

**IN THE DAYS OF ALFRED THE
GREAT**

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OF
ALFRED THE GREAT**

**BY
EVA MARCH TAPPAN, PH.D.**

ILLUSTRATED BY J. W. KENNEDY

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To My Mother

**WHOSE INTEREST IN THIS BOOK HAS
BEEN ITS INSPIRATION**

PREFACE

SHARING in the special interest in Alfred the Great that is aroused by the near approach of the one thousandth anniversary of the last year of his life, I have found it a real pleasure to write this story of a "blameless king." However faulty it may be, it is, at least, the result of a thoughtful study of his character, and an earnest effort to be as accurate as the scantiness of material and the thousand years' interval would permit.

Little of the legendary, less of the miraculous, has obscured the fame of the real Alfred. His deeds are his own,—great in themselves, greater in that they are the manifestation of the thought of a great mind. Even in "that fierce light which beats upon a throne," it is hard to find a flaw in the character of this man who believed in God, this king who never failed to do his best.

EVA MARCH TAPPAN.

WORCESTER,
April, 1900

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CHAPTER I

ALFRED'S EARLY HOME

THE palace in which Alfred the Great was born was hardly what we should call a palace in these days. It was a long, low, wooden house, or rather a group of houses; for whenever more room was needed, a new building was put up, and joined to the old ones wherever it seemed most convenient, so that the palace looked much like a company of one-story houses that had drifted together in a flood. There had to be room for a large family, for the king's counsellors and many of the church dignitaries lived with him. All around the house were many smaller houses for the fighting and the working men. Those were the days when at any moment a messenger might come flying on a panting horse and say:—

“O King Ethelwulf, the Danes are upon us! Their ships are in the offing, and they are driving toward Thanet.”

Then the king would send horsemen in hot haste to all his underchiefs, and he himself, at the head of the soldiers of his household, would march toward the coast, sometimes to fight and sometimes, if fight-

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ing failed, to buy them off by a ransom of money and jewels and vessels of gold and of silver.

The priests, with the women and children, would hasten into the church and throw themselves down before the altar and pray:—

“From the fury of the Northmen, good Lord, deliver us.”

They had good reason for their alarm; for perhaps even before the king and his men could reach the eastern shore, another fleet would come to land on the southern coast, and the fierce Danes would sweep like a whirlwind through the land, burning the homes of the people, carrying away the women, and tossing the little children back and forth on the points of their spears.

There were many workingmen about the king's palace, for almost everything that was needed had to be made on the premises. Not only must the grain be raised, wheat or barley or oats or corn, but it must be ground, sometimes by many small hand-mills, and sometimes by one large mill that belonged to the king. For drink, there was a kind of mead, or ale, and that must be brewed in the king's brewery. When it came to the question of clothes, there was still more work to do; for leather must be tanned for the shoes as well as for the harnesses, and flax and wool must be spun and woven. Then, too, there were blacksmiths, who not only made the simple implements needed to carry on the farm, but who must be skilful enough to make and repair the metal network of the coats of mail, and to

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keep the soldiers well supplied with spears and swords and battle-axes and arrowheads.

A king who was willing to “rough it” a little could live on his royal domain very comfortably without sending away for many luxuries. If his land did not border on the seashore, he would have to send for salt that was made by evaporating sea-water; and whenever he needed a mill-stone, he would send to France, for the best ones were found in quarries near Paris. For iron, King Ethelwulf sent to Sussex, not a very long journey, to be sure, but by no means an easy one, for some of the roads were of the roughest kind. If he had lived on the coast, it would have been almost as easy to send to Spain for iron, and sometimes men did make the long voyage rather than go a much shorter distance by land and bring home the heavy load. When the millstones were landed from France, the laborers had to take their cattle, and make the slow, tiresome journey to the shore to bring them home.

All these things were very interesting for the little Prince Alfred to see, though he was not quite five years old at the time when this story begins. He was the youngest child of King Ethelwulf and Queen Osburga, and a favorite with everybody on the great estate. The blacksmith had made him a tiny coat of mail and a spear, and he and the other children would play “Fight the Danes,” and the soldiers would look on and say, “There’s a prince for you,” and often one of them would take him up before him on his horse for a mad gallop through the forest. The half-wild swine would scatter before them, and sometimes the soldier, holding the little boy firmly with one hand, would charge

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upon them, and leaning far over the saddle, would run his spear through one; and back they would ride to the palace, dragging the pig behind them, and the little prince, his long, yellow hair streaming in the wind, would shout, "A Dane, father! We have killed a Dane!"

Nobody troubled the little boy about learning to read. Priests must read, of course, both English and Latin, for the service of the church was in Latin, and they must know how to pronounce the words, though very few of them were quite sure what the words meant. Kings seldom learned anything of books, but King Ethelwulf could read, for when he was a young man he had wished to become a priest and had studied a little with this plan in mind. His father had opposed the scheme; for after the older brother's death Ethelwulf was his only son, and there was no one else to whom he could leave the kingdom. He was greatly troubled, for he was afraid that a king who could read would not be a good warrior, but he finally decided to test him by giving him a small kingdom to practise on; so he put Kent into his hands, and for ten years Ethelwulf ruled under his father's eye. He was so attentive to his duties as a king, that his father concluded that learning how to read had not hurt him, and so at his death he left him the whole kingdom.

Even if no one made the little boy learn to read, the days were never long enough for him. The great domain was a busy place. Everybody was making something, and everybody was glad to have the little prince look on and ask questions. There were hives of bees, and there were hunting dogs and hawks. People were coming and going from morning till night. The

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king rented much of his land to different families. He was bound to care for them, and they were bound to fight under him and to work for him, to make hedges and ditches, to plough, to shear the sheep, and to help make roads. Besides this, they were to pay him rent, and this rent seldom came in money, but rather in produce of the land. There was a steward whose business it was to receive the rent, and a boy would be interested to keep by his side all day long and watch what the people brought. There might be cheese or bacon or honey or home-brewed ale; and often there was quite a lively time when a man appeared with hens or ducks or geese, cackling or quacking or hissing, as the case might be, and all making as much noise as their throats would permit. Sometimes this rent was paid only as a token that the land belonged to the king, and had no real value. One man was bound to present three fishes fresh from the river four times a year, and another had only to bring a sheaf of wheat on a certain day of each year.

