

THE DRAGON AND THE RAVEN

OR THE DAYS OF KING ALFRED

G. A. HENTY

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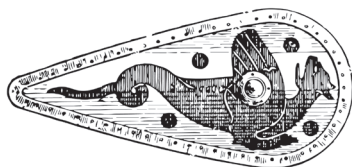
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OR THE DAYS OF KING ALFRED



G. A. HENTY



Generations
PASSING ON THE FAITH

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PREFACE

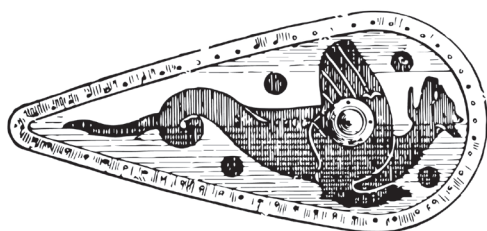
Living in the present days of peace and tranquillity it is difficult to picture the life of our ancestors in the days of King Alfred, when the whole country was for years overrun by hordes of pagan barbarians, who slaughtered, plundered, and destroyed at will. You may gain, perhaps, a fair conception of the state of things if you imagine that at the time of the great mutiny the English population of India approached that of the natives, and that the mutiny was everywhere triumphant. The wholesale massacres and outrages which would in such a case have been inflicted upon the conquered whites could be no worse than those suffered by the Saxons at the hands of the Danes. From this terrible state of subjection and suffering the Saxons were rescued by the prudence, the patience, the valour and wisdom of King Alfred. In all subsequent ages England has produced no single man who united in himself so many great qualities as did this first of great Englishmen. He was learned, wise, brave, prudent, and pious; devoted to his people, clement to his conquered enemies. He was as

great in peace as in war; and yet few English boys know more than a faint outline of the events of Alfred's reign—events which have exercised an influence upon the whole future of the English people. School histories pass briefly over them; and the incident of the burned cake is that which is, of all the actions of a great and glorious reign, the most prominent in boys' minds. In this story I have tried to supply the deficiency. Fortunately in the Saxon Chronicles and in the life of King Alfred written by his friend and counsellor Asser, we have a trustworthy account of the events and battles which first laid Wessex prostrate beneath the foot of the Danes, and finally freed England for many years from the invaders. These histories I have faithfully followed. The account of the siege of Paris is taken from a very full and detailed history of that event by the Abbe D'Abbon, who was a witness of the scenes he described.

Yours sincerely,
G. A. HENTY

CHAPTER 1

THE FUGITIVES



A low hut built of turf roughly thatched with rushes and standing on the highest spot of some slightly raised ground. It was surrounded by a tangled growth of bushes and low trees, through which a narrow and winding path gave admission to the narrow space on which the hut stood. The ground sloped rapidly. Twenty yards from the house the trees ceased, and a rank vegetation of reeds and rushes took the place of the bushes, and the ground became soft and swampy. A little further pools of stagnant water appeared among the rushes, and the path abruptly stopped at the edge of a stagnant swamp, though the passage could be followed by the eye for some distance among the tall rushes.

The hut, in fact, stood on a hummock in the midst of a wide swamp where the water sometimes deepened into lakes connected by sluggish streams.

On the open spaces of water herons stalked near the margin, and great flocks of wild-fowl dotted the surface. Other signs of life there were none, although a sharp eye might have detected light threads of smoke curling up here and there from spots where the ground rose somewhat above the general level. These slight elevations, however, were not visible to the eye, for the herbage here grew shorter than on the lower and wetter ground, and the land apparently stretched away for a vast distance in a dead flat—a rush-covered swamp, broken only here and there by patches of bushes and low trees.

The little hut was situated in the very heart of the fen country, now drained and cultivated, but in the year 870 untouched by the hand of man, the haunt of wild-fowl and human fugitives. At the door of the hut stood a lad some fourteen years old. His only garment was a short sleeveless tunic girded in at the waist, his arms and legs were bare; his head was uncovered, and his hair fell in masses on his shoulders. In his hand he held a short spear, and leaning against the wall of the hut close at hand was a bow and quiver of arrows. The lad looked at the sun, which was sinking towards the horizon.

“Father is late,” he said. “I trust that no harm has come to him and Egbert. He said he would return to-day without fail; he said three or four days, and this is the fourth. It is dull work here alone. You think so, Wolf, don’t you, old fellow? And it is worse for you than it is for me, pent up on this hummock of ground with scarce room to stretch your limbs.”

