exist, deeply seated and permanent. They depend very slightly upon any mere external causes. They have, on the contrary, their foundation in some hidden principles connected with the origin of life, and with the mode of its transmission from parent to offspring, which the researches of philosophers have never yet been able to explore.

These same constitutional and congenital peculiarities which we see developing themselves all around us in families, mark, on a greater scale, the characteristics of the different nations of the earth, and in a degree much higher still, the several great and distinct races into which the whole human family seems to be divided. Physiologists consider that there are five of these great races, whose characteristics, mental as well as bodily, are distinctly, strongly, and permanently marked. These characteristics descend by hereditary succession from father to son, and though education and outward influences may modify them, they can not essentially change them. Compare, for example, the Indian and the African races, each of which has occupied for a thousand years a continent of its own, where they have been exposed to the same variety of climates, and as far as possible to the same general outward influences. How entirely diverse from each other they are, not only in form, color, and other physical marks, but in all the tendencies and characteristics of the soul! One can no more be changed into the other, than a wolf, by being tamed and domesticated, can be made a dog, or a dog, by being driven into the forests, be transformed into a tiger. The difference is still greater between either of these races and the Caucasian race. This race might probably be called the European race, were it not that some Asiatic and some African nations have sprung from it, as the Persians, the Phœnicians, the Egyptians, the Carthaginians, and, in modern times, the Turks. All the nations of this race, whether European

or African, have been distinguished by the same physical marks in the conformation of the head and the color of the skin, and still more by those traits of character—the intellect, the energy, the spirit of determination and pride—which, far from owing their existence to outward circumstances, have always, in all ages, made all outward circumstances bend to them. That there have been some great and noble specimens of humanity among the African race, for example, no one can deny; but that there is a marked, and fixed, and permanent constitutional difference between them and the Caucasian race seems evident from this fact, that for two thousand years each has held its own continent, undisturbed, in a great degree, by the rest of mankind; and while, during all this time, no nation of the one race has risen, so far as is known, above the very lowest stage of civilization, there have been more than fifty entirely distinct and independent civilizations originated and fully developed in the other. For three thousand years the Caucasian race have continued, under all circumstances, and in every variety of situation, to exhibit the same traits and the same indomitable prowess. No calamities, however great—no desolating wars, no destructive pestilence, no wasting famine, no night of darkness, however universal and gloomy—has ever been able to keep them long in degradation or barbarism. There is not now a barbarous people to be found in the whole race, and there has not been one for a thousand years.

Nearly all the great exploits, and achievements too, which have signalized the history of the world, have been performed

by this branch of the human family. They have given celebrity to every age in which they have lived, and to every country that they have ever possessed, by some great deed, or discovery, or achievement, which their intellectual energies have accomplished. As Egyptians, they built the Pyramids, and reared enormous monoliths, which remain as perfect now as they were when first completed, thirty centuries ago. As Phœnicians, they constructed ships, perfected navigation, and explored, without compass or chart, every known sea. As Greeks, they modeled architectural embellishments, and cut sculptures in marble, and wrote poems and history, which have been ever since the admiration of the world. As Romans, they carried a complete and perfect military organization over fifty nations and a hundred millions of people, with one supreme mistress over all, the ruins of whose splendid palaces and monuments have not yet passed away. Thus has this race gone on, always distinguishing itself, by energy, activity, and intellectual power, wherever it has dwelt, whatever language it has spoken, and in whatever period of the world it has lived. It has invented printing, and filled every country that it occupies with permanent records of the past, accessible to all. It has explored the heavens, and reduced to precise and exact calculations all the complicated motions there. It has ransacked the earth, systematized, arranged, and classified the vast melange of plants, and animals, and mineral products to be found upon its surface. It makes steam and falling water do more than half the work necessary for feeding and clothing

the human race; and the howling winds of the ocean, the very emblems of resistless destruction and terror, it steadily employs in interchanging the products of the world, and bearing the means of comfort and plenty to every clime.

The Caucasian race has thus, in all ages, and in all the varieties of condition in which the different branches of it have been placed, evinced the same great characteristics, marking the existence of some innate and constant constitutional superiority; and yet, in the different branches, subordinate differences appear, which are to be accounted for, perhaps, partly by difference of circumstances, and partly, perhaps, by similar constitutional diversities—diversities by which one branch is distinguished from other branches, as the whole race is from the other races with which we have compared them. Among these branches, we, Anglo-Saxons ourselves, claim for the Anglo-Saxons the superiority over all the others.