At the regular times for paying rent, these people were coming and going all day long, and often they brought besides their rent some special gift for the boy—a bag of apples or of nuts, or a particularly yellow honeycomb on a great platter of bark covered with fresh green leaves. There were all these things going on as a matter of course, but sometimes there would be heard the trampling of hoofs and a great cry, and all the men who had been paying their rent, and all the men who were working in the fields, and all the servants of the house would run out and cry:—

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“Hillo! What ho?” and the men who had been hunting would ride into the little settlement, dragging behind them a wild boar or a deer to be roasted on the great hearth in the hall.

Alfred was, as I said, the youngest of King Ethelwulf’s five children. His sister, Ethelswitha, was only eleven years older than he, and she was his special friend. He was not very strong, and there were days when he liked better to stay in the house and listen to her stories than even to be among all the interesting things that were going on outside. One day she began:—

“Once there was a king, and he built a great hall—”

“My father’s a king,” said the little boy. “Was the hall like ours?”

“Oh, it was larger and much finer; but when the men were asleep in it, a monster used to come and carry them off to a cave under the water and eat them. At last a great warrior came, and he killed the dragon, and the water was all red with his blood.”

“My brother Ethelbald would kill a dragon; he fought in a real battle,” said Alfred. “Tell me more about the man that killed the dragon.”

“The king gave him rings and bracelets and spears and shields, and he went home to his own people; and by and by some one told him of another dragon that lived in a cave in the land, and had gold vases and spears and bronze shields and gold rings for

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the neck and for the arms; and he went out to kill this dragon so as to give the gold to the men."

"Did he go alone?"

"No, his fighting men went with him; but when the dragon came, it breathed out fire, and they were afraid, and all but one of them ran away from him."

"I would have stayed," said the little prince.

"And so I believe you would," said King Ethelwulf, who had been listening to their talk. "You would fight; but women do not fight; and what would you do, Ethelswitha, for a brave man?"

"I would pass him the mead as my mother does, and when you gave him great gifts, I would put the rings on his arms and the necklace about his neck, and he would say: 'It is the daughter of my king that gives me this, and I will fight for my king. My body and blood shall be his.'"

"Good, my girl. That you have done for many of my brave men; but if it was a great warrior who had fought beside your father, a warrior who was a king? Could you do no more for him?" And he looked closely into the eyes of the young girl.

"What else could I do, father?" she asked. "You never told me to do anything more for your thegns, and no one can be braver than they."

The king looked a little puzzled, then he said:—

"Come here, Alfred, and I'll tell you a story, and Ethelswitha may listen."

"About the brave king?" asked Alfred.

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“Yes, about the brave king,” said his father. “The brave king lives to the north of us, in Mercia. His name is Buhred. The Welsh people who live beyond him kept coming into his country, and when they came they would steal the treasures and kill the people.”

“Did they eat them, too?”

“No,” said the king, “but they tormented them, and shot them with arrows, and stabbed them with short, strong knives. This king was very brave, but he had not men enough to drive them away, so he sent to me and asked if I would help him. I think you can remember when we rode away from here.”

“Mother and you and I went to the church, Alfred,” said his sister, “to pray that they might come home safely.”

“Yes, I remember,” and the little boy nodded wisely.

“Well, this king had not any wife, but his sister went to their church and prayed for him to come back to her. He was very strong and killed a great many men, and the bad Welsh were all driven away, and then he went home. He wished that he had a wife at home to greet him, and he asked me if I would give him my daughter.”

Alfred had slipped down from his father’s knee, but the king put his arm about his daughter, who was sitting on the bench beside him, and said:—

“Do you see now what you can do for him?”

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The young girl looked straight into her father's eyes, and said:—

“Is he as brave a man as you?”

“Yes,” said the king.

“Then I will be his wife,” said she.

This was a few months before the time of our story, and the little boy had, of course, forgotten the conversation, but the wedding and the wedding feast even so little a fellow as he was could not forget.

Ever since Ethelwitha was a little child, the queen and the maidens of the household had been preparing for her marriage. They had spun and woven great chests full of linen and woolen. They had made beautifully embroidered tapestries and rich coverings for the benches of the hall. They had made gowns of blue and red and yellow and green, whose deep borders were worked with silk and with threads of gold. Then there were wide mantles of all the colors of the rainbow for her to wear over her gown. They were wound about the waist and thrown over the left shoulder, and they were so long that they would fall down nearly to the ground. These, too, were richly embroidered with gold thread. Both Queen Osburga and King Ethelwulf were descendants of Cerdic, who had conquered the Isle of Wight three hundred years before this. Some of their kinsfolk still dwelt near the island, and were skilful workers in gold and silver. From there had been brought beautiful ornaments, clasps for the cloak, necklaces, and ear-rings. One of the clasps was circular in shape, made of a fine gold

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filigree work. The centre was filled by a double star set with garnets. Another clasp was of silver in the shape of a Maltese cross, with green enamel around the edges and a ruby in the centre. Then there was a necklace with many gold pendants and a blue stone in each. There were "stick-pins" of red and blue enamel, and there were ear-rings of precisely the crescent shape that our grandmothers used to wear.