A great wolf-hound, who was lying with his head be-

tween his paws by the embers of a fire in the centre of the hut, raised his head on being addressed, and uttered a low howl indicative of his agreement with his master's opinion and his disgust at his present place of abode.

"Never mind, old fellow," the boy continued, "we sha'n't be here long, I hope, and then you shall go with me in the woods again and hunt the wolves to your heart's content." The great hound gave a lazy wag of his tail. "And now, Wolf, I must go. You lie here and guard the hut while I am away. Not that you are likely to have any strangers to call in my absence."

The dog rose and stretched himself, and followed his master down the path until it terminated at the edge of the water. Here he gave a low whimper as the lad stepped in and waded through the water; then turning he walked back to the hut and threw himself down at the door. The boy proceeded for some thirty or forty yards through the water, then paused and pushed aside the wall of rushes which bordered the passage, and pulled out a boat which was floating among them.

It was constructed of osier rods neatly woven together into a sort of basket-work, and covered with an untanned hide with the hairy side in. It was nearly oval in shape, and resembled a great bowl some three feet and a half wide and a foot longer. A broad paddle with a long handle lay in it, and the boy, getting into it and standing erect in the middle paddled down the strip of water which a hundred yards further opened out into a broad half a mile long and four or five hundred yards wide. Beyond moving slowly away as the coracle approached them, the water-fowl paid but little heed to its appearance.

The boy paddled to the end of the broad, whence a pas-

sage, through which flowed a stream so sluggish that its current could scarce be detected, led into the next sheet of water. Across the entrance to this passage floated some bundles of light rushes. These the boy drew out one by one. Attached to each was a piece of cord which, being pulled upon, brought to the surface a large cage, constructed somewhat on the plan of a modern eel or lobster pot. They were baited by pieces of dead fish, and from them the boy extracted half a score of eels and as many fish of different kinds.

“Not a bad haul,” he said as he lowered the cages to the bottom again. “Now let us see what we have got in our pen.”

He paddled a short way along the broad to a point where a little lane of water ran up through the rushes. This narrowed rapidly and the lad got out from his boat into the water, as the coracle could proceed no further between the lines of rushes. The water was knee-deep and the bottom soft and oozy. At the end of the creek it narrowed until the rushes were but a foot apart. They were bent over here, as it would seem to a superficial observer naturally; but a close examination would show that those facing each other were tied together where they crossed at a distance of a couple of feet above the water, forming a sort of tunnel. Two feet farther on this ceased, and the rushes were succeeded by lines of strong osier withies, an inch or two apart, arched over and fastened together. At this point was a sort of hanging door formed of rushes backed with osiers, and so arranged that at the slightest push from without the door lifted and enabled a wild-fowl to pass under, but dropping behind it prevented its exit. The osier tunnel widened out to a sort of inverted basket three feet in diameter.

On the surface of the creek floated some grain which had been scattered there the evening before as a bait. The lad left

the creek before he got to the narrower part, and, making a small circuit in the swamp, came down upon the pen.

“Good!” he said, “I am in luck to-day; here are three fine ducks.”

Bending the yielding osiers aside, he drew out the ducks one by one, wrung their necks, and passing their heads through his girdle, made his way again to the coracle. Then he scattered another handful or two of grain on the water, sparingly near the mouth of the creek, but more thickly at the entrance to the trap, and then paddled back again by the way he had come.

Almost noiselessly as he dipped the paddle in the water, the hound’s quick ear had caught the sound, and he was standing at the edge of the swamp, wagging his tail in dignified welcome as his master stepped on to dry land.

“There, Wolf, what do you think of that? A good score of eels and fish and three fine wild ducks. That means bones for you with your meal to-night—not to satisfy your hunger, you know, for they would not be of much use in that way, but to give a flavour to your supper. Now let us make the fire up and pluck the birds, for I warrant me that father and Egbert, if they return this evening, will be sharp-set. There are the cakes to bake too, so you see there is work for the next hour or two.”

The sun had set now, and the flames, dancing up as the boy threw an armful of dry wood on the fire, gave the hut a more cheerful appearance. For some time the lad busied himself with preparation for supper. The three ducks were plucked in readiness for putting over the fire should they be required; cakes of coarse rye-flour were made and placed in the red ashes of the fire; and then the lad threw himself down by the side of the dog.

