

# HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

THE DRAGON AND THE  
RAVEN; OR, THE DAYS OF  
KING ALFRED

George Henty

**The Dragon and the Raven;  
Or, The Days of King Alfred**

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# **G. A. Henty**

## **The Dragon and the Raven; Or, The Days of King Alfred**

### **CHAPTER I: THE FUGITIVES**

A low hut built of turf roughly thatched with rushes and standing on the highest spot of some slightly raised ground. It was surrounded by a tangled growth of bushes and low trees, through which a narrow and winding path gave admission to the narrow space on which the hut stood. The ground sloped rapidly. Twenty yards from the house the trees ceased, and a rank vegetation of reeds and rushes took the place of the bushes, and the ground became soft and swampy. A little further pools of stagnant water appeared among the rushes, and the path abruptly stopped at the edge of a stagnant swamp, though the passage could be followed by the eye for some distance among the tall rushes. The hut, in fact, stood on a hummock in the midst of a wide swamp where the water sometimes deepened into lakes connected by sluggish streams.

On the open spaces of water herons stalked near the margin, and great flocks of wild-fowl dotted the surface. Other signs of life there were none, although a sharp eye might have detected light threads of smoke curling up here and there from spots where the ground rose somewhat above the general level. These slight elevations, however, were not visible to the eye, for the herbage here grew shorter than on the lower and wetter ground, and the land apparently stretched away for a vast distance in a dead flat—a rush-covered swamp, broken only here and there by patches of bushes and low trees.

The little hut was situated in the very heart of the fen country, now drained and cultivated, but in the year 870 untouched by the hand of man, the haunt of wild-fowl and human fugitives. At the door of the hut stood a lad some fourteen years old. His only garment was a short sleeveless tunic girded in at the waist, his arms and legs were bare; his head was uncovered, and his hair fell in masses on his shoulders. In his hand he held a short spear, and leaning against the wall of the hut close at hand was a bow and quiver of arrows. The lad looked at the sun, which was sinking towards the horizon.

"Father is late," he said. "I trust that no harm has come to him and Egbert. He said he would return to-day without fail; he said three or four days, and this is the fourth. It is dull work here alone. You think so, Wolf, don't you, old fellow? And it is worse for you than it is for me, pent up on this hummock of ground with scarce room to stretch your limbs."

A great wolf-hound, who was lying with his head between his paws by the embers of a fire in the centre of the hut, raised his head on being addressed, and uttered a low howl indicative of his agreement with his master's opinion and his disgust at his present place of abode.

"Never mind, old fellow," the boy continued, "we sha'n't be here long, I hope, and then you shall go with me in the woods again and hunt the wolves to your heart's content." The great hound gave a lazy wag of his tail. "And now, Wolf, I must go. You lie here and guard the hut while I am away. Not that you are likely to have any strangers to call in my absence."

The dog rose and stretched himself, and followed his master down the path until it terminated at the edge of the water. Here he gave a low whimper as the lad stepped in and waded through the water; then turning he walked back to the hut and threw himself down at the door. The boy proceeded for some thirty or forty yards through the water, then paused and pushed aside the wall of rushes which bordered the passage, and pulled out a boat which was floating among them.

It was constructed of osier rods neatly woven together into a sort of basket-work, and covered with an untanned hide with the hairy side in. It was nearly oval in shape, and resembled a great bowl some three feet and a half wide and a foot longer. A broad paddle with a long handle lay in it, and

the boy, getting into it and standing erect in the middle paddled down the strip of water which a hundred yards further opened out into a broad half a mile long and four or five hundred yards wide. Beyond moving slowly away as the coracle approached them, the water-fowl paid but little heed to its appearance.

The boy paddled to the end of the broad, whence a passage, through which flowed a stream so sluggish that its current could scarce be detected, led into the next sheet of water. Across the entrance to this passage floated some bundles of light rushes. These the boy drew out one by one. Attached to each was a piece of cord which, being pulled upon, brought to the surface a large cage, constructed somewhat on the plan of a modern eel or lobster pot. They were baited by pieces of dead fish, and from them the boy extracted half a score of eels and as many fish of different kinds.

"Not a bad haul," he said as he lowered the cages to the bottom again. "Now let us see what we have got in our pen."

He paddled a short way along the broad to a point where a little lane of water ran up through the rushes. This narrowed rapidly and the lad got out from his boat into the water, as the coracle could proceed no further between the lines of rushes. The water was knee-deep and the bottom soft and oozy. At the end of the creek it narrowed until the rushes were but a foot apart. They were bent over here, as it would seem to a superficial observer naturally; but a close examination would show that those facing each other were tied together where they crossed at a distance of a couple of feet above the water, forming a sort of tunnel. Two feet farther on this ceased, and the rushes were succeeded by lines of strong osier withies, an inch or two apart, arched over and fastened together. At this point was a sort of hanging door formed of rushes backed with osiers, and so arranged that at the slightest push from without the door lifted and enabled a wild-fowl to pass under, but dropping behind it prevented its exit. The osier tunnel widened out to a sort of inverted basket three feet in diameter.

On the surface of the creek floated some grain which had been scattered there the evening before as a bait. The lad left the creek before he got to the narrower part, and, making a small circuit in the swamp, came down upon the pen.

"Good!" he said, "I am in luck to-day; here are three fine ducks."

Bending the yielding osiers aside, he drew out the ducks one by one, wrung their necks, and passing their heads through his girdle, made his way again to the coracle. Then he scattered another handful or two of grain on the water, sparingly near the mouth of the creek, but more thickly at the entrance to the trap, and then paddled back again by the way he had come.

Almost noiselessly as he dipped the paddle in the water, the hound's quick ear had caught the sound, and he was standing at the edge of the swamp, wagging his tail in dignified welcome as his master stepped on to dry land.

"There, Wolf, what do you think of that? A good score of eels and fish and three fine wild ducks. That means bones for you with your meal to-night—not to satisfy your hunger, you know, for they would not be of much use in that way, but to give a flavour to your supper. Now let us make the fire up and pluck the birds, for I warrant me that father and Egbert, if they return this evening, will be sharp-set. There are the cakes to bake too, so you see there is work for the next hour or two."

The sun had set now, and the flames, dancing up as the boy threw an armful of dry wood on the fire, gave the hut a more cheerful appearance. For some time the lad busied himself with preparation for supper. The three ducks were plucked in readiness for putting over the fire should they be required; cakes of coarse rye-flour were made and placed in the red ashes of the fire; and then the lad threw himself down by the side of the dog.

"No, Wolf, it is no use your looking at those ducks. I am not going to roast them if no one comes; I have got half a one left from dinner." After sitting quiet for half an hour the dog suddenly raised himself into a sitting position, with ears erect and muzzle pointed towards the door; then he gave a low whine, and his tail began to beat the ground rapidly.



"What! do you hear them, old fellow?" the boy said, leaping to his feet. "I wish my ears were as sharp as yours are, Wolf; there would be no fear then of being caught asleep. Come on, old boy, let us go and meet them."

It was some minutes after he reached the edge of the swamp before the boy could hear the sounds which the quick ears of the hound had detected. Then he heard a faint splashing noise, and a minute or two later two figures were seen wading through the water.

"Welcome back, father," the lad cried. "I was beginning to be anxious about you, for here we are at the end of the fourth day."

"I did not name any hour, Edmund," the boy's father said, as he stepped from the water, "but I own that I did not reckon upon being so late; but in truth Egbert and I missed our way in the windings of these swamps, and should not have been back to-night had we not luckily fallen upon a man fishing, who was able to put us right. You have got some supper, I hope, for Egbert and I are as hungry as wolves, for we have had nothing since we started before sunrise."

"I have plenty to eat, father; but you will have to wait till it is cooked, for it was no use putting it over the fire until I knew that you would return; but there is a good fire, and you will not have to wait long. And how has it fared with you, and what is the news?"

"The news is bad, Edmund. The Danes are ever receiving reinforcements from Mercia, and scarce a day passes but fresh bands arrive at Thetford, and I fear that ere long East Anglia, like Northumbria, will fall into their clutches. Nay, unless we soon make head against them they will come to occupy all the island, just as did our forefathers."

"That were shame indeed," Edmund exclaimed. "We know that the people conquered by our ancestors were unwarlike and cowardly; but it would be shame indeed were we Saxons so to be overcome by the Danes, seeing moreover that we have the help of God, being Christians, while the Danes are pagans and idolaters."

"Nevertheless, my son, for the last five years these heathen have been masters of Northumbria, have wasted the whole country, and have plundered and destroyed the churches and monasteries. At present they have but made a beginning here in East Anglia; but if they continue to flock in they will soon overrun the whole country, instead of having, as at present, a mere foothold near the rivers except for those who have come down to Thetford. We have been among the first sufferers, seeing that our lands lie round Thetford, and hitherto I have hoped that there would be a general rising against these invaders; but the king is indolent and unwarlike, and I see that he will not arouse himself and call his ealdormen and thanes together for a united effort until it is too late. Already from the north the Danes are flocking down into Mercia, and although the advent of the West Saxons to the aid of the King of Mercia forced them to retreat for a while, I doubt not that they will soon pour down again."

"'Tis a pity, father, that the Saxons are not all under one leading; then we might surely defend England against the Danes. If the people did but rise and fall upon each band of Northmen as they arrived they would get no footing among us."

"Yes," the father replied, "it is the unhappy divisions between the Saxon kingdoms which have enabled the Danes to get so firm a footing in the land. Our only hope now lies in the West Saxons. Until lately they were at feud with Mercia; but the royal families are now related by marriage, seeing that the King of Mercia is wedded to a West Saxon princess, and that Alfred, the West Saxon king's brother and heir to the throne, has lately espoused one of the royal blood of Mercia. The fact that they marched at the call of the King of Mercia and drove the Danes from Nottingham shows that the West Saxon princes are alive to the common danger of the country, and if they are but joined heartily by our people of East Anglia and the Mercians, they may yet succeed in checking the progress of these heathen. And now, Edmund, as we see no hope of any general effort to drive the Danes off our coasts, 'tis useless for us to lurk here longer. I propose to-morrow, then, to journey north into Lincolnshire, to the Abbey of Croyland, where, as you know, my brother Theodore is the abbot; there we can rest in peace for a time, and watch the progress of events. If we hear that the people of these

parts are aroused from their lethargy, we will come back and fight for our home and lands; if not, I will no longer stay in East Anglia, which I see is destined to fall piecemeal into the hands of the Danes; but we will journey down to Somerset, and I will pray King Ethelbert to assign me lands there, and to take me as his thane."

