

THE
LIFE AND TIMES
OF
ALFRED THE GREAT.

*in Easy Language,
for Young Children.*

BY MISS CORNER.
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Alfred presented to the Pope

Alfred & his brothers taught by their Mother

The Monks Illuminating parchment

THE LIFE AND TIMES
OF
ALFRED THE GREAT

AN INTERESTING NARRATIVE
IN EASY LANGUAGE FOR
YOUNG CHILDREN

R.Y.M.J.C

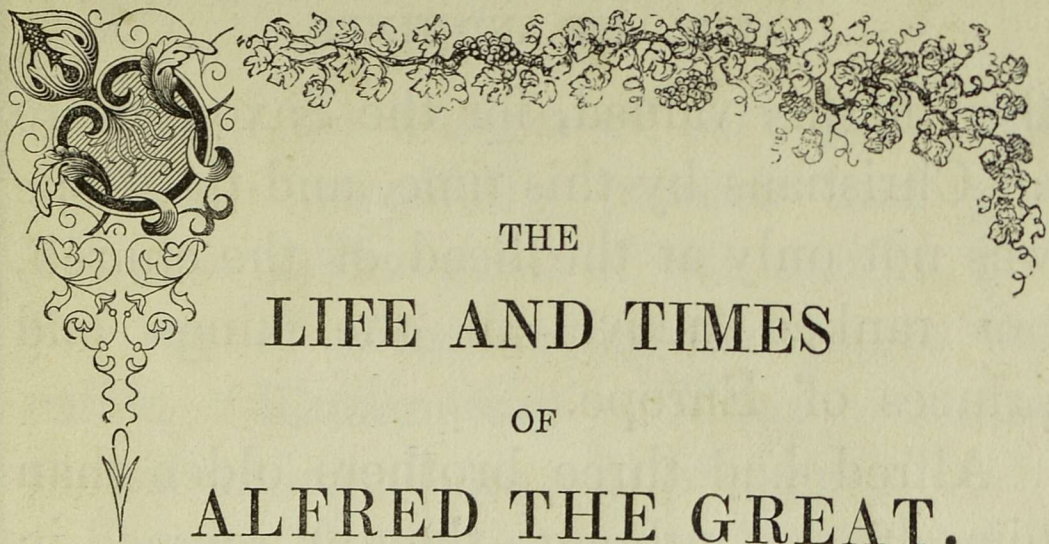


Alfred in the Danish camp disguised as a Saxon Minstrel


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THE
LIFE AND TIMES
OF
ALFRED THE GREAT.



ALFRED was the grandson of Egbert, who was the first king of all England, and was a learned as well as a good prince. His learning was remarkable in those days, when, excepting the monks, few persons knew how to read. Whilst a child, he was taken to Rome by his father, King Ethelwolf, and presented to the Pope, who publicly gave him his blessing, a mark of distinction that was

then highly valued, for the Saxons were all Christians by this time, and the Pope was not only at the head of the church, but ranked above all the kings and princes of Europe.

Alfred had three brothers older than himself, and although they all reigned in succession before him, he was the only one of the four who could read and write. He was instructed by his mother, of whom a story is related that, in order to induce her sons to study, she promised a volume of Saxon poems to whichever of them should be first able to read it, and it is said that Alfred, although the youngest, won the prize. It must have been an interesting and valuable present; for printing not being known in those days, books were extremely rare, being all written on parchment, and ornament-