"No, Wolf, it is no use your looking at those ducks. I am not going to roast them if no one comes; I have got half a one left from dinner." After sitting quiet for half an hour the dog suddenly raised himself into a sitting position, with ears erect and muzzle pointed towards the door; then he gave a low whine, and his tail began to beat the ground rapidly.

"What! do you hear them, old fellow?" the boy said, leaping to his feet. "I wish my ears were as sharp as yours are, Wolf; there would be no fear then of being caught asleep. Come on, old boy, let us go and meet them."

It was some minutes after he reached the edge of the swamp before the boy could hear the sounds which the quick ears of the hound had detected. Then he heard a faint splashing noise, and a minute or two later two figures were seen wading through the water.

"Welcome back, father," the lad cried. "I was beginning to be anxious about you, for here we are at the end of the fourth day."

"I did not name any hour, Edmund," the boy's father said, as he stepped from the water, "but I own that I did not reckon upon being so late; but in truth Egbert and I missed our way in the windings of these swamps, and should not have been back to-night had we not luckily fallen upon a man fishing, who was able to put us right. You have got some supper, I hope, for Egbert and I are as hungry as wolves, for we have had nothing since we started before sunrise."

"I have plenty to eat, father; but you will have to wait till it is cooked, for it was no use putting it over the fire until I knew that you would return; but there is a good fire, and you will not have to wait long. And how has it fared with you, and what is the news?"

"The news is bad, Edmund. The Danes are ever receiv-

ing reinforcements from Mercia, and scarce a day passes but fresh bands arrive at Thetford, and I fear that ere long East Anglia, like Northumbria, will fall into their clutches. Nay, unless we soon make head against them they will come to occupy all the island, just as did our forefathers.”

“That were shame indeed,” Edmund exclaimed. “We know that the people conquered by our ancestors were unwarlike and cowardly; but it would be shame indeed were we Saxons so to be overcome by the Danes, seeing moreover that we have the help of God, being Christians, while the Danes are pagans and idolaters.”

“Nevertheless, my son, for the last five years these heathen have been masters of Northumbria, have wasted the whole country, and have plundered and destroyed the churches and monasteries. At present they have but made a beginning here in East Anglia; but if they continue to flock in they will soon overrun the whole country, instead of having, as at present, a mere foothold near the rivers except for those who have come down to Thetford. We have been among the first sufferers, seeing that our lands lie round Thetford, and hitherto I have hoped that there would be a general rising against these invaders; but the king is indolent and unwarlike, and I see that he will not arouse himself and call his ealdormen and thanes together for a united effort until it is too late. Already from the north the Danes are flocking down into Mercia, and although the advent of the West Saxons to the aid of the King of Mercia forced them to retreat for a while, I doubt not that they will soon pour down again.”

“’Tis a pity, father, that the Saxons are not all under one leading; then we might surely defend England against the Danes. If the people did but rise and fall upon each band of Northmen as they arrived they would get no footing among us.”

“Yes,” the father replied, “it is the unhappy divisions between the Saxon kingdoms which have enabled the Danes to get so firm a footing in the land. Our only hope now lies in the West Saxons. Until lately they were at feud with Mercia; but the royal families are now related by marriage, seeing that the King of Mercia is wedded to a West Saxon princess, and that Alfred, the West Saxon king’s brother and heir to the throne, has lately espoused one of the royal blood of Mercia. The fact that they marched at the call of the King of Mercia and drove the Danes from Nottingham shows that the West Saxon princes are alive to the common danger of the country, and if they are but joined heartily by our people of East Anglia and the Mercians, they may yet succeed in checking the progress of these heathen. And now, Edmund, as we see no hope of any general effort to drive the Danes off our coasts, ‘tis useless for us to lurk here longer. I propose to-morrow, then, to journey north into Lincolnshire, to the Abbey of Croyland, where, as you know, my brother Theodore is the abbot; there we can rest in peace for a time, and watch the progress of events. If we hear that the people of these parts are aroused from their lethargy, we will come back and fight for our home and lands; if not, I will no longer stay in East Anglia, which I see is destined to fall piecemeal into the hands of the Danes; but we will journey down to Somerset, and I will pray King Ethelbert to assign me lands there, and to take me as his thane.”

