Wulfere, the son of Penda, regains the dominion of Mercia, and is conquered of Wessex. Ethelbald succeeds to his power, but yields to the West Saxons, upon whom he had partly imposed his yoke. Offa, who has written his name upon the great dyke reaching from the neighbourhood of Chester to the Wye, subjugates the ancient Britons, and ravages their territory; whilst the whole of the Anglo-Saxon states submit to his empire. Amidst these changes of fortune,—dire reverses, and horrible triumphs,—which were only partially brought to an end when Egbert of Wessex attained something like a supremacy at the beginning of the ninth century, and England had taken a place amongst the Christian communities of Europe,—it is consoling to turn from the outrages of barbarous chieftains to the contemplation of the learned and the pious, in their peaceful cells, keeping alive that flame of knowledge which without them might have been extinguished for ages. Out of his cloisters at Iona the light of piety and learning is first shed by Columba over the darkness of the northern Picts. Wilfred, the Bishop of York, builds churches in his diocese; and also teaches industrial arts to the South Saxons. Benedict Biscop, the Abbot of Wearmouth, fills his monastery with books and pictures which he brought from Rome. Cædmon, the cowherd, sings The Creation, and the Fall, in strains which have obtained for him the name of the Saxon Milton. Adhelm, whose Anglo-Latin poetry manifests his accomplishments,—a minstrel as well as a poet,—stands upon the bridge of Malmesbury, and as the peasants pass to and fro, gathers a crowd to listen to some of the popular songs to the accompaniment of his harp, and gradually weaves into the verses holy words of exhortation. Bede, a monk of undoubted genius and vast learning, sits in his cell at Jarrow, and amidst other worthy monuments of his piety and knowledge, gathers the obscure history of his country out of doubtful annals and imperfect traditions, weaving them into a narrative which we feel to be a conscientious one, however intermixed with stories which we, somewhat presumptuously, term superstitious. These men, and many illustrious fellow-labourers, struggled through the days of heathendom, and scarcely saw the full establishment of Christianity in this land. But the influences of what they taught gradually wrought that change which made the English one nation, under one creed. In the meantime knowledge is leading on to general civilisation. "The darkness begins to break; and the country which had been lost to view as Britain re-appears as England." *

* Macaulay.

CHAPTER VI.

Egbert at the Court of Charlemagne.—A'cuin.—Egbert, King of Wessex.—Reduces the other provinces to his supremacy.—The Northmen, or Danes.—Their ravages in England and France.—Ethelwulf.—Birth of Alfred.—His early years.—His sojourn at Rome.—Ethelbald.—Ethelbert.—Alfred's residence with Ethelbert.—Social ranks.—Rural Industry.

It is the last year of the eighth century. There is an English exile at the Court of Charlemagne, who, for thirteen years, has been a humble follower of the fortunes of the great king of the Franks. Egbert, the son of Alckmund, king of Kent, aspired to the crown of the West Saxons; but Beortric was preferred. Each claimed to be descended from Cerdic. Egbert fled to Offa, king of Mercia; but when Offa gave his daughter Edburga in marriage to Beortric there was no longer safety for him with a king to whom treachery and assassination were familiar instruments of his will. Charlemagne was one of those remarkable men whose influence M. Guizot has justly described: "Why a great man comes at a particular epoch, and what force of his own he puts into the development of the world, no one can say. This is the secret of Providence; but nevertheless the fact is certain." * Such a man does sometimes come to put an end to anarchy and social stagnation—a terrible and often a tyrannical power. Such a man was Charlemagne. He drove back the barbarian forces that were pressing forward against the establishment of European civilisation, by his power as a conqueror. He reduced the scattered elements of authority and justice into a system, by his skill as an administrator. He gave the grape of the South to the shores of the Rhine, and otherwise extended the domain of fertility, as a physical improver. He raised up the real civilising power of knowledge to render his triumphs of war and peace of permanent utility, by his zeal as a patriot and his sympathy as a student. In this school was Egbert, the Kentish exile, educated. As he marched with the armies of the great king against the Lombards and the Bavarians, the Huns and the Saxons, he saw war upon as grand a scale as the world had

* Civilisation en Europe. Troisième Leçon.