While they had been thus talking Egbert had been broiling the eels and wild ducks over the fire. He was a freeman, and a distant relation of Edmund's father, Eldred, who was an ealdorman in West Norfolk, his lands lying beyond Thetford, and upon whom, therefore, the first brunt of the Danish invasion from Mercia had fallen. He had made a stout resistance, and assembling his people had given battle to the invaders. These, however, were too strong and numerous, and his force having been scattered and dispersed, he had sought refuge with Egbert and his son in the fen country. Here he had remained for two months in hopes that some general effort would be made to drive back the Danes; but being now convinced that at present the Angles were too disunited to join in a common effort, he determined to retire for a while from the scene.

"I suppose, father," Edmund said, "you will leave your treasures buried here?"

"Yes," his father replied; "we have no means of transporting them, and we can at any time return and fetch them. We must dig up the big chest and take such garments as we may need, and the personal ornaments of our rank; but the rest, with the gold and silver vessels, can remain here till we need them."

Gold and silver vessels seem little in accordance with the primitive mode of life prevailing in the ninth century. The Saxon civilization was indeed a mixed one. Their mode of life was primitive, their dwellings, with the exception of the religious houses and the abodes of a few of the great nobles, simple in the extreme; but they possessed vessels of gold and silver, armlets, necklaces, and ornaments of the same metals, rich and brightly coloured dresses, and elaborate bed furniture while their tables and household utensils were of the roughest kind, and their floors strewn with rushes. When they invaded and conquered England they found existing the civilization introduced by the Romans, which was far in advance of their own; much of this they adopted. The introduction of Christianity further advanced them in the scale.

The prelates and monks from Rome brought with them a high degree of civilization, and this to no small extent the Saxons imitated and borrowed. The church was held in much honour, great wealth and possessions were bestowed upon it, and the bishops and abbots possessed large temporal as well as spiritual power, and bore a prominent part in the councils of the kingdoms. But even in the handsome and well-built monasteries, with their stately services and handsome vestments, learning was at the lowest ebb—so low, indeed, that when Prince Alfred desired to learn Latin he could find no one in his father's dominions capable of teaching him, and his studies were for a long time hindered for want of an instructor, and at the time he ascended the throne he was probably the only Englishman outside a monastery who was able to read and write fluently.

"Tell me, father," Edmund said after the meal was concluded, "about the West Saxons, since it is to them, as it seems, that we must look for the protection of England against the Danes. This Prince Alfred, of whom I before heard you speak in terms of high praise, is the brother, is he not, of the king? In that case how is it that he does not reign in Kent, which I thought, though joined to the West Saxon kingdom, was always ruled over by the eldest son of the king."

"Such has been the rule, Edmund; but seeing the troubled times when Ethelbert came to the throne, it was thought better to unite the two kingdoms under one crown with the understanding that at Ethelbert's death Alfred should succeed him. Their father, Ethelwulf, was a weak king, and should have been born a churchman rather than a prince. He nominally reigned over Wessex, Kent, and Mercia, but the last paid him but a slight allegiance. Alfred was his favourite son, and he sent him, when quite a child, to Rome for a visit. In 855 he himself, with a magnificent retinue, and accompanied by Alfred, visited Rome, travelling through the land of the Franks, and it was there, doubtless, that Alfred acquired that love of learning, and many of those ideas, far in advance of his



people, which distinguish him. His mother, Osburgha, died before he and his father started on the pilgrimage. The king was received with much honour by the pope, to whom he presented a gold crown of four pounds weight, ten dishes of the purest gold, a sword richly set in gold, two gold images, some silver-gilt urns, stoles bordered with gold and purple, white silken robes embroidered with figures, and other costly articles of clothing for the celebration of the service of the church, together with rich presents in gold and silver to the churches, bishops, clergy, and other dwellers in Rome. They say that the people of Rome marvelled much at these magnificent gifts from a king of a country which they had considered as barbarous. On his way back he married Judith, daughter of the King of the Franks; a foolish marriage, for the king was far advanced in years and Judith was but a girl.

"Ethelbald, Ethelwulf's eldest son, had acted as regent in his father's absence, and so angered was he at this marriage that he raised his standard of revolt against his father. At her marriage Judith had been crowned queen, and this was contrary to the customs of the West Saxons, therefore Ethelbald was supported by the people of that country; on his father's return to England, however, father and son met, and a division of the kingdom was agreed upon.

"Ethelbald received Wessex, the principal part of the kingdom, and Ethelwulf took Kent, which he had already ruled over in the time of his father Egbert. Ethelwulf died a few months afterwards, leaving Kent to Ethelbert, his second surviving son. The following year, to the horror and indignation of the people of the country, Ethelbald married his stepmother Judith, but two years afterwards died, and Ethelbert, King of Kent, again united Wessex to his own dominions, which consisted of Kent, Surrey, and Sussex. Ethelbert reigned but a short time, and at his death Ethelred, his next brother, ascended the throne. Last year Alfred, the youngest brother, married Elswitha, the daughter of Ethelred Mucil, Earl of the Gaini, in Lincolnshire, whose mother was one of the royal family of Mercia.

"It was but a short time after the marriage that the Danes poured into Mercia from the north. Messengers were sent to ask the assistance of the West Saxons. These at once obeyed the summons, and, joining the Mercians, marched against the Danes, who shut themselves up in the strong city of Nottingham, and were there for some time besieged. The place was strong, the winter at hand, and the time of the soldiers' service nearly expired. A treaty was accordingly made by which the Danes were allowed to depart unharmed to the north side of the Humber, and the West Saxons returned to their kingdom.

"Such is the situation at present, but we may be sure that the Danes will not long remain quiet, but will soon gather for another invasion; ere long, too, we may expect another of their great fleets to arrive somewhere off these coasts, and every Saxon who can bear arms had need take the field to fight for our country and faith against these heathen invaders. Hitherto, Edmund, as you know, I have deeply mourned the death of your mother, and of your sisters who died in infancy; but now I feel that it is for the best, for a terrible time is before us. We men can take refuge in swamp and forest, but it would have been hard for delicate women; and those men are best off who stand alone and are able to give every thought and energy to the defence of their country. 'Tis well that you are now approaching an age when the Saxon youth are wont to take their place in the ranks of battle. I have spared no pains with your training in arms, and though assuredly you lack strength yet to cope in hand-to-hand conflict with these fierce Danes, you may yet take your part in battle, with me on one side of you and Egbert on the other. I have thought over many things of late, and it seems to me that we Saxons have done harm in holding the people of this country as serfs."

"Why, father," Edmund exclaimed in astonishment, "surely you would not have all men free and equal."

"The idea seems strange to you, no doubt, Edmund, and it appears only natural that some men should be born to rule and others to labour, but this might be so even without serfdom, since, as you know, the poorer freemen labour just as do the serfs, only they receive a somewhat larger guerdon for their toil; but had the two races mixed more closely together, had serfdom been abolished and all

men been free and capable of bearing arms, we should have been able to show a far better front to the Danes, seeing that the serfs are as three to one to the freemen."

"But the serfs are cowardly and spiritless," Edmund said; "they are not of a fighting race, and fell almost without resistance before our ancestors when they landed here."

"Their race is no doubt inferior to our own, Edmund," his father said, "seeing that they are neither so tall nor so strong as we Saxons, but of old they were not deficient in bravery, for they fought as stoutly against the Romans as did our own hardy ancestors. After having been for hundreds of years subject to the Roman yoke, and having no occasion to use arms, they lost their manly virtues, and when the Romans left them were an easy prey for the first comer. Our fathers could not foresee that the time would come when they too in turn would be invaded. Had they done so, methinks they would not have set up so broad a line of separation between themselves and the Britons, but would have admitted the latter to the rights of citizenship, in which case intermarriage would have taken place freely, and the whole people would have become amalgamated. The Britons, accustomed to our free institutions, and taking part in the wars between the various Saxon kingdoms, would have recovered their warlike virtues, and it would be as one people that we should resist the Danes. As it is, the serfs, who form by far the largest part of the population, are apathetic and cowardly; they view the struggle with indifference, for what signifies to them whether Dane or Saxon conquer; they have no interest in the struggle, nothing to lose or to gain, it is but a change of masters."

Edmund was silent. The very possibility of a state of things in which there should be no serfs, and when all men should be free and equal, had never occurred to him; but he had a deep respect for his father, who bore indeed the reputation of being one of the wisest and most clear-headed of the nobles of East Anglia, and it seemed to him that this strange and novel doctrine contained much truth in it. Still the idea was as strange to him as it would have been to the son of a southern planter in America half a century ago. The existence of slaves seemed as much a matter of course as that of horses or dogs, and although he had been accustomed to see from time to time freedom bestowed upon some favourite serf as a special reward for services, the thought of a general liberation of the slaves was strange and almost bewildering, and he lay awake puzzling over the problem long after his father and kinsman had fallen asleep.

## CHAPTER II: THE BATTLE OF KESTEVEN

The following morning early the little party started. The great chest was dug up from its place of concealment, and they resumed their ordinary dresses. The ealdorman attired himself in a white tunic with a broad purple band round the lower edge, with a short cloak of green cloth. This was fastened with a gold brooch at the neck; a necklet of the same metal and several gold bracelets completed his costume, except that he wore a flat cap and sandals. Edmund had a green tunic and cloak of deep red colour; while Egbert was dressed in yellow with a green cloak—the Saxons being extremely fond of bright colours.

All wore daggers, whose sheaths were incrustated in silver, in their belts, and the ealdorman and his kinsman carried short broad-bladed swords, while Edmund had his boar-spear. Eldred placed in the pouch which hung at his side a bag containing a number of silver cubes cut from a long bar and roughly stamped. The chest was then buried again in its place of concealment among the bushes near the hut, Edmund placed his bows and arrows in the boat—not that in which Edmund had fished, but the much larger and heavier craft which Eldred and Egbert had used—and then the party, with the hound, took their places in it. The ealdorman and Egbert were provided with long poles, and with these they sent the little boat rapidly through the water.

After poling their way for some eight hours they reached the town of Norwich, to which the Danes had not yet penetrated; here, procuring what articles they needed, they proceeded on their journey to Croyland, making a great circuit to avoid the Danes at Thetford. The country was for the most part covered with thick forests, where the wild boar and deer roamed undisturbed by man, and where many wolves still lurked, although the number in the country had been greatly diminished by the energetic measures which King Egbert had taken for the destruction of these beasts. Their halting-places were for the most part at religious houses, which then served the purpose of inns for travellers, being freely opened to those whom necessity or pleasure might cause to journey. Everywhere they found the monks in a state of alarm at the progress of the Danes, who, wherever they went, destroyed the churches and religious houses, and slew the monks.

