

The Life of King Alfred

Asser, Bishop of Sherborne

Table of Contents

<u>The Life of King Alfred</u>	1
<u>Asser, Bishop of Sherborne</u>	1
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	1
<u>THE LIFE OF ALFRED THE GREAT From A.D. 849 to A.D. 887</u>	1

The Life of King Alfred

Asser, Bishop of Sherborne

Translated by Dr. J.A. Giles

Originally composed in Latin, possibly sometime around 888 A.D. by the Monk and Bishop Asser, although some scholars contend that the work was actually composed much later by an unknown hand. Translation by Dr. J.A. Giles (London, 1847).

INTRODUCTION

This work is ascribed, on its own internal authority, to Asser, who is said to have been Bishop of St. David's, of Sherborne or of Exeter, in the time of king Alfred. Though most of the public events recorded in this book are to be found in the Saxon Chronicle, yet for many interesting circumstances in the life of our great Saxon king we are indebted to this biography alone. But, as if no part of history is ever to be free from suspicion, or from difficulty, a doubt has been raised concerning the authenticity of this work. (1) There is also another short treatise called the Annals of Asser, or the Chronicle of St. Neot, different from the present: it is published in vol. iii. of Gale and Fell's "Collection of Historians". And it has been suspected by a living writer that both of these works are to be looked upon as compilations of a later date, the arguments upon which this opinion is founded are drawn principally from the abrupt and incoherent character of the work before us. But we have neither time nor space to enter further into this question. As the work has been edited by Petrie, so has it been here translated, and the reader, taking it upon its own merits, will find therein much of interest about our glorious king, concerning whom he will lament with me that all we know is so little, so unsatisfying.

— J.A. Giles

ENDNOTES: (1) See Wright's "Biographia Literaria Anglo-Saxonica", p. 405. Dr. Lingard, however, in his recent work on the "History and Antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon Church", vol. ii. pp. 424–428, has replied to Mr. Wright's objections, and vindicated the authenticity of Asser's "Life".

THE LIFE OF ALFRED THE GREAT From A.D. 849 to A.D. 887.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 849, was born Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, at the royal village of Wanating, (1) in Berkshire, which country has its name from the wood of Berroc, where the box-tree grows most abundantly. His genealogy is traced in the following order. King Alfred was the son of king Ethelwulf, who was the son of Egbert, who was the son of Elmund, was the son of Eafa, who was the son of Eoppa, who the son of Ingild. Ingild, and Ina, the famous king of the West-Saxons, were two brothers. Ina went to Rome, and there ending this life honourably, entered the heavenly kingdom, to reign there for ever with Christ. Ingild and Ina were the sons of Coenred, who was the son of Ceolwald, who was the son of Cudam, who was the son of Cuthwin, who was the son of Ceawlin, who was the son of Cynric, who was the son of Creoda, who was the son of Cerdic, who was the son of Elesa, who was the son of Gewis, from whom the Britons name all that nation Gegwis, (2) who was the son of Brond, who was the son of Beldeg, who was the son of Woden, who was the son of Frithowald, who was the son of Frealaf, who was the son of Frithuwulf, who was the son of Finn of Godwulf, who was the son of Gear, which Geat the pagans long worshipped as a god. Sedulius makes mention of him in his metrical Paschal poem, as follows: —

When gentile poets with their fictions vain,
In tragic language and bombastic strain,
To their god Geat, comic deity,

The Life of King Alfred

Loud praises sing,

Geat was the son of Taetwa, who was the son of Beaw, who was the son of Sceldi, who was the son of Heremod, who was the son of Itermon, who was the son of Hathra, who was the son of Guala, who was the son of Bedwig, who was the son of Shem, who was the son of Noah, who was the son of Lamech, who was the son of Methusalem, who was the son of Enoch, who was the son of Malaleci, who was the son of Cainian, who was the son of Enos, who was the son of Seth, who was the son of Adam.

The mother of Alfred was named Osburga, a religious woman, noble both by birth and by nature; she was daughter of Oslac, the famous butler of king Ethtelwulf, which Oslac was a Goth by nation, descended from the Goths and Jutes, of the seed, namely, of Stuf and Whitgar, two brothers and counts; who, having received possession of the Isle of Wight from their uncle, King Cerdic, and his son Cynric their cousin, slew the few British inhabitants whom they could find in that island, at a place called Gwihtgaraburgh; (3) for the other inhabitants of the island had either been slain, or escaped into exile.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 851, which was the third after the birth of king Alfred, Ceorl, earl of Devon, fought with the men of Devon against the pagans at a place called Wiegambeorg; (4) and the Christians gained the victory; and that same year the pagans first wintered in the island called Sheppey, which means the Sheep-isle, and is situated in the river Thames between Essex and Kent, but is nearer to Kent than to Essex; it has in it a fine monastery. (5)

The same year also a great army of the pagans came with three hundred and fifty ships to the mouth of the river Thames, and sacked Dorobernia, (6) which is the city of the Cantuarians, and also the city of London, which lies on the north bank of the river Thames, on the confines of Essex and Middlesex; but yet that city belongs in truth to Essex; and they put to flight Berthwulf, king of Mercia, with all the army, which he had led out to oppose them.

After these things, the aforesaid pagan host went into Surrey, which is a district situated on the south bank of the river Thames, and to the west of Kent. And Ethelwulf, king of the West-Saxons, and his son Ethelbald, with all their army, fought a long time against them at a place called Ac-lea, (7) i.e. the Oak-plain, and there, after a lengthened battle, which was fought with much bravery on both sides, the greater part of the pagan multitude was destroyed and cut to pieces, so that we never heard of their being so defeated, either before or since, in any country, in one day; and the Christians gained an honourable victory, and were triumphant over their graves.

In the same year king Athelstan, son of king Ethelwulf, and earl Ealhere slew a large army of pagans in Kent, at a place called Sandwich, and took nine ships of their fleet; the others escaped by flight.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 853, which was the fifth of king Alfred, Burhred king of the Mercians, sent messengers, and prayed Ethelwulf, king of the West Saxons, to come and help him in reducing the midland Britons, who dwell between Mercia and the western sea, and who struggled against him most immoderately. So without delay, king Ethelwulf, having received the embassy, moved his army, and advanced with king Burhred against Britain, (8) and immediately, on entering that country, he began to ravage it; and having reduced it under subjection to king Burhred, he returned home.

In the same year, king Ethelwulf sent his son Alfred, above-named, to Rome, with an honourable escort both of nobles and commoners. Pope Leo (the fourth) at that time presided over the apostolic see, and he anointed for king the aforesaid Alfred, and adopted him as his spiritual son. The same year also, earl Ealhere, with the men of Kent, and Iluda with the men of Surrey, fought bravely and resolutely against an army of the pagans, in the island, which is called in the Saxon tongue, Tenet, (9) but Ruim in the British language. The battle lasted a long time, and many fell on both sides, and also were drowned in the water; and both the earls were there slain. In the same year also, after Easter, Ethelwulf, king of the West-Saxons, gave His daughter to Burhred, king of the Mercians, and the marriage was celebrated royally at the royal vill of Chippenham. (10)

The Life of King Alfred

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 855, which was the seventh after the birth of the aforesaid king, Edmund the most glorious king of the East-Angles began to reign, on the eighth day before the kalends of January, i.e. on the birthday of our Lord, in the fourteenth year of his age. In this year also died Lothaire, the Roman emperor, son of the pious Lewis Augustus. In the same year the aforesaid venerable king Ethelwulf released the tenth part of all his kingdom from all royal service and tribute, and with a pen never to be forgotten, offered it up to God the One and the Three in One, in the cross of Christ, for the redemption of his own soul and of his predecessors. In the same year he went to Rome with much honour; and taking with him his son, the aforesaid king Alfred, for a second journey thither, because he loved him more than his other sons, he remained there a whole year; after which he returned to his own country, bringing with him Judith, daughter of Charles, the king of the Franks.

In the meantime, however, whilst king Ethelwulf was residing beyond the sea, a base deed was done, repugnant to the morals of all Christians, in the western part of Selwood. For king Ethelwald [son of king Ethelwulf] and Ealstan, bishop of the church of Sherborne, with Eanwulf, earl of the district of Somerton, are said to have made a conspiracy together, that king Ethelwulf, on his return from Rome, should never again be received into his kingdom. This crime, unheard-of in all previous ages, is ascribed by many to the bishop and earl alone, as resulting from their counsels. Many also ascribe it solely to the insolence of the king, because that king was pertinacious in this matter, and in many other perversities, as we have heard related by certain persons; as also was proved by the result of that which follows.

For as he was returning from Rome, his son aforesaid, with all his counsellors, or, as I ought to say, his conspirators, attempted to perpetrate the crime of repulsing the king from his own kingdom; but neither did God permit the deed, nor would the nobles of all Saxony consent to it. For to prevent this irremediable evil to Saxony, of a son warring against his father, or rather of the whole nation carrying on civil war, either on the side of the one or the other, the extraordinary mildness of the father, seconded by the consent of all the nobles, divided between the two the kingdom which had hitherto been undivided; the eastern parts were given to the father, and the western to the son; for where the father ought by just right to reign, there his unjust and obstinate son did reign; for the western part of Saxony is always preferable to the eastern.

When Ethelwulf, therefore, was coming from Rome, all that nation, as was fitting, so delighted in the arrival of the old man, that, if he permitted them, they would have expelled his rebellious son Ethelbald, with all his counsellors, out of the kingdom. But he, as we have said, acting with great clemency and prudent counsel, so wished things to be done, that the kingdom might not come into danger; and he placed Judith, daughter of king Charles, whom he had received from his father, by his own side on the regal throne, without any controversy or enmity from his nobles, even to the end of his life, contrary to the perverse custom of that nation. For the nation of the West-Saxons do not allow a queen to sit beside the king, nor to be called a queen, but only the king's wife; which stigma the elders of that land say arose from a certain obstinate and malevolent queen of the same nation, who did all things so contrary to her lord, and to all the people, that she not only earned for herself exclusion from the royal seat, but also entailed the same stigma upon those who came after her; for in consequence of the wickedness of that queen, all the nobles of that land swore together, that they would never let any king reign over them, who should attempt to place a queen on the throne by his side.

And because, as I think, it is not known to many whence this perverse and detestable custom arose in Saxony, contrary to the custom of all the Theotisean nations, it seems to me right to explain a little more fully what I have heard from my lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, as he also had heard it from many men of truth, who in great part recorded that fact.