The king had houses in several places and went from one to another as the needs of his kingdom demanded. Sometimes there would be fear of an attack by the Danes or the Welsh, for which the presence of the king might help his people to prepare. Sometimes there was a new church to be dedicated in some distant part of the kingdom, and then the furniture, the tapestries, and the valuable dishes were put on pack-horses, and thither the king and his great family would go, and stay for a few weeks or months, as the case might be. Then there was another reason, perhaps the strongest of all. The king was really "boarded around." There was not a great deal of money in the kingdom, and the easiest way to collect rent was to eat it in the shape of the grain and vegetables that the tenants brought in; so the king and his court would stay till they had eaten the products of the land in one place, and would then move on to another. The queen liked especially the house at Chippenham in Wiltshire, and so it was decided that there the marriage should be celebrated. The palace was in a beautiful valley through which the Avon flowed. Other streams were near, and the rolling country around was rich with fresh green forests.

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King Buhred came marching up with a great company of his men at arms, and King Ethelwulf stood ready to receive him. It was a brilliant sight, with the background of the woods and the river and the low-lying hills. King Ethelwulf was in advance of his men and was mounted on a great white horse. He wore a rich purple tunic, and over it a short blue cloak with a gold border. This was fastened at the shoulder with a gold brooch flashing with red stones. Bands of bright-colored cloth were wound about his legs, and ended in tassels at the knee.

On the saddle before him was the little prince, his yellow hair flying over a scarlet tunic; and next behind them came the three older sons of the king, wearing yellow tunics and blue cloaks.

Then came the bishops and priests with their vestments of white and gold, and behind them were King Ethelwulf's fighting men, with their light blue tunics, whose borders were embroidered with leaves and circles. Their short cloaks were fastened on the right shoulder or under the chin by a clasp. They carried shields and spears that flashed in the sun as they marched.

The queen wore a long red gown with wide-hanging sleeves. Her mantle of purple hung over her left shoulder in graceful folds.

The young bride, who was only fifteen, wore a white gown and white mantle, and her hair was bound by a narrow gold fillet set with blue stones. It must have been a gorgeous scene in the great hall of feasting. Iron lamps hung from the rafters and shone down

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upon the bright spears and helmets and chain armor that hung upon the walls. Brave deeds of their ancestors were pictured in the tapestry. In the centre of the hall was a great fireplace, or hearth, made of burnt clay, where the meat was roasted. Long tables were spread down the hall, and at the upper end was a platform where the royal family sat, and a few of the thegns whom the king wished to honor.

All day and far into the night was the feasting kept up, till even in the midst of the rejoicing little Alfred fell asleep in his father's arms. He was awakened by a sudden silence, and then came the sound of singing and of playing on the harp; for the harpers were come in their long green gowns and gay mantles, and all the brave warriors were silent listening to their music, for the one thing that they enjoyed most was to have a harper come in after the feast was well begun and sing to them the ballads of their people.

Long it lasted, but the time came when even the merriest of them had had enough of merriment, and the feast was ended.

Queen Osburga was sad at losing her only daughter, and she clasped the little Alfred more closely than ever to her breast, and kissed him again and again. The king was silent, and as she looked up, she saw his eyes fixed upon her and Alfred with a strange expression of pity and suffering and determination.

“What is it, my husband?” she asked, fearful of something she knew not what.

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“Perhaps it is nothing. They say that the thought is clearer in the morning light. We will sleep now, and when the sun rises, I will think. Sleep well, my own true wife.”

The king looked sad and troubled, and Osburga lay with a burden on her heart, she knew not what, even till the sun rose over the forest.

CHAPTER II

LIFE ON THE MANOR

ETHELSWITHA was gone, and Alfred was lonely, though his nurse Hilda, who was always with him, roamed about wherever he chose to go. They were wandering idly about the place when suddenly they heard shouting and screaming. Men were striking stones together and beating bits of iron, and all the small boys of the settlement were adding to the noise in every way that they could.

“It is the bees,” said Hilda. “Look! See them in the air!” And there they were flying in a dense swarm, slowly and in a vague, uncertain fashion. At last they seemed to rest on their wings almost motionless. The men drew back a little and looked at Hilda. She stepped forward, and caught up a handful of gravel in each hand. That in the left she threw over her left shoulder. Holding her right hand straight up above her head, she looked at the bees, tossed the rest of the gravel into the midst of them, and said in a kind of chanting tone:—

“Lithe and listen, my lady-bees;
Fly not far to the forest trees.”

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The moment that her voice was still, the noise began again louder than ever. The bees slowly settled down upon the limb of a tree in a shining, quivering mass. A hive made of braided straw was rubbed out with fresh leaves and put over them, and the swarm was safe.

“The old charms have not lost their power,” said Hilda to the blacksmith.

“No, that they have not,” said the blacksmith, “but they will not work for every one.”

“The king’s religion is the true one, of course, and we are baptized and go to his church, but the old gods are angry if we do not remember them sometimes,” said Hilda. “The Christian God is good and kind, but the old gods will often work one harm, and it is just as well to say a good word to them now and then. You can say a prayer in the church afterwards.”

The smith picked up the heavy tongs that he had been beating to add to the din, and went across the open place to where Alfred stood gazing curiously at the beehives.

“Will it please you, sir prince,” he said, “to come to the forge? To-day I have finished my work on the king’s new sword. Will you see it?”

“Yes, I will,” said Alfred, and they walked down to the little valley where the forge stood. As they crossed the brook, swollen by the recent rains, Hilda hurried the little boy over the narrow foot-bridge.

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“Be careful,” she said, “and never look down at the water, for that is where the black nixy-man lives. He is angry when children look at him, and he snaps at them, and drags them down and eats them.” So they went on till they came to the rude hut in which the smith had built his great fire on a heavy stone hearth. The sword was brought out, but Alfred was disappointed to see that it did not shine.

“My father’s sword shines,” he said at last.

“So will this,” said the smith, “but first it must go to the gold-worker, and he will polish it and twist gold cord about the handle, and put bands of bronze about it—and perhaps he will get a wise man to cut a rune into it,” he whispered to Hilda.