ever beheld. Compared with the artillery of modern times, the catapults of Charles were feeble instruments. But his myriads of armed tributaries, sweeping the countries from the Rhone to the Danube, or descending from the Alps like swarms of locusts, struck terror into the nations that he came to reduce to his obedience. Wherever he marched there was the same mighty array of horses and foot, drawn from all the provinces of his empire; and round the mailed conqueror ever gathered a train of bishops and priests, singing rejoicing hymns, as the terrible sword "Gaudiosa" gleamed in the eyes of the idolatrous Saxons or the rebellious Italians.* Fearful were the massacres of those who refused to accept Christianity at the hands of the remorseless Frank. We gladly turn from such scenes to look at the great Charles pursuing his bloodless victories over ignorance and anarchy—the lawgiver and the schoolmaster. The latter would seem a strange title to give to a man who had headed fifty-three expeditions against Saxons, Lombards, Arabs, Thuringians, Huns, Bretons, Bavarians, Slavonians, Saracens, Danes, Greeks, and Aquitanians.† Charlemagne had a school in which he received many pupils; and selected his professors from the most accomplished scholars of his age. The chief professor was Alcuin, an Englishman. It was not only a school for teaching Latin and Greek, but a school for "common things." Wherever the king travelled, this "School of the Palace" went with him; and there his sons, his daughters, his sisters, his privy-councillors, his clergy, in companionship with himself, received their lessons of elementary knowledge. From a specimen which has been preserved of these lessons, it would appear that, in the form of dialogue, the "Seven Sciences, such as they were then known, were taught in a very attractive shape; and these were mixed up with enigmatical questions which acted as a spur upon the mental activity of the learners. In this school, no doubt, Egbert of Kent was taught. Frequent, we may presume, were his conversations with his countryman Alcuin upon the future destinies of that England from which he was an exile; and which Alcuin looked upon as a land which was doomed to a long night of barbarity. For the Northmen had begun their devastations. The monastery of Lindisfarne was ravaged, and its monks slaughtered. From that time Alcuin had his home with the great Frank.

It is the year 800, and Charlemagne is about to be crowned at

* Such is the name of Charlemagne's sword in the Romance writers.
† See the Table of his expeditions in Guizot.

Rome as the Emperor of the West. There comes to his court a singular fugitive, Edburga, queen of Beortric, who had thrust Egbert from the throne of Wessex. The daughter of Offa is a murderess. She attempted to poison a friend of her husband; and both drank of the fatal cup, and died. The people have expelled her from the country. Charlemagne, according to a story which looks authentic, asks her if she will have him for a new husband, or have his son. She chose the younger; when the king replied that she should have neither, but if she had chosen him she might have married the son. This, if true, was the royal banter towards a guilty woman, whose evil deeds ultimately sunk her into the lowest depths of wretchedness. But her guilt placed Egbert on the throne of Wessex. He returned to his country; and was at once chosen as the successor of Beortric. Charlemagne, it is said, gave his own sword as a parting gift. But he had given him something better. He had shown him what a man of large capacity may do as an organiser of society. Egbert went forth from his foreign school; and, during his reign of thirty-six years, he accomplished that consolidation of authority which justified him in taking the title of King of England.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, under the year 800, has this record: "Ecgbryht succeeded to the kingdom of the West Saxons. And the same day Æthelmund ealdorman rode out from the Huiccii at Cynemæresford (Kempsford). Then Weostan the ealdorman with the men of Wiltshire met him. There was a great fight, and both the ealdormen were slain, and the men of Wiltshire got the victory." The Huiccii, or Wiccii, were men of Worcestershire and Warwickshire; and thus the accession of Egbert is signalised by a battle between people having the same origin, speaking the same language, separated only by a river. What was the work, then, which was before the new king to accomplish before the land could have rest and security? To put down these petty conflicts of tribes and chieftains, and reduce them to submission to one dominant power. It was a tedious and a fearful work. After a few years of repose the people of Cornwall and Wales were in commotion; as their brethren of Armorica were also revolting against Charlemagne. There was always this sympathy between the Britons on either side of the Channel. They were put down; and Cornwall was nominally united with Wessex, but remained free from Anglo-Saxon occupation for centuries, during which the people preserved their own language. In Mercia there was usurpa-

tion and anarchy. Egbert seized the opportunity, and asserted that supremacy which Wessex never lost. The battle of Ellendune (Wilton)—the great struggle between Egbert and Beornwulf—was fought in 823. Henry of Huntingdon, quoting, it is supposed, an old poem, says,—"Ellendune's stream was tinged with blood, and was choked with the slain, and became foul with the carnage." In 827, Northumbria had submitted to the king who had conquered the whole country south of the Humber.