There was in Mercia, in recent times, a certain valiant king, who was feared by all the kings and neighbouring states around. His name was Offa, and it was he who had the great rampart made from sea to sea between Britain and Mercia. (12) His daughter, named Eadburga, was married to Bertric, king of the West-Saxons; who immediately, having the king's affections, and the control of almost all the kingdom, began to live tyrannically like her father, and to execrate every man whom Bertric loved, and to do all things hateful to God and man, and to

The Life of King Alfred

accuse all she could before the king, and so to deprive them insidiously of their life or power; and if she could not obtain the king's consent, she used to take them off by poison: as is ascertained to have been the case with a certain young man beloved by the king, whom she poisoned, finding that the King would not listen to any accusation against him. It is said, moreover, that king Bertric unwittingly tasted of the poison, though the queen intended to give it to the young man only, and so both of them perished.

Bertric therefore, being dead, the queen could remain no longer among the West-Saxons, but sailed beyond the sea with immense treasures, and went to the court of the great and famous Charles, king of the Franks. As she stood before the throne, and offered him money, Charles said to her, "Choose, Eadburga, between me and my son, who stands here with me." She replied, foolishly, and without deliberation, "If I am to have my choice, I choose your son, because he is younger than you." At which Charles smiled and answered, "If you had chosen me, you would have had my son; but as you have chosen him, you shall not have either of us."

However, he gave her a large convent of nuns, in which, having laid aside the secular habit and taken the religious dress, she discharged the office of abbess during a few years; for, as she is said to have lived irrationally in her own country, so she appears to have acted still more so in that foreign country; for being convicted of having had unlawful intercourse with a man of her own nation, she was expelled from the monastery by king Charles's order, and lived a vicious life of reproach in poverty and misery until her death; so that at last, accompanied by one slave only, as we have heard from many who saw her, she begged her bread daily at Pavia, and so miserably died.

Now king Ethelwulf lived two years after his return from Rome; during which, among many other good deeds of this present life, reflecting on his departure according to the way of all flesh, that his sons might not quarrel unreasonably after their father's death, he ordered a will or letter of instructions to be written, in which he ordered that his kingdom should be divided between his two eldest sons, his private inheritance between his sons, his daughters, and his relations, and the money which he left behind him between his sons and nobles, and for the good of his soul. Of this prudent policy we have thought fit to record a few instances out of many for posterity to imitate; namely, such as are understood to belong principally to the needs of the soul; for the others, which relate only to human dispensation, it is not necessary to insert in this work, lest prolixity should create disgust in those who read or wish to hear my work. For the benefit of his soul, then, which he studied to promote in all things from his youth, he directed through all his hereditary dominions, that one poor man in ten, either native or foreigner, should be supplied with meat, drink, and clothing, by his successors, until the day of judgment; supposing, however, that the country should still be inhabited both by men and cattle, and should not become deserted. He commanded also a large sum of money, namely, three hundred mancuses, to be carried to Rome for the good of his soul, to be distributed in the following manner: namely, a hundred mancuses in honour of St. Peter, specially to buy oil for the lights of the church of that apostle on Easter eve, and also at the cock-crow: a hundred mancuses in honour of St. Paul, for the same purpose of buying oil for the church of St. Paul the apostle, to light the lamps on Easter eve and at the cock-crow; and a hundred mancuses for the universal apostolic pontiff.

But when king Ethelwulf was dead, and buried at Stemrugam,(12) his son Ethelbald, contrary to God's prohibition and the dignity of a Christian, contrary also to the custom of all the pagans, ascended his father's bed, and married Judith, daughter of Charles, king of the Franks, and drew down much infamy upon himself from all who heard of it. During two years and a half of licentiousness after his father he held the government of the West-Saxons.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 856, which was the eighth after Alfred's birth, the second year of king Charles III, and the eighteenth year of the reign of Ethelwulf, king of the West-Saxons, Humbert, bishop of the East-Angles, anointed with oil and consecrated as king the glorious Edmund, with much rejoicing and great honour in the royal town called Burva, in which at that time was the royal seat, in the fifteenth year of his age, on a Friday, the twenty-fourth moon, being Christmas-day.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 860, which was the twelfth of king Alfred's age, died Ethelbald, king of the West-Saxons, and was buried at Sherborne. His brother Ethelbert, as was fitting, joined Kent, Surrey, and Sussex

The Life of King Alfred

also to his dominion.

In his days a large army of pagans came up from the sea, and attacked and destroyed the city of Winchester. As they were returning laden with booty to their ships, Osric, earl of Hampshire, with his men, and earl Ethelwulf, with the men of Berkshire, confronted them bravely; a severe battle took place, and the pagans were slain on every side; and, finding themselves unable to resist, took to flight like women, and the Christians obtained a triumph.

Ethelbert governed his kingdom five years in peace, with the love and respect of his subjects, who felt deep sorrow when he went the way of all flesh. His body was honourably interred at Sherborne by the side of his brothers.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 864, the pagans wintered in the isle of Thanet, and made a firm treaty with the men of Kent, who promised them money for adhering to their covenant; but the pagans, like cunning foxes, burst from their camp by night, and setting at naught their engagements, and spurning at the promised money, which they knew was less than they could get by plunder, they ravaged all the eastern coast of Kent.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 866, which was the eighteenth of king Alfred, Ethelred, brother of Ethelbert, king of the West Saxons, undertook the government of the kingdom for five years; and the same year a large fleet of pagans came to Britain from the Danube, and wintered in the kingdom of the Eastern-Saxons, which is called in Saxon East-Anglia; and there they became principally an army of cavalry. But, to speak in nautical phrase, I will no longer commit my vessel to the power of the waves and of its sails, or keeping off from land steer my round-about course through so many calamities of wars and series of years, but will return to that which first prompted me to this task; that is to say, I think it right in this place briefly to relate as much as has come to my knowledge about the character of my revered lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, during the years that he was an infant and a boy.

He was loved by his father and mother, and even by all the people, above all his brothers, and was educated altogether at the court of the king. As he advanced through the years of infancy and youth, his form appeared more comely than that of his brothers; in look, in speech, and in manners he was more graceful than they. His noble nature implanted in him from his cradle a love of wisdom above all things; but, with shame be it spoken, by the unworthy neglect of his parents and nurses, he remained illiterate even till he was twelve years old or more; but, he listened with serious attention to the Saxon poems which he often heard recited, and easily retained them in his docile memory. He was a zealous practiser of hunting in all its branches, and hunted with great assiduity and success; for skill and good fortune in this art, as in all others, are among the gifts of God, as we also have often witnessed.

On a certain day, therefore, his mother (13) was showing him and his brother a Saxon book of poetry, which she held in her hand, and said, "Whichever of you shall the soonest learn this volume shall have it for his own." Stimulated by these words, or rather by the Divine inspiration, and allured by the beautifully illuminated letter at the beginning of the volume, he spoke before all his brothers, who, though his seniors in age, were not so in grace, and answered, "Will you really give that book to one of us, that is to say, to him who can first understand and repeat it to you?" At this his mother smiled with satisfaction, and confirmed what she had before said. Upon which the boy took the book out of her hand, and went to his master to read it, and in due time brought it to his mother and recited it.

After this he learned the daily course, that is, the celebration of the hours, and afterwards certain psalms, and several prayers, contained in a certain book which he kept day and night in his bosom, as we ourselves have seen, and carried about with him to assist his prayers, amid all the bustle and business of this present life. But, sad to say, he could not gratify his most ardent wish to learn the liberal arts, because, as he said, there were no good readers at that time in all the kingdom of the West-Saxons.

The Life of King Alfred

This he confessed, with many lamentations and sighs, to have been one of his greatest difficulties and impediments in this life, namely, that when he was young and had the capacity for learning, he could not find teachers; but, when he was more advanced in life, he was harassed by so many diseases unknown to all the physicians of this island, as well as by internal and external anxieties of sovereignty, and by continual invasions of the pagans, and had his teachers and writers also so much disturbed, that there was no time for reading. But yet among the impediments of this present life, from infancy up to the present time, and, as I believe, even until his death, he continued to feel the same insatiable desire of knowledge, and still aspires after it.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 867, which was the nineteenth of the life of the aforesaid king Alfred, the army of pagans before mentioned removed from the East–Angles to the city of York, which is situated on the north bank of the river Humber.

At that time a violent discord arose, by the instigation of the devil, among the inhabitants of Northumberland; as always is used to happen among a people who have incurred the wrath of God. For the Northumbrians at that time, as we have said, had expelled their lawful king Osbert, and appointed a certain tyrant named Aella, not of royal birth, over the affairs of the kingdom; but when the pagans approached, by divine providence, and the union of the nobles for the common good, that discord was a little appeased, and Osbert and Aella uniting their resources, and assembling an army, marched to York. The pagans fled at their approach, and attempted to defend themselves within the walls of the city. The Christians, perceiving their flight and the terror they were in, determined to destroy the walls of the town, which they succeeded in doing; for that city was not surrounded at that time with firm or strong walls, and when the Christians had made a breach as they had purposed, and many of them had entered into the town, the pagans, urged by despair and necessity, made a fierce sally upon them, slew them, routed them, and cut them down on all sides, both within and without the walls. In that battle fell almost all the Northumbrian warriors, with both the kings and a multitude of nobles; the remainder, who escaped, made peace with the pagans.

In the same year, Ealstan, bishop of the church of Sherborne, went the way of all flesh, after he had honourably ruled his see four years, and he was buried at Sherborne.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 868, which was the twentieth of king Alfred's life, there was a severe famine. Then the aforesaid revered king Alfred, but at that time occupying a subordinate station, asked and obtained in marriage a noble Mercian lady, daughter of Athelred, surnamed Mucil, (14) earl of the Gaini. (15) The mother of this lady was named Edburga, of the royal line of Mercia, whom we have often seen with our own eyes a few years before her death. She was a venerable lady, and after the decease of her husband, she remained many years a widow, even till her own death.

In the same year, the above–named army of pagans, leaving Northumberland, invaded Mercia and advanced to Nottingham, which is called in the British tongue, "Tiggocobauc," but in Latin, the "House of Caves," and they wintered there that same year. Immediately on their approach, Burhred, king of Mercia, and all the nobles of that nation, sent messengers to Ethelred, king of the West–Saxons, and his brother Alfred, suppliantly entreating them to come and aid them in fighting against the aforesaid army. Their request was easily obtained; for the brothers, as soon as promised, assembled an immense army from all parts of their dominions, and entering Mercia, came to Nottingham, all eager for battle, and when the pagans, defended by the castle, refused to fight, and the Christians were unable to destroy the wall, peace was made between the Mercians and pagans, and the two brothers, Ethelred and Alfred, returned home with their troops.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 869, which was the twenty– first of king Alfred's life, there was a great famine and mortality of men, and a pestilence among the cattle. And the aforesaid army of the pagans, galloping back to Northumberland, went to York, and there passed the winter.