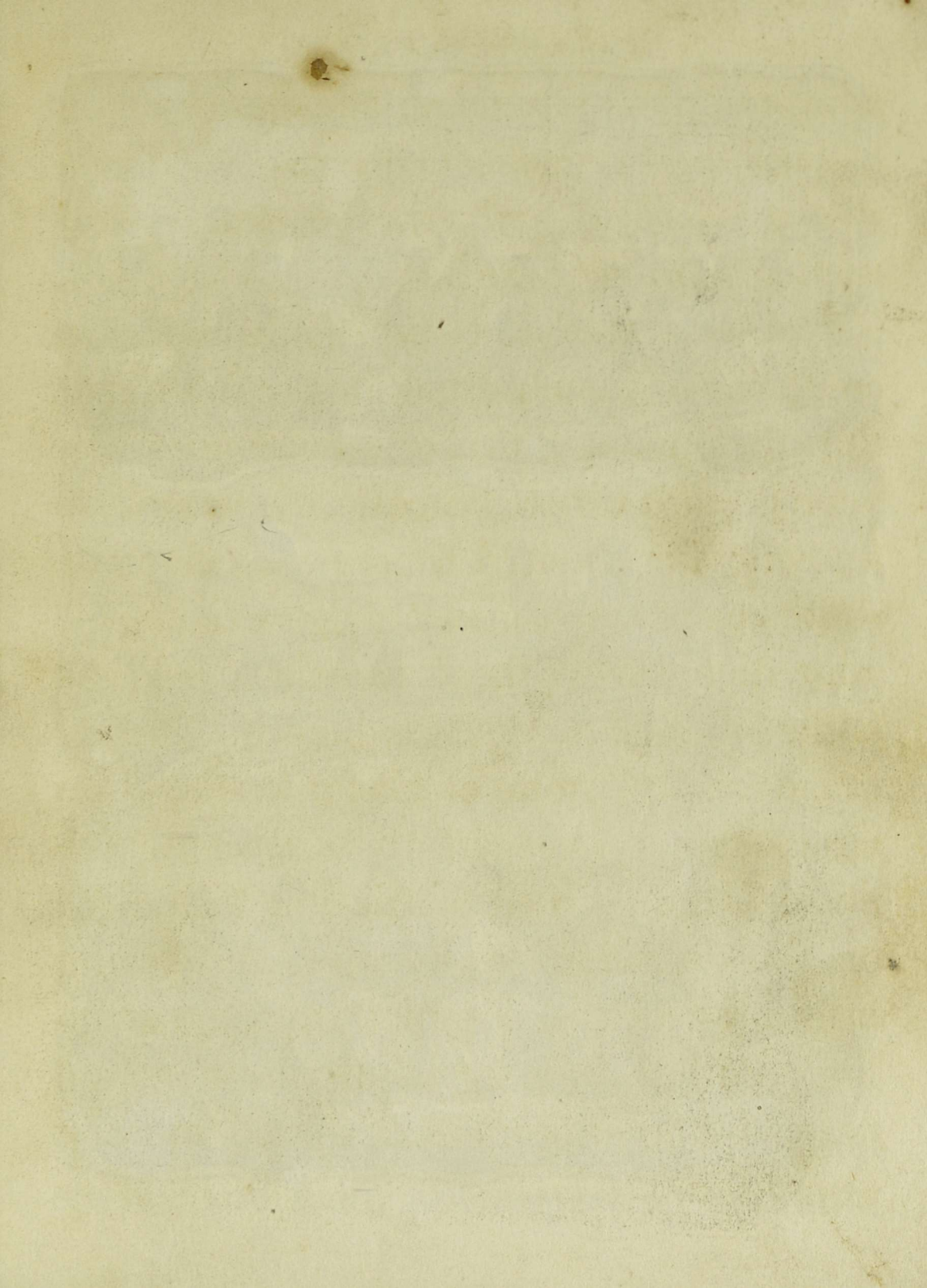
ed round the margin of each page with pictures, beautifully painted and gilt. They were the work of the monks, and the art of ornamenting the pages was called 'illuminating.' Many volumes thus illuminated are still preserved.

During the reigns of Alfred's father and brothers, England was frequently invaded by the Danes or Northmen. They, like the ancient Saxons, were pirates, and their chief object was plunder, which they obtained by the most cruel means; killing those who opposed them, and destroying every thing they could not take away; so that fire and the sword told of their presence wherever they came.

The Anglo Saxons were now disposed to habits of peace and friendship. They were a hospitable race; a distinction that had become much greater since their

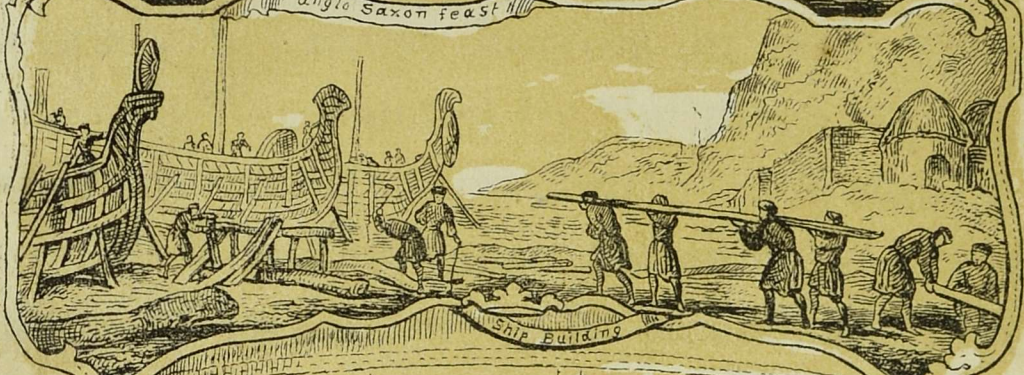
adoption of Christianity; the clergy being examples of beneficence and charity, in the exercise of which the kings and nobles were not wanting.