How rapidly England under one ruler might have repaired the never-ceasing warfare of three centuries was not yet to be manifested. There was an enemy coming upon the Anglo-Saxon power far more to be dreaded than the Welch or the Picts. It was that enemy that had even dared to pillage the coasts of France during the life of the great Charles; and that moved that stern conqueror to shed prophetic tears over the impending fate of his empire, when he saw the piratical flag in the Mediterranean. The enemy, whose race was destined to make two successive conquests of England, was the Dane, so called. He came at first for pillage to the estuaries and rivers of Gaul and Britain. In a few years he came to both countries for territory. Before the century was over, East Anglia and Northumbria were the prizes of the Northmen; and in a few years more they were finally established in that noble province of France to which they gave their name.

The Northmen were designated as Danes by the Anglo-Saxons, but they were not exclusively natives of Denmark. Their home was the sea. The ancient Scandinavia could never have been very fully peopled; and a thousand years ago the coasts only were populous. Malthus considers that the superfluity of inhabitants in the countries of the Baltic was a cause of their predatory expeditions and enforced settlements, which assumed so formidable a shape in the ninth century.* The law of primogeniture has been more satisfactorily assigned as a cause; for there was no want of soil on which an increasing population might subsist. "The eldest son of an aristocratic house inherited the family property. The younger ones were not indeed quartered on their own country, but were sent forth in ships, for the purpose of plundering the happier lands of the south. From these expeditions the idea first sprang of making permanent conquests, which ended in the establishment of Scandinavian dynasties in England."† The son of a king or chief,

* Principle of Population, book i. chap. vi.
† Thorpe, note in Lappenberg, vol. ii. p. 17.

who had a maritime command, was termed a Viking; and thus we term generally those fierce captains, whose ravages afflicted our country, so exposed to their incursions. They came not, at first, in such swarms as could at once take possession of territory, and hold it. They came in numerous small vessels, in which they penetrated narrow rivers, and poured down upon defenceless villages and unprotected houses of religion. One of their heavy boats, by which they had reached Paris towards the end of the ninth century, was dug up in 1806 near the Champ-de-Mars, the keel hollowed out from a single piece of timber.* If there was obstruction in a river, the crews would drag their boats on shore, and carry them forward till they had passed the rocks or the shallows. They distracted and terrified the peaceful inhabitants by their combined attacks upon different points. Henry of Huntingdon has described their system with picturesque simplicity:—"It was wonderful how, when the English kings were hastening to encounter them in the eastern districts, before they could fall in with the enemy's bands, a hurried messenger would arrive and say, 'Sir King, whither are you marching? The heathens have disembarked from a countless fleet on the southern coast, and are ravaging the towns and villages, carrying fire and sword into every quarter.' The same day another messenger would come running, and say, 'Sir King, whither are you retreating? A formidable enemy has landed in the west of England, and if you do not quickly turn your face toward them, they will think you are fleeing, and follow in your rear with fire and sword.' Again, the same day, or on the morrow, another messenger would arrive, saying, 'What place, O noble chiefs, are you making for? The Danes have made a descent in the north; already they have burnt your mansions; even now they are sweeping away your goods; they are tossing your young children raised on the points of their spears; your wives, some they have forcibly dishonoured, others they have carried off.'"† This is a vivid picture, scarcely over-coloured as to the cruel barbarism of these Northmen, and corresponding generally with what we learn from other sources. What these fierce assailants were doing on the Thames and the Parret, they were doing at the same period on the Seine and the Loire.

Egbert died in 837, and was succeeded by his eldest son, Ethelwulf. During the supremacy of Egbert there were still tribu-

* Palgrave, Normandy and England, vol. i. p. 615.
† Chronicle. Translated by Thomas Forester, preface to book v.

tary kings; and, too often, the contests for a vacant throne left large provinces, such as Northumbria, more exposed than ever to the ravages of the Northmen. Ethelwulf deputed the governments of Kent, Essex, Surrey and Sussex, to his son Æthelstan. This divided sovereignty was probably a fatal obstacle to unity of action in the defence of the country. The same causes operated in France after the division of the empire on the death of Charlemagne. Sir Francis Palgrave has truly said of this portion of our history—which more or less applies to all our history—that "Anglo-Saxon history must be read in parallel with the history of France."* In the middle of the ninth century the terrible Vikings ranged over the English Channel,—now landing in Devonshire to be defeated; now worsted in a sea-fight at Sandwich; now wintering in the Isle of Thanet, or, according to some chroniclers, in Sheppey. Then they arrive with a mighty fleet at the mouth of the Thames,—plunder Canterbury; sail up to London; and, penetrating into Surrey, are defeated and driven back by Ethelwulf and his son Ethelbald. "The warriors fell on both sides, like corn in harvest."† It was indifferent to these marauders on which side of the channel they carried forward their unceasing hostilities. Rouen they occupied, and re-occupied. In 845, after a winter of terrible severity, they entered Paris, on a chilling Easter-eve, having everywhere left the traces of their ravages along the banks of the Seine, on whose eyots they raised gibbets, and whose overhanging trees bent beneath the load of stiffened victims. Their chief was Regner Lodbrok, whose later history is fatally connected with England. The inhabitants fled from Paris, resigning the city to the plunderers. Charles the Bald, by an enormous subsidy, bought off their retreat. Again and again they ravaged the countries which were bordered by the Seine and the Loire; and France appears to have had no rest from their attacks till they in some measure concentrated their forces upon a great attempt to possess themselves of all our island.

