

CHAPTER VII.

Regner Lodbrok.—Ethelred and Alfred.—Danes invade Mercia.—Ravages in the Fen Countries.—Edmund of East Anglia.—Danes in Wessex.—Battle of Æscedun.—Alfred the King.—Danes in Northumbria.—Imputed faults of Alfred.—The flight to Athelney.—Legends and Traditions.

THE Dane who sailed up the Seine in 845, and carried desolation into Paris on that fatal Easter-eve, when the churches were forsaken, and the citizens fled, was named Regner Lodbrok. Of his historical existence there can be but little doubt; but some of the wild stories that are associated with his name appear to belong to the doubtful legends of the north. According to these, after ravaging Scotland and Ireland, he embarked in two vessels of more than ordinary size, and being unequal to their management was wrecked on the coast of Northumbria. Advancing into the country he was surrounded and overpowered, and was cast into a dungeon amidst venomous snakes. His death-song is one of the most striking pieces of Scandinavian poetry—an ancient relic, full of images of ferocity exulting in some terrible carnage, when “many fell into the jaws of the wolf, and the hawk plucked the flesh from the wild beasts.” In this last hour, the sea-king looks gladly to his immortal feasts, “in the seats of Baldor’s father,” where “we shall drink ale continually from the large hollowed skulls.”* To revenge his death, the sons of Regner Lodbrok came in great power to England. There is a seeming inconsistency in the story, which is attempted to be reconciled by another legend which accounts for their landing in East Anglia in 866. But as it appears, from our own chronicles, that they only wintered there, and proceeded into Northumbria the next year, we may accept the legend that the sons of the great pirate did carry their avenging arms into the northern parts of England, where, for a century, there had been perpetual anarchy.

At this time of peril Ethelbert died. During the eight years

* See Turner, book iv. chap. iii.

which had elapsed since the death of Ethelwulf, two of Alfred’s brothers had reigned. Upon the two younger sons now rested the destinies of England. Ethelred succeeded to the crown of the united kingdoms of Wessex and Kent. Alfred appears to have had a responsible position. He is called “Secundarius.” Some conjecture that he ruled over a small district; others that he had a joint authority with his brother. Asser says that Alfred, if he had so chosen, might have been king, whilst his brother Ethelred was alive. The strict hereditary succession to the crown was not always regarded; and as the *witena-gemot* had certainly some power of election, the qualities which Alfred displayed, even at that early age, might have commanded the admiration of the various representatives of public opinion. For the *witena-gemot* was a representative body, having a consultative voice with the king in great public questions, such as peace or war—making new laws or confirming old,—levying taxes,—raising armaments,—and deciding, in many cases, upon ecclesiastical matters. They had, in these and other affairs, a concurrent authority with the king, as a deliberative body. Alfred, then,—the young man who was “*secundarius*” to Ethelred,—might have reigned in his stead had he been so minded. He was not so minded. It was not, “because,” as Asser writes, “he much excelled all his brothers both in wisdom and all good qualities, and moreover because he was warlike to excess” (*nimum bellicosus*), that he was to risk any distraction of the country at a time of great danger from without, and great suffering within. The year 868 was a year of famine. A failure of the bounty of heaven in a settled country, where the larger abundance of one district equalises the scantier production of another district, is a great misfortune. But in England, at the time when Ethelred was king, where predatory armies were ravaging the north, and hostile fleets throwing their swarms of new plunderers on the east, a dearth in the south and west would bring even more than common misery. The next year saw the same infliction, and with the famine came starvation’s sister, pestilence. Alfred is now married. It was an early age for marriage, and a strange time for marrying. His wife was Elswitha, the daughter of a famous ealdorman of Lincolnshire; and through her mother, who afterwards lived in Alfred’s home, she was descended from the royal house of Mercia. Alfred’s sister had been married fifteen years before, to Burrhed, king of Mercia. There was thus intimate union between the two states in their family alliances. Asser relates a remarkable incident that occurred