“The king would not be pleased,” said she.

“But it might save his life,” said the smith. “Did you never hear of the two kings, Jarl and Thorl, how they fought; and each was a great warrior, and at the first stroke each drove his sword clear through the body of the other? Thorl’s armorer loved him, and he had secretly had a rune cut on the inside of the handle where the king would never see it; but Jarl’s armorer hated him, and so there was no rune on his sword; and the men stood, each with the other’s sword run clear through him. But Jarl’s sword sprang out from Thorl’s body, and no one ever saw it again, and the wound closed, and there was no scar. But Thorl’s sword had a rune on it, and so it did not spring out of the wound. It grew heavier and heavier, and in a minute Jarl sank down and died.”

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Alfred and Hilda had seated themselves under a tree not far from the great rock that stood beside the little hut of the smith. Alfred said:—

“Hilda, what is a rune?”

“It’s a strange mark,” said Hilda. “Long ago, when the gods used to live with men, they told a few very wise men how to make these signs. The gods know what they mean, and if a man cuts them on his sword, then the gods will come to help him when he fights; but you must not tell the bishop, for the priests do not like the runes.”

“Are they afraid of them? Is the runes’ god stronger than their God?” asked Alfred.

“No, I suppose not,” said Hilda, a little doubtfully, “but they will not let us use them.”

Alfred thought a minute, and then said:—

“Was Thorl a good man?”

“Yes,” said Hilda.

“If Jarl had been a good man, would not his sword have stayed in as well as Thorl’s?”

“I don’t know,” said Hilda, a little hastily, and looked around over her shoulder, for she was not a little afraid of the evil spirits that she believed were in the air all around. Then, too, she had just seen an eagle fly by toward the left, and she knew that this was a bad sign.

“Come a little way into the forest,” she said, “and we will gather flowers, and I will make you a

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crown, because some day you will have a crown of gold and sit on the high seat on the dais; and you will ride at the head of the fighting men when they go out to battle, and when they speak to you, they will bow down low and say, 'Hail, sir king.' ”

They wandered on and on into the forest, for Hilda was thoughtless of danger except from evil spirits. At last they sat down on a mossy log to rest, and Alfred said:—

“Tell me a story about a king;” and Hilda began:—

“Once upon a time there was a king, and he was an old man—”

“Was he as old as my father?”

“Much older,” said Hilda. “He was so old that he knew that he must soon die, and he told the thegns to build him a beautiful boat. They must paint it white and put a broad band of gold around it, and the sails must be of gold woven into cloth. At the bow was a pillar made of wood and gilded; and on the pillar was an image of a mighty warrior, and this warrior was a great god.”

“Did he use to live with men?” asked the boy.

“Yes, but it was so long ago that no one can remember his name,” said Hilda.

“Perhaps if we knew his name and cut it on all the swords, the Danes would never dare to come to the land again,” said Alfred. At this, Hilda looked a lit-

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tle frightened, for she had been forbidden to tell the prince of the heathen gods; but the child went on:—

“How did he look? Did he look like my father?”

“No one could ever see his face without dying,” said Hilda, “but his helmet covered it, so people could come near and bow down at his feet and make him presents. He had a blue banner in his right hand, and a great red rose was embroidered on it. The crest of his helmet was a cock, and on his shield was a lion with flowers around his neck.”

“You haven’t made my crown,” said Alfred. “Make it, for I shall be a king; and tell me what this king did.”

So Hilda wove a wreath of the pretty scarlet anemones and put it on the boy’s head, and went on with her story.

“The king told his men to hang all around the outside of his vessel the shields that he had used, and behind every shield they were to put three spears fastened together with golden chains; and on the mast was the most beautiful shield of all, the one that the king had carried in his greatest battle, and over it was his banner, blood-red, with a bear in the centre. And at the stern of the vessel was the king’s coat of mail, and it flashed like fire when the sun shone on it. Then the king bade his men to pile up a great heap of dry pine wood on the ship in front of the figure, and over that to put fir, and over that oak, and to bind it with golden chains, and to hang golden chains from the masts, and to put many jeweled rings on the prow. Men wondered

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what it might mean, but they must obey the king, and so when he said:—

“ ‘Lay me upon your shields, and carry me on board the ship,’ they did so. Then he said:—

“ ‘Place me on top of the oaken wood, and put my sword into my right hand, and the chain from the helmet of the god into my left, and bind the helm straight for the north, and leave me.’

“The thegns obeyed with wonder and fear and great sorrow, and they left the ship and rowed for the shore; and they said afterward that they heard a sound like strange music and like the marching of soldiers a great way off, but before they had come to the shore, a strong wind arose from the south. Only one of the thegns dared to look at the vessel, and never until he was about to die did he tell what he saw. Then he said that he saw the king wave his sword. It made strange runes of fire in the air, and the wood of the pile began to smoke. Then the king pulled the golden chain that hung from the helmet and looked straight up into the face of the great figure; and the figure took the king by the hand. All at once it was twilight, and afar off there was a red glare on the waters; and then it was dark, and the thegns—”

“That’s a good story, woman,” said one of three men who suddenly appeared from among the rocks behind them, “but we can’t wait to hear another”; and he bound the trembling Hilda fast with withes, while another caught up the prince.

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“There’ll be a fine ransom for him,” said the man. “He’s the son of some noble.”

“Put me down. If I had my father’s sword, I would run it straight through you,” said the little boy.

“And who is your father?” asked the third man, while the others listened eagerly.

“My father is the king,” said the child, “and I shall be a king some day—don’t you see my crown?—and my father will kill you.”

“Does he say true?” whispered one, in awe. “See the silver thread around his tunic. This game is too high for us. Fly! I hear the tread of horses,” and the man set the child down carefully, and the three all slid into the dark shadows of the forest, leaving Hilda lying bound. The hoof-beats grew louder, and four of the king’s hunters drew near.