The Anglo-Saxons commenced their career as pirates and robbers, and as pirates and robbers of the most desperate and dangerous description. In fact, the character which the Anglo-Saxons have obtained in modern times for energy and enterprise, and for desperate daring in their conflicts with foes, is no recent fame. The progenitors of the present race were celebrated every where, and every where feared and dreaded, not only in the days of Alfred, but several centuries before. All the historians of those days that speak of them at all, describe them as universally distinguished above their neighbors for their

energy and vehemence of character, their mental and physical superiority, and for the wild and daring expeditions to which their spirit of enterprise and activity were continually impelling them. They built vessels, in which they boldly put forth on the waters of the German Ocean or of the Baltic Sea on excursions for conquest or plunder. Like their present posterity on the British isles and on the shores of the Atlantic, they cared not, in these voyages, whether it was summer or winter, calm or storm. In fact, they sailed often in tempests and storms by choice, so as to come upon their enemies the more unexpectedly.

They would build small vessels, or rather boats, of osiers, covering them with skins, and in fleets of these frail floats they would sally forth among the howling winds and foaming surges of the German Ocean. On these expeditions, they all embarked as in a common cause, and felt a common interest. The leaders shared in all the toils and exposures of the men, and the men took part in the counsels and plans of the leaders. Their intelligence and activity, and their resistless courage and ardor, combined with their cool and calculating sagacity, made them successful in every attempt. If they fought, they conquered; if they pursued their enemies, they were sure to overtake them; if they retreated, they were sure to make their escape. They were clothed in a loose and flowing dress, and wore their hair long and hanging about their shoulders; and they had the art, as their descendants have now, of contriving and fabricating arms of such superior construction and workmanship, as to give them, on this

account alone, a great advantage over all cotemporary[2] nations. There were two other points in which there was a remarkable similarity between this parent stock in its rude, early form, and the extended social progeny which represents it at the present day. One was the extreme strictness of their ideas of conjugal fidelity, and the stern and rigid severity with which all violations of female virtue were judged. The woman who violated her marriage vows was compelled to hang herself. Her body was then burned in public, and the accomplice of her crime was executed over the ashes. The other point of resemblance between the ancient Anglo-Saxons and their modern descendants was their indomitable pride. They could never endure any thing like *submission*. Though sometimes overpowered, they were never conquered. Though taken prisoners and carried captive, the indomitable spirit which animated them could never be really subdued. The Romans used sometimes to compel their prisoners to fight as gladiators, to make spectacles for the amusement of the people of the city. On one occasion, thirty Anglo-Saxons, who had been taken captive and were reserved for this fate, strangled themselves rather than submit to this indignity. The whole nation manifested on all occasions a very unbending and unsubmissive will, encountering every possible danger and braving every conceivable ill rather than succumb or submit to any power except such as they had themselves created for their own ends; and their descendants, whether in England or

[2] Concise Oxford Dictionary: co-temporary etc. See CONTEMPORARY etc.]

America, evince much the same spirit still.

It was the landing of a few boat-loads of these determined and ferocious barbarians on a small island near the mouth of the Thames, which constitutes the great event of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in England, which is so celebrated in English history as the epoch which marks the real and true beginning of British greatness and power. It is true that the history of England goes back beyond this period to narrate, as we have done, the events connected with the contests of the Romans and the aboriginal Britons, and the incursions and maraudings of the Picts and Scots; but all these aborigines passed gradually—after the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons—off the stage. The old stock was wholly displaced. The present monarchy has sprung entirely from its Anglo-Saxon original; so that all which precedes the arrival of this new race is introductory and preliminary, like the history, in this country, of the native American tribes before the coming of the English Pilgrims. As, therefore, the landing of the Pilgrims on the Plymouth Rock marks the true commencement of the history of the American Republic, so that of the Anglo-Saxon adventurers on the island of Thanet represents and marks the origin of the British monarchy. The event therefore, stands as a great and conspicuous landmark, though now dim and distant in the remote antiquity in which it occurred.