at the period when the nuptials of Alfred and Elswitha were celebrated in Mercia, "among innumerable multitudes of people of both sexes, and after continual feasts, both by night and by day." He says that Alfred "was immediately seized, in presence of all the people, by sudden and overwhelming pain." The biographer adds, "He had this sort of disease from his childhood," and then relates how it formerly passed away, at Alfred's earnest prayers; and, returning to him at these hours of gladness, continued to his forty-fourth year. The narrative of Asser, as to this sudden infiction, is extremely confused; and does not occur in the proper chronological order. Of these bodily sufferings of Alfred, some of the chroniclers make no mention; but Asser, in another place, says, "when he was more advanced in life, he was harassed by many diseases unknown to all the physicians of the island." Having regard to the early deaths of all his brothers, we may be warranted in believing that the sons of Ethelwulf were constitutionally of weak health. The extraordinary energy in war, in council, in study, of the youngest and most illustrious of this family, is not inconsistent with his long-continued struggles against an hereditary infirmity. It was the unconquerable will that supported, in the discharge of duty, the Saxon Alfred, as it supported the Dutch William, through many years of pain and anxiety.

The dangers that surrounded the island, generally, were coming close to Alfred, in those days of early domesticity, when he had brought a wife to share his narrow fortunes, and his doubtful prospects. For Alfred was poor. We learn distinctly from his will, that his brother, the king, had not given him a due share of the paternal estates. There is an emphatic passage in his translation of Boetius, which is not found in the original Latin, in which he speaks of a loving wife: "She has enough of every good in this present life, but she has despised it all for thee alone. She has shunned it all, because only she has not thee also."* This sounds like a personal retrospect of the support which he had received in the affection of his queen, during his wanderings and turmoils. They were about to begin. In 868 the Danes, who had established themselves at York, crossed the Humber, for the invasion of Mercia. They possessed themselves of Nottingham, where they wintered. The Mercian king immediately sent for succour to his

* Turner, Anglo-Saxons, book v. chap. ii. Mr. Turner has given a great interest to Alfred's Boetius (of which we shall have to speak), by pointing out the passages which are the translator's expansion of the original idea.

brothers-in-law of Wessex; and Ethelred and Alfred marched to his assistance. They besieged "the house of caves," as Nottingham was called, and compelled the enemy to quit its occupation, and return to Northumbria. Henry of Huntingdon says, that "Hinguar," (Ivar, or Ingvar, who, with his brother Ubba, are now first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon annals), "seeing that the whole force of the English was assembled, and that his army was besieged and of inferior strength, had recourse to smooth words, and with dangerous cunning obtained terms of peace from the English." But there was no safety for southern England while the invader was secure in the north. There was rest for a year; and then the devastating power of the Dane rolled onward like a vast engulfing sea that no barrier could shut out.

In 870, the Danes again crossed the Humber. "The army," says the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, "rode across Mercia into East-Anglia, and took up their winter-quarters at Thetford." By the term "the army" — "the heathen army" — the Anglo-Saxon records now begin to distinguish the invaders. They were no longer mere predatory "crews;" — they were "the army" — wintering in one place; garrisoning in another; coming, again and again, in larger numbers from the icy capes of the Baltic; occupying the small islands that cluster round Britain; and planting at length a firm foot upon a territory far more valuable than the Orkneys and the Hebrides. They "rode across Mercia." It was a terrible ride for the scattered cultivators and the solitary monasteries of the fen countries. The history attributed to Ingulphus, the Abbot of Croyland, details, from the traditionary relations of an eye-witness, the course of this devastating march through Lincolnshire to Norfolk. But we are warned by a very competent critic against putting too much credence in this authority. Dr. Henry had thus written: "Ingulphus published an excellent history of the abbey of Croyland, from its foundation, A.D., 664 to A.D., 1091, with which he had introduced much of the general history of the kingdom, with a variety of curious anecdotes that are no where else to be found." Sir Francis Palgrave says, "It is exactly these curious anecdotes which must be unsparingly rejected."* May not this historical scepticism be carried too far? There are many anachronisms in the book of Ingulphus; it may have been written at a later period than the beginning of the twelfth century, when Ingulphus died. But there is little of extravagance in the narrative;