Eldred was everywhere received with marked honour; being known as a wise and valiant noble, his opinions on the chances of the situation were eagerly listened to, and he found the monks at all their halting-places prepared, if need be, to take up arms and fight the pagan invaders, as those of Mercia and Wessex had done in the preceding autumn. The travellers, on arriving at Croyland, were warmly welcomed.

"I heard, brother," the abbot said, "that you had bravely fought against the Danes near Thetford, and have been sorely anxious since the news came of the dispersal of your force."

"I have been in hiding," Eldred said, "hoping that a general effort would be made against the invaders. My own power was broken, since all my lands are in their hands. The people of East Anglia foolishly seem to suppose that, so long as the Danes remain quiet, the time has not come for action. They will repent their lethargy some day, for, as the Danes gather in strength, they will burst out over the surrounding country as a dammed-up river breaks its banks. No, brother, I regard East Anglia as lost so far as depends upon itself; its only hope is in the men of Kent and Wessex, whom we must now look upon as our champions, and who may yet stem the tide of invasion and drive back the Danes. This abbey of yours stands in a perilous position, being not far removed from the Humber, where so many of the Danes find entrance to England."

"It is not without danger, Eldred, but the men of the fens are numerous, hardy and brave, and will offer a tough resistance to any who may venture to march hitherward, and if, as I hope, you will stay with us, and will undertake their command, we may yet for a long time keep the Danes from our doors."

For some weeks the time passed quietly. Edmund spent most of his time in hunting, being generally accompanied by Egbert. The Saxon was an exceedingly tall and powerful man, slow and scanty of speech, who had earned for himself the title of Egbert the Silent. He was devoted to his kinsmen and regarded himself as special guardian of Edmund. He had instructed him in the use of arms, and always accompanied him when he went out to hunt the boar, standing ever by his side to aid him to receive the rush of the wounded and furious beasts; and more than once, when Edmund had been borne down by their onslaughts, and would have been severely wounded, if not killed, a sweeping blow of Egbert's sword had rid him of his assailant.

Sometimes Edmund made excursions in the fens, where with nets and snares he caught the fish which swarmed in the sluggish waters; or, having covered his boat with a leafy bower until it resembled a floating bush, drifted close to the flocks of wild-fowl, and with his bow and arrows obtained many a plump wild duck. Smaller birds were caught in snares or traps, or with bird-lime smeared on twigs. Eldred seldom joined his son in his hunting excursions, as he was busied with his brother the abbot in concerting the measures of defence and in organizing a band of messengers, who, on the first warning of danger, could be despatched throughout the fens to call in the fisher population to the defence of the abbey.

It was on the 18th of September, 870, that a messenger arrived at the abbey and craved instant speech with the prior. The latter, who was closeted with his brother, ordered the man to be admitted.

"I come," he said, "from Algar the ealdorman. He bids me tell you that a great Danish host has landed from the Humber at Lindsay. The rich monastery of Bardenay has been pillaged and burned. Algar is assembling all the inhabitants of the marsh lands to give them battle, and he prays you to send what help you can spare, for assuredly they will march hither should he be defeated."

"Return to the ealdorman," the abbot said; "tell him that every lay brother and monk who can bear arms shall march hence to join him under the command of lay brother Toley, whose deeds of arms against the Danes in Mercia are well known to him. My brother here, Eldred, will head all the inhabitants of the marshes of this neighbourhood. With these and the brothers of the abbey, in all, as I reckon, nigh four hundred men, he will to-morrow march to join Algar."

Messengers were at once sent off through the surrounding country bidding every man assemble on the morrow morning at Croyland, and soon after daybreak they began to arrive. Some were armed with swords, some with long sickles, used in cutting rushes, tied to poles, some had fastened long pieces of iron to oars to serve as pikes. They were a rough and somewhat ragged throng, but Eldred saw with satisfaction that they were a hard and sturdy set of men, accustomed to fatigue and likely to stand firm in the hour of battle.

Most of them carried shields made of platted osiers covered with skin. The armoury of the abbey was well supplied, and swords and axes were distributed among the worst armed of the fenmen. Then, with but little order or regularity, but with firm and cheerful countenances, as men determined to win or die, the band moved off under Eldred's command, followed by the contingent of the abbey, eighty strong, under lay brother Toley.

A sturdy band were these monks, well fed and vigorous. They knew that they had no mercy to expect from the Danes, and, regarding them as pagans and enemies of their religion as well as of their country, could be trusted to do their utmost. Late that evening they joined Algar at the place they had appointed, and found that a large number of the people of the marshes had gathered round his banner.

The Danes had not moved as yet from Bardenay, and Algar determined to wait for another day or two before advancing, in order to give time to others farther from the scene of action to arrive.

The next day came the contingents from several other priories and abbeys, and the sight of the considerable force gathered together gave heart and confidence to all. Algar, Eldred, and the other leaders, Morcar, Osgot, and Harding, moved about among the host, encouraging them with cheering words, warning them to be in no way intimidated by the fierce appearance of the Danes, but to hold steadfast and firm in the ranks, and to yield no foot of ground to the onslaught of the enemy. Many

priests had accompanied the contingents from the religious houses, and these added their exhortations to those of the leaders, telling the men that God would assuredly fight on their side against the heathen, and bidding each man remember that defeat meant the destruction of their churches and altars, the overthrow of their whole religion, and the restored worship of the pagan gods.

Edmund went about among the gathering taking great interest in the wild scene, for these marsh men differed much in their appearance from the settled inhabitants of his father's lands. The scenes in the camp were indeed varied in their character. Here and there were harpers with groups of listeners gathered round, as they sung the exploits of their fathers, and animated their hearers to fresh fire and energy by relating legends of the cruelty of the merciless Danes. Other groups there were surrounding the priests, who were appealing to their religious feelings as well as to their patriotism.

Men sat about sharpening their weapons, fixing on more firmly the handles of their shields, adjusting arrows to bowstrings, and preparing in other ways for the coming fight. From some of the fires, round which the marsh men were sitting, came snatches of boisterous song, while here and there, apart from the crowd, priests were hearing confessions, and shriving penitents.

The next morning early, one of the scouts, who had been sent to observe the movements of the Danes, reported that these were issuing from their camp, and advancing into the country.

Algar marshalled his host, each part under its leaders, and moved to meet them. Near Kesteven the armies came in sight of each other, and after advancing until but a short distance apart both halted to marshal their ranks anew. Eldred, with the men of the marshes near Croyland and the contingent from the abbey, had their post in the central division, which was commanded by Algar himself, Edmund took post by his father, and Egbert stood beside him.

Edmund had never before seen the Danes, and he could not but admit that their appearance was enough to shake the stoutest heart. All carried great shields covering them from head to foot. These were composed of wood, bark, or leather painted or embossed, and in the cases of the chiefs plated with gold and silver. So large were these that in naval encounters, if the fear of falling into the enemy's hands forced them to throw themselves into the sea, they could float on their shields; and after death in battle a soldier was carried to his grave on his buckler. As they stood facing the Saxons they locked their shields together so as to form a barrier well-nigh impregnable against the arrows.

All wore helmets, the common men of leather, the leaders of iron or copper, while many in addition wore coats of mail. Each carried a sword, a battle-axe, and a bow and arrows. Some of the swords were short and curled like a scimitar; others were long and straight, and were wielded with both hands. They wore their hair long and hanging down their shoulders, and for the most part shaved their cheeks and chins, but wore their moustaches very long.

They were, for the most, tall, lithe, and sinewy men, but physically in no way superior to the Saxons, from whom they differed very widely in complexion, the Saxons being fair while the Danes were very dark, as much so as modern gypsies; indeed, the Saxon historians speak of them as the black pagans. Upon the other hand many of the Northmen, being Scandinavians, were as fair as the Saxons themselves.

The Danes began the battle, those in front shouting fiercely, and striking their swords on their shields with a clashing noise, while the ranks behind shot a shower of arrows among the Saxons. These at once replied. The combat was not continued long at a distance, for the Danes with a mighty shout rushed upon the Saxons. These stood their ground firmly and a desperate conflict ensued. The Saxon chiefs vied with each other in acts of bravery, and singling out the leaders of the Danes engaged with them in hand-to-hand conflict.

Algar had placed his swordsmen in the front line, those armed with spears in the second; and as the swordsmen battled with the Danes the spearmen, when they saw a shield uplifted to guard the head, thrust under with their weapons and slew many. Edmund, seeing that with his sword he should have but little chance against these fierce soldiers, fell a little behind his father and kinsman, and as these were engaged with the enemy he from time to time, when he saw an opportunity, rushed in

and delivered a thrust with his spear at an unguarded point. The Saxon shouts rose louder and louder as the Danes in vain endeavoured to break through their line. The monks fought stoutly, and many a fierce Norseman fell before their blows.

The Danes, who had not expected so firm a resistance, began to hesitate, and Algar giving the word, the Saxons took the offensive, and the line pressed forward step by step. The archers poured their arrows in a storm among the Danish ranks. These fell back before the onslaught. Already three of their kings and many of their principal leaders had fallen, and at last, finding themselves unable to withstand the impetuous onslaught of the Saxons, they turned and fled in confusion towards their camp. The Saxons with exulting shouts pursued them, and great numbers were slaughtered. The Danes had, however, as was their custom, fortified the camp before advancing, and Algar drew off his troops, deeming that it would be better to defer the attack on this position until the following day.

There was high feasting in the Saxon camp that evening, but this was brought to an abrupt conclusion by the arrival of a scout, who reported that a great Danish army marching from the Humber was approaching the camp of the compatriots. The news was but too true. The kings Guthorn, Bergsecg, Oskytal, Halfdene, and Amund, and the Jarls Frene, Hingwar, Hubba, and the two Sidrocs, with all their followers, had marched down from Yorkshire to join the invaders who had just landed.

The news of this immense reinforcement spread consternation among the Angles. In vain their leaders went about among them and exhorted them to courage, promising them another victory as decisive as that they had won that day. Their entreaties were in vain, for when the morning dawned it was found that three-fourths of their number had left the camp during the night, and had made off to the marshes and fastnesses.

A council of the chiefs was held. The chances of conflict appeared hopeless, so vastly were they out-numbered by the Danes. Algar, however, declared that he would die rather than retreat.

"If we fly now," he said, "all East Anglia will fall into the hands of the heathen. Even should we fight and fall, the example of what a handful of brave men can do against the invaders will surely animate the Angles to further resistance; while if we conquer, so great a blow will be dealt to the renown of these Danes that all England will rise against them."