The Life of King Alfred

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 870, which was the twenty– second of king Alfred's life, the above–named army of pagans, passed through Mercia into East–Anglia, and wintered at Thetford.

In the same year Edmund, king of the East–Angles, fought most fiercely against them; but, lamentable to say, the pagans triumphed, Edmund was slain in the battle, and the enemy reduced all that country to subjection.

In the same year Ceolnoth, archbishop of Canterbury, went the way of all flesh, and was buried peaceably in his own city.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 871, which was the twenty– third of king Alfred's life, the pagan army, of hateful memory, left the East–Angles, and entering the kingdom of the West– Saxons, came to the royal city, called Reading, situated on the south bank of the Thames, in the district called Berkshire; and there, on the third day after their arrival, their earls, with great part of the army, scoured the country for plunder, while the others made a rampart between the rivers Thames and Kennet on the right side of the same royal city. They were encountered by Ethelwulf, earl of Berkshire, with his men, at a place called Englefield; (16) both sides fought bravely, and made long resistance. At length one of the pagan earls was slain, and the greater part of the army destroyed; upon which the rest saved themselves by flight, and the Christians gained the victory.

Four days afterwards, Ethelred, king of the West–Saxons, and his brother Alfred, united their forces and marched to Reading, where, on their arrival, they cut to pieces the pagans whom they found outside the fortifications. But the pagans, nevertheless, sallied out from the gates, and a long and fierce engagement ensued. At last, grief to say, the Christians fled, the pagans obtained the victory, and the aforesaid earl Ethelwulf was among the slain.

Roused by this calamity, the Christians, in shame and indignation, within four days, assembled all their forces, and again encountered the pagan army at a place called Ashdune, (17) which means the "Hill of the Ash." The pagans had divided themselves into two bodies, and began to prepare defences, for they had two kings and many earls, so they gave the middle part of the army to the two kings, and the other part to all their earls. Which the Christians perceiving, divided their army also into two troops, and also began to construct defences. But Alfred, as we have been told by those who were present, and would not tell an untruth, marched up promptly with his men to give them battle; for king Ethelred remained a long time in his tent in prayer, hearing the mass, and said that he would not leave it, till the priest had done, or abandon the divine protection for that of men. And he did so too, which afterwards availed him much with the Almighty, as we shall declare more fully in the sequel.

Now the Christians had determined that king Ethelred, with his men, should attack the two pagan kings, but that his brother Alfred, with his troops, should take the chance of war against the two earls. Things being so arranged, the king remained a long time in prayer, and the pagans came up rapidly to fight. Then Alfred, though possessing a subordinate authority, could no longer support the troops of the enemy, unless he retreated or charged upon them without waiting for his brother. At length he bravely led his troops against the hostile army, as they had before arranged, but without awaiting his brother's arrival; for he relied in the divine counsels, and forming his men into a dense phalanx, marched on at once to meet the foe.

But here I must inform those who are ignorant of the fact, that the field of battle was not equally advantageous to both parties. The pagans occupied the higher ground, and the Christians came up from below. There was also a single thorn–tree, of strutted growth, but we have ourselves never seen it. Around this tree the opposing armies came together with loud shouts from all sides, the one party to pursue their wicked course, the other to fight for their lives, their dearest ties, and their country. And when both armies had fought long and bravely, at last the pagans, by the divine judgment, were no longer able to bear the attacks of the Christians, and having lost great part of their army, took to a disgraceful flight. One of their two kings, and five earls were there slain, together with many thousand pagans, who fell on all sides, covering with their bodies the whole plain of Ashdune.

The Life of King Alfred

There fell in that battle king Bagsac, earl Sidrac the elder, and earl Sidrac the younger, earl Osborn, earl Frene, and earl Harold; and the whole pagan army pursued its flight, not only until night but until the next day, even until they reached the stronghold from which they had sallied. The Christians followed, slaying all they could reach, until it became dark.

After fourteen days had elapsed, king Ethelred, with his brother Alfred, again joined their forces and marched to Basing to fight with the pagans. The enemy came together from all quarters, and after a long contest gained the victory. After this battle, another army came from beyond the sea, and joined them.

The same year, after Easter, the aforesaid king Ethelred, having bravely, honourably, and with good repute, governed his kingdom five years, through much tribulation, went the way of all flesh, and was buried in Wimborne Minster, where he awaits the coming of the Lord, and the first resurrection with the just.

The same year, the aforesaid Alfred, who had been up to that time only of secondary rank, whilst his brothers were alive, now, by God's permission, undertook the government of the whole kingdom, amid the acclamations of all the people; and if he had chosen, he might have done so before, whilst his brother above-named was still alive; for in wisdom and other qualities he surpassed all his brothers, and moreover, was warlike and victorious in all his wars. And when he had reigned one month, almost against his will, for he did not think he could alone sustain the multitude and ferocity of the pagans, though even during his brothers' lives, he had borne the woes of many, -- he fought a battle with a few men, and on very unequal terms, against all the army of the pagans, at a hill called Wilton, on the south bank of the river Wily, from which river the whole of that district is named, and after a long and fierce engagement, the pagans, seeing the danger they were in, and no longer able to bear the attack of their enemies, turned their backs and fled. But, oh, shame to say, they deceived their too audacious pursuers, and again rallying, gained the victory. Let no one be surprised that the Christians had but a small number of men, for the Saxons had been worn out by eight battles in one year, against the pagans, of whom they had slain one king, nine dukes, and innumerable troops of soldiers, besides endless skirmishes, both by night and by day, in which the oft-named Alfred, and all his chieftains, with their men, and several of his ministers, were engaged without rest or cessation against the pagans. How many thousand pagans fell in these numberless skirmishes God alone knows, over and above those who were slain in the eight battles above-mentioned. In the same year the Saxons made peace with the pagans, on condition that they should take their departure, and they did so.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 872, the twenty-fourth of king Alfred's life, the above-named army of pagans went to London, and there wintered. The Mercians made peace with them.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 873, the twenty-fifth of king Alfred, the above-named army, leaving London, went into the country of the Northumbrians, and there wintered in the district of Lindsey; and the Mercians again made treaty with them.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 874, the twenty-sixth since the birth of king Alfred, the army before so often mentioned left Lindsey and marched to Mercia, where they wintered at Repton. Also they compelled Burhred, king of Mercia, against his will, to leave his kingdom and go beyond the sea to Rome, in the twenty-second year of his reign. He did not long live after his arrival, but died there, and was honourably buried in the school of the Saxons, in St. Mary's church, where he awaits the Lord's coming and the first resurrection with the just. The pagans also, after his expulsion, subjected the whole kingdom of the Mercians to their dominion; but by a most miserable arrangement, gave it into the custody of a certain foolish man, named Ceolwulf, one of the king's ministers, on condition that he should restore it to them, whenever they should wish to have it again; and to guarantee this agreement, he gave them hostages, and swore that he would not oppose their will, but be obedient to them in every respect.

The Life of King Alfred

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 875, which was the 27th of king Alfred, the above-named army, leaving Repton, divided into two bodies, one of which went with Halfdene into Northumbria, and having wintered there near the Tyne, reduced all Northumberland to subjection; they also ravaged the Picts and the Strath-Clydensians. (18) The other division, with Gothrun, Oskytel, and Anwiund, three kings of the pagans, went to a place called Grantabridge, (19) and there wintered.

In the same year, king Alfred fought a battle by sea against six ships of the pagans, and took one of them; the rest escaped by flight.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 876, being the twenty-eighth year of king Alfred's life, the aforesaid army of the pagans, leaving Grantabridge by night, entered a castle called Wareham, where there is a monasterium of holy virgins between the two rivers Fraum (20) and Trent, in the district which is called in British "Durnguers", but in Saxon "Thornsæta", placed in a most secure situation, except that it was exposed to danger on the western side from the nature of the ground. With this army Alfred made a solemn treaty, to the effect that they should depart out of the kingdom, and for this they made no hesitation to give as many hostages as he named; also they swore an oath over the Christian relics, (21) which with king Alfred were next in veneration after the Deity himself, that they would depart speedily from the kingdom. But they again practised their usual treachery, and caring nothing for the hostages or their oaths, they broke the treaty, and sallying forth by night, slew all the horsemen that the king had round him, and turning off into Devon, to another place called in Saxon "Exauceaster", (22) but in British "Cair-wise", which means in Latin, the city of the Ex, situated on the eastern bank of the river Wise, they directed their course suddenly towards the south sea, which divides Britain and Gaul, and there passed the winter.

In the same year, Halfdene, king of those parts, divided out the whole country of Northumberland between himself and his men, and settled there with his army. In the same year, Rollo with his followers penetrated into Normandy.

This same Rollo, duke of the Normans, whilst wintering in Old Britain, or England, at the head of his troops, enjoyed one night a vision revealing to him the future. See more of this Rollo in the Annals. (23)

In the year 877, the pagans, on the approach of autumn, partly settled in Exeter, and partly marched for plunder into Mercia. The number of that disorderly crew increased every day, so that, if thirty thousand of them were slain in one battle, others took their places to double the number. Then King Alfred commanded boats and galleys, i.e. long ships, to be built throughout the Kingdom, in order to offer battle by sea to the enemy as they were coming. On board of these he placed seamen, and appointed them to watch the seas. Meanwhile he went himself to Exeter, where the pagans were, wintering, and having shut them up within the walls, laid siege to the town. He also gave orders to his sailors to prevent them from obtaining any supplies by sea; and his sailors were encountered by a fleet of a hundred and twenty ships full of armed soldiers, who were come to help their countrymen. As soon as the king's men knew that they were fitted with pagan soldiers, they leaped to their arms, and bravely attacked those barbaric tribes: but the pagans, who had now for almost a month been tossed and almost wrecked among the waves of the sea, fought vainly against them; their bands were discomfited in a moment, and all were sunk and drowned in the sea, at a place called Suanevic. (24)

In the same year the army of pagans, leaving Wareham, partly on horseback and partly by water, arrived at Suanevic, where one hundred and twenty of their ships were lost; (25) and king Alfred pursued their land-army as far as Exeter; there he made a covenant with them, and took hostages that they would depart.

The same year, in the month of August, that army went into Mercia, and gave part of that country to one Ceolwulf, a weak-minded man, and one of the king's ministers; the other part they divided among themselves.