* "Quarterly Review," vol. xxxiv. p. 296.

and it has the great charm of local colouring. The Danes cross the Witham, and enter the district of Kesteven. Out of the district called Holland come forth the marshmen, under the leading of Earl Algar. The moist soil shakes beneath the trappings of gathering bands, pouring out from Deeping, Longtoft, and Boston. The lord of Brunne comes with his followers. Tolius, the monk of Croyland, throws off the cowl, and, at the head of a body of fugitives, who had rallied round him, joins the united forces. They attack the Northmen in their advance, and drive them back to their earth-works. The alarm goes forth; and the ravagers from other parts hasten to the rescue. Many of the Mercians fly from the terror of their increasing enemies. But Algar, the earl of Holland, and Morcard, the lord of Brunne, and Osgot, the sheriff of Lincolnshire, and Tolius, the soldier-monk, and Harding of Rehale, stand firm, through an autumn day of attack and repulse. In the evening the Northmen make a feint of withdrawing from the field. The English rush forward to the pursuit. The Danes rally; and a noon of sagacious resistance is ended in a night of carnage, in which all the patriotic chieftains perish. A few of their followers escape to Croyland. The abbot and his monks are performing matins, when the terror-stricken fugitives tell of the approaching destruction. Some of the timid prayer-men take boat, and leave their fertile gardens, and their sunny orchards, where the vines and the apple-trees luxuriated amidst a waste of waters,—to hide themselves in the marshes. The bold and the aged who remain at their altars fall in one general slaughter. A little boy only is spared to be led away by Sidroc, one of the Danish chiefs, when they marched forward, and left Croyland in flames. Onward they march, by the ancient roads which cross this land of fens, to Peterborough. The abbot of this great monastery, famous for its architectural beauty, and whose library was rich with the collected manuscripts of two centuries, resisted the assailants. His courage was unavailing. All perished; and a pile of smouldering ruins alone remained, where the piety of many generations had heaped up precious relics and costly shrines, and where the transcriber and illuminator had been working at illustrated chronicles which have now perished. The boy of Croyland escaped from his captivity. Wandering amidst pathless marshes, hiding amidst reeds and bulrushes, he went on his perilous way to Croyland, and told his dismal experience to the few fugitives who had returned to behold the devastation of their pleasant seats; and from this boy, whose name was

Thurgar, the narrative of Ingulphus was stated to be derived. Onward went the Northmen. The abbey of Ely was ravaged, as Peterborough and Croyland had been, and all its inmates were murdered. These Danes had left fearful traces of their course, as "they rode across Mercia," before they "took up their winter-quarters at Thetford."