On hearing these words all the chiefs came to the determination to win or die as they stood. Eldred took Edmund aside after this determination had been arrived at.

"My son," he said, "I allowed you yesterday to stand by my side in battle, and well and worthily did you bear yourself, but to-day you must withdraw. The fight is well-nigh hopeless, and I believe that all who take part in it are doomed to perish. I would not that my house should altogether disappear, and shall die more cheerfully in the hope that some day you will avenge me upon these heathen. Therefore, Edmund, I bid you take station at a distance behind the battle, so that when you see the day goes against us you may escape in time. I shall urge our faithful Egbert to endeavour, when he sees that all is lost, to make his way from the fight and rejoin you, and to journey with you to Wessex and there present you to the king. For myself, if the battle is lost I shall die rather than fly. Such is the resolution of Algar and our other brave chiefs, and Eldred the ealdorman must not be the only one of the leaders to run from the fray."

Edmund was deeply touched at his father's words, but the parental rule was so strict in those days that it did not even enter his mind to protest against Eldred's decision.

As the morning went on the Danes were engaged in the funeral ceremonies of their dead kings, while the Saxons, quiet and resolute, received the holy sacrament and prepared for the fight. Algar chose a position on rising ground. He himself with Eldred commanded the centre, Toley and Morcar led the right wing, Osgot and Harding the left.

Each of these wings contained about five hundred men. Algar's centre, which was a little withdrawn from its wings, contained about 200 of his best warriors, and was designed as a reserve, with which, if need be, he could move to the assistance of either of the wings which might be sorely pressed and in danger. The Saxons formed in a solid mass with their bucklers linked together. The



Danish array which issued out from their camp was vastly superior in numbers, and was commanded by four kings and eight jarls or earls, while two kings and four earls remained in charge of the camp, and of the great crowd of prisoners, for the most part women and children, whom they had brought with them.

With the Danes who had come down from Yorkshire were a large body of horsemen, who charged furiously down upon the Saxons; but these maintained so firm an array with their lances and spears projecting outward that the Danes failed to break through them, and after making repeated efforts and suffering heavy loss they drew back. Then the Danish archers and slingers poured in a storm of missiles, but these effected but little harm, as the Saxons stooped a little behind their closely packed line of bucklers, which were stout enough to keep out the shower of arrows. All day the struggle continued. Again and again the Danes strove to break the solid Saxon array, and with sword and battle-axe attempted to hew down the hedge of spears, but in vain. At last their leaders, convinced that they could not overcome the obstinacy of the resistance, ordered their followers to feign a retreat.

As the Danes turned to fly the Saxons set up a triumphant shout, and breaking up their solid phalanx rushed after them in complete disorder. In vain Algar, Osgot, Toley, Eldred, and the other leaders shouted to them to stand firm. Weary of their long inactivity, and convinced that the Danes were routed, the Saxons pursued them across the plain. Suddenly the Danish horse, who after failing to break through the ranks had remained apart at a short distance from the conflict, dashed down upon the disordered Saxons, while the flying infantry turning round also fell upon them with exulting shouts.

Taken wholly by surprise, confused and disordered, the Saxons could offer no effectual opposition to the charge. The Danish horse rode among them hewing and slaying, and the swords and battle-axes of the footmen completed the work. In a few minutes of all the Saxon band which had for so many hours successfully resisted the onslaught of the Danes, not one survived save a few fleet-footed young men who, throwing away their arms, succeeded in making their escape, and a little group, consisting of Algar, Toley, Eldred, and the other leaders who had gathered together when their men broke their ranks and had taken up their position on a knoll of ground rising above the plain. Here for a long time they resisted the efforts of the whole of the Danes, surrounding themselves with a heap of slain; but at length one by one they succumbed to the Danish onslaught, each fighting valiantly to the last.

From his position at a distance Edmund watched the last desperate struggle. With streaming eyes and a heart torn by anxiety for his father he could see the Danish foe swarming round the little band who defended the crest. These were lost from his sight, and only the flashing of swords showed where the struggle was still going on in the centre of the confused mass. Edmund had been on his knees for some time, but he now rose.

"Come, old boy," he said to the hound, who lay beside him watching the distant conflict and occasionally uttering deep angry growls. "I must obey my father's last command; let us away."

He took one more glance at the distant conflict before turning. It was plain that it was nearly finished. The swords had well-nigh ceased to rise and fall when he saw a sudden movement in the throng of Danes and suddenly a man burst out from them and started at headlong speed towards him, pursued by a number of Danes. Even at that distance Edmund thought that he recognized the tall figure of his kinsman, but he had no time to assure himself of this, and he at once, accompanied by the hound, set off at the top of his speed from the field of battle. He had fully a quarter of a mile start, and being active and hardy and accustomed to exercise from his childhood, he had no fear that the Danes would overtake him. Still he ran his hardest.

Looking over his shoulder from time to time he saw that at first the Danes who were pursuing the fugitive were gaining upon him also, but after a time he again increased the distance, while, being unencumbered with shield or heavy weapons, the fugitive kept the advantage he had at first gained. Three miles from the battle-field Edmund reached the edge of a wide-spreading wood. Looking

round as he entered its shelter he saw that the flying Saxon was still about a quarter of a mile behind him, and that the Danes, despairing of over-taking him, had ceased their pursuit. Edmund therefore checked his footsteps and awaited the arrival of the fugitive, who he now felt certain was his kinsman.

In a few minutes Egbert came up, having slackened his speed considerably when he saw that he was no longer pursued. He was bleeding from several wounds, and now that the necessity for exertion had passed he walked but feebly along. Without a word he flung himself on the ground by Edmund and buried his face in his arms, and the lad could see by the shaking of his broad shoulders that he was weeping bitterly. The great hound walked up to the prostrate figure and gave vent to a long and piteous howl, and then lying down by Egbert's side placed his head on his shoulder.

## CHAPTER III: THE MASSACRE AT CROYLAND

Edmund wept sorely for some time, for he knew that his kinsman's agitation could be only caused by the death of his father. At last he approached Egbert.

"My brave kinsman," he said, "I need ask you no questions, for I know but too well that my dear father has fallen; but rouse yourself, I pray you; let me bandage your wounds, which bleed fast, for you will want all your strength, and we must needs pursue our way well into the forest, for with to-morrow's dawn the Danes will scatter over the whole country."

"Yes," Egbert said, turning round and sitting up, "I must not in my grief forget my mission, and in truth I am faint with loss of blood. It was well the Danes stopped when they did, for I felt my strength failing me, and could have held out but little further. Yes, Edmund," he continued, as the lad, tearing strips from his garments, proceeded to bandage his wounds, "your father is dead. Nobly, indeed, did he fight; nobly did he die, with a circle of dead Danes around him. He, Algar, Toley, and myself were the last four to resist. Back to back we stood, and many were the Danes who fell before our blows. Toley fell first and then Algar. The Danes closed closer around us. Still we fought on, till your father was beaten to his knee, and then he cried to me, 'Fly, Egbert, to my son.' Then I flung myself upon the Danes like a wild boar upon the dogs, and with the suddenness of my rush and the heavy blows of my battle-axe cut a way for myself through them. It was well-nigh a miracle, and I could scarce believe it when I was free. I flung away my shield and helmet as soon as I had well begun to run, for I felt the blood gushing out from a dozen wounds, and knew that I should want all my strength. I soon caught sight of you running ahead of me. Had I found we were gaining upon you I should have turned off and made another way to lead the Danes aside, but I soon saw that you were holding your own, and so followed straight on. My knees trembled, and I felt my strength was well-nigh gone, when, looking round, I found the Danes had desisted from their pursuit. I grieve, Edmund, that I should have left the battle alive when all the others have died bravely, for, save a few fleet-footed youths, I believe that not a single Saxon has escaped the fight; but your father had laid his commands upon me, and I was forced to obey, though God knows I would rather have died with the heroes on that field."

"'Tis well for me that you did not, my good Egbert," Edmund said, drying his eyes, "for what should I have done in this troubled land without one protector?"

"It was the thought of that," Egbert said, "that seemed to give me strength as I dashed at the Danes. And now, methinks, I am strong enough to walk again. Let us make our way far into the forest, then we must rest for the night. A few hours' sleep will make a fresh man of me, and to-morrow morning we will go to Croyland and see what the good abbot your uncle proposes to do, then will we to the hut where we dwelt before coming hither. We will dig up the chest and take out such valuables as we can carry, and then make for Wessex. After this day's work I have no longer any hope that East Anglia will successfully oppose the Danes. And yet the Angles fought well, and for every one of them who has fallen in these two days' fighting at least four Danes must have perished. Have you food, Edmund, for in truth after such a day's work I would not lie down supperless?"

"I have in my pouch here, Egbert, some cakes, which I cooked this morning, and a capon which one of the monks of Croyland gave me. I was tempted to throw it away as I ran."

"I am right glad, Edmund, that the temptation was not too strong for you. If we can find a spring we shall do well."

It was now getting dark, but after an hour's walk through the forest they came upon a running stream. They lit a fire by its side, and sitting down ate the supper, of which both were in much need. Wolf shared the repast, and then the three lay down to sleep. Egbert, overcome by the immense exertions he had made during the fight, was soon asleep; but Edmund, who had done his best to keep a brave face before his kinsman, wept for hours over the loss of his gallant father.

On the following morning Egbert and Edmund started for Croyland. The news of the defeat at Kesteven had already reached the abbey, and terror and consternation reigned there. Edmund went at once to his uncle and informed him of the circumstance of the death of his father and the annihilation of the Saxon army.

"Your news, Edmund, is even worse than the rumours which had reached me, and deeply do I grieve for the loss of my brave brother and of the many valiant men who died with him. This evening or to-morrow the spoilers will be here, and doubtless will do to Croyland as they have done to all the other abbeys and monasteries which have fallen into their hands. Before they come you and Egbert must be far away. Have you bethought you whither you will betake yourselves?"

"We are going to the king of the West Saxons," Edmund replied. "Such was my father's intention, and I fear that all is now lost in East Anglia."

"'Tis your best course, and may God's blessing and protection rest upon you!"

"But what are you going to do, uncle? Surely you will not remain here until the Danes arrive, for though they may spare other men they have no mercy on priests and monks?"