And yet the event, though so wide-reaching and grand in its bearings and relations, and in the vast consequences which have flowed and which still continue to flow from it, was apparently

a minute and unimportant circumstance at the time when it occurred. There were only three vessels at the first arrival. Of their size and character the accounts vary. Some of these accounts say they contained three hundred men; others seem to state that the number which arrived at the first landing was three thousand. This, however, would seem impossible, as no three vessels built in those days could convey so large a number. We must suppose, therefore, that that number is meant to include those who came at several of the earlier expeditions, and which were grouped by the historian together, or else that several other vessels or transports accompanied the three, which history has specially commemorated as the first arriving.

In fact, very little can now be known in respect to the form and capacity of the vessels in which these half-barbarous navigators roamed, in those days, over the British seas. Their name, indeed, has come down to us, and that is nearly all. They were called *cyules*; though the name is sometimes spelled, in the ancient chronicles, *ceols*, and in other ways. They were obviously vessels of considerable capacity and were of such construction and such strength as to stand the roughest marine exposures. They were accustomed to brave fearlessly every commotion and to encounter every danger raised either by winter tempests or summer gales in the restless waters of the German Ocean.

The names of the commanders who headed the expedition which first landed have been preserved, and they have acquired, as might have been expected, a very wide celebrity. They were

Hengist and Horsa. Hengist and Horsa were brothers.

The place where they landed was the island of Thanet. Thanet is a tract of land at the mouth of the Thames, on the southern side; a sort of promontory extending into the sea, and forming the cape at the south side of the estuary made by the mouth of the river. The extreme point of land is called the North Foreland which, as it is the point that thousands of vessels, coming out of the Thames, have to round in proceeding southward on voyages to France, to the Mediterranean, to the Indies, and to America, is very familiarly known to navigators throughout the world. The island of Thanet, of which this North Foreland is the extreme point, ought scarcely to be called an island, since it forms, in fact, a portion of the main land, being separated from it only by a narrow creek or stream, which in former ages indeed, was wide and navigable, but is now nearly choked up and obliterated by the sands and the sediment, which, after being brought down by the Thames, are driven into the creek by the surges of the sea.

In the time of Hengist and Horsa the creek was so considerable that its mouth furnished a sufficient harbor for their vessels. They landed at a town called Ebbs-fleet, which is now, however, at some distance inland.

There is some uncertainty in respect to the motive which led Hengist and Horsa to make their first descent upon the English coast. Whether they came on one of their customary piratical expeditions, or were driven on the coast accidentally by stress of weather, or were invited to come by the British king, can

not now be accurately ascertained. Such parties of Anglo-Saxons had undoubtedly often landed before under somewhat similar circumstances, and then, after brief incursions into the interior, had re-embarked on board their ships and sailed away. In this case, however, there was a certain peculiar and extraordinary state of things in the political condition of the country in which they had landed, which resulted in first protracting their stay, and finally in establishing them so fixedly and permanently in the land, that they and their followers and descendants soon became the entire masters of it, and have remained in possession to the present day. These circumstances were as follows:

The name of the king of Britain at this period was Vortigern. At the time when the Anglo-Saxons arrived, he and his government were nearly overwhelmed with the pressure of difficulty and danger arising from the incursions of the Picts and Scots; and Vortigern, instead of being aroused to redoubled vigilance and energy by the imminence of the danger, as Alfred afterward was in similar circumstances, sank down, as weak minds always do, in despair, and gave himself up to dissipation and vice—endeavoring, like depraved seamen on a wreck, to drown his mental distress in animal sensations of pleasure. Such men are ready to seek relief or rescue from their danger from any quarter and at any price. Vortigern, instead of looking upon the Anglo-Saxon intruders as new enemies, conceived the idea of appealing to them for succor. He offered to convey to them a large tract of territory in the part of the island where they had

landed, on condition of their aiding him in his contests with his other foes.

Hengist and Horsa acceded to this proposal. They marched their followers into battle, and defeated Vortigern's enemies. They sent across the sea to their native land, and invited new adventurers to join them. Vortigern was greatly pleased with the success of his expedient. The Picts and Scots were driven back to their fastnesses in the remote mountains of the north, and the Britons once more possessed their land in peace, by means of the protection and the aid which their new confederates afforded them.