The Life of King Alfred

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 878, which was the thirtieth of king Alfred's life, the army above-mentioned left Exeter, and went to Chippenham, a royal villa, situated in the west of Wiltshire, and on the eastern bank of the river, which is called in British, the Avon. There they wintered, and drove many of the inhabitants of that country beyond the sea by the force of their arms, and by want of the necessaries of life. They reduced almost entirely to subjection all the people of that country.

At the same time the above-named Alfred, king of the West-Saxons, with a few of his nobles, and certain soldiers and vassals, used to lead an unquiet life among the woodlands (26) of the country of Somerset, in great tribulation; for he had none of the necessaries of life, except what he could forage openly or stealthily, by frequent sallies, from the pagans, or even from the Christians who had submitted to the rule of the pagans, and as we read in the Life of St. Neot, at the house of one of his cowherds.

But it happened on a certain day, that the countrywoman, wife of the cowherd, was preparing some loaves to bake, and the king, sitting at the hearth, made ready his bow and arrows and other warlike instruments. The unlucky woman espying the cakes burning at the fire, ran up to remove them, and rebuking the brave king, exclaimed:

"Ca'sn thee mind the ke-aks, man, an' doossen zee 'em burn?
I'm boun thee's eat 'em vast enough, az zoon az 'tiz the
turn." (27)

The blundering woman little thought that it was king Alfred, who had fought so many battles against the pagans, and gained so many victories over them.

But the Almighty not only granted to the same glorious king victories over his enemies, but also permitted him to be harassed by them, to be sunk down by adversities, and depressed by the low estate of his followers, to the end that he might learn that there is one Lord of all things, to whom every knee doth bow, and in whose hand are the hearts of kings; who puts down the mighty from their seat and exalteth the humble; who suffers his servants when they are elevated at the summit of prosperity to be touched by the rod of adversity, that in their humility they may not despair of God's mercy, and in their prosperity they may not boast of their honours, but may also know, to whom they owe all the things which they possess.

We may believe that the calamity was brought upon the king aforesaid, because, in the beginning of his reign, when he was a youth, and influenced by youthful feelings, he would not listen to the petitions which his subjects made to him for help in their necessities, or for relief from those who oppressed them; but he repulsed them from him, and paid no heed to their requests. This particular gave much annoyance to the holy man St. Neot, who was his relation, and often foretold to him, in the spirit of prophecy, that he would suffer great adversity on this account; but Alfred neither attended to the reproof of the man of God, nor listened to his true prediction. Wherefore, seeing that a man's sins must be corrected either in this world or the next, the true and righteous Judge was willing that his sin should not go unpunished in this world, to the end that he might spare him in the world to come. From this cause, therefore, the aforesaid Alfred often fell into such great misery, that sometimes none of his subjects knew where he was or what had become of him.

In the same year the brother (28) of Hingwar and Halfdene, with twenty-three ships, after much slaughter of the Christians, came from the country of Demetia, (29) where he had wintered, and sailed to Devon, where, with twelve hundred others, he met with a miserable death, being slain while committing his misdeeds, by the king's servants, before the castle of Cynuit (Kynwith), (30) into which many of the king's servants, with their followers, had fled for safety. The pagans, seeing that the castle was altogether unprepared and unfortified, except that it had walls in our own fashion, determined not to assault it, because it was impregnable and secure on all sides, except on the eastern, as we ourselves have seen, but they began to blockade it, thinking that those who were inside would soon surrender either from famine or want of water, for the castle had no spring near it. But the result did

The Life of King Alfred

not fall out as they expected; for the Christians, before they began to suffer from want, inspired by Heaven, judging it much better to gain victory or death, attacked the pagans suddenly in the morning, and from the first cut them down in great numbers, slaying also their king, so that few escaped to their ships; and there they gained a very large booty, and amongst other things the standard called Raven; for they say that the three sisters of Hingwar and Hubba, daughters of Lodobroch, wove that flag and got it ready in one day. They say, moreover, that in every battle, wherever that flag went before them, if they were to gain the victory a live crow would appear flying on the middle of the flag; but if they were doom to be defeated it would hang down motionless, and this was often proved to be so.

The same year, after Easter, king Alfred, with a few followers, made for himself a stronghold in a place called Athelney, and from thence sallied with his vassals and the nobles of Somersetshire, to make frequent assaults upon the pagans. Also, in the seventh week after Easter, he rode to the stone of Egbert, (31) which is in the eastern part of the wood which is called Selwood, (32) which means in Latin *Silva Magna*, the Great Wood, but in British *Coit-mawr*. Here he was met by all the neighbouring folk of Somersetshire, and Wiltshire, and Hampshire, who had not, for fear of the pagans, fled beyond the sea; and when they saw the king alive after such great tribulation, they received him, as he deserved, with joy and acclamations, and encamped there for one night. When the following day dawned, the king struck his camp, and went to Okely, (33) where he encamped for one night. The next morning he removed to Edington, and there fought bravely and perseveringly against all the army of the pagans, whom, with the divine help, he defeated with great slaughter, and pursued them flying to their fortification. Immediately he slew all the men, and carried off all the booty that he could find without the fortress, which he immediately laid siege to with all his army; and when he had been there fourteen days, the pagans, driven by famine, cold, fear, and last of all by despair, asked for peace, on the condition that they should give the king as many hostages as he pleased, but should receive none of him in return, in which form they had never before made a treaty with any one. The king, hearing that, took pity upon them, and received such hostages as he chose; after which the pagans swore, moreover, that they would immediately leave the kingdom; and their king, Gothrun, promised to embrace Christianity, and receive baptism at king Alfred's hands. All of which articles he and his men fulfilled as they had promised. For after seven weeks Gothrun, king of the pagans, with thirty men chosen from the army, came to Alfred at a place called Aller, near Athelney, and there King Alfred, receiving him as his son by adoption, raised him up from the holy laver of baptism on the eighth day, at a royal villa named Wedmore, (34) where were the holy chrism was poured upon him. (35) After his baptism he remained twelve nights with the king, who, with all his nobles, gave him many fine houses.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 879, which was the thirty-first of king Alfred, the aforesaid army of pagans leaving Chippenham, as they had promised, went to Cirencester, which is called in British "Cair Cori", and is situate in the southern part of the Wiccii, (36) and there they remained one year.

In the same year, a large army of pagans sailed from foreign parts into the river Thames, and joined the army which was already in the country. They wintered at Fulham near the river Thames.

In the same year an eclipse of the sun took place, between three o'clock and the evening, but nearer to three o'clock.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 880, which was the thirty-second of king Alfred, the above named army of pagans left Cirencester, and went among the East Angles, where they divided out the country and began to settle.

The same year the army of pagans, which had wintered at Fulham, left the island of Britain, and sailed over the sea to the eastern part of France, where they remained a year at a place called Ghent.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 881, which was the thirty-third of king Alfred's life, the aforesaid army went higher up into France; and the French fought against them; and after the battle the pagans obtained horses and became an army of cavalry.

The Life of King Alfred

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 882, the thirty-fourth of king Alfred's life, the above named army steered their ships up into France by a river called the Mese [Meuse] and there wintered one year.

In the same year Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, fought a battle by sea against the pagan fleet, of which he captured two ships, having slain all who were on board; and the two commanders of two other ships, with all their crews, distressed by the battle and the wounds which they had received, laid down their arms and submitted to the king.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 883, which was the thirty-fifth of king Alfred's life, the aforesaid army went up the river called Scald [Scheldt] to a convent of nuns called Cundoht [Conde] and there remained a year.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 884, which was the thirty-sixth of king Alfred's life, the aforesaid army divided into two parts; one body of them went into East France, and the other coming to Britain entered Kent, where they besieged a city called in Saxon Rochester, and situated on the eastern bank of the river Medway. Before the gate of the town the pagans suddenly erected a strong fortress, but yet they were unable to take the city, because the citizens defended themselves bravely, until king Alfred came up to help them with a large army. Then the pagans abandoned their fortress, and all their horses which they had brought with them out of France, and leaving behind them in the fortress the greater part of their prisoners, on the arrival of the king, fled immediately to their ships, and the Saxons immediately seized on the prisoners and horses left by the pagans; and so the pagans, compelled by stern necessity, returned the same summer to France.

In the same year Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, led his fleet, full of fighting men, out of Kent to the country of the East-Angles, for the sake of plunder; (37) and, when they had arrived at the mouth of the river Stour, (38) immediately thirteen ships of the pagans met them, prepared for battle; a fierce fight ensued, and all the pagans, after a brave resistance, were slain; all the ships, with all their money, were taken. After this, while the royal fleet were reposing, the pagans, who lived in the eastern part of England, assembled their ships, met the same royal fleet at sea in the mouth of the same river, and, after a naval battle, the pagans gained the victory.

In the same year, also, Carloman, king of the Western Franks, whilst hunting a wild boar, was miserably killed by a large animal of that species, which inflicted a dreadful wound on him with its tusk. His brother Louis [III], who had been king of the Franks, died the year before. These two brothers were sons of Louis, king of the Franks, who had died in the year above mentioned, in which the eclipse of the sun took place; and it was he whose daughter Judith was given by her father's wish in marriage to Ethelwulf, King of the West Saxons.

In the same year also a great army of the pagans came from Germany into the country of the ancient Saxons, which is called in Saxon Ealdseaxum. (39) To oppose them the said Saxons and Frisons joined their forces, and fought bravely twice in that same year. In both those battles the Christians, with the merciful aid of the Lord, obtained the victory.

In the same year also, Charles, king of the Almain, received, with universal consent, all the territories which lie between the Tyrrhenian sea and that gulf which runs between the old Saxons and the Gauls, except the kingdom of Armorica, i.e. Lesser Britain. This Charles was the son of king Louis, who was brother of Charles, King of the Franks, father of the aforesaid queen Judith; these two brothers were sons of Louis, but Louis was the son of the great, the ancient, and wise Charlemagne, who was the son of Pepin.

In the same year pope Martin, of blessed memory, went the way of all flesh; it was he who, in regard for Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, and at his request, freed the school of the Anglo-Saxons resident at Rome from all tribute and tax. He also sent many gifts on that occasion, among which was no small portion of the holy and venerable cross on which our Lord Jesus Christ was suspended, for the general salvation of mankind.

The Life of King Alfred

In the same year also the army of pagans, which dwelt among the East Angles, disgracefully broke the peace which they had concluded with king Alfred.