“It is the prince,” said one, “and where is Hilda?”

“There,” said another, “and bound. Who has done this? Grant that the prince be not harmed; it would kill the king.”

Hilda was quickly freed, and she and the boy were put on two of the horses, which were led by two men toward the palace.

“I’ll never go back to the king with such a tale,” said one.

“I will,” said another, “and the heads of the thieves shall go with it. How dared they venture so near the homes of the fighters of the king!” And so the

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two set off, and when they returned late that night, they were a grim sight, for their clothes were dusty and torn and bloody, and they held the heads of the three robbers high in the air on the points of their spears.

“We were two, but two thegns of King Ethelwulf can well meet three thieves,” said they. “We smoked them out of their cave like bees from a honey tree, and they will not bind women again.” The next day the three heads were carried afar into the forest and put up each on the top of a high pole, that all the other robbers might see and take warning.

Hilda was punished severely for her carelessness, and never again was the prince left in her charge. Indeed, Queen Osburga could hardly bear to have him out of her sight for a moment; and when it was found out that Hilda had been telling him the stories that she was forbidden to tell, then the king banished her from his court and sent her to a convent a long way off.

The queen was anxious about the king in those days, for he often seemed lost in thought, and many times she saw his eyes fixed upon her and Alfred with the same look of suffering and determination that she had seen the night of the wedding; and one day when she was in one of the rooms behind the dais, she heard him pacing to and fro on the raised platform, and saying to himself:—

“It is all for my sins. I must atone—I must atone. It is a warning.” His voice was so full of anguish that the queen did not venture to come in upon him then; but her heart fell, for she was sure that some terrible grief was coming to them.

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As she sat in sadness and anxiety, the little prince climbed upon her knee, and said:—

“Mother, won’t you tell me a story? Hilda used to.”

“My fear shall not make my child sad,” she thought, and she said:—

“Yes, I will tell you a story, and I will show you a story, too.” And she called one of her women.

“Go to the carved oaken chest in the southeast corner of the treasure room, and bring me the manuscript that is wrapped in a blue silken cloth.”

The manuscript was brought, and the child watched with the deepest interest while the queen carefully unfolded the silken wrapping. She took out a parchment that was protected by a white leather covering. At the corners were bits of gold filigree work, and in the filigree was traced in enamel, in one corner the head of a lion, in the second that of a calf, in the third a man’s face, and in the fourth a flying eagle. In the centre of the cover was a bright red stone that glowed in the light of the great wood fire.

Then the cover was thrown back, and there was a single piece of parchment. It was torn in one place and a little crumpled, and one corner had been scorched in the fire. It was covered with strange signs, most of them in black, but sometimes one was larger than the rest and painted in red, and blue, and green, and gold, in brighter, clearer colors than Alfred had ever seen in silk or in woolen.

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“WHAT IS IT, MOTHER?” HE CRIED.

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“What is it, mother?” he cried. “Did the gods—the old ones—did they give it to you? and did they tell you how to make runes?”

“Hush!” said his mother, looking half fearfully around and making the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead. “There are no gods but our own, but there are evil spirits. We must not speak of the old gods. This is a manuscript from Canterbury.”

The older sons had come into the room and pressed near to look at the treasure, Ethelbald who had stood beside his father as man by man in the last war with the Danes, Ethelbert, who was but a few years younger, and Ethelred, who was also a tall young man.

“Does it mean anything?” asked Ethelred.

“Yes,” said his mother. “It tells a part of a story. There must have been much more of it sometime. It was in the convent at Canterbury, and when the Danes burned it—you were a baby, Alfred—the roll was burned; but a thegn saw this piece lying half hidden under a stone where the wind had blown it. The bishop said he might bring it to me, and I had the cover made for it. This is what it says,” and she repeated:—

“Once on a time it happened that we in our vessel
Ventured to ride o’er the billows, the high-dashing surges.
Full of danger to us were the paths of the ocean.
Streams of the sea beat the shores, and loud roared the breakers,
Fierce Terror rose from the breast of the sea o’er our wave-ship.
There the Almighty, glorious Creator of all men,

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Was biding his time in the boat. Men trembled at heart,
Called upon God for compassion, the Lord for his mercy;
Loud wailed the crowd in the keel. Arose straightway
The Giver of joy to the angels; the billows were silenced,
The whelm of the waves and the winds was stilled at his word,
The sea was calm and the ocean-streams smooth in their limits.
There was joy in our hearts when under the circle of heaven
The winds and the waves and the terror of waters, themselves
In fear of the glorious Lord became fearful.
Wherefore the living God—'tis truth that I tell you—
Never forsakes on this earth a man in his trouble,
If only his heart is true and his courage unfailing.”

The tall young man listened as eagerly as the child, but when at the end she said:—

“I will give it to any one of you who will learn to repeat it,” Alfred spoke first:—

“Will you really give it to the one that will learn it?”

“Yes,” said his mother, smiling, “but you are too little. Will you have it, Ethelbald?”

“Songs are good, but fighting is better, so I'll none of it;” and Ethelbert said:—

“Saying poems is for harpers, not for princes;” and Ethelred looked at the red stone on the cover rather longingly, and then at the torn and scorched sheet of parchment, and said:—

“I don't care for pieces of things. Alfred may have it.” Alfred was listening eager-eyed.

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“Mother, I will learn it, truly I will. The priest will say it to me, and I will learn it. Won’t you let me have it?” he pleaded.

“But what would a little boy like you do with it, if you had it?” asked the queen.

“I’d send it to my sister Ethelswitha. Won’t you let me take it to the priest?” he begged. The queen yielded, the parchment was rolled up, the silken covering carefully wrapped around it, and a man was sent with the child to find the priest. It was not many days before the priest came with the little prince to the queen and said:—

“My lady, the young prince can say every word of it.”