In the mean time the Anglo-Saxons were establishing and strengthening themselves very rapidly in the part of the island which Vortigern had assigned them—which was, as the reader will understand from what has already been said in respect to the place of their landing, the southeastern part—a region which now constitutes the county of Kent. In addition, too, to the natural increase of their power from the increase of their numbers and their military force, Hengist contrived, if the story is true, to swell his own personal influence by means of a matrimonial alliance which he had the adroitness to effect. He had a daughter named Rowena. She was very beautiful and accomplished. Hengist sent for her to come to England. When she had arrived he made a sumptuous entertainment for King Vortigern, inviting also to it, of course, many other distinguished guests. In the midst of the feast, when the king was in the state of high excitement produced

on such temperaments by wine and convivial pleasure, Rowena came in to offer him more wine. Vortigern was powerfully struck, as Hengist had anticipated, with her grace and beauty. Learning that she was Hengist's daughter, he demanded her hand. Hengist at first declined, but, after sufficiently stimulating the monarch's eagerness by his pretended opposition, he yielded, and the king became the general's son-in-law. This is the story which some of the old chroniclers tell. Modern historians are divided in respect to believing it. Some think it is fact, others fable.

At all events, the power of Hengist and Horsa gradually increased, as years passed on, until the Britons began to be alarmed at their growing strength and multiplying numbers, and to fear lest these new friends should prove, in the end, more formidable than the terrible enemies whom they had come to expel. Contentions and then open quarrels began to occur, and at length both parties prepared for war. The contest which soon ensued was a terrible struggle, or rather series of struggles, which continued for two centuries, during which the Anglo-Saxons were continually gaining ground and the Britons losing; the mental and physical superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race giving them with very few exceptions, every where and always the victory.

There were, occasionally, intervals of peace, and partial and temporary friendliness. They accuse Hengist of great treachery on one of these occasions. He invited his son-in-law, King Vortigern, to a feast, with three hundred of his officers, and then

fomenting a quarrel at the entertainment, the Britons were all killed in the affray by means of the superior Saxon force which had been provided for the emergency. Vortigern himself was taken prisoner, and held a captive until he ransomed himself by ceding three whole provinces to his captor. Hengist justified this demand by throwing the responsibility of the feud upon his guests; and it is not, in fact, at all improbable that they deserved their share of the condemnation.

The famous King Arthur, whose Knights of the Round Table have been so celebrated in ballads and tales, lived and flourished during these wars between the Saxons and the Britons. He was a king of the Britons, and performed wonderful exploits of strength and valor. He was of prodigious size and muscular power, and of undaunted bravery. He slew giants, destroyed the most ferocious wild beasts, gained very splendid victories in the battles that he fought, made long expeditions into foreign countries, having once gone on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to obtain the Holy Cross. His wife was a beautiful lady, the daughter of a chieftain of Cornwall. Her name was Guenever.[3] On his return from one of his distant expeditions, he found that his nephew, Medrawd, had won her affections while he was gone, and a combat ensued in consequence between him and Medrawd. The combat took place on the coast of Cornwall. Both parties fell. Arthur was mortally wounded. They took him from the field into a boat, and carried him along the coast till they came to a river. They

[3] Spelled sometimes Gwenlyfar and Ginevra.]

ascended the river till they came to the town of Glastonbury. They committed the still breathing body to the care of faithful friends there; but the mortal blow had been given. The great hero died, and they buried his body in the Glastonbury churchyard, very deep beneath the surface of the ground, in order to place it as effectually as possible beyond the reach of Saxon rage and vengeance. Arthur had been a deadly and implacable foe to the Saxons. He had fought twelve great pitched battles with them, in every one of which he had gained the victory. In one of these battles he had slain, according to the traditional tale, four hundred and seventy men, in one day, with his own hand.

Five hundred years after his death, King Henry the Second, having heard from an ancient British bard that Arthur's body lay interred in the Abbey of Glastonbury, and that the spot was marked by some small pyramids erected near it, and that the body would be found in a rude coffin made of a hollowed oak, ordered search to be made. The ballads and tales which had been then, for several centuries, circulating throughout England, narrating and praising King Arthur's exploits, had given him so wide a fame, that great interest was felt in the recovery and the identification of his remains. The searchers found the pyramids in the cemetery of the abbey. They dug between them, and came at length to a stone. Beneath this stone was a leaden cross, with the inscription in Latin, "HERE LIES BURIED THE BODY OF GREAT KING ARTHUR." Going down still below this, they came at length, at the depth of sixteen feet from the surface, to a great coffin, made

of the trunk of an oak tree, and within it was a human skeleton of unusual size. The skull was very large, and showed marks of ten wounds. Nine of them were closed by concretions of the bone, indicating that the wounds by which those contusions or fractures had been made had been healed while life continued. The tenth fracture remained in a condition which showed that that had been the mortal wound.