They are now in East Anglia. Edmund, the king, obtained the crown of that separate province, in 855. He has held his rule in peace till this fatal invasion, which is destined to end the dominion of the Anglo-Saxon race in that part of the island. In a battle with Ingvar, the most cruel of the Danish chiefs, Edmund is taken prisoner. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says, "The same winter, King Edmund fought against them, and the Danes got the victory, and slew the king, and subdued all the land, and destroyed all the minsters which they came to. The names of their chiefs who slew the king were Ingwair and Ubba." In the next century Dunstan is affirmed to have related the piteous story of Edmund's death, as he heard it, in his youth, from an ancient warrior, who had been the sword-bearer of the king. The Danes sent their messengers to Edmund, who was dwelling at Hagilsdun (now Hoxne, near Diss), upon the river Waveney, to demand that he should abjure his religion, divide his treasures, and reign under their supremacy. The proposal was rejected; and the king disdained to fly. Resistance was now vain. He was bound to a tree; scourged with whips; pierced with arrows, and finally beheaded. The constancy and sufferings of the East Anglian king raised him to a place in the martyrology. Saint Edmundsbury became one of the richest endowed monasteries in the kingdom. The monastic legends connected with Saint Edmund furnish a proof of the veneration in which his memory was held by the Anglo-Saxon people, when East Anglia had become a Danish province. For nearly a century and a half the remains of the murdered prince were carefully preserved at Beodrechesworth (St. Edmund's Bury); were then removed for a short time to London; and were finally brought back to the great abbey to receive a veneration which was maintained for centuries in credulity, though commenced in patriotism. The little wooden church at Greensted, in Essex, in which tradition says that the body of the royal martyr rested in its way from London to Suffolk, is still an object of national interest. The purity of his life, and the heroism of his death, commanded the sympathy of a long suffering people, and justify the reverence for the man which we yield

not to the saint, when we read the story of the last of the East Anglians.

The great danger of England is drawing closer and closer round the rulers and the people of Wessex. Northumbria is in the power of the invaders. Guthrum, the Dane, rules over East Anglia: Mercia is weak and irresolute. "This year," 871, says the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, "the army came to Reading, in Wessex; and three days after this, two of their earls rode forth. Then Ethelwulf, the ealdorman, met them at Englefield, and there fought against them, and got the victory; and there one of them, whose name was Sidroc, was slain. About three days after this, King Ethelred and Alfred his brother led a large force to Reading, and fought against the army, and there was great slaughter made on either hand." The Northmen, with superior strategy, had thrown up an entrenchment between the Thames and the Kennet, and their superiority of position compelled the Saxons to retreat. "Ethelwulf, the ealdorman, was slain, and the Danish men had possession of the place of carnage." But the retreat was not a flight. "And about four days after this, King Ethelred and Alfred his brother fought against the whole army at Æscesdun." It is now, for the first time, that we distinctly see the man Alfred, in his character of a great military leader. He is twenty-two years of age. The story of this battle is told with some minuteness by William of Malmesbury, and with more detail by Asser. It was the turning-point of Alfred's life. The locality of Æscesdun—the ash-tree hill—has not been satisfactorily determined. Aston, a village near Wallingford, and Ashhampstead, also in Berkshire, at a mid distance between Wallingford, Newbury, and Reading, have each been contended for. The chalk-hills about Wantage have been associated with this memorable battle; and the White Horse of the Saxon race has been held to be a monument of the Saxon victory. Asser says, "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 stunted growth, which we have seen with our own eyes.* Around this tree the opposing armies came together, with loud shouts from all sides." The Danish army was divided into two bodies; the one commanded by two kings,

* "Quam nos ipsi nostris propriis oculis vidimus." In Dr. Giles' edition this is translated, "but we have ourselves never seen it." An accurate translation of Asser is much wanted.

whose names are recorded as Bageseg and Healfdene, the other by many earls. The Pagans came on rapidly to fight. Asser says, "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 he would not leave it till the priest had done, or abandon the divine protection for that of men." The younger brother rushed on alone,—he rushed on, like a boar of the woods (*aprino more*). William of Malmesbury says, "The piety of the king was of infinite advantage to his brother, who was too impetuous." Asser, as became his vocation, also attributes the victorious issue of the terrible conflict to the prayers of Ethelred. Alfred was habitually religious. He who in his youth prostrated himself before an altar, and, having earnestly prayed that his bodily sufferings might be assuaged, had the holy conviction that his prayers had been heard,—he was not likely to have forgotten the God of battles in this great extremity. But his present business was to fight; to be foremost in the tumult and the clashing of spears; to strike terror by his boldness. His "book of devotion in his bosom, to assist his prayers;"* but in this hour of conflict it is no want of godliness to trust to the sword in his hand. To him, as to all those who have swayed the world, whether by arms or by policy, belonged this great attribute of boldness. Rashness is as ready to retreat as to rush on. Boldness is persevering. Malmesbury, describing Alfred at a later period of his life, says, "The king himself was, with his usual activity, present in every action, ever daunting the invaders, and inspiring his subjects, with the signal display of his courage. He would oppose himself singly to the enemy, and by his own personal exertions rally his declining forces. The very places are yet pointed out by the inhabitants where he felt the vicissitudes of good and evil fortune. It was necessary to contend with Alfred even after he was overcome." We believe the whole history of this remarkable man may be associated with these two leading characteristics of his mind, his boldness and his perseverance. The passionate onslaught of the young Saxon in his first great battle a thousand years ago ought not to be forgotten by his descendants, who, during the eventful annals of their country, have never yet escaped danger except by fronting it. The danger of that conflict round the hill