While they had been thus talking Egbert had been broiling the eels and wild ducks over the fire. He was a freeman, and a distant relation of Edmund’s father, Eldred, who was an ealdorman in West Norfolk, his lands lying beyond Thetford, and upon whom, therefore, the first brunt of the Danish invasion from Mercia had fallen. He had made a stout

resistance, and assembling his people had given battle to the invaders. These, however, were too strong and numerous, and his force having been scattered and dispersed, he had sought refuge with Egbert and his son in the fen country. Here he had remained for two months in hopes that some general effort would be made to drive back the Danes; but being now convinced that at present the Angles were too disunited to join in a common effort, he determined to retire for a while from the scene.

"I suppose, father," Edmund said, "you will leave your treasures buried here?"

"Yes," his father replied; "we have no means of transporting them, and we can at any time return and fetch them. We must dig up the big chest and take such garments as we may need, and the personal ornaments of our rank; but the rest, with the gold and silver vessels, can remain here till we need them."

Gold and silver vessels seem little in accordance with the primitive mode of life prevailing in the ninth century. The Saxon civilization was indeed a mixed one. Their mode of life was primitive, their dwellings, with the exception of the religious houses and the abodes of a few of the great nobles, simple in the extreme; but they possessed vessels of gold and silver, armlets, necklaces, and ornaments of the same metals, rich and brightly coloured dresses, and elaborate bed furniture while their tables and household utensils were of the roughest kind, and their floors strewn with rushes. When they invaded and conquered England they found existing the civilization introduced by the Romans, which was far in advance of their own; much of this they adopted. The introduction of Christianity further advanced them in the scale.

The prelates and monks from Rome brought with them a high degree of civilization, and this to no small extent the Saxons imitated and borrowed. The church was held in much honour, great wealth and possessions were bestowed upon it, and the bishops and abbots possessed large temporal as well as spiritual power, and bore a prominent part in the councils of the kingdoms. But even in the handsome and well-built monasteries, with their stately services and handsome vestments, learning was at the lowest ebb—so low, indeed, that when Prince Alfred desired to learn Latin he could find no one in his father's dominions capable of teaching him, and his studies were for a long time hindered for want of an instructor, and at the time he ascended the throne he was probably the only Englishman outside a monastery who was able to read and write fluently.

"Tell me, father," Edmund said after the meal was concluded, "about the West Saxons, since it is to them, as it seems, that we must look for the protection of England against the Danes. This Prince Alfred, of whom I before heard you speak in terms of high praise, is the brother, is he not, of the king? In that case how is it that he does not reign in Kent, which I thought, though joined to the West Saxon kingdom, was always ruled over by the eldest son of the king."

"Such has been the rule, Edmund; but seeing the troubled times when Ethelbert came to the throne, it was thought better to unite the two kingdoms under one crown with the understanding that at Ethelbert's death Alfred should succeed him. Their father, Ethelwulf, was a weak king, and should have been born a churchman rather than a prince. He nominally reigned over Wessex, Kent, and Mercia, but the last paid him but a slight allegiance. Alfred was his favourite son, and he sent him, when quite a child, to Rome for a visit.

In 855 he himself, with a magnificent retinue, and accompanied by Alfred, visited Rome, travelling through the land of the Franks, and it was there, doubtless, that Alfred acquired that love of learning, and many of those ideas, far in advance of his people, which distinguish him. His mother, Osburgha, died before he and his father started on the pilgrimage. The king was received with much honour by the pope, to whom he presented a gold crown of four pounds weight, ten dishes of the purest gold, a sword richly set in gold, two gold images, some silver-gilt urns, stoles bordered with gold and purple, white silken robes embroidered with figures, and other costly articles of clothing for the celebration of the service of the church, together with rich presents in gold and silver to the churches, bishops, clergy, and other dwellers in Rome. They say that the people of Rome marvelled much at these magnificent gifts from a king of a country which they had considered as barbarous. On his way back he married Judith, daughter of the King of the Franks; a foolish marriage, for the king was far advanced in years and Judith was but a girl.

“Ethelbald, Ethelwulf’s eldest son, had acted as regent in his father’s absence, and so angered was he at this marriage that he raised his standard of revolt against his father. At her marriage Judith had been crowned queen, and this was contrary to the customs of the West Saxons, therefore Ethelbald was supported by the people of that country; on his father’s return to England, however, father and son met, and a division of the kingdom was agreed upon.