The bones of Arthur's wife were found near those of her husband. The hair was apparently perfect when found, having all the freshness and beauty of life; but a monk of the abbey, who was present at the disinterment, touched it and it crumbled to dust.

Such are the tales which the old chronicles tell of the good King Arthur, the last and greatest representative of the power of the ancient British aborigines. It is a curious illustration of the uncertainty which attends all the early records of national history, that, notwithstanding all the above particularity respecting the life and death of Arthur, it is a serious matter of dispute among the learned in modern times whether any such person ever lived.

Chapter III
The Danes

The landing of Hengist and Horsa, the first of the Anglo-Saxons, took place in the year 449, according to the commonly received chronology. It was more than two hundred years after this before the Britons were entirely subdued, and the Saxon authority established throughout the island, unquestioned and supreme. One or two centuries more passed away, and then the Anglo-Saxons had, in their turn, to resist a new horde of invaders, who came, as they themselves had done, across the German Ocean. These new invaders were the Danes.

The Saxons were not united under one general government when they came finally to get settled in their civil polity. The English territory was divided, on the contrary, into seven or eight separate kingdoms. These kingdoms were ruled by as many separate dynasties, or lines of kings. They were connected with each other by friendly relations and alliances, more or less intimate, the whole system being known in history by the name of the Saxon Heptarchy.

The princes of these various dynasties showed in their dealings with one another, and in their relations with foreign powers, the same characteristics of boldness and energy as had always marked the action of the race. Even the queens and princesses

evinced, by their courage and decision, that Anglo-Saxon blood lost nothing of its inherent qualities by flowing in female veins.

For example, a very extraordinary story is told of one of these Saxon princesses. A certain king upon the Continent, whose dominions lay between the Rhine and the German Ocean, had proposed for her hand in behalf of his son, whose name was Radiger. The consent of the princess was given, and the contract closed. The king himself soon afterward died, but before he died he changed his mind in respect to the marriage of his son. It seems that he had himself married a second wife, the daughter of a king of the Franks, a powerful continental people; and as, in consequence of his own approaching death, his son would come unexpectedly into possession of the throne, and would need immediately all the support which a powerful alliance could give him, he recommended to him to give up the Saxon princess, and connect himself, instead, with the Franks, as he himself had done. The prince entered into these views; his father died, and he immediately afterward married his father's youthful widow—his own step-mother—a union which, however monstrous it would be regarded in our day, seems not to have been considered any thing very extraordinary then.

The Anglo-Saxon princess was very indignant at this violation of his plighted faith on the part of her suitor. She raised an army and equipped a fleet, and set sail with the force which she had thus assembled across the German Ocean, to call the faithless Radiger to account. Her fleet entered the mouth of the Rhine,

and her troops landed, herself at the head of them. She then divided her army into two portions, keeping one division as a guard for herself at her own encampment, which she established near the place of her landing, while she sent the other portion to seek and attack Radiger, who was, in the mean time, assembling his forces, in a state of great alarm at this sudden and unexpected danger.

In due time this division returned, reporting that they had met and encountered Radiger, and had entirely defeated him. They came back triumphing in their victory, considering evidently, that the faithless lover had been well punished for his offense. The princess, however, instead of sharing in their satisfaction, ordered them to make a new incursion into the interior, and not to return without bringing Radiger with them as their prisoner. They did so; and after hunting the defeated and distressed king from place to place, they succeeded, at last, in seizing him in a wood, and brought him in to the princess's encampment. He began to plead for his life, and to make excuses for the violation of his contract by urging the necessities of his situation and his father's dying commands. The princess said she was ready to forgive him if he would now dismiss her rival and fulfill his obligations to her. Radiger yielded to this demand; he repudiated his Frank wife, and married the Anglo-Saxon lady in her stead.