"I shall assuredly remain here, Edmund, at my post, and as my brother Eldred and Earl Algar and their brave companions died at their posts in the field of battle, so I am prepared to die here where God has placed me. I shall retain here with me only a few of the most aged and infirm monks, too old to fly or to support the hardships of the life of a hunted fugitive in the fens; together with some of the children who have fled here, and who, too, could not support such a life. It may be that when the fierce Danes arrive and find nought but children and aged men even their savage breasts may be moved to pity; but if not, God's will be done. The younger brethren will seek refuge in the fens, and will carry with them the sacred relics of the monastery. The most holy body of St. Guthlac with his scourge and psalmistry, together with the most valuable jewels and muniments, the charters of the foundation of the abbey, given by King Ethelbald, and the confirmation thereof by other kings, with some of the most precious gifts presented to the abbey."

Edmund and Egbert set to work to assist the weeping monks in making preparations for their departure. A boat was laden with the relics of the saints, the muniments of the king, and the most precious vessels. The table of the great altar covered with plates of gold, which King Wichtlof had presented, with ten gold chalices, and many other vessels, was thrown into the well of the convent.

In the distance the smoke of several villages could now be seen rising over the plain, and it was clear that the Danes were approaching. The ten priests and twenty monks who were to leave now knelt, and received the solemn benediction of the abbot, then, with Edmund and Egbert, they took their places in the boat and rowed away to the wood of Ancarig, which lay not far from the abbey.

The abbot Theodore and the aged monks and priests now returned to the church, and, putting on their vestments, commenced the services of the day; the abbot himself celebrated high mass, assisted by brother Elfget the deacon, brother Savin the sub-deacon, and the brothers Egelred and Wylric, youths who acted as taper-bearers. When the mass was finished, just as the abbot and his assistants had partaken of the holy communion, the Danes burst into the church. The abbot was slain upon the holy altar by the hand of the Danish king Oskytal, and the other priests and monks were beheaded by the executioner.

The old men and children in the choir were seized and tortured to disclose where the treasures of the abbey were concealed, and were also put to death with the prior and sub-prior. Turgar, an acolyte of ten years of age; a remarkably beautiful boy, stood by the side of the sub-prior as he was murdered and fearlessly confronted the Danes, and bade them put him to death with the holy father. The young Earl Sidroc, however, struck with the bearing of the child, and being moved with compassion, stripped him of his robe and cowl, and threw over him a long Danish tunic without sleeves, and ordering him to keep close by him, made his way out of the monastery, the boy being the only one who was saved from the general massacre.

The Danes, furious at being able to find none of the treasures of the monastery, broke open all the shrines and levelled the marble tombs, including those of St. Guthlac, the holy virgin Ethelbritha, and many others, but found in these none of the treasure searched for. They piled the bodies of the saints in a heap, and burned them, together with the church and all the buildings of the monastery; then, with vast herds of cattle and other plunder, they moved away from Croyland, and attacked the monastery of Medeshamsted. Here the monks made a brave resistance. The Danes brought up machines and attacked the monastery on all sides, and effected a breach in the walls. Their first assault, however, was repelled, and Fulba, the brother of Earl Hulba, was desperately wounded by a stone.

Hulba was so infuriated at this that when, at the second assault, the monastery was captured, he slew with his own hand everyone of the monks, while all the country people who had taken refuge within the walls were slaughtered by his companions, not one escaping. The altars were levelled to the ground, the monuments broken in pieces. The great library of parchments and charters was burnt. The holy relics were trodden under foot, and the church itself, with all the monastic buildings, burnt to the ground. Four days later, the Danes, having devastated the whole country round and collected an enormous booty, marched away against Huntingdon.

Edmund and Egbert remained but a few hours with the monks who had escaped from the sack of Croyland; for, as soon as they saw the flames mounting up above the church, they knew that the Danes had accomplished their usual work of massacre, and there being no use in their making further stay, they started upon their journey. They travelled by easy stages, for time was of no value to them. For the most part their way lay among forests, and when once they had passed south of Thetford they had no fear of meeting with the Danes. Sometimes they slept at farm-houses or villages, being everywhere hospitably received, the more so when it was known that Edmund was the son of the brave ealdorman Eldred; but the news which they brought of the disastrous battle of Kesteven, and the southward march of the great Danish army, filled everyone with consternation.

The maids and matrons wept with terror at the thought of the coming of these terrible heathen, and although the men everywhere spoke of resistance to the last, the prospect seemed so hopeless that even the bravest were filled with grief and despair. Many spoke of leaving their homes and retiring with their wives and families, their serfs and herds to the country of the West Saxons, where alone there appeared any hope of a successful resistance being made. Wherever they went Edmund and Egbert brought by their news lamentation and woe to the households they entered, and at last Edmund said:

"Egbert, let us enter no more houses until we reach the end of our journey; wherever we go we are messengers of evil, and turn houses of feasting into abodes of grief. Every night we have the same sad story to tell, and have to witness the weeping and wailing of women. A thousand times better were it to sleep among the woods, at any rate until we are among the West Saxons, where our news may cause indignation and rage at least, but where it will arouse a brave resolve to resist to the last instead of the hopelessness of despair."

Egbert thoroughly agreed with the lad, and henceforth they entered no houses save to buy bread and mead. Of meat they had plenty, for as they passed through the forests Wolf was always upon the alert, and several times found a wild boar in his lair, and kept him at bay until Edmund and Egbert ran up and with spears and swords slew him. This supplied them amply with meat, and gave them indeed far more than they could eat, but they exchanged portions of the flesh for bread in the villages. At last they came down upon the Thames near London, and crossing the river journeyed west. They were now in the kingdom of the West Saxons, the most warlike and valiant of the peoples of England, and who had gradually extended their sway over the whole of the country. The union was indeed but little more than nominal, as the other kings retained their thrones, paying only a tribute to the West Saxon monarchs.

As Egbert had predicted, their tale of the battle of Kesteven here aroused no feeling save that of wrath and a desire for vengeance upon the Danes. Swords were grasped, and all swore by the saints

of what should happen to the invaders should they set foot in Wessex. The travellers felt their spirits rise at the martial and determined aspect of the people.

"It is a sad pity," Egbert said to Edmund one day, "that these West Saxons had not had time to unite England firmly together before the Danes set foot on the island. It is our divisions which have rendered their task so far easy. Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia have one by one been invaded, and their kings have had to fight single-handed against them, whereas had one strong king reigned over the whole country, so that all our force could have been exerted against the invader wherever he might land, the Danes would never have won a foot of our soil. The sad day of Kesteven showed at least that we are able to fight the Danes man for man. The first day we beat them, though they were in superior numbers, the second we withstood them all day, although they were ten to one against us, and they would never have triumphed even then had our men listened to their leaders and kept their ranks. I do not believe that even the West Saxons could have fought more bravely than did our men on that day; but they are better organized, their king is energetic and determined, and when the Danes invade Wessex they will find themselves opposed by the whole people instead of merely a hastily raised assemblage gathered in the neighbourhood."

They presently approached Reading, where there was a royal fortress, in which King Ethelred and his brother Alfred were residing.

"It is truly a fine city," Edmund said as he approached it; "its walls are strong and high, and the royal palace, which rises above them, is indeed a stately building."

They crossed the river and entered the gates of the town. There was great bustle and traffic in the streets, cynings, or nobles, passed along accompanied by parties of thanes, serfs laden with fuel or provisions made their way in from the surrounding country, while freemen, with their shields flung across their shoulders and their swords by their sides, stalked with an independent air down the streets.

The travellers approached the royal residence. The gates were open, and none hindered their entrance, for all who had business were free to enter the royal presence and to lay their complaints or petitions before the king.

Entering they found themselves in a large hall. The lower end of this was occupied by many people, who conversed together in little groups or awaited the summons of the king. Across the upper end of the room was a raised dais, and in the centre of this was a wide chair capable of holding three persons. The back and sides were high and richly carved. A table supported by four carved and gilded legs stood before it. Two persons were seated in the chair.

One was a man of three or four and twenty, the other was his junior by some two years. Both wore light crowns of gold somewhat different in their fashion. Before the younger was a parchment, an inkhorn, and pens. King Ethelred was a man of a pleasant face, but marked by care and by long vigils and rigorous fastings. Alfred was a singularly handsome young prince, with an earnest and intellectual face. Both had their faces shaven smooth. Ethelred wore his hair parted in the middle, and falling low on each side of the face, but Alfred's was closely cut. On the table near the younger brother stood a silver harp.

Edmund looked with great curiosity and interest on the young prince, who was famous throughout England for his great learning, his wisdom, and sweetness of temper. Although the youngest of the king's brothers, he had always been regarded as the future King of England, and had his father survived until he reached the age of manhood, he would probably have succeeded directly to the throne. The law of primogeniture was by no means strictly observed among the Saxons, a younger brother of marked ability or of distinguished prowess in war being often chosen by a father to succeed him in place of his elder brothers.

Alfred had been his father's favourite son. He had when a child been consecrated by the pope as future King of England; and his two journeys to Rome, and his residence at the court of the Frankish king had, with his own great learning and study, given him a high prestige and reputation among his people as one learned in the ways of the world. Although but a prince, his authority in the kingdom



nearly equalled that of his brother, and it was he rather than Ethelred whom men regarded as the prop and stay of the Saxons in the perils which were now threatening them.

One after another, persons advanced to the table and laid their complaints before the king; in cases of dispute both parties were present and were often accompanied by witnesses. Ethelred and Alfred listened attentively to all that was said on both sides, and then gave their judgment. An hour passed, and then seeing that no one else approached the table, Egbert, taking Edmund by the hand, led him forward and knelt before the royal table.

"Whom have we here?" the king said. "This youth is by his attire one of noble race, but I know not his face."

"We have come, sir king," Egbert said, "as fugitives and suppliants to you. This is Edmund, the son of Ealdorman Eldred, a valiant cyning of East Anglia, who, after fighting bravely against the Danes near Thetford, joined Earl Algar, and died by his side on the fatal field of Kesteven. He had himself purposed to come hither to you and to ask you to accept him as your thane, and on the morn of the battle he charged me if he fell to bring hither his son to you; and we pray you to accept, in token of our homage to you, these vessels."

And here he placed two handsome goblets of silver gilt upon the table.

"I pray you rise," the king said. "I have assuredly heard of the brave Eldred, and will gladly receive his son as my thane. I had not heard of Eldred's death, though two days since the rumour of a heavy defeat of the East Angles at Kesteven, and the sacrilegious destruction of the holy houses of Bardenay, Croyland, and Medeshamsted reached our ears. Were you present at the battle?"

"I was, sir king," Egbert said, "and fought beside Earl Algar and my kinsman the Ealdorman Eldred until both were slain by the Danes, and I with difficulty cut my way through them and escaped to carry out my kinsman's orders regarding his son."