So the boy was put up high on the king’s seat in the great hall, and the king and the thegns and the priests and the women of the house all came in to see the wonderful thing. To sing the old ballads, that was nothing; many a man could do that; but to say off something that had come right from a wonderful piece of parchment, that was quite another matter. Some of them were not really sure that there was not some witchcraft about it, and they stood as near the middle of the hall as they could, so that if the evil spirits should come in at either end, they could get out at the other.

Nothing dangerous happened, however. The little boy said the poem, and was praised and petted very much as a child would be to-day for accomplishing some small feat. Then the precious roll was laid on a

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golden salver, and one of the king's favorite thegns carried it to him, and bending low on one knee, presented it to the little prince.

"And now may I carry it to Ethelswitha?" he asked eagerly.

"It shall be sent to her," said his mother, "and the thegn shall say, 'Your little brother Alfred sends you this with his love'; but Ethelswitha's home is a long way off, and I could not spare my little boy, not even for a single day."

Again there came that strange look into the eyes of the king. He drew Osburga into a room back of the dais, and said:—

"Could you spare your son to save your husband?"

"What do you mean?" Osburga asked. She felt that the mysterious trouble that she had feared was coming upon her.

"Many years ago," said the king, "I wished to become a priest. I gave it up to please my father, because he had no other son; but I vowed to make the pilgrimage to Rome as penance, because I had drawn back after I had put my hand to the plough. My duty to the kingdom, and I am sometimes afraid my love for you,— " and he put his arm tenderly about her,— "has kept me from performing my vow. A warning came. The child that I love best was in the hands of robbers. God interposed with a miracle, and he was saved; but there will not be another miracle. I must not

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go to Rome, the kingdom needs me. Shall I lose my soul for my broken vow, or shall I send—?”

“Don’t say it, I cannot bear it,” begged the queen; but the king laid his finger gently upon her lips, and said:—

“One must give that which he values most. Shall we send Alfred?”

“Not the child,” sobbed the queen. “Send the older ones, not the little one. Ethelswitha is gone, and Alfred gone—I cannot bear it.”

“One must give what he values most,” repeated the king gravely; “and again, it was about Alfred that the warning came. Shall we leave him to be taken from us, or shall we spare him for a little while to save him to us?”

“Let me go with him,” pleaded Osburga.

“And leave me alone?” the king answered. “Is it not enough to spare my best-loved son?” and as she looked up in his face, she trembled to see how pale it had become.

“No, I could not leave you,” she said. “You are wise, and I am not. You must do what is right, but how can I bear it?”

The next morning there was great excitement, for every one knew that Prince Alfred was going to Rome in the care of Bishop Swithin.

CHAPTER III

ALFRED GOES TO LONDON

IT was a long journey to Rome, and almost as much of a distinction for a man to go there as it would be now to visit the planet Mars. There would have been great interest and excitement if the king had been going to make the pilgrimage, but for the little prince, a child of five years, to go was even more thrilling. The priests were very ready that the people should know that it was to atone for his father's deed and to keep his father's vow, that he was going; and many of them sympathized with the little fellow, and thought it very hard that he should have to go over land and sea into that great, unknown, and dangerous world.

Every one loved the king's youngest son, and every one was eager to do something for him before his departure. The spinners and weavers made for him finer linens and softer woolens than they had ever made before; the embroiderers worked most intricate borders of leaves and flowers and circles and squares and scrolls around his tunics. The tunics were made of silk or of the finest woolen, and were of the brightest colors that could be dyed. The bakers were continually sending him tiny loaves of bread made of the finest

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wheat, and from the brewery would often come little cups of the juice of mulberries sweetened with honey. The tenants who lived farther away could not come near the palace without bringing him nuts or grapes or apples or combs of honey. The smith who had given him his little coat of mail now made him supremely happy by the gift of a tiny sword.

“Did you put a rune on it?” asked Alfred. “You know my father’s sword has a rune, and if we meet a Dane, I’m going to cut his head off just like this,” and he slashed off the head of a thistle that grew by the forge.

Not only to Alfred himself did the gifts come, but Wynfreda, his nurse, who had taken the place of the thoughtless Hilda, was quite loaded down with all sorts of things for him to use on the way. One of the cooks brought a package of little hard cakes that would keep fresh for a long time, lest he should be hungry on the road and not be able to find anything to eat. Another brought a small bag of salt, because she was sure that in the strange lands over the seas they would not be able to find salt.

The keeper of the dogs quite insisted that he should take at least five or six with him; and one small boy who was a great friend of Alfred’s, the son of the king’s cup-bearer, came in a procession consisting of himself and a tiny, pink-eyed pig, to offer his pet as a companion for the prince on his journey, the pig all the while expressing his objections in the most energetic squeals. The carpenter brought him a whole armful of wooden toys, and a bow that was polished until

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it shone. The ends were carved in the shape of a horse's head, and about the horse's neck was a little collar of bronze, and where the collar was fastened, a tiny green jewel shone out.

The queen seemed almost dazed with grief at the approaching separation. She followed him about wherever he went, saying little, but watching every movement. She was continually planning something to make him more comfortable, or to amuse him on his journey. One day she said:—

“Alfred, I am going to give you a gold chain to wear around your neck, and a pretty gold jewel to hang on it. Now what shall the picture be? Shall we have Saint Cuthbert, your own saint?”

“Yes,” said Alfred, “and some red roses; but I don't want a helmet. I want to see his face and not pull a chain.” The poor queen was somewhat mystified, but she said:—

“I am afraid that Saint Cuthbert did not have any red roses, but he shall have them this time, if you wish.”

“And the red rose was on a blue banner,” he said. “I want it all blue.”

“And what shall his tunic be?” Alfred thought seriously for a minute, and then said:—

“Green.”

“It shall be just as you choose to have it,” said his mother, “and around the edge shall be written, ‘Al-

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fred had me made,' and when you come back from Rome, you shall learn how to read it."