We are entering upon an epoch with the general outline of which every Englishman is supposed to be familiar,—that of Alfred. The great Saxon was born in 849. It might be supposed that in travelling over the recorded events from his birth to his death, in 901, there was no duty for the compiler of a popular history but to take the leading facts narrated by more diffuse compilers, and to weave them into a plain and consistent story. The

* Normandy and England, vol. i. p. 476. † Henry of Huntingdon.

salient points might be thought sufficient to command attention, without any very minute investigation of authorities. Thus, following Hume, we might record that, at twelve years old, Alfred was "totally ignorant of the lowest elements of literature;" that "encouraged by the queen," (a convenient term for his mother or step-mother) he learned to read; that he soon became a diligent student, but, shaking off his literary indolence, devoted himself to the duties of a king; that he was driven from his throne, and became the servant of a neat-herd; went as a harper to the Danish camp; finally recovered his dominions; divided England into counties, hundreds, and tithings; made property so secure that he hung up golden bracelets in the highways, which no pilferer dared to touch; instituted trial by jury; and framed a code of laws, which are the foundation of our common law. Looking into the evidence of all these matters, and finding that many things are doubtful and some untrue, how are we to tell the story of Alfred, when the sunlight of romance is no longer gleaming around it, and we have to sound our way amidst meagre annals and dim traditions? when his biography, attributed to Asser, is held to be written by a monk of the succeeding century, instead of by his own bosom friend?* when Alfred himself is proclaimed by some to be a mere creation of modern ignorance and bombast? There is quite enough remaining of the authentic and credible to make Alfred one of the most interesting and important persons in our country's history;—and we proceed.

King Ethelwulf had four sons and a daughter. His wife was Osburga, the daughter of Oslac, his cup-bearer. At a time when nobility was derived from personal service upon the king, the cup-bearer was amongst the most honoured of the royal officers. Osburga was of the race of Cerdic, from whom Ethelwulf himself derived his lineage. The eldest son Ethelbald was aiding his father in a great battle against the Danes in 850. The youngest, Alfred, was born the year before. The eldest had arrived at manhood when the youngest was an infant in his father's halls at Wantage. The king, like the great body of the freemen, was a landowner. He had larger hereditary possessions than others; he was surrounded by wealthy and noble retainers; his life was put at a higher value than any other member of the community; he was the first in rank and in power; he presided over public deliber-

* Wright's Biographia Britannica Literaria, p. 411.