Sad was it that they should have to contend with such cruel foes. Wherever the Raven standard of the Danes appeared the worst horrors of war were known; for, excited by the magicians or soothsayers of their northern country, who dictated to those ferocious soldiers oaths of superstitious influence, binding them to spare none of Saxon blood,—no circumstance checked their savage purpose:—the uplifted battle-axe fell alike on the opposing warrior and the fleeing peasant, the aged suppliant and the strippling youth;—even shrieking mothers and helpless babes were not spared in their indiscriminate havoc.





Anglo Saxon feast



Ship Building



Meeting of the Witenagemote

At the time Alfred ascended the throne, great numbers of them were established in fortified camps in various parts of the country, which was in a most miserable state, owing to their ravages. The young king, with as large a force as he could muster, fought many battles with them, and gained some victories; but the Danes being strengthened by the frequent arrival of fresh bands, his soldiers, unable to contend against them, withdrew in great numbers, and Alfred was obliged to fly in disguise to a small place called the Isle of Athelney, a secluded and thickly wooded spot in Somersetshire.

In this island, then formed of rivers and bogs, which have been since drained and cultivated, he was long concealed;—and the peasant, in whose hut he obtained shelter and food, not suspecting his rank,

employed him as a cow-herd. A story is told of his letting some loaves burn while baking on the hearth, on which the peasant's wife said to him in anger,—
“ You man ! you will not turn the bread you see burning, though you will be glad enough to eat it.”

At length Alfred's friends again assembled, and his hope of being enabled to rid his country of the Danes, was revived. Then, in order to learn the numbers and intentions of the enemy, he went to the Danish Camp disguised as one of the minstrels, who, in those days, were in the habit of going from place to place to amuse the people with their harps and songs. The harp was a favourite instrument among the Anglo Saxons, and was not only played by the wandering minstrels or gleemen, but by

the nobles and landowners, who at their entertainments used to pass it round for each to play and sing in turn.

Alfred remained for several days among the Danes, going from tent to tent, amusing them with songs of battles and heroic deeds, so that they had no suspicion he was any other than a Saxon minstrel, and talked freely before him. Thus he found out that they believed he was dead; and he saw that they were quite at their ease, thinking only of feasting and enjoying themselves; so, leaving the Danish camp, he sent messages to his friends to bring all the armed ceorls they could muster on a certain day, to a wood called Selwood Forest, in Somersetshire, where he met them, and led them by night against the Danes, who, being quite unprepared for any attack,

were totally defeated, their camp destroyed. This was called the battle of Ethandune.

Still the Danes were so numerous, and held possession of so many places in the eastern parts of the country, that Alfred thought it would be best to make friends of them, and induce them to quit the other parts of the country, and live in peace with the Saxons; so he gave up to them the counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Norfolk, and a wide tract of country along the coast as far as Northumberland; all which had been so desolated by the long wars, that for many miles together no signs of cultivation nor any human dwelling were to be seen.

The Danish settlers became, by degrees, industrious cultivators of the land, and gradually assumed the habits and man-

ners of the Saxons, who had greatly improved in civilization since their conquest of England. But they were still so rude a people, that even a nobleman who could read or sign his name was looked upon as a very learned person.

Ignorance is allied to strife and evil: this Alfred knew; and he knew, also, that education promotes peace and goodness; therefore he applied himself to the advancement of learning, and instituted or revived many schools, particularly one at Oxford, to which the nobles were compelled to send their sons; and this seminary is supposed to have been the foundation of the Oxford University.