The jewel was made, and the bishop blessed it, and the queen hung it around Alfred's neck, and before many days it was time to start. They were going as directly as they could to the river Thames, and then by boat to London. There they expected to stay for a few days and then to sail for France.

The morning came. The king was going as far as the bank of the river, so he rode first, as he had done at Ethelswitha's wedding, with Alfred on his horse before him. Then came Bishop Swithin, who was to be Alfred's especial guardian, then Wynfreda the nurse and two other women to assist her; and then came a long retinue of armed men, for the king's son must go in state.

When the procession was ready to go, Osburga stood in the door of the palace with Alfred clinging to her. She wore a robe of deep blue richly embroidered with gold. The clasp was of gold filigree set with red stones. Her hair was fastened back with a narrow gold band, and over it and around her neck was a white wimple, or veil, of the finest linen. She wore rings and bracelets and chains, more than ever before, even at their greatest banquets. The king looked at her in surprise, and she said:—

"It comes to my heart that I shall never see my son again. He must remember me in my best." Then she lifted the little jewel on his chain, kissed it lightly, and said in a chanting tone and with a strange far-away look:—

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OSBURGA STOOD IN THE DOOR OF THE PALACE
WITH ALFRED CLINGING TO HER.

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“My people had the gift of prophecy. Sometimes to me too it comes, and my thought is full, not of the present, but of the future. Alfred, this is to remind you of me in all the years that are to come; but when it is finally lost to you, do not grieve, for then the hardest days of your life will have passed. Much will even then lie before you, but you will overcome.”

Little child as he was, Alfred never forgot those words, and he never forgot his mother as she stood in the palace door in her long blue robe with the glittering jewels, and with one hand extended toward the southwest. Her face was white, and a red spot glowed on either cheek. She kissed him for the last time, and they were gone.

It was not a long ride to the bank of the Thames where it was deep enough for their light vessels. The road was hardly more than a rough track, but it led through the woods, and it was farther from home than Alfred had ever been before; and to so little a boy that was an adventure in itself.

Twice they passed by a little settlement where some noble had built his castle. There they had mead and wine and hot bread and roasted fowls, and the noble came to do homage to his king; and all the children on the place flocked around to gaze shyly at the little boy who sat fearlessly on his father's horse and who was going to the great and wonderful Rome which no one that they knew had ever seen. It was all a marvel, and after the glittering company had passed, they were not really sure that it was not a dream.

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But the riders left the little villages and swept on to the banks of the Thames; and there were many boats drawn up to the shore waiting for them. These were light vessels drawing little water, and having but one sail each. On the top of the mast of the boat in which Alfred was to go was an eagle. The prow of the boat was made in the shape of a dragon with a wide-open mouth and great, fiery, red eyes. The stern was made like a dragon's tail. Everything about the boat was bright and shining, and in the middle of the sail was drawn the figure of a white horse in lines of gold. It was very beautiful, but the little prince was disappointed.

“Where are the shields?” he said, “and the spears?”

“The fighting men have them,” said his father, a little puzzled.

“But there was a coat of mail on the boat and a blue banner with a red rose, and there was a god. Why isn't it all here?”

“It was one of Hilda's stories,” whispered one of the men; and the king said:—

“The true God is with you here, Alfred, and will be on the boat with you, and go all the way, and bring you back to me, if—” but the king could say no more. In a moment he recovered himself and turned to the bishop.

“Bishop Swithin,” he said, “I trust to you my beloved son. Care for him as for the apple of your eye. Let not a hair of his head be injured. Let but the least

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breath of harm come to him, and—" the king's eyes blazed—"I swear to you by all that I hold sacred that, priest and bishop and friend of my father though you are, you shall be hanged like a Dane to the nearest tree." The king sprang upon his great white horse and galloped into the forest, leaving his followers to find their way after him as best they might.

It was little more than one hundred miles to London, and with wind and current in their favor, it did not need many hours to make the journey. As long as the daylight lasted, Alfred sat at the prow of the boat on a bench made just like his father's on the dais in their own hall. It was covered with a thick, soft cloth of deep red, whose ends were fringed with tiny disks of gold. Bishop Swithin sat beside him, ready to tell him stories and to answer all his questions. On the other side was Wynfreda, his nurse, and behind them were two servants who held a canopy over their heads whenever the sun was too warm.

When the sun went down and it grew chilly, the little prince was warmly wrapped in the softest furs and taken to a sheltered place in the stern, and there he slept as soundly as if in his father's palace, until the sun was well up again, and they had been under way for several hours.

Alfred thought it was a wonderful voyage. To float along hour after hour past woods and meadows and hills that he had never seen before—this of itself was exciting enough, especially when he awoke in the morning and found that it was not all a dream; but besides this, to have the strange city of London before

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them—it was more than he could imagine, and as for the long journey that would come after London, he could not think of that at all. He had never seen so large a boat before, and he thought it very wonderful that the water was strong enough to hold it up. The bishop tried to explain it to him, and then said:—

“There’s another way that water can hold up things. I’ll tell you a riddle that a great poet named Cynewulf made a long time ago about water that grew strong.”

“Was it before Ethelwitha was married?” asked Alfred.

“Yes, long before. This is the riddle; see if you can guess it.

“Wonderful deeds by the power alone
Of one that I watched as he went on his way
Were done. At his touch the water was bone.”

“Can you guess it, Wynfreda?” said Alfred.

Wynfreda said “No,” and the bishop said the answer was, “The frost.”

There was no time for more riddles, for London was coming into view. They could see a great wall running along the river front, and going back from it up the gentle slope. Here and there was a building tall enough to peer over the top of the wall. There were many boats anchored in front of the city. At the angles of the wall were turrets for the archers, and places of shelter for the sentinels, where they were always

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watching, and fearing lest the Danes should return, for it was only two years since they had sacked and burned a part of the city.