ations; he was the chief magistrate; he was the head of the national levies, which he could call out for attack or defence. But the estates of others were independent of his control. He claimed no absolute lordship, as in the feudal system. He had tolls upon markets, and dues upon mines; he received voluntary gifts, and a portion of the fines levied upon offenders. But he seized upon no possessions of others; holding his own by inheritance or purchase. He disposed of his acquired property by will as any other owner, although certain estates always went with the crown. That property was scattered about the country. Alfred was born at the royal house at Wantage. Ethelswitha, his only sister, was married to the king of Mercia in another royal house at Chippenham. In these mansions there was no great pomp, and very little of what we call comfort. The king had a large body of thanes, his friends and servants—his defenders and ministers. They were the leaders in his wars—they were the comptrollers in his household. Great ecclesiastics, too, lived in fellowship with him, and assisted in his councils. The learning of the Church often gave an important direction to the rougher impulses of the Crown. But little of the regal splendour of feudality had yet arisen. The king wore his golden circlet; his nobles had their golden-hilted swords. There were banquets and there were processions. The king and his ealdormen sate upon the high seat, and the wine-cup was served; and the warriors and attendants stood around, and for them were the drinking-horns duly filled. But the slavish homage of the vassal to the suzerain belonged not to the personal independence of the Saxon times. We may imagine, then, the family arrangements amidst which the child Alfred was reared, as regards the kingly position of his father. Considerable doubt rests upon the narrative of Asser as to the nurture which he received from his mother. Asser records the public events of the kingdom up to the year 866, when Alfred was in his eighteenth year, and then proceeds thus:—"I think 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. . . . 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."* He listened, it is added, to the Saxon poems which he often heard recited, and easily retained them in his memory. He was a zealous practiser of hunting in all its varieties. At this age, then, of twelve years, "his genius," according to Hume, "was first roused by the recital of Saxon poems, in which the queen took delight;" and "he soon learned to read those compositions, and proceeded thence to acquire a knowledge of the Latin tongue." This theory is built upon the charming story of Asser, that one day, when his mother was showing him and his brothers a volume of Saxon poems, with illuminated letters, she said, "whichever of you shall soonest learn this book, to him will I give it." The youngest of the three brothers—Ethelbert, Ethelred, and Alfred—made himself certain of the conditions. "Will you assuredly give that book to one of us,—will you give it to him who may first be able to understand and repeat it to you?" "Most certainly I will," said the mother, laughingly and joyfully. The boy "carried it to his teacher, and read it; and after he had read it, he brought it back to his mother and recited it." The story evidently belongs to a much earlier period of Alfred's life than that of his twelfth year. In his fourth or fifth year he is sent by his father to Rome. Two years after, Ethelwulf himself journeys to Rome; and, after a sojourn of twelve months, returns through France; and, staying awhile at the court of the French King, Charles the Bald, marries Judith, his daughter, and carries her to England as his lawful queen. Was Osburga, the mother of Alfred, dead? Was she divorced? Of her death, or of her divorce, the chroniclers make no mention. In two years after this French marriage Ethelwulf died. Judith, who was a child of thirteen when the old man married her, became the wife of his son, Ethelbald. This marriage of his step-mother was against the canons of the Church; and Judith was sent back to her father. That she should have been the enthusiastic lover of Saxon poetry, who excited the emulation of Alfred and his elder brothers, is an absurdity. That Ethelwulf, who was in all things devoted to the maintenance of the authority of the Church, should have repudiated his wife without any express cause, and without ecclesiastical sanction, is most unlikely. The probability is, that Osburga died in Alfred's very early years; and that the story of the Saxon book of poems was a tradi-

* The words of Asser are, "illiteratus permansit." This certainly does not warrant Hume's interpretation, "totally ignorant of the lowest elements of literature," even if we accept Asser's "twelve years old" as correct.

tion, which showed the precocious talent of the child of four or five years old, and has nothing to do with the acquirements of the youth of twelve.

Alfred, we have mentioned, was sent to Rome in his fourth or fifth year. In 853, says the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, "King Ethelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome." In 855, we find in the same record, "King Ethelwulf went to Rome in great state, and dwelt there twelve months, and then returned homewards." His marriage, and his death about two years afterwards, are subsequently recorded. We have then, in one of the MSS. of this Chronicle, the following entry: "Alfred, his third [fourth] son, he had sent to Rome; and *when Pope Leo heard say that Ethelwulf was dead*, he consecrated Alfred king, and held him as his spiritual son at confirmation, even as his father Ethelwulf had requested on sending him thither." This remarkable passage appears to us to have been overlooked by our historians. The second journey to Rome of Alfred, with his father, is distinctly recorded by Asser, although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle only mentions the first. But in neither authority is it recorded that Alfred returned with his father. Was Alfred, at five years old, sent to Rome for his education? Did he remain at Rome till after the death of his father, and was he then consecrated king? Ethelwulf died in 858, when Alfred was nine years old.*

It is impossible to believe that a residence in Rome should have been without an enduring influence upon the mind of such a boy as Alfred. In the ninth century many of the glorious monuments of the republic and the empire had been preserved from time and the barbarian. The Coliseum had been plundered of its ornaments; but the majestic walls, though stripped of the metal clamps which bound each massy stone to the other, stood as if defying the petty spoliation. Bede has recorded the admiration with which the Saxon pilgrims regarded this mighty monument, when they exclaimed, "As long as the Coliseum stands, Rome shall stand; when the Coliseum falls, Rome will fall; when Rome falls, the world will fall."† The noble Pantheon was little injured. Baths, triumphal arches, columns, some little mutilated, some half-destroyed, would present themselves to the wonder of the young islander. In the

* In Alexander Cook's curious "Dialogue between a Protestant and a Papist" (1610), the Papist asserts that Alfred was educated at Rome; and is answered by the Protestant, contending that at twelve years old he could not read. See "Harleian Miscellany."