Wherefore, to return to that from which I digressed, that I may not be compelled by my long navigation to abandon the port of rest which I was making for, I propose, as far as my knowledge will enable me, to speak of the life and character and just conduct of my lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, after he married the above named respected lady of Mercian race, his wife; and, with God's blessing, I will despatch it succinctly and briefly, as I promised, that I may not offend the delicate minds of my readers by prolixity in relating each new event.

His nuptials were honourably celebrated in Mercia, among innumerable multitudes of people of both sexes; and after continual feasts, both by night and by day, he was immediately seized, in presence of all the people, by sudden and overwhelming pain, as yet unknown to all the physicians; for it was unknown to all who were then present, and even to those who daily see him up to the present time, — which, sad to say! is the worst of all, that he should have protracted it so long from the twentieth to the fortieth year of his life, and even more than that through the space of so many years, — from what cause so great a malady arose. For many thought that this was occasioned by the favour and fascination of the people who surrounded him; others, by some spite of the devil, who is ever jealous of the good; others, from an unusual kind of fever. He had this sort of severe disease from his childhood; but once, divine Providence so ordered it, that when he was on a visit to Cornwall for the sake of hunting, and had turned out of the road to pray in a certain chapel, in which rests the body of Saint Guerir, (40) and now also St. Neot (41) rests there, — for king Alfred was always from his infancy a frequent visitor of holy places for the sake of prayer and almsgiving, — he prostrated himself for private devotion, and, after some time spent therein, he entreated of God's mercy, that in his boundless clemency he would exchange the torments of the malady which then afflicted him for some other lighter disease; but with this condition, that such disease should not show itself outwardly in his body, lest he should be an object of contempt, and less able to benefit mankind; for he had great dread of leprosy or blindness, or any such complaint, as makes men useless or contemptible when it afflicts them. When he had finished his prayers, he proceeded on his journey, and not long after he felt within him that by the hand of the Almighty he was healed, according to his request, of his disorder, and that it was entirely eradicated, although he had first had even this complaint in the flower of his youth, by his devout and pious prayers and supplications to Almighty God. For if I may be allowed to speak briefly, but in a somewhat preposterous order, of his zealous piety to God in the flower of his youth, before he entered the marriage state, he wished to strengthen his mind in the observance of God's commandments, for he perceived that he could with difficulty abstain from gratifying his carnal desires; and, because he feared the anger of God, if he should do anything contrary to his will, he used often to rise in the morning at the cock-crow, and go to pray in the churches and at the relics of the saints. There he prostrated himself on the ground, and prayed that God in his mercy would strengthen his mind still more in his service by some infirmity such as he might bear, but not such as would render him imbecile and contemptible in his worldly duties; and when he had often prayed with much devotion to this effect, after an interval of some time, Providence vouchsafed to afflict him with the above-named disease, which he bore long and painfully for many years, and even despaired of life, until he entirely got rid of it by his prayers; but, sad to say! it was replaced, as we have said, at his marriage by another which incessantly tormented him, night and day, from the twentieth to the forty-fourth year of his life. But if ever, by God's mercy, he was-relieved from this infirmity for a single day or night, yet the fear and dread of that dreadful malady never left him, but rendered him almost useless, as he thought, for every duty, whether human or divine.

The sons and daughters, which he had by his wife above mentioned were Ethelfled the eldest, after whom came Edward, then Ethelgiva, then Ethelwitha, and Ethelwerd, besides those who died in their infancy, one of whom was Edmund. Ethelfled, when she arrived at a marriageable age, was united to Ethered, earl of Mercia; Ethelgiva also was dedicated to God, and submitted to the rules of a monastic life. Ethelwerd the youngest, by the divine counsels and the admirable prudence of the king, was consigned to the schools of learning, where, with the children of almost all the nobility of the country, and many also who were not noble, he prospered under the diligent care of his teachers. Books in both languages, namely, Latin and Saxon, were both read in the school. They also learned to write; so that before they were of an age to practice manly arts, namely, hunting and such

The Life of King Alfred

pursuits as befit noblemen, they became studious and clever in the liberal arts. Edward and Ethelwitha were bred up in the king's court and received great attention from their attendants and nurses; nay, they continue to this day, with the love of all about them, and showing affability, and even gentleness towards all, both natives and foreigners, and in complete subjection to their father; nor, among their other studies which appertain to this life and are fit for noble youths, are they suffered to pass their time idly and unprofitably without learning the liberal arts; for they have carefully learned the Psalms and Saxon books, especially the Saxon poems, and are continually in the habit of making use of books.

In the meantime, the king, during the frequent wars and other trammels of this present life, the invasions of the pagans, and his own daily infirmities of body, continued to carry on the government, and to exercise hunting in all its branches; to teach his workers in gold and artificers of all kinds, his falconers, hawkers and dog-keepers; to build houses, majestic and good beyond all the precedents of his ancestors, by his new mechanical inventions; to recite the Saxon books, and especially to learn by heart the Saxon poems, and to make others learn them; and he alone never desisted from studying, most diligently, to the best of his ability; he attended the mass and other daily services of religion; he was frequent in psalm-singing and prayer, at the hours both of the day and the night. He also went to the churches, as we have already said, in the night-time to pray, secretly, and unknown to his courtiers; he bestowed alms and largesses on both natives and foreigners of all countries; he was affable and pleasant to all, and curiously eager to investigate things unknown. Many Franks, Frisons, Gauls, pagans, Britons, Scots, and Armoricans, noble and ignoble, submitted voluntarily to his dominion; and all of them, according to their nation and deserving, were ruled, loved, honoured, and enriched with money and power. Moreover, the king was in the habit of hearing the divine scriptures read by his own countrymen, or, if by any chance it so happened, in company with foreigners, and he attended to it with sedulity and solicitude. His bishops, too, and all ecclesiastics, his earls and nobles, minsters and friends, were loved by him with wonderful affection, and their sons, who were bred up in the royal household, were no less dear to him than his own; he had them instructed in all kinds of good mortals, and among other things, never ceased to teach them letters night and day; but as if he had no consolation in all these things, and suffered to other annoyance either from within or without, yet he was harassed by daily and nightly affliction, that he complained to God, and to all who were admitted to his familiar love, that Almighty God had made him ignorant of divine wisdom, and of the liberal arts; in this emulating the pious, the wise, and wealthy Solomon, king of the Hebrews, who at first, despising all present glory and riches, asked wisdom of God, and found both, namely, wisdom and worldly glory; as it is written, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." But God, who is always the inspector of the thoughts of the mind within, and the instigator of all good intentions, and a most plentiful aider, that good desires may be formed, — for he would not instigate a man to good intentions, unless he also amply supplied that which the man justly and properly wishes to have, — instigated the king's mind within; as it is written, "I will hearken what the Lord God will say concerning me." He would avail himself of every opportunity to procure coadjutors in his good designs, to aid him in his strivings after wisdom, that he might attain to what he aimed at; and, like a prudent bird, which rising in summer with the early morning from her beloved nest, steers her rapid flight through the uncertain tracks of ether, and descends on the manifold and varied flowers of grasses, herbs, and shrubs, essaying that which pleases most, that she may bear it to her home, so did he direct his eyes afar, and seek without, that which he had not within, namely, in his own kingdom.

But God at that time, as some consolation to the king's benevolence, yielding to his complaint, sent certain lights to illuminate him, namely, Wenefrith, bishop of the church of Worcester, a man well versed in divine scripture, who, by the king's command, first turned the books of the Dialogues of pope Gregory and Peter, his disciple, from Latin into Saxon, and sometimes putting sense for sense, interpreted them with clearness and elegance. After him was Plegmund, a Mercian by birth, archbishop of the church of Canterbury, a venerable man, and endowed with wisdom; Ethelstan also, and Werewulf, his priests and chaplains, Mercians by birth and erudite. These four had been invited out of Mercia by king Alfred, who exalted them with many honours and powers in the kingdom of the West-Saxons, besides the privileges which archbishop Plegmund and bishop Wenefrith enjoyed in Mercia. By their teaching and wisdom the king's desires increased unceasingly, and were gratified. Night and day, whenever he had leisure, he commanded such men as these to read books to him; for he never suffered himself to be without

The Life of King Alfred

one of them, wherefore he possessed a knowledge of every book, though of himself he could not yet understand anything of books, for he had not yet learned to read any thing.

But the king's commendable avarice could not be gratified even in this; wherefore he sent messengers beyond the sea to Gaul, to procure teachers, and he invited from thence Grimbald, (42) priest and monk, a venerable man, and good singer, adorned with every kind of ecclesiastical discipline and good morals, and most learned in holy scripture. He also obtained from thence John, (43) also priest and monk, a man of most energetic talents, and learned in all kinds of literary science, and skilled in many other arts. By the teaching of these men the king's mind was much enlarged, and he enriched and honoured them with much influence.

In these times, I also came into Saxony out of the furthest coasts of Western Britain; and when I had proposed to go to him through many intervening provinces, I arrived in the country of the Saxons, who live on the right hand, which in Saxon is called Sussex, under the guidance of some of that nation; and there I first saw him in the royal vill, which is called Dene. (44) He received me with kindness, and among other familiar conversation, he asked me eagerly to devote myself to his service and become his friend, to leave every thing which I possessed on the left, or western bank of the Severn, and he promised he would give more than an equivalent for it in his own dominions. I replied that I could not incautiously and rashly promise such things; for it seemed to me unjust, that I should leave those sacred places in which I had been bred, educated, and crowned, (45) and at last ordained, for the sake of any earthly honour and power, unless by compulsion. Upon this, he said, "If you cannot accede to this, at least, let me have your service in part: spend six months of the year with me here, and the other six in Britain." To this, I replied, "I could not even promise that easily or hastily without the advice of my friends." At length, however, when I perceived that he was anxious for my services, though I knew not why, I promised him that, if my life was spared, I would return to him after six months, with such a reply as should be agreeable to him as well as advantageous to me and mine. With this answer he was satisfied, and when I had given him a pledge to return at the appointed time, on the fourth day we left him and returned on horseback towards our own country.

After our departure, a violent fever seized me in the city of Winchester, where I lay for twelve months and one week, night and day, without hope of recovery. At the appointed time, therefore, I could not fulfil my promise of visiting him, and he sent messengers to hasten my journey, and to inquire the cause of my delay. As I was unable to ride to him, I sent a second messenger to tell him the cause of my delay, and assure him that, if I recovered from my infirmity, I would fulfil what I had promised. My complaint left me, and by the advice and consent of all my friends, for the benefit of that holy place, and of all who dwelt therein, I did as I had promised to the king, and devoted myself to his service, on the condition that I should remain with him six months in every year, either continuously, if I could spend six months with him at once, or alternately, three months in Britain and three in Saxony. (46) For my friends hoped that they should sustain less tribulation and harm from king Hemeid, (47) who often plundered that monastery and the parish of St. Deguus, (48) and sometimes expelled the prelates, as they expelled archbishop Novis, (49) my relation, and myself; if in any manner I could secure the notice and friendship of the king.