Though the Anglo-Saxon race continued thus to evince in all their transactions the same extraordinary spirit and energy, and met generally with the same success that had characterized them

at the beginning, they seemed at length to find their equals in the Danes. These Danes, however, though generally designated by that appellation in history, were not exclusively the natives of Denmark. They came from all the shores of the Northern and Baltic Seas. In fact, they inhabited the sea rather than the land. They were a race of bold and fierce naval adventurers, as the Anglo-Saxons themselves had been two centuries before. Most extraordinary accounts are given of their hardihood, and of their fierce and predatory habits. They haunted the bays along the coasts of Sweden and Norway, and the islands which encumber the entrance to the Baltic Sea. They were banded together in great hordes, each ruled by a chieftain, who was called a *sea king*, because his dominions scarcely extended at all to the land. His possessions, his power, his subjects pertained all to the sea. It is true they built or bought their vessels on the shore, and they sought shelter among the islands and in the bays in tempests and storms; but they prided themselves in never dwelling in houses, or sharing, in any way, the comforts or enjoyments of the land. They made excursions every where for conquest and plunder, and were proud of their successful deeds of violence and wrong. It was honorable to enter into their service. Chieftains and nobles who dwelt upon the land sent their sons to acquire greatness, and wealth, and fame by joining these piratical gangs, just as high-minded military or naval officers, in modern times, would enter into the service of an honorable government abroad.

Besides the great leaders of the most powerful of these

bands, there was an infinite number of petty chieftains, who commanded single ships or small detached squadrons. These were generally the younger sons of sovereigns or chieftains who lived upon the land, the elder brothers remaining at home to inherit the throne or the paternal inheritance. It was discreditable then, as it is now in Europe, for any branches of families of the higher class to engage in any pursuit of honorable industry. They could plunder and kill without dishonor, but they could not toil. To rob and murder was glory; to do good or to be useful in any way was disgrace.

These younger sons went to sea at a very early age too. They were sent often at twelve, that they might become early habituated to the exposures and dangers of their dreadful combats, and of the wintery storms, and inured to the athletic exertions which the sea rigorously exacts of all who venture within her dominion. When they returned they were received with consideration and honor, or with neglect and disgrace, according as they were more or less laden with booty and spoil. In the summer months the land kings themselves would organize and equip naval armaments for similar expeditions. They would cruise along the coasts of the sea, to land where they found an unguarded point, and sack a town or burn a castle, seize treasures, capture men and make them slaves, kidnap women, and sometimes destroy helpless children with their spears in a manner too barbarous and horrid to be described. On returning to their homes, they would perhaps find their own castles burned

and their own dwellings roofless, from the visit of some similar horde.

Thus the seas of western Europe were covered in those days, as they are now, with fleets of shipping; though, instead of being engaged as now, in the quiet and peaceful pursuits of commerce, freighted with merchandise, manned with harmless seamen, and welcome wherever they come, they were then loaded only with ammunition and arms, and crowded with fierce and reckless robbers, the objects of universal detestation and terror.

One of the first of these sea kings who acquired sufficient individual distinction to be personally remembered in history has given a sort of immortality, by his exploits, to the very rude name of Ragnar Lodbrog, and his character was as rude as his name.

Ragnar's father was a prince of Norway. He married, however, a Danish princess, and thus Ragnar acquired a sort of hereditary right to a Danish kingdom—the territory including various islands and promontories at the entrance of the Baltic Sea. There was, however, a competitor for this power, named Harald. The Franks made common cause with Harald. Ragnar was defeated and driven away from the land. Though defeated, however, he was not subdued. He organized a naval force, and made himself a sea king. His operations on the stormy element of the seas were conducted with so much decision and energy, and at the same time with so much system and plan, that his power rapidly extended. He brought the other sea kings under his control, and established quite a maritime empire. He made more and more

distant excursions, and at last, in order to avenge himself upon the Franks for their interposition in behalf of his enemy at home, he passed through the Straits of Dover, and thence down the English Channel to the mouth of the Seine. He ascended this river to Rouen, and there landed, spreading throughout the country the utmost terror and dismay. From Rouen he marched to Paris, finding no force able to resist him on his way, or to defend the capital. His troops destroyed the monastery of St. Germain's, near the city, and then the King of the Franks, finding himself at their mercy, bought them off by paying a large sum of money. With this money and the other booty which they had acquired, Ragnar and his horde now returned to their ships at Rouen, and sailed away again toward their usual haunts among the bays and islands of the Baltic Sea.