"You are a stout champion yourself," the king said, regarding with admiration Egbert's huge proportions; "but tell us the story of this battle, of which at present but vague rumours have reached us." Egbert related the incidents of the battle of Kesteven. "It was bravely fought," the king said when he had concluded; "right well and bravely, and better fortune should have attended such valour. Truly the brave Algar has shown that we Saxons have not lost the bravery which distinguished our ancestors, and that, man for man, we are equal to these heathen Danes."

"But methinks," Prince Alfred said, "that the brave Algar and his valiant companions did wrong to throw away their lives when all was lost. So long as there is the remotest chance of victory it is the duty of a leader to set an example of valour to his followers, but when all is lost he should think of his country. What though the brave thanes slew each a score of Danes before they died, their death has left their countrymen without a leader, and by that one battle the Danes have made themselves masters of the north of East Anglia. Better far had they, when the day was lost, retreated, to gather the people together when a better opportunity presented itself, and again to make head against the invaders. It is heathen rather than Christian warfare thus to throw away their lives rather than to retreat and wait for God's time to come again. To stake all on one throw, which if lost loses a whole people, seems to me the act of a gamester. I trust that, should the time ever come, as it is too much to be feared it will ere long, that the Danes invade my brother's kingdom of Wessex, I shall not be found wanting in courage; but assuredly when defeated in battle I would not throw away my life, for that belongs to our people rather than to myself, but would retire to some refuge until I could again gather the Saxons around me and attack the invaders. I like the face of the young ealdorman, and doubt not that he will prove a valiant warrior like his father. My brother will doubtless assign him lands for his maintenance and yours; but if he will let me I will attach him to my person, and will be at once a master and a friend to him. Wouldst thou like this, young Edmund?"

The lad, greatly pleased at the young prince's kindness of speech and manner, replied enthusiastically that he would follow him to the death if he would accept him as his faithful thane.

"Had the times been more peaceful, Edmund," Alfred said, "I would fain have imparted to you some of the little knowledge that I have gained, for I see an intelligence in your face which tells me that you would have proved an apt and eager pupil; but, alas, in the days that are coming it is the sword rather than the book which will prevail, and the cares of state, and the defence of the country, will shortly engross all my time and leave me but little leisure for the studies I love so well."

"There are the lands," the king said, "of Eabald, Ealdorman of Sherborne, in Dorset. He died but last week and has left no children. These lands I will grant to Edmund in return for liege and true service." The lad knelt before the king, and, kissing his hand, swore to be his true and faithful thane, and to spend land, goods, and life in his service.

"And now," the king said, "since the audience is over, and none other comes before us with petitions, we will retire to our private apartments, and there my brother Alfred will present you to the fair Elswitha, his wife."

The room into which Egbert and Edmund followed the king and his brother was spacious and lofty. The walls were covered with hangings of red cloth, and a thick brown baize covered the floor. The ceiling was painted a dark brown with much gilding. Round the sides of the room stood several dressers of carved oak, upon which stood gold and silver cups.

On a table were several illuminated vellums. At Croyland Edmund had seen a civilization far in advance of that to which he had been accustomed in his father's abode; but he saw here a degree of luxury and splendour which surprised him. Alfred had, during his two visits to Rome, learned to appreciate the high degree of civilization which reigned there, and many of the articles of furniture and other objects which met Edmund's eye he had brought with him on his return with his father from that city.

Across the upper end of the room was a long table laid with a white cloth. Elswitha was sitting in a large gilded chair by the great fire which was blazing on the hearth.

Prince Alfred presented Edmund and Egbert to her. Elswitha was well acquainted with the Ealdorman Eldred, as his lands lay on the very border of her native Mercia, and she received the lad and his kinsman with great kindness. In a short time they took their places at table. First the attendance brought in bowls containing broth, which they presented, kneeling, to each of those at table. The broth was drunk from the bowl itself; then a silver goblet was placed by each diner, and was filled with wine. Fish was next served. Plates were placed before each; but instead of their cutting food with their own daggers, as Edmund had been accustomed to see in his father's house, knives were handed round. After the fish came venison, followed by wild boar, chickens, and other meats. After these confections, composed chiefly of honey, were placed on the table. The king and Prince Alfred pledged their guests when they drank. No forks were used, the meat as cut being taken up by pieces of bread to the mouth. During the meal a harper played and sung.

Edmund observed the decorum with which his royal hosts fed, and the care which they took to avoid dipping their fingers into their saucers or their plates. He was also struck with the small amount of wine which they took; for the Saxons in general were large feeders, and drank heavily at their meals.

When the dinner was over a page brought round a basin of warm water, in which lavender had been crushed, and each dipped his fingers in this and then dried them on the cloth. Then at Prince Alfred's request Egbert again related in full the details of the two days' desperate struggle at Kesteven, giving the most minute particulars of the Danes' method of fighting. Egbert and Edmund then retired to the royal guest-house adjoining the palace, where apartments were assigned to them.

After remaining for a week at Reading they took leave of the king and started for the lands which he had assigned to Edmund. They were accompanied by an officer of the royal household, who was to inform the freemen and serfs of the estate that by the king's pleasure Edmund had been appointed ealdorman of the lands. They found on arrival that the house had been newly built, and was large and comfortable. The thanes of the district speedily came in to pay their respects to their new ealdorman, and although surprised to find him so young, they were pleased with his bearing

and manner, and knowing that he came of good fighting blood doubted not that in time he would make a valiant leader. All who came were hospitably entertained, and for many days there was high feasting. So far removed was this part of England from the district which the Danes had invaded, that at present but slight alarm had been caused by them; but Edmund and his kinsman lost no time in impressing upon them the greatness of the coming danger.

"You may be sure," he said, "that ere long we shall see their galleys on the coast. When they have eaten up Mercia and Anglia they will assuredly come hither, and we shall have to fight for our lives, and unless we are prepared it will go hard with us."

After he had been at his new residence for a month Edmund sent out messengers to all the thanes in his district requesting them to assemble at a council, and then formally laid the matter before them.

"It is, above all things," he said, "necessary that we should have some place where we can place the women and children in case of invasion and where we can ourselves retire in extreme necessity. Therefore I propose that we shall build a fort of sufficient size to contain all the inhabitants of the district, with many flocks and herds. My cousin Egbert has ridden far over the country, and recommends that the Roman fortification at Moorcaster shall be utilized. It is large in extent, and has a double circle of earthen banks. These differ from those which we are wont to build, since we Saxons always fill up the ground so as to be flat with the top of the earthen banks, while the Romans left theirs hollow. However, the space is so large that it would take a vast labour to fill it up, therefore I propose that we should merely thicken the banks, and should, in Saxon custom, build a wall with turrets upon them. The sloping banks alone would be but a small protection against the onslaught of the Danes, but stone walls are another matter, and could only be carried after a long siege. If you fall in with my views you will each of you send half your serfs to carry out the work, and I will do the same, and will, moreover, pay fifty freemen who may do the squaring of the stones and the proper laying of them."

The proposal led to a long discussion, as some thought that there was no occasion as yet to take such a measure; but the thanes finally agreed to carry out Edmund's proposal.

## CHAPTER IV: THE INVASION OF WESSEX

Edmund and Egbert devoted most of their time to the building of the new fort, living very simply, and expended the whole of the revenues of the lands on the payment of the freemen and masons engaged upon the work. The Roman fort was a parallelogram, the sides being about 200 yards long, and the ends half that length. It was surrounded by two earthen banks with wide ditches. These were deepened considerably, and the slopes were cut down more sharply. The inner bank was widened until it was 15 feet across the top.

On this the wall was built. It was faced on both sides with square stones, the space between filled up with rubble and cement, the total thickness being 4 feet. The height of the wall was 8 feet, and at intervals of 30 yards apart towers were raised 10 feet above it, one of these being placed at either side of the entrance. Here the bank was cut away, and solid buttresses of masonry supported the high gates. The opening in the outer bank was not opposite to the gate in the inner, being fifty yards away, so that any who entered by it would have for that distance to follow the ditch between the two banks, exposed to the missiles of those on the wall before arriving at the inner gate.

Five hundred men laboured incessantly at the work. The stone for the walls was fortunately found close at hand, but, notwithstanding this, the work took nearly six months to execute; deep wells were sunk in the centre of the fort, and by this means an ample supply of water was secured, however large might be the number within it.

A very short time after the commencement of the work the news arrived that King Edmund of East Anglia had gathered his forces together and had met the Danes in a great battle near Thetford on Sunday the 20th of November, and had been totally defeated by them, Edmund himself having been taken prisoner. The captive king, after having been for a long time cruelly tortured by the Danes, was shot to death with arrows. It was not long after this that news came that the whole of East Anglia had fallen into the hands of the Danes.

Early in the month of February, 871, just as the walls of his fort had begun to rise, a messenger arrived from the king bidding Edmund assemble all the men in his earlship and march at once to join him near Devizes, as the news had come that a great Danish fleet had sailed up the Thames and had already captured the royal town of Reading.

Messengers were sent out in all directions, and early the next morning, 400 men having assembled, Edmund and his kinsman marched away with them towards Devizes. Upon their arrival at that town they found the king and his brother with 8000 men, and the following day the army moved east towards Reading.

They had not marched many miles before a messenger arrived saying that two of the Danish jarls with a great following had gone out to plunder the country, that they had been encountered by Aethelwulf, Earl of Berkshire, with his men at Englefield, and a fierce battle had taken place. The Saxons had gained the victory, and great numbers of the Danes had been slain, Sidroc, one of their jarls, being among the fallen.

Three days later the royal army arrived in sight of Reading, being joined on their march by Aethelwulf and his men. The Danes had thrown up a great rampart between the Thames and the Kennet, and many were still at work on this fortification. These were speedily slain by the Saxons, but their success was a short one. The main body of the invaders swarmed out from the city and a desperate engagement took place.

The Saxons fought valiantly, led by the king and Prince Alfred; but being wholly undisciplined and unaccustomed to war they were unable to withstand the onslaught of the Danes, who fought in better order, keeping together in ranks: after four hours' hard fighting the Saxons were compelled to fall back.

They rallied again a few miles from Reading. Ethelred and Alfred went among them bidding them be of good cheer, for that another time, when they fought in better order, they would gain the victory; and that their loss had not been greater than the Danes, only that unhappily the valiant Ealdorman Aethelwulf had been slain. Fresh messengers were sent throughout the country bidding all the men of Wessex to rally round their king, and on the fourth morning after the defeat Ethelred found himself at the head of larger forces than had fought with him in the last battle.