At that time, and long before, all the countries on the right hand side of Britain belonged to king Alfred and still belonged to him. For instance, king Hemeid, with all the inhabitants of the region of Demetia, compelled by the violence of the six sons of Rotri, had submitted to the dominion of the King. Howel also, son of Ris, king of Gleguising, and Brocmail and Fernmail, sons of Mouric, kings of Gwent, compelled by the violence and tyranny of earl Ethered and of the Mercians, of their own accord sought king Alfred, that they might enjoy his government and protection from him against their enemies. Helised, also, son of Tendyr, king of Brecon, compelled by the force of the same sons of Rotri, of his own accord sought the government of the aforesaid king; and Anarawd, son of Rotri, with his brother, at length abandoning the friendship of the Northumbrians, from which he received no good but harm, came into king Alfred's presence and eagerly sought his friendship. The king received him honourably, received him as his son by confirmation from the bishop's hand, and presented him with many gifts. Thus he became subject to the king with all his people, on the same condition, that he should be obedient to the king's will in all respects, in the same way as Ethered with the Mercians.

The Life of King Alfred

Nor was it in vain that all these princes gained the friendship of the king. For those who desired to augment their worldly power, obtained power; those who desired money, gained money; and in like way, those who desired his friendship, or both money and friendship, succeeded in getting what they wanted. But all of them gained his love and guardianship and defence from every quarter, even as the king with his men could protect himself.

When therefore I had come into his presence at the royal vill, called Leonaford, I was honourably received by him, and remained that time with him at his court eight months; during which I read to him whatever books he liked, and such as he had at hand; for this is his most usual custom, both night and day, amid his many other occupations of mind and body, either himself to read books, or to listen whilst others read them. And when I frequently asked his leave to depart, and could in no way obtain it, at length when I had made up my mind by all means to demand it, he called me to him at twilight, on Christmas eve, and gave me two letters, in which was a long list of all the things which were in two monasteries, called in Saxon, Ambresbury (50) and Banwell; (51) and on that same day he delivered to me those two monasteries with all the things that were in them, and a silken pall of great value, and a lead for a strong man, of incense, adding these words, that he did not give me these trifling presents, because he was unwilling hereafter to give me greater; for in the course of time he unexpectedly gave me Exeter, with all the diocese which belonged to him in Saxony (52) and in Cornwall, besides gifts every day, without number, in every kind of worldly wealth, which it would be too long to enumerate here, lest they should make my reader tired. But let no one suppose that I have mentioned these presents in this place for the sake of glory or flattery, or to obtain greater honour. I call God to witness, that I have not done so; but that I might certify to those who are ignorant, how profuse he is in giving, he then at once gave me permission to ride to those two rich monasteries and afterwards to return to my own country.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation, 886, which was the thirty– eighth since the birth of Alfred, the army so often before mentioned again fled the country, and went into the country of the Western Franks, directing their ships to the river called the Seine, and sailed up it as far as the city of Paris, and there they wintered and measured out their camp. They besieged that city a whole year, as far as the bridge, that they might prevent the inhabitants from making use of it; for the city is situated on a small island in the middle of the river; but by the merciful favour of God, and the brave defence of citizens, the army could not force their way inside the walls.

In the same year, Alfred, King of the Anglo–Saxons, after the burning of the cities and the slaying of the people, honourably rebuilt the city of London, and made it again habitable. He gave it into the custody of his son–in–law, Ethered, earl of Mercia, to which king all the Angles and Saxons, who before had been dispersed everywhere, or were in captivity with the pagans, voluntarily turned and submitted themselves to his dominion.

(53) [In the same year there arose a foul and deadly discord at Oxford, between Grimbald, with those learned men whom he had brought with him, and the old scholars whom he had found there, who, on his arrival, refused altogether to embrace the laws, modes, and forms of praelection instituted by the same Grimbald. During three years there had been no great dissension between them, but there was a secret enmity which afterwards broke out with great atrocity, clearer than the light itself. To appease this quarrel, that invincible king Alfred, having been informed of the strife by a messenger from Grimbald, went to Oxford to put an end to the controversy, and endured much trouble in hearing the arguments and complaints which were brought forwards on both sides. The substance of the dispute was this: the old scholars contended, that literature had flourished at Oxford before the coming of Grimbald, although the number of scholars was smaller than in ancient time, because several had been driven away by the cruelty and tyranny of the pagans. They also proved and showed, by the undoubted testimony of ancient annals, that the orders and institutions of that place had been sanctioned by certain pious and learned men, as for instance by Saint Gildas, Melkinus, Nennius, Kentigern, and others, who had all grown old there in literature, and happily administered everything there in peace and concord; and also, that Saint Germanus had come to Oxford, and stopped there half a year, at the time when he went through Britain to preach against the Pelagian heresy; he wonderfully approved of the customs and institutions above–mentioned. The king, with unheard–of humility, listened to both sides carefully, and exhorted them again and again with pious and wholesome admonitions to cherish mutual love and concord. He therefore left them with this decision, that each

The Life of King Alfred

party should follow their own counsel, and preserve their own institutions. Grimbald, displeased at this, immediately departed to the monastery at Winchester, (54) which had been recently founded by King Alfred, and ordered a tomb to be carried to Winchester, in which he proposed, after this life, that his bones should be laid in the vault which had been made under the chancel of St. Peter's church in Oxford; which church the same Grimbald had built from its foundations, of stone polished with great care.]

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 887, which was the thirty– ninth of king Alfred's life, the above mentioned army of the pagans, leaving the city of Paris uninjured, because they could not succeed against it, sailed up the river Seine under the bridge, until they reached the mouth of the river Materne [Marne]; where they left the Seine, and, following for a long time the course of the Marne, at length, but not without much labour, they arrived at a place called Chezy, a royal vill, where they wintered one year. In the following year they entered the mouth of the river Ionna [Yonne], not without doing much damage to the country, and there remained one year.

In the same year Charles, king of the Franks, went the way of all flesh; but Arnulf, his brother's son, six weeks before he died, had expelled him from his kingdom. After his death five kings were appointed, and the kingdom was split into five parts; but the principal rank in the kingdom justly and deservedly devolved on Arnulf, save only that he committed an unworthy offence against his uncle. The other four kings promised fidelity and obedience to Arnulf, as was proper; for none of these four kings was hereditary on his father's side in his share of the kingdom, as was Arnulf; therefore, though the five kings were appointed immediately on the death of Charles, yet the empire remained in the hands of Arnulf.

Such, then, was the division of the kingdom; Arnulf received the countries on the east of the river Rhine; Rodulf the inner parts of the kingdom; Oda the western part; Beorngar and Guido, Lombardy, and those countries which are in that part of the mountains; but they did not keep these large dominions in peace, for they twice fought a pitched battle, and often mutually ravaged their kingdoms, and drove each other out of their dominions.

In the same year in which that [pagan] army left Paris and went to Chezy, Ethelhelm, earl of Wiltshire, carried to Rome the alms of king Alfred and of the Saxons.

In the same year Alfred, king of the Anglo–Saxons, so often before mentioned, by divine inspiration, began, on one and the same day, to read and to interpret; but that I may explain this more fully to those who are ignorant, I will relate the cause of this long delay in beginning.

On a certain day we were both of us sitting in the king's chamber, talking on all kinds of subjects, as usual, and it happened that I read to him a quotation out of a certain book. He heard it attentively with both his ears, and addressed me with a thoughtful mind, showing me at the same moment a book which he carried in his bosom, wherein the daily courses and psalms, and prayers which he had read in his youth, were written, and he commanded me to write the same quotation in that book. Hearing this, and perceiving his ingenuous benevolence, and devout desire of studying the words of divine wisdom, I gave, though in secret, boundless thanks to Almighty God, who had implanted such a love of wisdom in the king's heart. But I could not find any empty space in that book wherein to write the quotation, for it was already full of various matters; wherefore I made a little delay, principally that I might stir up the bright intellect of the king to a higher acquaintance with the divine testimonies. Upon his urging me to make haste and write it quickly, I said to him, "Are you willing that I should write that quotation on some leaf apart? For it is not certain whether we shall not find one or more other such extracts which will please you; and if that should so happen, we shall be glad that we have kept them apart." "Your plan is good," said he, and I gladly made haste to get ready a sheet, in the beginning of which I wrote what he bade me; and on that same day, I wrote therein, as I had anticipated, no less than three other quotations which pleased him; and from that time we daily talked together, and found out other quotations which pleased him, so that the sheet became full, and deservedly so; according as it is written, "The just man builds upon a moderate foundation, and by degrees passes to greater things." Thus, like a most productive bee, he flew here and there, asking questions, as he went, until he had eagerly and unceasingly collected many various flowers of divine scriptures, with which he

The Life of King Alfred

thickly stored the cells of his mind.

Now when that first quotation was copied, he was eager at once to read, and to interpret in Saxon, and then to teach others; even as we read of that happy robber, who recognized his Lord, aye, the Lord of all men, as he was hanging on the blessed cross, and, saluting him with his bodily eyes only, because elsewhere he was all pierced with nails, cried, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom!" for it was only at the end of his life that he began to learn the rudiments of the Christian faith. But the king, inspired by God, began to study the rudiments of divine Scripture on the sacred solemnity of St. Martin (Nov. 11), and he continued to learn the flowers collected by certain masters, and to reduce them into the form of one book, as he was then able, although mixed one with another, until it became almost as large as a psalter. This book he called his ENCHIRIDION or MANUAL, because he carefully kept it at hand day and night, and found, as he told me, no small consolation therein.

But as has already been written by a certain wise man,

"Of watchful minds are they whose pious care
It is to govern well,"

so must I be watchful, in that I just now drew a kind of comparison or similarity, though in dissimilar manner, between that happy robber and the king; for the cross is hateful to every one, wherever there is suffering. But what can he do, if he cannot save himself or escape thence? Or by what art can he remain there and improve his cause? He must, therefore, whether he will or no, endure with pain and sorrow that which he is suffering.