† See Gibbon, chap. lxxi. Byron has paraphrased this in "Childe Harold," canto iv.

splendid Basilicas, adapted to the uses of the Christian worship, would be seen the models of the cathedrals, however inferior their size and decorations, which had been erected in England. The pageantry of the sovereign pontiff, surrounded by bishops and abbots, and followed by crowds of pious supplicants, would be exhibited in many a long procession. The services of the altar would be conducted upon a scale of magnificence, of which Alfred had seen no example in his father's cathedral at Winchester. Were these impressions to produce no effect, beyond that of passing wonder, on the mind of a youth with ardent curiosity and an insatiable desire of knowledge? Was there no one to associate in his rapid comprehension the memories of the past with his aspirations for the future? It is said that the famous bishop Swithin accompanied the boy to Rome. It is known that Ethelwulf rebuilt at Rome the Saxon school which had been destroyed by fire. That school was especially set apart for the liberal education of the priests and nobles of England who sought instruction in the great metropolis of Christendom. Is it unlikely that the son of Ethelwulf should himself have derived advantage from his father's munificence?

Ethelbald, the eldest brother of Alfred, had met Ethelwulf with unfilial hostility when he returned from France with his young wife; and before Ethelwulf's death this son had, by a compulsory partition, attained the dominion of Wessex. The father bequeathed Kent and his other dominions to his second son Ethelbert. After the death of Ethelbald, if he were childless, the succession of Wessex was left to Ethelred, the third son, and to Alfred. In little more than two years after the decease of his father, king Ethelbald dies. Alfred is now twelve years old. The two younger brothers assert no claim to the separate sovereignty, and Ethelbert of Kent is king also of the other dominions. There is no doubt that Alfred lived with his reigning brother, as documents exist bearing both their signatures. He, as well as Ethelred, had given up the patrimonial inheritance to him who was to maintain the dignity of the family and the safety of the kingdom. The Danes were again in fierce activity. They landed at Southampton, and plundered Winchester. They landed in Thanet, and kept Kent in terror by their predatory incursions. The island counties were the safest; and we may contemplate Alfred dwelling in his birthplace. From the accession of Ethelbert in 860, to his death in 866, Alfred is without responsibility, except that of self-improvement. He is of weak health; but

he leads no sedentary life. Asser distinguishes between "manly arts, such as hunting," and "liberal arts." Alfred saw that, however excellent were books, there were other means of education; and thus he became, not only the great warrior and statesman, but the most practical improver of the people, elevating their knowledge and exciting their industry. He taught workers of gold and other artificers how best to labour in their crafts. He instructed his falconers, hawkers, and dog-keepers. He built houses, majestic and good beyond all the precedents of his ancestors, by his new mechanical inventions. Thus Asser describes his later life. But he must have learned these things experimentally, before he could have been a teacher. Let us endeavour to trace what would have been his industrial and social experience in the royal home of Wantage.

That district of remarkable fertility, now known as the Vale of White Horse, was favourably situated as a regal possession. Its rich arable land would yield wheat and barley, while the verdant slopes of the chalk hills would maintain numerous flocks and herds. The surrounding woods would give food to abundance of swine, and supply the indispensable necessary of fuel. All around would be ample forests and unenclosed commons, well fitted for the chase. The Thames, at no great distance, would furnish a highway for the conveyance of merchandise from the towns upon its banks. But upon the royal estate would be produced nearly all that would be required for the support of the household. The principal dwelling would have few of the attributes of palatial splendour. A series of low buildings, with addition after addition, according to the wants of the family, it would claim no admiration for its grand or beautiful features. No well-tended lawns or picturesque trees would give to its surrounding pastures the character of the garden. A rough utility would preside over every arrangement. The stall-fed cattle would be in close vicinity to the dwelling. The dogs and the hawks would have their kennel and their mews not far removed from the ladies' bower-chambers and the priests' chapel. The grinding-slaves at their hand-mills would be in close attendance upon the bakery; and the fragrant wort of the brewery would mingle its steams with the thin smoke of the wood-fire in the hall. In various adjoining buildings would live the agricultural and handicraft serfs —the plowmen, the woodmen, the herdsmen, the shepherds. There would be the forge of the smith, and the bench of the carpenter, close at hand. The women would ply the spindle, and the weaver

would throw his shuttle, to produce the coarse garments of the household. Adjoining lands would be leased out upon a tenure of dues or service. Rents would come in, but in the primitive shape of flitches of bacon, geese, hens, cheese, eggs, honey, and ambers of ale. Hedging and ditching, ploughing and shearing, fishing and road-making, would be done for service.* Every large household, whether of the king or the ealdorman, had thus, in a greater or less degree, an independent existence. The land was the great source of wealth. A few articles of necessity, such as salt, had in many instances to be obtained by exchange. The cups of silver and gold, the furs and the silks of kingly houses, were, in most cases, presents. The life even of the highest was simple, and not without cares and labour. But it called forth many exercises of ingenuity which are not thought of in states of society where every want is commercially supplied, where there are abundant stores, and ready communication. It was a life of earnest work, and therefore not unfavourable to mental activity. It was under its healthful influences that Alfred educated himself for the higher duties of the defender and the teacher of his people.