The Danes had moved out from Reading and had taken post at Ashdown, and as the Saxon army approached they were seen to be divided into two bodies, one of which was commanded by their two kings and the other by two jarls. The Saxons therefore made a similar division of their army, the king commanding one division and Prince Alfred the other.

Edmund with the men of Sherborne was in the division of Alfred. The Danes advanced to the attack and fell with fury upon them. It had been arranged that this division should not advance to the attack until that commanded by the king was also put in motion. For some time Alfred and his men supported the assaults of the Danes, and then, being hardly pressed, the prince sent a messenger to his brother to urge that a movement should be made. The Saxons were impatient at standing on the defensive, and Alfred saw that he must either allow them to charge the enemy or must retreat.

Presently the messenger returned saying that the king was in his tent hearing mass, and that he had given orders that no man should move or any should disturb him until mass was concluded. Alfred hesitated no longer; he formed his men into a solid body, and then, raising his battle cry, rushed upon the Danes. The battle was a furious one. The Danes were upon higher ground, their standard being planted by the side of a single thorn-tree which grew on the slopes of the hill. Towards this Alfred with his men fought their way.

The lesson of the previous battle had not been lost, the Saxons kept together in a solid body which made its way with irresistible weight through the ranks of the Danes. Still the latter closed in on all sides, and the fight was doubtful until the king, having finished his devotions, led his division into the battle. For a long time a desperate strife continued and great numbers on both sides were killed; but the Saxons, animated at once by love of their country and hatred of the invaders and by humiliation at their previous defeat, fought with such fury that the Danes began to give way. Then the Saxons pressed them still more hotly, and the invaders presently lost heart and fled in confusion, pursued in all directions by the exulting Saxons.

The Danish king Bergsecg and five jarls, the two Sidrocs, Osbeorn, Frene, and Hareld, were slain, and many thousands of their followers. Great spoil of arms and armour fell into the hands of the victors.

Edmund had fought bravely in the battle at the head of his men. Egbert had kept beside him, and twice, when the lad had been smitten to his knees by the enemy, covered him with his shield and beat off the foe.

"You are over-young for such a fight as this, Edmund," he said when the Danes had taken to flight. "You will need another four or five years over your head before you can stand in battle against these fierce Northmen. They break down your guard by sheer weight; but you bore yourself gallantly, and I doubt not will yet be as famous a warrior as was your brave father."

Edmund did not join in the pursuit, being too much bruised and exhausted to do so; but Egbert with the men of Sherborne followed the flying Danes until nightfall.

"You have done well, my young ealdorman," Prince Alfred said to the lad after the battle. "I have been wishing much that you could be with me during the past month, but I heard that you were building a strong fort and deemed it better to let you continue your work undisturbed. When it is finished I trust that I shall have you often near me; but I fear that for a time we shall have but little space for peaceful pursuits, for the Danes are coming, as I hear, in great troops westward, and we shall have many battles to fight ere we clear the land of them."

In those days a defeat, however severe, had not the same decisive effect as it has in modern warfare. There were no cannons to lose, no great stores to fall into the hands of the victors. The army was simply dispersed, and its component parts reassembled in the course of a day or two, ready, when reinforcements arrived, to renew the fight. Thus, decisive as was the victory of Ashdown, Prince Alfred saw that many such victories must be won, and a prolonged and exhausting struggle carried on before the tide of invasion would be finally hurled back from Wessex. The next few days were spent in making a fair distribution of the spoil and arms among the conquerors. Some of the thanes then returned home with their people; but the remainder, on the king's entreaty, agreed to march with him against the Danes, who after the battle had fallen back to Basing, where they had been joined by others coming from the coast. The royal army advanced against them, and fourteen days after the battle of Ashdown the struggle was renewed. The fight lasted for many hours, but towards nightfall the Saxons were compelled to retreat, moving off the field, however, in good order, so that no spoil fell into the hands of the Danes.

This check was a great disappointment to the Saxons, who after their late victory had hoped that they should speedily clear the kingdom of the Danes. These, indeed, taught prudence by the manner in which the West Saxons had fought, for a while refrained from plundering excursions. Two months later the Saxons were again called to arms. Somerled, a Danish chieftain, had again advanced to Reading, and had captured and burned the town. The king marched against him, and the two armies met at Merton. Here another desperate battle took place.

During the first part of the day the Saxons were victorious over both the divisions of the Danish army, but in the afternoon the latter received some reinforcements and renewed the fight. The Saxons, believing that the victory had been won, had fallen into disorder and were finally driven from the field. Great numbers were slain on both sides. Bishop Edmund and many Saxon nobles were killed, and King Ethelred so severely wounded that he expired a few days later, April 23rd, 871, having reigned for five years. He was buried at Wimbourne Minster, and Prince Alfred ascended the throne.

Ethelred was much regretted by his people, but the accession of Alfred increased their hopes of battling successfully against the Danes. Although wise and brave, King Ethelred had been scarcely the monarch for a warlike people in troubled times. Religious exercises occupied too large a share of his thoughts. His rule was kindly rather than strong, and his authority was but weak over his nobles. From Prince Alfred the Saxons hoped better things. From his boyhood he had been regarded with special interest and affection by the people, as his father had led them to regard him as their future king.

The fact that he had been personally consecrated by the pope appeared to invest him with a special authority. His immense superiority in learning over all his people greatly impressed them. Though gentle he was firm and resolute, prompt in action, daring in the field. Thus, then, although the people regretted King Ethelred, there was a general feeling of hope and joy when Alfred took his place on the throne. He had succeeded to the crown but a month when the Danes again advanced in great numbers. The want of success which had attended them in the last two battles had damped the spirit of the people, and it was with a very small force only that Alfred was able to advance against them.

The armies met near Wilton, where the Danes in vastly superior numbers were posted on a hill. King Alfred led his forces forward and fell upon the Danes, and so bravely did the Saxons fight that for some time the day went favourably for them. Gradually the Danes were driven from their post of vantage, and after some hours' fighting turned to fly; but, as at Merton and Kesteven, the impetuosity of the Saxons proved their ruin. Breaking their compact ranks they scattered in pursuit of the Danes, and these, seeing how small was the number of their pursuers, rallied and turned upon them, and the Saxons were driven from the field which they had so bravely won.

"Unless my brave Saxons learn order and discipline," the king said to Edmund and some of his nobles who gathered round him on the evening after the defeat, "our cause is assuredly lost. We have proved now in each battle that we are superior man to man to the Danes, but we throw away



the fruits of victory by our impetuosity. The great Caesar, who wrote an account of his battles which I have read in Latin, described the order and discipline with which the Roman troops fought. They were always in heavy masses, and even after a battle the heavy-armed soldiers kept their ranks and did not scatter in pursuit of the enemy, leaving this task to the more lightly armed troops.

"Would that we had three or four years before us to teach our men discipline and order, but alas! there is no time for this. The Danes have fallen in great numbers in every fight, but they are ever receiving reinforcements and come on in fresh waves of invasion; while the Saxons, finding that all their efforts and valour seem to avail nothing, are beginning fast to lose heart. See how small a number assembled round my standard yesterday, and yet the war is but beginning. Truly the look-out is bad for England."

The king made strenuous efforts again to raise an army, but the people did not respond to his call. In addition to the battles which have been spoken of several others had been fought in different parts of Wessex by the ealdormen and their followers against bodies of invading Danes. In the space of one year the Saxons had engaged in eight pitched battles and in many skirmishes. Great numbers had been slain on both sides, but the Danes ever received fresh accessions of strength, and seemed to grow stronger and more numerous after every battle, while the Saxons were dwindling rapidly. Wide tracts of country had been devastated, the men slaughtered, and the women and children taken captives, and the people, utterly dispirited and depressed, no longer listened to the voices of their leaders, and refused again to peril their lives in a strife which seemed hopeless. Alfred therefore called his ealdormen together and proposed to them, that since the people would no longer fight, the sole means that remained to escape destruction was to offer to buy off the Danes.

The proposal was agreed to, for although none of them had any hope that the Danes would long keep any treaty they might make, yet even a little respite might give heart and spirit to the Saxons again. Accordingly negotiations were entered into with the Danes, and these, in consideration of a large money payment, agreed to retire from Wessex. The money was paid, the Danes retired from Reading, which they had used as their headquarters, and marched to London. King Burhred, the feeble King of Mercia, could do nothing to oppose them, and he too agreed to pay them a large annual tribute.

From the end of 872 till the autumn of 875 the country was comparatively quiet. Alfred ruled it wisely, and tried to repair the terrible damages the war had made. Edmund looked after his earldom, and grew into a powerful young man of nineteen years old.

King Alfred had not deceived himself for a moment as to the future. "The Danes," he said, "are still in England. East Anglia and Northumbria swarm with them. Had this army, after being bought off by us and my brother of Mercia, sailed across the seas and landed in France there would have been some hope for us, but their restless nature will not allow them to stay long in the parts which they have conquered.

"In Anglia King Guthrum has divided the land among his jarls, and there they seem disposed to settle down; but elsewhere they care not for the land, preferring to leave it in the hands of its former owners to till, and after to wring from the cultivators the fruits of the harvest; then, as the country becomes thoroughly impoverished, they must move elsewhere. Mercia they can overrun whensoever they choose, and after that there is nothing for them to do but to sweep down again upon Wessex, and with all the rest of England at their feet it is hopeless to think that we alone can withstand their united power."

"Then what, think you, must be the end of this?" Edmund asked.

"'Tis difficult to see the end," Alfred replied. "It would seem that our only hope of release from them is that when they have utterly eaten up and ravaged England they may turn their thoughts elsewhere. Already they are harrying the northern coasts of France, but there are richer prizes on the Mediterranean shores, and it may be that when England is no longer worth plundering they may sail away to Spain and Italy. We have acted foolishly in the way we have fought them. When they first

began to arrive upon our coasts we should have laboured hard to build great fleets, so that we could go forth and meet them on the seas.

"Some, indeed, might have escaped our watch and landed, but the fleets could have cut off reinforcements coming to them, and thus those who reached our shores could have been overwhelmed. Even now, I think that something might be done that way, and I purpose to build a fleet which may, when they again invade us, take its station near the mouth of the Thames and fall upon the vessels bringing stores and reinforcements. This would give much encouragement to the people, whose hopelessness and desperation are caused principally by the fact that it seems to be of no use killing the enemy, since so many are ready constantly to take their places."