Now the king was pierced with many nails of tribulation, though placed in the royal seat; for from the twentieth year of his age to the present year, which is his fortieth, (55) he has been constantly afflicted with most severe attacks of an unknown complaint, so that he has not a moment's ease either from suffering the pain which it causes, or from the gloom which is thrown over him by the apprehension of its coming. Moreover, the constant invasions of foreign nations, by which he was continually harassed by land and sea, without any interval of quiet, were a just cause of disquiet. What shall I say of his repeated expeditions against the pagans, his wars, and incessant occupations of government? Of the daily embassies sent to him by foreign nations, from the Tyrrhenian sea to the farthest end of Ireland? (56) For we have seen and read letters, accompanied with presents, which were sent to him by Abel the patriarch of Jerusalem. What shall I say of the cities and towns which he restored, and of others which he built, where none had been before? Of the royal halls and chambers, wonderfully erected by his command, with stone and wood? Of the royal villas constructed of stone, removed from their old site, and handsomely rebuilt by the king's command in more fitting places? Besides the disease above mentioned, he was disturbed by the quarrels of his friends, who would voluntarily endure little or no toil, though it was for the common necessity of the kingdom; but he alone, sustained by the divine aid, like a skilful pilot, strove to steer his ship, laden with much wealth, into the safe and much desired harbour of his country, though almost all his crew were tired, and suffered them not to faint or hesitate, though sailing amid the manifold waves and eddies of this present life.

For all his bishops, earls, nobles, favourite ministers, and prefects, who, next to God and the king, had the whole government of the kingdom, as is fitting, continually received from him instruction, respect, exhortation, and command; nay, at last, when they were disobedient, and his long patience was exhausted, he would reprove them severely, and censure at pleasure their vulgar folly and obstinacy; and in this way he directed their attention to the common interests of the kingdom. But, owing to the sluggishness of the people, these admonitions of the king were either not fulfilled, or were begun late at the moment of necessity, and so ended less to the advantage of those who put them in execution; for I will say nothing of the castles which he ordered to be built, but which, being begun late, were never finished, because the hostile troops broke in upon them by land and sea, and, as often happened, the thwarters of the royal ordinances repented when it was too late, and blushed at their non-performance of his commands. I speak of repentance when it is too late, on the testimony of Scripture,

The Life of King Alfred

whereby numberless persons have had cause for too much sorrow when many insidious evils have been wrought. But though by these means, sad to say, they may be bitterly afflicted and roused to sorrow by the loss of fathers, wives, children, ministers, servant-men, servant-maids, and furniture and household stuff, what is the use of hateful repentance when their kinsmen are dead, and they cannot aid them, or redeem those who are captive from captivity? For they are not able even to assist those who have escaped, as they have not wherewith to sustain even their own lives. They repented, therefore, when it was too late, and grieved at their incautious neglect of the king's commands, and they praised the royal wisdom with one voice, and tried with all their power to fulfil what they had before refused, namely, concerning the erection of castles, and other things generally useful to the whole kingdom.

Of his fixed purpose of holy meditation, which, in the midst of prosperity and adversity he never neglected, I cannot with advantage now omit to speak. For, whereas he often thought of the necessities of his soul, among the other good deeds to which his thoughts were night and day turned, he ordered that two monasteries should be built, one for monks at Athelney, which is a place surrounded by impassable marshes and rivers, where no one can enter but by boats, or by a bridge laboriously constructed between two other heights; at the western end of which bridge was erected a strong tower, of beautiful work, by command of the aforesaid king; and in this monastery he collected monks of all kinds, from every quarter, and placed them therein.

For at first, because he had no one of his own nation, noble and free by birth, who was willing to enter the monastic life, except children, who could neither choose good nor avoid evil in consequence of their tender years, because for many previous years the love of a monastic life had utterly decayed from that nation as well as from many other nations, though many monasteries still remain in that country; yet, as no one directed the rule of that kind of life in a regular way, for what reason I cannot say, either from the invasions of foreigners which took place so frequently both by sea and land, or because that people abounded in riches of every kind, and so looked with contempt on the monastic life. It was for this reason that king Alfred sought to gather monks of different kinds to place in the same monastery.

First he placed there as abbat, John (57) the priest and monk, an old Saxon by birth, then certain priests and deacons from beyond the sea; of whom, finding that he had not as large a number as he wished, he procured as many as possible of the same Gallic race, some of whom, being children, he ordered to be taught in the same monastery, and at a later period to be admitted to the monastic habit. I have myself seen a young lad of pagan birth who was educated in that monastery, and by no means the hindmost of them all.

There was also a deed done once in that monastery, which I would utterly consign to oblivion, although it is an unworthy deed; for throughout the whole of Scripture the base deeds of the wicked are interspersed among the blessed deeds of the just, as tares and darnel are sown among the wheat: good deeds are recorded that they may be praised and imitated, and that their imitators may be held in all honour; wicked deeds are there related, that they may be censured and avoided, and their imitators be reprov'd with all odium, contempt, and vengeance.

For once upon a time, a certain priest and a deacon, Gauls by birth, and two of the aforesaid monks, by the instigation of the devil, and excited by some secret jealousy, became so embittered in secret against their abbat, the above mentioned John, that, like Jews, they circumvented and betrayed their master. For whereas he had two servants, whom he had hired out of Gaul, they taught these such wicked practices, that in the night, when all men were enjoying the sweet tranquillity of sleep, they should make their way into the church armed, and shutting it behind them as usual, hide themselves therein, and wait for the moment when the abbat should enter the church alone. At length, when he should come alone to pray, and, bending his knees, bow before the holy altar, the men should rush on him with hostility, and try to slay him on the spot. They then should drag his lifeless body out of the church, and throw it down before the house of a certain harlot, as if he had been slain whilst on a visit to her. This was their machination, adding crime to crime, as it is said, "The last error shall be worse than the first."

The Life of King Alfred

But the divine mercy, which always delights to aid the innocent, frustrated in great part the wicked design of the wicked men, so that it should not turn out in every respect as they had proposed.

When, therefore, the whole of the evil counsel had been explained by those wicked teachers to their wicked agents, and the night which had been fixed on as most fit was come, the two armed ruffians were placed, with a promise of impunity, to await in the church for the arrival of the abbat. In the middle of the night John, as usual, entered the church to pray, without any one's knowing of it, and knelt before the altar. The two ruffians rushed upon him with drawn swords, and dealt him some severe wounds. But he, being a man of a brave mind, and, as we have heard say, not unacquainted with the art of self-defence, if he had not been a follower of a better calling, no sooner heard the sound of the robbers, before he saw them, than he rose up against them before he was wounded, and, shouting as loud as he could, struggled against them, crying out that they were devils and not men; for he himself knew no better, as he thought that no men would dare to attempt such a deed. He was, however, wounded before any of his people could come to his help. His attendants, roused by the noise, were frightened when they heard the word devils, and both those two who, like Jews, sought to betray their master, and the others who knew nothing of the matter, rushed together to the doors of the church; but before they got there those ruffians escaped, leaving the abbat half dead. The monks raised the old man, in a fainting condition, and carried him home with tears and lamentations; nor did those two deceitful monks shed tears less than the innocent. But God's mercy did not allow so bold a deed to pass unpunished; the ruffians who perpetrated it, and all who urged them to it, were taken and put in prison, where, by various tortures, they came to a disgraceful end. Let us now return to our narrative.

Another monastery, also, was built by the same king as a residence for nuns, near the eastern gate of Shaftesbury; and his own daughter, Ethelgiva, was placed in it as abbess. With her many other noble ladies bound by the rules of the monastic life, dwell in that monastery. These two edifices were enriched by the king with much land, as well as personal property.

These things being thus disposed of, the king began, as was his practice, to consider within himself, what more he could do to augment and show forth his piety; what he had begun wisely, and thoughtfully conceived for the public benefit, as adhered to with equally beneficial result; for he had heard it out of the book of the law, that the Lord had promised to restore to him tenfold; and he knew that the Lord had kept his promise, and had actually restored to him tenfold. Encouraged by this example, and wishing to exceed the practices of his predecessors, he vowed humbly and faithfully to devote to God half his services, both day and night, and also half of all his wealth, such as lawfully and justly came annually into his possession; and this vow, as far as human discretion can perceive and keep, he skilfully and wisely endeavoured to fulfil. But, that he might, with his usual caution, avoid that which scripture warns us against: "If you offer aright, but do not divide aright, you sin," he considered how he might divide aright that which he had vowed to God; and as Solomon had said, "The heart of the king is in the hand of God," that is, his counsel he ordered with wise policy, which could come only from above, that his officers should first divide into two parts the revenues of every year.

When this division was made, he assigned the first part to worldly uses, and ordered that one-third of it should be paid to his soldiers, and also to his ministers, the nobles who dwelt at court where they discharged divers duties; for so the king's family was arranged at all times into three classes. The king's attendants were most wisely distributed into three companies, so that the first company should be on duty at court for one month, night and day, at the end of which they returned to their homes, and were relieved by the second company. At the end of the second month, in the same way, the third company relieved the second, who returned to their homes, where they spent two months, until their services were again wanted. The third company also gave place to the first in the same way, and also spent two months at home. Thus was the threefold division of the companies arranged at all times in the royal household.

To these therefore was paid the first of the three portions aforesaid, to each according to their respective dignities and peculiar services; the second to the operatives, whom he had collected from every nation, and had about him

The Life of King Alfred

in large numbers, men skilled in every kind of construction; the third portion was assigned to foreigners who came to him out of every nation far and near, whether they asked money of him or not, he cheerfully gave to each with wonderful munificence according to their respective merits, according to what is written: "God loveth a cheerful giver."

But the second part of all his revenues, which came yearly into his possession, and was included in the receipts of the exchequer, as we mentioned a little before, he, with ready devotion, gave to God, ordering his ministers to divide it carefully into four parts, on the condition that the first part should be discreetly bestowed on the poor of every nation who came to him; and on this subject he said that, as far as human discretion could guarantee, the remark of pope St. Gregory should be followed: "Give not much to whom you should give little, nor little to whom much, nor something to whom nothing, nor nothing to whom something." The second of the four portions was given to the two monasteries which he had built, and to those who therein had dedicated themselves to God's service, as we have mentioned above. The third portion was assigned to the school, which he had studiously collected together, consisting of many of the nobility of his own nation. The fourth portion was for the use of all the neighbouring monasteries in all Saxony and Mercia, and also during some years, in turn, to the churches and servants of God dwelling in Britain (Wales), Cornwall, Gaul, Armorica, Northumbria, and sometimes also in Ireland; according to his means, he either distributed to them beforehand, or afterwards, if life and success should not fail him.