Alfred, the king, before he came to the throne, had made himself well acquainted with the condition of the population over which he was to rule. His translation of Boetius, "from Latin to the English phrase," has many original passages introduced, which are incidental illustrations of the state of society. For example: he says, "These are the materials of a king's work, and his tools to govern with; that he have his land fully peopled; that he should have prayer-men, and army-men, and workmen." The peopling of the land was derived from a systematic occupation, and not a chance establishment of large migratory bands. The hide of land was the estate of one family. There are calculations in Bede's Ecclesiastical History, and in later authorities, as to the number of hides in particular places, such as the Isle of Thanet, and the Isle of Wight; and, making due allowance for waste land, common land, and woods, it is supposed that the hide of arable was from thirty to forty acres. As families multiplied, generation after generation, the enclosed land gradually extended on every side; so that we may understand the meaning of a passage which immediately follows Alfred's description of "the materials of a king's work." He says, "These are also his materials, that with these tools he should have provision for these three classes; and their provision then is, land

* See Kemble's "Saxons in England," book i. chap. xi.

to inhabit, and gifts, and weapons, and meat, and ale, and clothes, and what else that these three classes need." The great point of contest between the British races and the Saxon settlers was "the land to inhabit;" and so, we may assume, was the contest after the first settlements, between neighbouring tribes—between Mercians and West-Saxons, East Anglian and Northumbrians. Out of this "land to inhabit" were to come the supplies of these various classes—gifts for the prayer-men; weapons for the army-men; meat, and ale, and clothes for all. With regard to the prayer-men, there were not only the monastic establishments, and parish churches in great number, but resident priests in the houses of the rich and powerful. The prayer-men undoubtedly formed a very large body; and by their influence in the transition-period through which England had passed from heathendom to Christianity—and was still passing, with heathendom assaulting the country in its most ferocious attributes—their services were as essential to the welfare and preservation of the State as those of the army-men. Yet they had deteriorated as scholars, when compared with their predecessors of the seventh and eighth centuries, when the cloisters of England sent forth the best teachers of the schools of continental Europe. And yet, though their learning was not conspicuous in the time of Alfred, their continued practice of the civilizing arts preserved the land, during its intestine struggles, in a condition far removed from barbarism. The Church kept the island in a connexion with the European community under the Roman ecclesiastical authority; and thus prevented it halting while other countries were progressing. In their own localities the clergy were necessarily advancing the great arts of life. They kept alive the emulation of the cultivators. They had the trimmest gardens and the most productive orchards. Their ponds were stored with the choicest fish. They practised the healing arts before medicine and surgery were professions. They were the transcribers of books. Their breviaries and chronicles were adorned with pictorial representations, more powerful often than words. They were musicians. They were architects. When Alfred therefore said that when he ascended the throne there were very few on his side the Humber who could understand their daily prayers in English, or translate any writing from the Latin, he meant to describe that sleep of the soul which belongs to all functionaries who cleave to the letter and not to the spirit of their duties. They mumbled their mass-books, as some of their successors continued to mumble

them for centuries. The Latin words passed from their lips, but they could not interpret the sense of other Latin. Above all, they could not adapt knowledge to popular instruction in "the English phrase." There were schoolmasters amongst us at a time not very distant, when such ignorance and such indifference to the wants of the many were not uncommon. The elevation of the great body of the people is the best corrective of the ignorance of classes; and Alfred, in his later life, laboured to accomplish this in his limited field of utility. His acute perception of the wants of the people led him to express himself strongly as to the deficiencies of the churchmen.