They came nearer and nearer, and soon the little company of boats left the Thames and went north up the Fleet, which was then a rapid stream, flowing down not far west of the city wall. It was not so easy now, for the strong current was against them; but the rowers were strong, too, and it was not long before they were ready to land the prince and his followers near Lud Gate, a massive door in the great wall that surrounded the city.

There were many people waiting to receive them, the priests from Saint Paul's Church, that was not far away, the commanders of the soldiers who were in the various strongholds, and all the other great men of the city. Some came on foot, and some came on horseback, and a few came in heavy wagons with wide, clumsy wheels; and all of them, no matter how they had come, were eager to do honor to the son of the king. There were women whose eyes were full of tears as they looked at the tiny, blue-eyed, fair-haired child who was so far from his mother, and who was so soon to make the great journey by sea and by land; and there were crowds of boys swarming up the posts and on top of the low-roofed cottages, every one of whom wished that he was the son of the king, and was going to make a wonderful journey.

Some of the ponderous wagons had been brought to convey the prince and his nobles to the palace, for Ethelwulf had a palace in London not far

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from Saint Paul's Church. These were decorated with bright-colored cloth, and with flowers and green branches. The one in which Alfred was to go had a seat covered with cushions and drapings of bright blue, and built up so high that all the people could see him as he rode past. It made the boys more wildly envious than ever when they saw that he actually wore a coat of mail, and had a real sword hanging down by his side.

They were a little stolid and slow in their thinking, these Englishmen of the ninth century, but there was something in the sight of this little child that appealed to them, and aroused all their loyalty and enthusiasm; and they shouted for Alfred, and for Ethelwulf, and for Bishop Swithin, until they were hoarse, and they followed the wagons until the prince and his retinue had gone into the palace. The bishop stood on the steps a minute, and raised his hand and blessed them. Then he, too, went in, and the tired and excited little child could have the rest that he so much needed.

The palace was a little west of Saint Paul's Church and not far from the river. Around it were fields and woods; and to the westward, beyond the last straggling houses, were pastures and forests and fens and moors and commons and low-lying hills, a beautiful, restful country for tired people to look upon.

The city was made up of small houses, hardly larger than huts, that seemed to have been dropped down anywhere; of convents and churches and fortresses; of rough, tumble-down sheds, and queer little dark shops in which were benches, a table, and some

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simple arrangements for cooking. Whatever there was to sell was put on a shelf that projected in front of the shop. Far to the east, just within the wall, one could see a fort that was higher and larger than the rest, for there the closest watch must be kept for the enemy, and there, too, if the enemy came, must the hardest fighting be done.

The streets, so far as there were any streets, ran any way, and every building seemed to have been set down without the least regard to any other building. Then too, there were great vacant spaces, and these were gloomy enough, for here were blackened ruins of the city that used to be before the Danes had burned it. Under all this rubbish were fragments of beautiful mosaic pavement that the Romans had made centuries before.

Even then there was enough in London to interest one for a long time, but the first duty of the prince after he was thoroughly rested was to go to Saint Paul's Church with the gifts that his father had sent. The church was at the top of a hill that rose gently from the Thames River. It could hardly have been more than a very simple chapel, built perhaps of stones that may have been part of a heathen temple in the old Roman times, but now the bell rang seven times a day for Christian prayer.

This little church was very rich, for it possessed the bones of Saint Erkenwald, and wonderful were the miracles that they were said to have wrought, and generous were the gifts that pilgrims, nobles, warriors, and kings had laid on his shrine.

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Saint Paul's had had a hard struggle to get these relics, for Saint Erkenwald had died when away from London, and both the clergy of Saint Paul's and the monks of Chertsey, whose abbot he had been, contended for the bones. Both parties were very much in earnest. The Londoners seized the bier and held on. The monks protested. A tempest suddenly came upon them, and there they all stood, drenched and dripping, but neither would yield. The river rose, and then they were obliged to stand still, for there was neither bridge nor boat. They might have been standing there yet, had not one of the monks begun to intone the litany; and as he sang, the river sank, and the Londoners crossed with the precious relics, the monks giving up, either because they were satisfied that Providence had settled the question, or because the Londoners were the stronger party, the story does not tell. At any rate, the bones were in Saint Paul's, and there it was that Alfred must go to carry his father's gifts, and to kneel before the shrine of the saint to say the prayers that the bishop had taught him.

And so Alfred and the bishop and the long train of followers set out for the church. The unwieldy wagons moved slowly, but Alfred would have liked to go even more slowly, for there was so much to see that was new to him. There were rough soldiers in leather tunics or in a kind of coat, or jacket, covered with scales that would protect them in battle almost as well as a coat of mail. They had heavy axes and spears and shields. Their beards were long and shaggy. Then there were half-savage men from the country, bringing great, rough carts of timber from the forests, or driving

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herds of oxen or swine, or carrying rude baskets of vegetables or fruit. They were stout, red-faced men who looked strong and well and ready for a good-natured wrestling match or a downright fight, as the case might be. They wore tunics of the coarsest woolen, and would stop with mouths wide open, and stare with wonder at the sight of the prince and his men with their finely wrought clothes and their jewels and banners.

The royal train went up the hill to the church, and Alfred, taught by the bishop, presented the gifts that his father had sent, seven golden vases filled to the brim with roughly cut, but bright and shining silver coins. On the side of each one of these vases was a red stone, and below it was the inscription, "Ethelwulf the king sent me."

The service was ended. Alfred had said his prayer before Saint Erkenwald's shrine, and had gazed half fearfully on the bones of the saint. The prince and his followers left the church. There were fragments of the old Roman pavement under their feet.

"See the soldier," said Alfred suddenly, "but he isn't like my father's soldiers." The bishop looked, and there in the pavement was the figure of a soldier done in mosaic.

"That is a Roman soldier," said the bishop, "and we shall start for Rome to-morrow. Look down to the river and you will see the ships that are to take us."