This exploit, of course, gave Ragnar Lodbrog's barbarous name a very wide celebrity. It tended, too, greatly to increase and establish his power. He afterward made similar incursions into Spain, and finally grew bold enough to brave the Anglo-Saxons themselves on the green island of Britain, as the Anglo-Saxons had themselves braved the aboriginal inhabitants two or three centuries before. But Ragnar seems to have found the Anglo-Saxon swords and spears which he advanced to encounter on landing in England much more formidable than those which were raised against him on the southern side of the Channel. He was destroyed in the contest. The circumstances were as follows:

In making his preparations for a descent upon the English

coast, he prepared for a very determined contest, knowing well the character of the foes with whom he would have now to deal. He built two enormous ships, much larger than those of the ordinary size, and armed and equipped them in the most perfect manner. He filled them with selected men, and sailing down along the coast of Scotland, he watched for a place and an opportunity to land. Winds and storms are almost always raging among the dark and gloomy mountains and islands of Scotland. Ragnar's ships were caught on one of these gales and driven on shore. The ships were lost, but the men escaped to the land. Ragnar, nothing daunted, organized and marshaled them as an army, and marched into the interior to attack any force which might appear against them. His course led him to Northumbria, the most northerly Saxon kingdom. Here he soon encountered a very large and superior force, under the command of Ella, the king; but, with the reckless desperation which so strongly marked his character, he advanced to attack them. Three times, it is said, he pierced the enemy's lines, cutting his way entirely through them with his little column. He was, however, at length overpowered. His men were cut to pieces, and he was himself taken prisoner. We regret to have to add that our cruel ancestors put their captive to death in a very barbarous manner. They filled a den with poisonous snakes, and then drove the wretched Ragnar into it. The horrid reptiles killed him with their stings. It was Ella, the king of Northumbria, who ordered and directed this punishment.

The expedition of Ragnar thus ended without leading to any permanent results in Anglo-Saxon history. It is, however, memorable as the first of a series of invasions from the Danes—or Northmen, as they are sometimes called, since they came from all the coasts of the Baltic and German Seas—which, in the end, gave the Anglo-Saxons infinite trouble. At one time, in fact, the conquests of the Danes threatened to root out and destroy the Anglo-Saxon power from the island altogether. They would probably have actually effected this, had the nation not been saved by the prudence, the courage, the sagacity, and the consummate skill of the subject of this history, as will fully appear to the reader in the course of future chapters.

Ragnar was not the only one of these Northmen who made attempts to land in England and to plunder the Anglo-Saxons, even in his own day. Although there were no very regular historical records kept in those early times, still a great number of legends, and ballads, and ancient chronicles have come down to us, narrating the various transactions which occurred, and it appears by these that the sea kings generally were beginning, at this time, to harass the English coasts, as well as all the other shores to which they could gain access. Some of these invasions would seem to have been of a very formidable character.

At first these excursions were made in the summer season only, and, after collecting their plunder, the marauders would return in the autumn to their own shores, and winter in the bays and among the islands there. At length, however, they grew more

bold. A large band of them landed, in the autumn of 851, on the island of Thanet where the Saxons themselves had landed four centuries before, and began very coolly to establish their winter quarters on English ground. They succeeded in maintaining their stay during the winter, and in the spring were prepared for bolder undertakings still.

They formed a grand confederation, and collected a fleet of three hundred and fifty ships, galleys, and boats, and advanced boldly up the Thames. They plundered London, and then marched south to Canterbury, which they plundered too. They went thence into one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms called Mercia, the inhabitants of the country not being able to oppose any effectual obstacle to their marauding march. Finally, a great Anglo-Saxon force was organized and brought out to meet them. The battle was fought in a forest of oaks, and the Danes were defeated. The victory, however, afforded the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms only a temporary relief. New hordes were continually arriving and landing, growing more and more bold if they met with success, and but little daunted or discouraged by temporary failures.

The most formidable of all these expeditions was one organized and commanded by the sons and relatives of Ragnar, whom, it will be recollected, the Saxons had cruelly killed by poisonous serpents in a dungeon or den. The relatives of the unhappy chieftain thus barbarously executed were animated in their enterprise by the double stimulus of love of plunder