* Asser.

of ash-trees was escaped; and the banner of the White Horse floated triumphantly over the Danish raven.

But though signally defeated in the greatest battle that the Northmen had fought on the English soil, they would shrink from no contest as long as the fertile lands of the west and the south were to be won. They came, with great reinforcements, from their native seas. They fought with Ethelred and Alfred at Basing, and were not driven back. In two months after, they fought at Merton; and the Saxon brothers were victorious during a great part of the day, and there was great slaughter on either hand; but, adds the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, "the Danes had possession of the place of carnage." At Easter, after this battle, King Ethelred died, "worn down with numberless labours," as Malmesbury records. Others say that he received a fatal wound in the battle of Merton.

Alfred is king. When he was anointed at Rome, a mere boy, he had four brothers. They have each worn the crown of Wessex in due succession. They are gone, as the homely old chroniclers write, "the way of all flesh." Ethelred has left two infant sons; but this is not a time when the ordinary laws of lineal succession can be regarded, even if the Saxon principle of election had ceased to be in force. Asser writes,—“In the same year (871), the aforesaid Alfred, who, hitherto, during the life of his brother, had held a secondary place, immediately upon Ethelred's death, by the grace of God, assumed the government of the whole realm, with the greatest good-will of all the inhabitants of the kingdom.” There is a theory that in the earlier part of his reign he lost “this good-will of all the inhabitants of the kingdom.” Asser says that he accepted the crown almost against his wish; that he doubted whether he should be so supported by the divine assistance, as to be able to resist the enemies that were gathering around them. From his brother's grave at Wimborne, in Dorsetshire, he marched to attack the Danes at Wilton. He was defeated. In one year nine battles had been fought, and the Saxons were reduced to a small band. The invaders agreed to quit Wessex, upon the payment of a tribute. The next year Mercia submitted to the same humiliating conditions. No submission could save Mercia and its unhappy king. The Danes again ravaged the country, and the brother-in-law of Alfred fled from the shores of England to die a pilgrim in Rome. Alfred's sister survived, and probably found an asylum with her brother. The throne of Mercia was then filled by Ceolwulf, “an unwise king,” as the