The army-men, who were to be provided with weapons, were the *posse-comitatus*—the national levies, headed by the king, his ealdormen, and his inferior nobles. The freemen constituted the armed force of the shire, and the ealdorman of the shire was their chief. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle we constantly read of the ealdorman winning or losing a battle, of the ealdorman being slain, of the king and the ealdorman engaged together in warfare. The divisions of the country into shires, hundreds, tithings, made the calling out of these levies a matter of well-ordered arrangement. During a period of alarm, such as that upon which we are entering, every town and village must have had its band of army-men organised and disciplined, ready to follow the summons of their legal chief. The burghers were associated in their guilds, under their portreeve or their bishop. The villagers joined hide to hide, and tithing to tithing, for common defence. How they fought, this sturdy Anglo-Saxon race, needs no eulogy—"Our blood is fet from fathers of war-proof."

Let us glance at the third class of tools that a king must govern with—the workmen. Unhappily, the greater number of them are serfs; but the king knows full well that they must have due provision for their physical wants—meat, and ale, and clothes, and what else is needful. In the cold and uncertain climate of our island the workman will not subsist upon a dish of lentils; or bask, half-naked, under a bright sun. If he works diligently he must be well fed, clothed, and housed. The agricultural labourers are the first to be considered. The ordinary operations of husbandry have varied little in principle during a thousand years. There are some dialogues for popular instruction, written in the tenth century, which quaintly describe many of the industrial occupations, and which, although often quoted, must be slightly noticed here.* In

* See Turner's Anglo-Saxons, vol. ii.

these dialogues, composed by Alfric of Canterbury, the ploughman says,—"I labour much. I go out at daybreak, urging the oxen to the field, and I yoke them to the plough." He sees the shear and the coulter fastened; he has a boy to impel them with a goad; and the poor lad is hoarse with cold and bawling. The ploughman further says, "I am bound to plough every day a full acre or more." The herdsman says,—"When the ploughman separates the oxen, I lead them to the meadows; and all night I stand watching over them on account of thieves; and again, in the morning, I take them to the plough well-fed and watered." In the old series of illuminations to illustrate the Saxon Calendar, which Mr. Strutt first engraved,* the sower closely follows at the heels of the ploughman. In another illumination the gardeners are lopping their fruit-trees and pruning their vines. October was the wyn-monat, or wine-month; and ancient drawings give us the wine-press and the vine-picker. Of the cultivation of the vine in England there can be no doubt, however partial was the growth as to more or less favoured localities. Bede says that the island "produces vines in some places." The religious houses undoubtedly had vineyards. Camden imputes the non-cultivation of the grape for wine to the sloth of the people in his more modern times. Commerce, which gives us what other lands can produce better than our own, drove out the native cultivation of what was truly unfitted for our climate, if we regard the essential condition of quality. In other rude drawings we have the labourer in the hay-harvest, with the scythe and the rake. Others exhibit the various operations of the corn-harvest—the reaping, the sheafing, the carrying. The shepherd, in the old colloquy, describes his duties:—"In the first part of the morning I drive my sheep to their pasture, and stand over them in heat and cold with my dogs, lest the wolves destroy them. I lead them back to their folds, and milk them twice a day; and I move their folds, and make cheese and butter, and am faithful to my lord." The dense woods which surrounded every seat of the cultivators, forming an original boundary of peculiar sanctity, and latterly a safeguard against marauders, were filled with swine. They fed in common, as in the New Forest within our own times, though they were individual property. There, too, ranged the wild boar, sometimes startling the woodmen as they bore home the winter fuel in the loaded wain; and now pursued by the hunter, with his bold dogs and his trusty spear. The festivities of the holy month of

* "Manners, Customs, &c., of the Inhabitants of England," vol. i.

December were gladdened by the presence of the boar's head. It told of bold adventures akin to warfare—of youths trained up to hardihood and defiance of danger. At that season the noise of the flail was heard in the barn; and the wheat and the barley were stored in the granary. Those who had abundance feasted in their halls; but the poor were not wholly disregarded. There was a fund for the poor which was a part of the tithe of the church; there were altar oblations. The Saxon law for the poor was strictly a law of settlement; and as the serf was compelled to remain in one place and one service, his lord was also obliged to provide for him. But there were miserable wanderers who had no legal provision, who must have depended upon private benevolence. In some years, too, a bad season produced a general or local distress; and the natural laws which regulated price were inoperative in a country of limited communication. Then the lord and the lady distributed alms at the hall-door. Etymologists have disputed whether these titles were derived from the Saxon words, which mean loaf-giver. One old illumination shows us a royal or noble house, with its attendant warriors, its priests, and its chapel, with the poor receiving food from the heads of the household. It is a rude work, but its authenticity is undoubted.

Such were some of the influences of a rural life amidst which Alfred was reared. They brought him into connexion with the people; and thus fitted him for the duties of government. Rulers who live apart from the people must, naturally, be self-seekers. He was not one of those who live for themselves alone.