When the king had arranged these matters, he remembered that sentence of divine scripture, "Whosoever will give alms, ought to begin from himself," and prudently began to reflect what he could offer to God from the service of his body and mind; for he proposed to consecrate to God no less out of this than he had done of things external to himself. Moreover, he promised, as far as his infirmity and his means would allow, to give up to God the half of his services, bodily and mental, by night and by day, voluntarily, and with all his might; but, inasmuch as he could not equally distinguish the lengths of the hours by night, on account of the darkness, and oftentimes of the day, on account of the storms and clouds, he began to consider, by what means and without any difficulty, relying on the mercy of God, he might discharge the promised tenor of his vow until his death.

After long reflection on these things, he at length, by a useful and shrewd invention, commanded his chaplains to supply wax in a sufficient quantity, and he caused it to be weighed in such a manner that when there was so much of it in the scales, as would equal the weight of seventy-two pence, (58) he caused the chaplains to make six candles thereof, each of equal length, so that each candle might have twelve divisions (59) marked longitudinally upon it. By this plan, therefore, those six candles burned for twenty-four hours, a night and day, without fail, before the sacred relics of many of God's elect, which always accompanied him wherever he went; but sometimes when they would not continue burning a whole day and night, till the same hour that they were lighted the preceding evening, from the violence of the wind, which blew day and night without intermission through the doors and windows of the churches, the fissures of the divisions, the plankings, or the wall, or the thin canvass of the tents, they then unavoidably burned out and finished their course before the appointed time; the king therefore considered by what means he might shut out the wind, and so by a useful and cunning invention, he ordered a lantern to be beautifully constructed of wood and white ox-horn, which, when skilfully planed till it is thin, is no less transparent than a vessel of glass. This lantern, therefore, was wonderfully made of wood, and horn, as we before said, and by night a candle was put into it, which shone as brightly without as within, and was not extinguished by the wind; for the opening of the lantern was also closed up, according to the king's command, by a door made of horn.

By this contrivance, then, six candles, lighted in succession, lasted four and twenty hours, neither more nor less, and, when these were extinguished, others were lighted.

When all these things were properly arranged, the king, eager to give up to God the half of his daily service, as he had vowed, and more also, if his ability on the one hand, and his malady on the other, would allow him, showed himself a minute investigator of the truth in all his judgments, and this especially for the sake of the poor, to

The Life of King Alfred

whose interest, day and night, among other duties of this life, he ever was wonderfully attentive. For in the whole Kingdom the poor, besides him, had few or no protectors; for all the powerful and noble of that country had turned their thoughts rather to secular than to heavenly things: each was more bent on secular matters, to his own profit, than on the public good.

He strove also, in his own judgments, for the benefit of both the noble and the ignoble, who often perversely quarrelled at the meetings of his earls and officers, so that hardly one of them admitted the justice of what had been decided by the earls and prefects, and in consequence of this pertinacious and obstinate dissension, all desired to have the judgment of the king, and both sides sought at once to gratify their desire. But if any one was conscious of injustice on his side in the suit, though by law and agreement he was compelled, however reluctant, to go before the king, yet with his own good will he never would consent to go. For he knew, that in the king's presence no part of his wrong would be hidden; and no wonder, for the king was a most acute investigator in passing sentence, as he was in all other things. He inquired into almost all the judgments which were given in his own absence, throughout all his dominion, whether they were just or unjust. If he perceived there was iniquity in those judgments, he summoned the judges, either through his own agency, or through others of his faithful servants, and asked them mildly, why they had judged so unjustly; whether through ignorance or malevolence; i.e., whether for the love or fear of any one, or hatred of others; or also for the desire of money. At length, if the judges acknowledged they had given judgment because they knew no better, he discreetly and moderately reproved their inexperience and folly in such terms as these: "I wonder truly at your insolence, that, whereas by God's favour and mine, you have occupied the rank and office of the wise, you have neglected the studies and labours of the wise. Either, therefore, at once give up the discharge of the temporal duties which you hold, or endeavour more zealously to study the lessons of wisdom. Such are my commands." At these words the earls and prefects would tremble and endeavour to turn all their thoughts to the study of justice, so that, wonderful to say, almost all his earls, prefects, and officers, though unlearned from their cradles, were sedulously bent upon acquiring learning, choosing rather laboriously to acquire the knowledge of a new discipline than to resign their functions; but if any one of them from old age or slowness of talent was unable to make progress in liberal studies, he commanded his son, if he had one, or one of his kinsmen, or, if there was no other person to be had, his own freedman or servant, whom he had some time before advanced to the office of reading, to recite Saxon books before him night and day, whenever he had any leisure, and they lamented with deep sighs, in their inmost hearts, that in their youth they had never attended to such studies; and they blessed the young men of our days, who happily could be instructed in the liberal arts, whilst they execrated their own lot, that they had not learned these things in their youth, and now, when they are old, though wishing to learn them, they are unable. But this skill of young and old in acquiring letters, we have explained to the knowledge of the aforesaid king. (60)

ENDNOTES:

- (1) Wantage.
- (2) The Gewisse, generally understood to be the West Saxons.
- (3) Carisbrooke, as may be conjectured from the name, which is a combination of Wight and Caraburgh.
- (4) Wembury.
- (5) Minster.
- (6) Canterbury.
- (7) Oakley, in Surrey.
- (8) This is one of the few instances in the work in which the name Britannia applied to Wales.
- (9) Thanet.
- (10) Wilts.
- (11) Offa's dyke, between Wales and England.
- (12) Ingram supposes this to be Stonehenge. Staeningham, however, is the common reading, which Camden thinks is Steyning, in Sussex. The Saxon Chronicle, A.D. 855, states, that Ethelwulf was buried in Winchester.
- (13) We must understand this epithet as denoting his mother-in-law, Judith, rather than his own mother, who was dead in A.D. 856, when Alfred was not yet seven years old. When his

The Life of King Alfred

- father brought Judith from Franco Alfred was thirteen years old.
- (14) This nobleman occurs as a witness [Mucil, dux] to many Mercian charters, dated from A.D. 814 to 866.
 - (15) Inhabitants of Gainsborough.
 - (16) Englefield Green is about four miles from Windsor.
 - (17) Aston, in Berkshire.
 - (18) Stratclyde Britons.
 - (19) Cambridge.
 - (20) The Frome.
 - (21) They swore oaths to Alfred on the holy ring, says the Saxon Chronicle. The most solemn manner of swearing among the Danes and other northern nations was by their arms. Olaus Magnus, lib. viii. c. 2.
 - (22) Exeter.
 - (23) It is necessary to inform the reader that many passages of this work are modern interpolations, made in the old MS., by a later hand. The "Annals" referred to in the text are supposed not to be a genuine work of Asser.
 - (24) Swanwich, in Dorsetshire.
 - (25) This clause is a mere repetition of the preceding. See a former note in this page.
 - (26) Athelney, a morass formed by the conflux of the Thone and Parret.
 - (27) The original here is in Latin verse, and may therefore be rendered into English verse, but such as every housewife in Somersetshire would understand.
 - (28) Probably the sanguinary Ilubba.
 - (29) Or South Wales.
 - (30) Kynwith castle stood on the river Taw. Camden, p. 35.
 - (31) Now called Brixton Deverill, in Wilts.
 - (32) Selwood Forest extended from Frome to Burham, and was probably much larger at one time.
 - (33) Or Iglea. Supposed to be Leigh, now Westbury, Wilts.
 - (34) Wedmore is four miles and three quarters from Axbridge, in Somersetshire.
 - (35) In the Saxon Chronicle (A.D. 878) it is said, that Gothrun was baptized at Aller, and his "chrism-loosing" was at Wedmore. The "chrismal" was a white linen cloth put on the head at the administration of baptism, which was taken off at the expiration of eight days.
 - (36) Inhabitants of Gloucester, Worcester, and part of Warwickshire.
 - (37) This expression paints in strong colours the unfortunate and divided state of England at this period, for it shows that the Danes had settled possession of parts of it. In fact, all traces of the heptarchy, or ancient division of the island into provinces, did not entirely disappear until some years after the Norman conquest.
 - (38) Not the river Stour, in Kent; but the Stour which divides Essex from Suffolk. Lambard fixes the battle at Harwich haven.
 - (39) Or, Old Saxons.
 - (40) St. Guerir's church was at Ham Stroke, in Cornwall.
 - (41) An interesting account of St. Neot will be found in Gorham's "History and Antiquities of Eynesbury and St. Neot's".
 - (42) Grimbald was provost of St. Omer's.
 - (43) John had been connected with the monastery of Corbie.
 - (44) East Dene (or Dean) and West Dene are two villages near Chichester. There are also other villages of the same name near East Bourne.
 - (45) This expression alludes to the tonsure, which was undergone

The Life of King Alfred

by those who became clerks. For a description of the ecclesiastical tonsure see Bede's "Ecclesiastical History" p. 160.

- (46) The original Latin continues, "Et illa adjuvaretur per rudimenta Sancti Degui in omni causa, tamen pro viribus," which I do not understand, and therefore cannot translate.
- (47) A petty prince of South Wales.
- (48) Or St. Dewi. Probably by the "parish" of St. Degnus is meant the "diocese" of St. David's. Hence it is said, that Alfred gave to Asser the whole parish (omnis parochia) of Exeter.
- (49) Archbishop of St. David's.
- (50) Amesbury, in Wilts.
- (51) In Somersetshire.
- (52) Wessex.
- (53) The whole of this paragraph concerning Oxford is thought to be an interpolation, because it is not known to have existed in more than one MS. copy.
- (54) Hyde Abbey.
- (55) This must consequently have been written in A.D. 888.
- (56) Wise conjectures that we ought to read Hiberiae, "Spain", and not Hiberniae, "Ireland", in this passage.
- (57) Not the celebrated John Scotus Eregina.
- (58) Denarii.
- (59) Unciae pollicus.
- (60) Some of the MSS. record, in a note or appendix written by a later hand, that king Alfred died on the 26th of October, A.D. 900, in the thirtieth of his reign. "The different dates assigned to the death of Alfred," says Sir Francis Palgrave, "afford singular proof of the uncertainty arising from various modes of computation. The 'Saxon Chronicle' and Florence of Worcester agree in placing the event in 901. The first 'six nights before All Saints'; the last, with more precision, 'Indictione quarta, et Feria quarta, 5 Cal. Nov.' Simon of Durham, in 889, and the Saxon Chronicle, in another passage, in 900. The concurrents of Florence of Worcester seem to afford the greatest certainty, and the date of 901 has therefore been preferred."