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle calls him, who was a traitor to his country. He was soon dethroned by those to whom he had become a tributary. In Northumbria, the Danes became established settlers, “and that year (876) Healfdene apportioned the lands of Northumbria, and they thenceforward continued ploughing and tilling them.” This record of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is highly important, as showing the process that was going on in the subdued districts, of peaceful cultivation instead of lawless plunder. Proceeding from the same original stock, the Dane and the Saxon, having no great dissimilarity of language or manners, would gradually intermix, especially when the heathen obstinacy had ultimately yielded to the general progress of Christianity on the European continent. But the ambition of the Northmen was still unsated: they aimed at the subjection of all England. As Rollo overran Normandy, and wholly subdued it, at this very time, Healfdene and Guthrum sought to conquer Wessex, the only barrier to their overwhelming power. Alfred, for seven years, had been carrying on a desultory contest, with no marked result. He made truce after truce; he exacted oaths; he received hostages. With the exception of his first naval battle, in 875, the king appears to have been constantly aiming at a false security by vain negotiation. This, as it presents itself to our imperfect historical knowledge, is inexplicable except upon the theory that he had lost the confidence of his people. Mr. Turner adopts this belief, with every desire to do justice to the character of Alfred. In the life of St. Neot, the young king is accused of arrogance. Some of the later monastic chroniclers take up the tale, and speak of his vices. In his Life, it is said that his misfortunes were not unmerited, and this is the reason,—“Because, in the first part of his reign, when he was a young man, and governed by a youthful mind, when the men of his kingdom and his subjects came to him and besought his aid in their necessities,—when they who were oppressed by the powerful implored his assistance and defence,—he was unwilling to hear them, nor lent them any help, but held them of no account.” This passage has found its way into most biographies of Alfred, and histories of his times, and has called forth many explanations of the probable circumstances which led to such a remarkable deviation from his general principles and subsequent course of life. St. Neot, it is alleged upon the authority of an ancient manuscript, exhorted him to depart entirely from his unrighteousness. Another manuscript records that the saint said to him, “You shall be deprived of that

very sovereignty, of whose vain splendour you are so extravagantly arrogant." In a Latin poem he is reproached with being "dissolute, cruel, proud, and severe." These charges must be received with caution; for, as the monastic writers gloried in Alfred's principles and justice, so might they, not unnaturally, attribute to the influence of his religious advisers the wonderful exhibition of courage, constancy, and moderation, which made him the traditional "darling of England"—"the truth-teller." Some of the subsequent chroniclers adopted these views, and transmitted them to posterity four centuries after the events recorded. But the greatest reliance is placed upon the testimony of Asser, as supposed to be given in the words which we have quoted above. "He loved his royal master," says Mr. Turner, "and we cannot read his artless biography of him, without perceiving that it is not likely he would have ever told his faults, or have even mentioned them, if they had not been then too well known to have been omitted by an honest writer." The true Asser, it appears, did not mention them. It was reserved for a spurious Asser to embody the scandals of a previous century. The passage thus relied upon is held, upon very sufficient evidence, to be an interpolation in Asser's genuine manuscript. In the preface to the "Monumenta Historica Britannica," the inconsistencies of the narrative are pointed out. Alfred might have obtained the throne in his brother's life-time by his good qualities. For seven years his struggles against the enemy are described. Then we suddenly find him accused, in the passage here given, of neglecting the complaints of his subjects; but when he re-appears after his seclusion (as we shall presently see), the whole population are filled with delight. The writer of the Preface then says, "Now the explanation of this inconsistency, and of other similar difficulties, seems to be, that many passages of the printed text formed no part of Asser's works, but were the insertions of Archbishop Parker." The archbishop first published the Life in 1574; and, it seems, incorporated passages from a MS. of the twelfth century, entitled "Chronicon Fani S. Neoti, sive Annales Johannes Asserii," which is a compilation from various sources by an anonymous writer, and contains passages from a work by Abbo, who wrote fourscore years after Asser's death.

But, whatever doubt may attach to these relations, there can be no doubt that Alfred was left, in his great hour of need, without support, if not without sympathy. It appears to us that the humil-