and a ferocious thirst for revenge. A considerable time was spent in collecting a large fleet, and in combining, for this purpose, as many chieftains as could be induced to share in the enterprise. The story of their fellow-countryman expiring under the stings of adders and scorpions, while his tormentors were exulting around him over the cruel agonies which their ingenuity had devised, aroused them to a phrensy of hatred and revenge. They proceeded, however, very deliberately in their plans. They did nothing hastily. They allowed ample time for the assembling and organizing of the confederation. When all was ready, they found that there were eight kings and twenty earls in the alliance, generally the relatives and comrades of Ragnar. The two most prominent of these commanders were Guthrum and Hubba. Hubba was one of Ragnar's sons. At length, toward the close of the summer, the formidable expedition set sail. They approached the English coast, and landed without meeting with any resistance. The Saxons seemed appalled and paralyzed at the greatness of the danger. The several kingdoms of the Heptarchy, though they had been imperfectly united, some years before, under Egbert, were still more or less distinct, and each hoped that the one first invaded would be the only one which would suffer; and as these kingdoms were rivals, and often hostile to each other, no general league was formed against what soon proved to be the common enemy. The Danes, accordingly, quietly encamped, and made calm and deliberate arrangements for spending the winter in their new quarters, as if they were at

home.

During all this time, notwithstanding the coolness and deliberation with which these avengers of their murdered countryman acted, the fires of their resentment and revenge were slowly but steadily burning, and as soon as the spring opened, they put themselves in battle array, and marched into the dominions of Ella. Ella did all that it was possible to do to meet and oppose them, but the spirit of retaliation and rage which his cruelties had evoked was too strong to be resisted. His country was ravaged, his army was defeated, he was taken prisoner, and the dying terrors and agonies of Ragnar among the serpents were expiated by tenfold worse tortures which they inflicted upon Ella's mutilated body, by a process too horrible to be described.

After thus successfully accomplishing the great object of their expedition, it was to have been hoped that they would leave the island and return to their Danish homes. But they evinced no disposition to do this. On the contrary, they commenced a course of ravage and conquest in all parts of England, which continued for several years. The parts of the country which attempted to oppose them they destroyed by fire and sword. They seized cities, garrisoned and occupied them, and settled in them as if to make them their permanent homes. One kingdom after another was subdued. The kingdom of Wessex seemed alone to remain, and that was the subject of contest. Ethelred was the king. The Danes advanced into his dominions to attack him. In the battle that

ensued, Ethelred was killed. The successor to his throne was his brother Alfred, the subject of this history, who thus found himself suddenly and unexpectedly called upon to assume the responsibilities and powers of supreme command, in as dark and trying a crisis of national calamity and danger as can well be conceived. The manner in which Alfred acted in the emergency, rescuing his country from her perils, and laying the foundations, as he did, of all the greatness and glory which has since accrued to her, has caused his memory to be held in the highest estimation among all nations, and has immortalized his name.

Chapter IV
Alfred's Early Years

Before commencing the narrative of Alfred's administration of the public affairs of his realm, it is necessary to go back a little, in order to give some account of the more private occurrences of his early life. Alfred, like Washington, was distinguished for a very extraordinary combination of qualities which exhibited itself in his character, viz., the combination of great military energy and skill on the one hand, with a very high degree, on the other, of moral and religious principle, and conscientious devotion to the obligations of duty. This combination, so rarely found in the distinguished personages which have figured among mankind, is, in a great measure, explained and accounted for, in Alfred's case, by the peculiar circumstances of his early history.

It was his brother Ethelred, as has already been stated, whom Alfred immediately succeeded. His father's name was Ethelwolf; and it seems highly probable that the peculiar turn which Alfred's mind seemed to take in after years, was the consequence, in some considerable degree, of this parent's situation and character. Ethelwolf was a younger son, and was brought up in a monastery at Winchester. The monasteries of those days were the seats both of learning and piety, that is, of such learning and piety as then prevailed. The ideas of religious faith and duty which were

entertained a thousand years ago were certainly very different from those which are received now; still, there was then, mingled with much superstition, a great deal of honest and conscientious devotion to the principles of Christian duty, and of sincere and earnest desire to live for the honor of God and religion, and for the highest and best welfare of mankind. Monastic establishments existed every where, defended by the sacredness which invested them from the storms of violence and war which swept over every thing which the cross did not protect. To these the thoughtful, the serious, and the intellectual retired, leaving the restless, the rude, and the turbulent to distract and terrify the earth with their endless quarrels. Here they studied, they wrote, they read; they transcribed books, they kept records, they arranged exercises of devotion, they educated youth, and, in a word, performed, in the inclosed and secluded retreats in which they sought shelter, those intellectual functions of civil life which now can all be performed in open exposure, but which in those days, if there had been no monastic retreats to shelter them, could not have been performed at all. For the learning and piety of the present age, whether Catholic or Protestant, to malign the monasteries of Anglo-Saxon times is for the oak to traduce the acorn from which it sprung.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.