“Ethelbald received Wessex, the principal part of the kingdom, and Ethelwulf took Kent, which he had already ruled over in the time of his father Egbert. Ethelwulf died a few months afterwards, leaving Kent to Ethelbert, his second surviving son. The following year, to the horror and in-

dignation of the people of the country, Ethelbald married his stepmother Judith, but two years afterwards died, and Ethelbert, King of Kent, again united Wessex to his own dominions, which consisted of Kent, Surrey, and Sussex. Ethelbert reigned but a short time, and at his death Ethelred, his next brother, ascended the throne. Last year Alfred, the youngest brother, married Elswitha, the daughter of Ethelred Mucil, Earl of the Gaini, in Lincolnshire, whose mother was one of the royal family of Mercia.

“It was but a short time after the marriage that the Danes poured into Mercia from the north. Messengers were sent to ask the assistance of the West Saxons. These at once obeyed the summons, and, joining the Mercians, marched against the Danes, who shut themselves up in the strong city of Nottingham, and were there for some time besieged. The place was strong, the winter at hand, and the time of the soldiers’ service nearly expired. A treaty was accordingly made by which the Danes were allowed to depart unharmed to the north side of the Humber, and the West Saxons returned to their kingdom.

“Such is the situation at present, but we may be sure that the Danes will not long remain quiet, but will soon gather for another invasion; ere long, too, we may expect another of their great fleets to arrive somewhere off these coasts, and every Saxon who can bear arms had need take the field to fight for our country and faith against these heathen invaders. Hitherto, Edmund, as you know, I have deeply mourned the death of your mother, and of your sisters who died in infancy; but now I feel that it is for the best, for a terrible time is before us. We men can take refuge in swamp and forest, but it would have been hard for delicate women; and those men are best off who stand alone and are able to give

every thought and energy to the defence of their country. 'Tis well that you are now approaching an age when the Saxons on youth are wont to take their place in the ranks of battle. I have spared no pains with your training in arms, and though assuredly you lack strength yet to cope in hand-to-hand conflict with these fierce Danes, you may yet take your part in battle, with me on one side of you and Egbert on the other. I have thought over many things of late, and it seems to me that we Saxons have done harm in holding the people of this country as serfs."

"Why, father," Edmund exclaimed in astonishment, "surely you would not have all men free and equal."

"The idea seems strange to you, no doubt, Edmund, and it appears only natural that some men should be born to rule and others to labour, but this might be so even without serfdom, since, as you know, the poorer freemen labour just as do the serfs, only they receive a somewhat larger guerdon for their toil; but had the two races mixed more closely together, had serfdom been abolished and all men been free and capable of bearing arms, we should have been able to show a far better front to the Danes, seeing that the serfs are as three to one to the freemen."

"But the serfs are cowardly and spiritless," Edmund said; "they are not of a fighting race, and fell almost without resistance before our ancestors when they landed here."

"Their race is no doubt inferior to our own, Edmund," his father said, "seeing that they are neither so tall nor so strong as we Saxons, but of old they were not deficient in bravery, for they fought as stoutly against the Romans as did our own hardy ancestors. After having been for hundreds of years subject to the Roman yoke, and having no occasion to use arms, they lost their manly virtues, and when the Romans

left them were an easy prey for the first comer. Our fathers could not foresee that the time would come when they too in turn would be invaded. Had they done so, methinks they would not have set up so broad a line of separation between themselves and the Britons, but would have admitted the latter to the rights of citizenship, in which case intermarriage would have taken place freely, and the whole people would have become amalgamated. The Britons, accustomed to our free institutions, and taking part in the wars between the various Saxon kingdoms, would have recovered their warlike virtues, and it would be as one people that we should resist the Danes. As it is, the serfs, who form by far the largest part of the population, are apathetic and cowardly; they view the struggle with indifference, for what signifies to them whether Dane or Saxon conquer; they have no interest in the struggle, nothing to lose or to gain, it is but a change of masters."

Edmund was silent. The very possibility of a state of things in which there should be no serfs, and when all men should be free and equal, had never occurred to him; but he had a deep respect for his father, who bore indeed the reputation of being one of the wisest and most clear-headed of the nobles of East Anglia, and it seemed to him that this strange and novel doctrine contained much truth in it. Still the idea was as strange to him as it would have been to the son of a southern planter in America half a century ago. The existence of slaves seemed as much a matter of course as that of horses or dogs, and although he had been accustomed to see from time to time freedom bestowed upon some favourite serf as a special reward for services, the thought of a general liberation of the slaves was strange and almost bewildering, and he lay awake puzzling over the problem long after his father and kinsman had fallen asleep.