All the buildings of that period were of wood, and thatched, except a very few of the churches, which were of stone, roofed with lead. Some had glass windows, but

glass was rare, and most windows, even of churches, monasteries, castles, and houses of the nobles, were only of lattice work, such as we now see in dairies. The furniture of the poor was only a few stools, a larger one serving for a table, a few coarse earthenware pans, and wooden platters, and a bundle or two of dried rushes, which they spread upon the earthen floor, and used for beds; their clothing were sheep skins. The furniture of the great was of carved oak, and the floors of their houses were strewed with rushes.

At their feasts the joints of meat were brought in on wooden spits by the household thralls, who presented them kneeling to each guest, so that every one might cut off a piece where he liked. This practice was made still more remarkable

by each person providing his own knife, which he carried stuck in his girdle. They used spoons, horn cups, wooden bowls and dishes; but some of the very rich had also silver plate for their tables, which they used on grand occasions.

The beds of the great people were only pallets stuffed with straw or dried leaves; some had bedsteads, made of boards, in form like a child's crib; but the usual custom was to sleep on the ground on straw, and use a cloak for covering.

The dwelling places of the Ceorls were mere huts, round in shape, and formed of branches of trees stuck into the ground, interwoven with sticks and plastered on both sides with clay. The covering of the roof was straw or rushes. Imagination is scarcely able to associate comfort with such humble places of abode; and

yet, could we have seen the inmates of one of them assembled round their fire, made in the middle of the room, the smoke from which passing, as it did, through a hole in the roof, we should have seen happy faces, and heard the cheerful conversation and merry song; nor would there have been wanting a fervent thanksgiving for the bounty of Providence.

Some of the nobles had each as many as two hundred dependents, vassals and thralls, on his lands; and their condition was still the same as described in 'The Heptarchy.' A thane or lord sometimes gave freedom to a thrall, as a reward for faithful service; and this was done with a little ceremony:—the master took his favoured servant to the market-place, when the sheriff was there, engaged in



The Danes Landing in England

Alfred in the Cottage

The treaty with the Danes

public affairs, and giving his hand to the sheriff, told his slave that he was free, and might go where he pleased. Or the same might be done before the priest at church. Instead of absolute freedom, a grant of land was often given, and the thrall became a Ceorl. From these Ceorls, in course of time, long after the Norman Conquest, arose the middle classes or Free Commons of England; so that they were our own ancestors.

Alfred greatly improved the state of the country. He rebuilt London, which had been totally destroyed by the Danes; and many other cities. He also procured shipbuilders from Italy, who taught the people to build better and larger ships than they had before; so that his seamen could meet and beat the Danish pirate ships at sea. He revived the operation

of the laws, making many good ones in addition; but causing them to be obeyed was no easy matter at first; for badly disposed people had been so long without restraint, that they were unwilling to be governed. During the long Danish wars, the magistrates were afraid to exert their authority, so that nobody was safe, and it was almost impossible to obtain the least redress for any injuries.

Some of the old Saxon laws appear strange to us now, but no doubt those laws suited the state of society then; as, for instance, the punishment for murder was to pay a fine, and the amount of the fine depended on the rank of the person murdered; that is, if a man killed a thane, or nobleman, he had to pay a much larger sum than if his victim had been only a ceorl, and less still, if he murdered

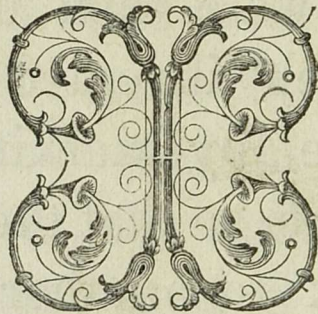
a thrall. The king however could put no new law in force without the consent of the Witenagemote, or great council of the nation, which was something like a parliament, composed of those nobles who held lands of the crown, for which they paid certain dues or taxes, that then formed the revenue of the government.

Alfred encouraged commerce and trade, and gave prizes to those who displayed their genius by any useful invention, as is now done by our Society of Arts. Clocks were then unknown, but the king himself invented a method of measuring time, by marking candles at regular distances, so that they would burn from one mark to another in an hour; and these, being placed in horn lanterns, served for time-pieces.

In short, during the reign of Alfred,

peace and order were restored, trade encouraged, the military force strengthened, a navy created, and the people, on the whole, made better and happier.

This good king reigned twenty-eight years, and died much regretted, in the year 900, which was 166 years before the Norman Conquest; of which event, we shall next speak.



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