



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

IN THE DAYS OF  
ALFRED THE GREAT

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Eva March Tappan

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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# In the Days of Alfred the Great

*by*

EVA MARCH TAPPAN





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## ALFRED'S EARLY HOME

**T**he palace in which Alfred the Great was born was hardly what we should call a palace in these days. It was a long, low, wooden house, or rather a group of houses; for whenever more room was needed, a new building was put up, and joined to the old ones wherever it seemed most convenient, so that the palace looked much like a company of one-story houses that had drifted together in a flood. There had to be room for a large family, for the king's counsellors and many of the church dignitaries lived with him. All around the house were many smaller houses for the fighting and the working men. Those were the days when at any moment a messenger might come flying on a panting horse and say:—

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

Then the king would send horsemen in hot haste to all his underchiefs, and he himself, at the head of the soldiers of his household, would march toward the coast, sometimes to fight and sometimes, if fighting failed, to buy them off by a ransom of money and jewels and vessels of gold and of silver.

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

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

They had good reason for their alarm; for perhaps even be-

fore the king and his men could reach the eastern shore, another fleet would come to land on the southern coast, and the fierce Danes would sweep like a whirlwind through the land, burning the homes of the people, carrying away the women, and tossing the little children back and forth on the points of their spears.

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

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



from France, the laborers had to take their cattle, and make the slow, tiresome journey to the shore to bring them home.

All these things were very interesting for the little Prince Alfred to see, though he was not quite five years old at the time when this story begins. He was the youngest child of King Ethelwulf and Queen Osburga, and a favorite with everybody on the great estate. The blacksmith had made him a tiny coat of mail and a spear, and he and the other children would play "Fight the Danes," and the soldiers would look on and say, "There's a prince for you," and often one of them would take him up before him on his horse for a mad gallop through the forest. The half-wild swine would scatter before them, and sometimes the soldier, holding the little boy firmly with one hand, would charge upon them, and leaning far over the saddle, would run his spear through one; and back they would ride to the palace, dragging the pig behind them, and the little prince, his long, yellow hair streaming in the wind, would shout, "A Dane, father! We have killed a Dane!"

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

tive to his duties as a king, that his father concluded that learning how to read had not hurt him, and so at his death he left him the whole kingdom.

Even if no one made the little boy learn to read, the days were never long enough for him. The great domain was a busy place. Everybody was making something, and everybody was glad to have the little prince look on and ask questions. There were hives of bees, and there were hunting dogs and hawks. People were coming and going from morning till night. The king rented much of his land to different families. He was bound to care for them, and they were bound to fight under him and to work for him, to make hedges and ditches, to plough, to shear the sheep, and to help make roads. Besides this, they were to pay him rent, and this rent seldom came in money, but rather in produce of the land. There was a steward whose business it was to receive the rent, and a boy would be interested to keep by his side all day long and watch what the people brought. There might be cheese or bacon or honey or home-brewed ale; and often there was quite a lively time when a man appeared with hens or ducks or geese, cackling or quacking or hissing, as the case might be, and all making as much noise as their throats would permit. Sometimes this rent was paid only as a token that the land belonged to the king, and had no real value. One man was bound to present three fishes fresh from the river four times a year, and another had only to bring a sheaf of wheat on a certain day of each year.

At the regular times for paying rent, these people were coming and going all day long, and often they brought besides their rent some special gift for the boy—a bag of apples or of nuts, or a particularly yellow honeycomb on a great platter of bark covered with fresh green leaves. There were all these things going on as a matter of course, but sometimes there would be heard the

trampling of hoofs and a great cry, and all the men who had been paying their rent, and all the men who were working in the fields, and all the servants of the house would run out and cry:—

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The king gave him rings and bracelets and spears and shields, and he went home to his own people; and by and by some one told him of another dragon that lived in a cave in the land, and had gold vases and spears and bronze shields and gold rings for the neck and for the arms; and he went out to kill this dragon so as to give the gold to the men.”

“Did he go alone?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"About the brave king?" asked Alfred.

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

"Did they eat them, too?"

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

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

"Yes, I remember," and the little boy nodded wisely.

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

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

"Do you see now what you can do for him?"

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

"Is he as brave a man as you?"

"Yes," said the king.

"Then I will be his wife," said she.

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

Ever since Ethelwitha was a little child, the queen and the maidens of the household had been preparing for her marriage. They had spun and woven great chests full of linen and woolen. They had made beautifully embroidered tapestries and rich coverings for the benches of the hall. They had made gowns of blue and red and yellow and green, whose deep borders were worked with silk and with threads of gold. Then there were wide mantles of all the colors of the rainbow for her to wear over her gown. They were wound about the waist and thrown over the left shoul-

der, and they were so long that they would fall down nearly to the ground. These, too, were richly embroidered with gold thread. Both Queen Osburga and King Ethelwulf were descendants of Cerdic, who had conquered the Isle of Wight three hundred years before this. Some of their kinsfolk still dwelt near the island, and were skilful workers in gold and silver. From there had been brought beautiful ornaments, clasps for the cloak, necklaces, and ear-rings. One of the clasps was circular in shape, made of a fine gold filigree work. The centre was filled by a double star set with garnets. Another clasp was of silver in the shape of a Maltese cross, with green enamel around the edges and a ruby in the centre. Then there was a necklace with many gold pendants and a blue stone in each. There were "stick-pins" of red and blue enamel, and there were ear-rings of precisely the crescent shape that our grandmothers used to wear.