"I will gladly undertake to build one ship," Edmund said. "The fort is now finished, and with the revenues of the land I could at once commence a ship; and if the Danes give us time, when she is finished I would build another. I will the more gladly do it, since it seems to me that if the Danes entirely overrun our country we must take to the sea and so in turn become plunderers. With this view I will have the ship built large and strong, so that she may keep the sea in all weathers and be my home if I am driven out of England. There must be plenty of ports in France, and many a quiet nook and inlet round England, where one can put in to refit when necessary, and we could pick up many a prize of Danish ships returning laden with booty. With such a ship I could carry a strong crew, and with my trusty Egbert and the best of my fighting men we should be able to hold our own, even if attacked by two or three of the Danish galleys."

"The idea is a good one, Edmund," the king said, "and I would that I myself could carry it into effect. It were a thousand times better to live a free life on the sea, even if certain at last to be overpowered by a Danish fleet, than to lurk a hunted fugitive in the woods; but I cannot do it. So long as I live I must remain among my people, ready to snatch any chance that may offer of striking a blow against the invader. But for you it is different."

"I should not, of course, do it," Edmund said, "until all is lost here, and mean to defend my fort to an extremity; still should it be that the Danes conquer all our lands, it were well to have such a refuge."

Edmund talked the matter over with Egbert, who warmly entered into the plan. "So long as I have life I will fight against the Danes, and in a ship at least we can fight manfully till the end. We must not build her on the sea-coast, or before the time when we need her she may be destroyed by the Danes. We will build her on the Parrot. The water is deep enough far up from the sea to float her when empty, and if we choose some spot where the river runs among woods we might hide her so that she may to the last escape the attention of the Danes."

"We must get some men crafty in ship-building from one of the ports, sending down a body of our own serfs to do the rough work. We will go to Exeter first and there choose us the craftsman most skilled in building ships, and will take council with him as to the best form and size. She must be good to sail and yet able to row fast with a strong crew, and she must have room to house a goodly number of rowing and fighting men. You, Edmund, might, before we start, consult King Alfred. He must have seen at Rome and other ports on the Mediterranean the ships in use there, which are doubtless far in advance of our own. For we know from the Holy Bible that a thousand years ago St. Paul made long voyages in ships, and doubtless they have learned much since those days."

Edmund thought the idea a good one, and asked the king to make him a drawing of the vessels in use in the Mediterranean. This King Alfred readily did, and Egbert and Edmund then journeyed to Exeter, where finding out the man most noted for his skill in building ships, they told him the object they had in view, and showed him the drawings the king had made. There were two of them, the one a long galley rowed with double banks of oars, the other a heavy trading ship.

"This would be useless to you," the shipwright said, laying the second drawing aside. "It would not be fast enough either to overtake or to fly. The other galley would, methinks, suit you well. I have seen a drawing of such a ship before. It is a war galley such as is used by the Genoese in their

fight against the African pirates. They are fast and roomy, and have plenty of accommodation for the crews. One of them well manned and handled should be a match for six at least of the Danish galleys, which are much lower in the water and smaller in all ways. But it will cost a good deal of money to build such a ship."

"I will devote all the revenues of my land to it until it is finished," Edmund said. "I will place a hundred serfs at your service, and will leave it to you to hire as many craftsmen as may be needed. I intend to build her in a quiet place in a deep wood on the river Parrot, so that she may escape the eyes of the Danes."

"I shall require seasoned timber," the shipwright urged.

"That will I buy," Edmund replied, "as you shall direct, and can have it brought up the river to the spot."

"Being so large and heavy," the shipwright said, "she will be difficult to launch. Methinks it were best to dig a hole or dock at some little distance from the river; then when she is finished a way can be cut to the river wide enough for her to pass out. When the water is turned in it will float her up level to the surface, and as she will not draw more than two feet of water the cut need not be more than three feet deep."

"That will be the best plan by far," Edmund agreed, "for you can make the hole so deep that you can build her entirely below the level of the ground. Then we can, if needs be, fill up the hole altogether with bushes, and cover her up, so that she would not be seen by a Danish galley rowing up the river, or even by any of the enemy who might enter the wood, unless they made special search for her; and there she could lie until I chose to embark."

The shipwright at once set to work to draw out his plans, and a week later sent to Edmund a messenger with an account of the quantity and size of wood he should require. This was purchased at once. Edmund and Egbert with their serfs journeyed to the spot they had chosen, and were met there by the shipwright, who brought with him twenty craftsmen from Exeter. The wood was brought up the river, and while the craftsmen began to cut it up into fitting sizes, the serfs applied themselves to dig the deep dock in which the vessel was to be built.

## CHAPTER V: A DISCIPLINED BAND

The construction of the ship went on steadily. King Alfred, who was himself building several war vessels of ordinary size, took great interest in Edmund's craft and paid several visits to it while it was in progress.

"It will be a fine ship," he said one day as the vessel was approaching completion, "and much larger than any in these seas. It reminds me, Edmund, not indeed in size or shape, but in its purpose, of the ark which Noah built before the deluge which covered the whole earth. He built it, as you know, to escape with his family from destruction. You, too, are building against the time when the deluge of Danish invasion will sweep over this land, and I trust that your success will equal that of the patriarch."

"I shall be better off than Noah was," Edmund said, "for he had nothing to do, save to shut up his windows and wait till the floods abated, while I shall go out and seek my enemies on the sea."

The respite purchased by the king from the Danes was but a short one. In the autumn of 875 their bands were again swarming around the borders of Wessex, and constant irruptions took place. Edmund received a summons to gather his tenants, but he found that these no longer replied willingly to the call. Several of his chief men met him and represented to him the general feeling which prevailed.

"The men say," their spokesman explained, "that it is useless to fight against the Danes. In 872 there were ten pitched battles, and vast numbers of the Danes were slain, and vast numbers also of Saxons. The Danes are already far more numerous than before, for fresh hordes continue to arrive on the shores, and more than fill up the places of those who are killed; but the places of the Saxons are empty, and our fighting force is far smaller than it was last year. If we again go out and again fight many battles, even if we are victorious, which we can hardly hope to be, the same thing will happen. Many thousands will be slain, and the following year we shall in vain try to put an army in the field which can match that of the Danes, who will again have filled up their ranks, and be as numerous as ever. So long as we continue to fight, so long the Danes will slay, burn, and destroy wheresoever they march, until there will remain of us but a few fugitives hidden in the woods. We should be far better off did we cease to resist, and the Danes become our masters, as they have become the masters of Northumbria, Mercia, and Anglia.

"There, it is true, they have plundered the churches and thanes' houses and have stolen all that is worth carrying away; but when they have taken all that there is to take they leave the people alone, and unmolested, to till the ground and to gain their livelihood. They do not slay for the pleasure of slaying, and grievous as is the condition of the Angles they and their wives and children are free from massacre and are allowed to gain their livings. The West Saxons have showed that they are no cowards; they have defeated the Northmen over and over again when far outnumbering them. It is no dishonour to yield now when all the rest of England has yielded, and when further fighting will only bring ruin upon ourselves, our wives, and children."

Edmund could find no reply to this argument. He knew that even the king despaired of ultimately resisting the Danish invasion, and after listening to all that the thanes had to say he retired with Egbert apart.

"What say you, Egbert? There is reason in the arguments that they use. You and I have neither wives nor children, and we risk only our own lives; but I can well understand that those who have so much to lose are chary of further effort. What say you?"

"I do not think it will be fair to press them further," Egbert answered; "but methinks that we might raise a band consisting of all the youths and unmarried men in the earldom. These we might train carefully and keep always together, seeing that the lands will still be cultivated and all able to pay their assessment, and may even add to it, since you exempt them from service. Such a band we

could train and practise until we could rely upon them to defeat a far larger force of the enemy, and they would be available for our crew when we take to the ship."

"I think the idea is a very good one, Egbert; we will propose it to the thanes." The proposition was accordingly made that all married men should be exempt from service, but that the youths above the age of sixteen and the unmarried men should be formed into a band and kept permanently under arms. Landowners who lost the services of sons or freemen working for them should pay the same assessment only as before, but those who did not contribute men to the levy should pay an additional assessment. Edmund said he would pay the men composing the band the same wages they would earn in the field, and would undertake all their expenses. "So long as the king continues the struggle," he said, "it is our duty to aid him, nor can we escape from the dangers and perils of invasion. Should the Danes come near us all must perforce fight, but so long as they continue at a distance things can go on here as if we had peace in the land."

The proposal was, after some discussion, agreed to, and the news caused gladness and contentment throughout the earldom. The younger men who had been included in the levy were quite satisfied with the arrangement. The spirit of the West Saxons was still high, and those without wives and families who would suffer by their absence or be ruined by their death were eager to continue the contest. The proposal that they should be paid as when at work was considered perfectly satisfactory.

The men of Sherborne had under their young leader gained great credit by their steadiness and valour in the battles four years before, and they looked forward to fresh victories over the invader. The result was that ninety young men assembled for service. Edmund had sent off a messenger to the king saying that the people were utterly weary of war and refused to take up arms, but that he was gathering a band of young men with whom he would ere long join him; but he prayed for a short delay in order that he might get them into a condition to be useful on the day of battle.

After consultation with Egbert, Edmund drew up a series of orders somewhat resembling those of modern drill. King Alfred had once, in speaking to him, described the manner in which the Thebans, a people of Northern Greece, had fought, placing their troops in the form of a wedge. The formation he now taught his men. From morning to night they were practised at rallying from pursuit or flight, or changing from a line into the form of a wedge. Each man had his appointed place both in the line and wedge. Those who formed the outside line of this formation were armed with large shields which covered them from chin to foot, and with short spears; those in the inner lines carried no shields, but bore spears of increasing length, so that four lines of spears projected from the wedge to nearly the same distance. Inside the four lines were twenty men armed with shields, bows, and arrows. The sides of the wedge were of equal length, so that they could march either way.

Egbert's place was at the apex of the wedge intended generally for attack. He carried no spear, nor did those at the other corners, as they would be covered by those beside and behind them; he was armed with a huge battle-axe. The other leaders were also chosen for great personal strength. Edmund's place was on horseback in the middle of the wedge, whence he could overlook the whole and direct their movements.

In three weeks the men could perform their simple movements to perfection, and at a sound from Edmund's horn would run in as when scattered in pursuit or flight, or could form from line into the wedge, without the least confusion, every man occupying his assigned place.

The men were delighted with their new exercises, and felt confident that the weight of the solid mass thickly bristling with spears would break through the Danish line without difficulty, or could draw off from the field in perfect order and safety in case of a defeat, however numerous their foes. The two front lines were to thrust with their pikes, the others keeping their long spears immovable to form a solid hedge. Each man carried a short heavy sword to use in case, by any fatality, the wedge should get broken up.

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