iating treaties, which have been imputed to him as an individual fault; the comparative inaction during seven years; the somewhat absurd imposition of Christian oaths upon pagan enemies,—may find a reasonable explanation,—that Alfred was surrounded by a timid and feeble witan. The king had no power of himself to conclude peace or make war, without the authority of the witan. The great peace which was concluded with Guthrum in 878, runs thus: "This is the peace that Alfred the king, and Guthrum the king, and the witan of all the English nation, and all the people that are in East-Anglia, have all ordained," &c. The wild-boar, of *Æscesdun* was chafing with pent-up sorrows, while ealdormen and bishops were counselling safety in submission. The terrible spoils of East Anglia and Mercia were, in their view, to be averted by tribute, and by oaths upon relics of saints, and the heathens' own "holy ring." The catastrophe justifies this interpretation. Authentic history shows that he was meditating a deliverance from foreign foes—perhaps from domestic treason*—by one of those bold actions which decide the fate of nations. "This year (878) during midwinter, after twelfth night, the army stole away to Chippenham, and overran the land of the West-Saxons, and sat down there; and many of the people they drove beyond sea, and of the remainder the greater part they subdued and forced to obey them *except king Alfred.*"† Where was king Alfred? He is fled, no one knows whither. Where are his thanes and his prelates? They are not with him. "He, with a small band, with difficulty retreated to the woods, and to the fastnesses of the moors."‡ King Alfred relies upon himself alone. The regal pomp, whatever that might be, is no more. Aged councillors no longer exhort him against the indulgence of youthful rashness. Reverend priests no longer preach of the virtues of relics and the protection of saints. He is naked and powerless; but he was never so truly master of his own fortune, as in this point of his uttermost depression.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle notices a triumph over the Danes in Devonshire; and then takes up the story of Alfred again. The king retreated to the woods and moors, after Twelfth-night, in 878. "At Easter," says the Chronicle, "king Alfred with a small band, constructed a fortress at Athelney; and from this fortress, with that part of the men of Somerset which was nearest to it,

* See Lappenberg, vol. ii. p. 52. † Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. ‡ Ibid.

from time to time they fought against the army." In the genuine text of Asser we find that during this wintry season, from Twelfth-night to Easter, the king, with a few nobles, and certain soldiers and vassals, led an unquiet life, in great tribulation, amongst the woodlands of Somersetshire. It was the outlaw's life. Under the Anglo-Saxon laws every man was bound to have a settled habitation. Whether freeman or thrall, to be a wanderer was to be in peril. In the laws of king Ina, which were confirmed by Alfred, it is written,—“If a far-coming man, or a stranger, journey through a wood out of the highway, and neither shout nor blow his horn, he is to be held for a thief, either to be slain or redeemed.”* But this fugitive band were not only hiding from their oppressors, but were compelled to plunder for subsistence. Utterly destitute of the necessaries of life, they sallied forth from their coverts, to compel the pagans, or those who were under the dominion of the pagans, to give them food. The stories which relieve the dry historical narrative of its uniformity, and which the dramatist and the painter alike rejoice in, belong to this period. Alfred sits by the fire in a cowherd's cottage, in which he had found refuge, mending his bow, instead of minding the loaves which are baking on the hearth. Who knows not how the impatient housewife vented her anger upon the stranger, reproaching him that he suffered the bread to burn which he was ready enough to eat? The wrathful speech of the good dame appears in the original in the form of two Latin verses. We have no complaint against the parade of knowledge which thus puts the mark of a cloister upon the traditional songs of the people. Again, the legendary tales show how the Saxon hero, in his adversity, was visited by Saint Cuthbert, who, in the shape of a poor man, asked for alms of the fugitive. In a miserable hut sits Alfred with his wife. He has one loaf of bread which he divides with the beggar. The saint vanishes; but in a vision announces that the days of the king's adversity are passed, and that glory and honour are before him. Again: Alfred is a minstrel. He finds admission to the Danish camp. He wanders from tent to tent with his harp. His skill reaches the knowledge of the Danish king. He is feasted and welcomed. But he has noted the numbers and position of his enemies, and returns to Athelney, to lead forth his followers to victory. Who would be fastidious about the

* Ancient Laws and Institutes, p. 50.

authenticity of such narratives? They affect no principle. They lead to no erroneous conclusions. We must take them for what they are, and be glad of them:

“Dreams that the soul of youth engage
Ere fancy has been quelled;
Old legends of the monkish page,
Traditions of the saint and sage,
Tales that have the rime of age,
And chronicles of euld.”*

* Longfellow.