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

decided that there the marriage should be celebrated. The palace was in a beautiful valley through which the Avon flowed. Other streams were near, and the rolling country around was rich with fresh green forests.

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

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

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

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

The young bride, who was only fifteen, wore a white gown and white mantle, and her hair was bound by a narrow gold fillet set with blue stones. It must have been a gorgeous scene in the great hall of feasting. Iron lamps hung from the rafters and shone down upon the bright spears and helmets and chain armor that hung upon the walls. Brave deeds of their ancestors were pictured in the tapestry. In the centre of the hall was a great fire-

place, or hearth, made of burnt clay, where the meat was roasted. Long tables were spread down the hall, and at the upper end was a platform where the royal family sat, and a few of the thegns whom the king wished to honor.

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter II.

## LIFE ON THE MANOR

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

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

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

The moment that her voice was still, the noise began again louder than ever. The bees slowly settled down upon the limb of a tree in a shining, quivering mass. A hive made of braided straw was

rubbed out with fresh leaves and put over them, and the swarm was safe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So will this,” said the smith, “but first it must go to the gold-

worker, and he will polish it and twist gold cord about the handle, and put bands of bronze about it—and perhaps he will get a wise man to cut a rune into it,” he whispered to Hilda.

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

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

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

“Hilda, what is a rune?”

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

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

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

Alfred thought a minute, and then said:—

“Was Thorl a good man?”

“Yes,” said Hilda.

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

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

“Come a little way into the forest,” she said, “and we will gather flowers, and I will make you a crown, because some day you will have a crown of gold and sit on the high seat on the dais; and you will ride at the head of the fighting men when they go out to battle, and when they speak to you, they will bow down low and say, ‘Hail, sir king.’”

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

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

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

“Was he as old as my father?”

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

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

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

“Perhaps if we knew his name and cut it on all the swords, the

Danes would never dare to come to the land again," said Alfred. At this, Hilda looked a little frightened, for she had been forbidden to tell the prince of the heathen gods; but the child went on:—

"How did he look? Did he look like my father?"

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

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

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

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

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

"'Place me on top of the oaken wood, and put my sword into

my right hand, and the chain from the helmet of the god into my left, and bind the helm straight for the north, and leave me.'

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

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

"There'll be a fine ransom for him," said the man. "He's the son of some noble."

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

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

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

"Does he say true?" whispered one, in awe. "See the silver thread around his tunic. This game is too high for us. Fly! I hear the tread of horses," and the man set the child down carefully, and the three all slid into the dark shadows of the forest, leaving

Hilda lying bound. The hoof-beats grew louder, and four of the king's hunters drew near.

"It is the prince," said one, "and where is Hilda?"

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

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

"I'll never go back to the king with such a tale," said one.

"I will," said another, "and the heads of the thieves shall go with it. How dared they venture so near the homes of the fighters of the king!" And so the two set off, and when they returned late that night, they were a grim sight, for their clothes were dusty and torn and bloody, and they held the heads of the three robbers high in the air on the points of their spears.

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

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

The queen was anxious about the king in those days, for he often seemed lost in thought, and many times she saw his eyes fixed upon her and Alfred with the same look of suffering and determination that she had seen the night of the wedding; and one day when she was in one of the rooms behind the dais, she

heard him pacing to and fro on the raised platform, and saying to himself:—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

“Does it mean anything?” asked Ethelred.

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

“Once on a time it happened that we in our vessel  
 Ventured to ride o'er the billows, the high-dashing surges.  
 Full of danger to us were the paths of the ocean.  
 Streams of the sea beat the shores, and loud roared the breakers,  
 Fierce Terror rose from the breast of the sea o'er our wave-ship.  
 There the Almighty, glorious Creator of all men,  
 Was biding his time in the boat. Men trembled at heart,  
 Called upon God for compassion, the Lord for his mercy;  
 Loud wailed the crowd in the keel. Arose straightway  
 The Giver of joy to the angels; the billows were silenced,  
 The whelm of the waves and the winds was stilled at his word,  
 The sea was calm and the ocean-streams smooth in their limits.  
 There was joy in our hearts when under the circle of heaven



“WHAT IS IT, MOTHER?” HE CRIED.

The winds and the waves and the terror of waters, themselves  
In fear of the glorious Lord became fearful.  
Wherefore the living God—'tis truth that I tell you—  
Never forsakes on this earth a man in his trouble,  
If only his heart is true and his courage unailing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So the boy was put up high on the king's seat in the great hall, and the king and the thegns and the priests and the women of the house all came in to see the wonderful thing. To sing the old ballads,

that was nothing; many a man could do that; but to say off something that had come right from a wonderful piece of parchment, that was quite another matter. Some of them were not really sure that there was not some witchcraft about it, and they stood as near the middle of the hall as they could, so that if the evil spirits should come in at either end, they could get out at the other.

Nothing dangerous happened, however. The little boy said the poem, and was praised and petted very much as a child would be to-day for accomplishing some small feat. Then the precious roll was laid on a golden salver, and one of the king's favorite thegns carried it to him, and bending low on one knee, presented it to the little prince.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Let me go with him,” pleaded Osburga.

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

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

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