

King Ethelbert, in the mortal struggle against the Pagans, then raging around Reading and along the rich valley through which the Great Western Railway now runs, and where a Saxon victory is commemorated by the White Horse, which forms the subject of a little work by Thomas Hughes, a true representative, if any there be, of the liegemen and soldiers of King Alfred. When Ethelbert was showing that in him at all events Christianity was not free from the ascetic taint, by continuing to hear mass in his tent when the moment had come for decided action, Alfred charged up hill "like a wild boar" against the heathen, and began a battle which, his brother at last coming up, ended in a great victory.

The death of Ethelbert, in the midst of the crisis, placed the perilous crown on Alfred's head. Ethelbert left infant sons, but the monarchy was elective, though one of the line of Cerdic was always chosen; and those were the days of the real king, the ruler, judge, and captain of the people. In pitched battles, eight of which were fought in rapid succession, the English held their own; but they were worn out, and at length could no longer be brought into the field. Whether a faint monkish tradition of the estrangement of the people by unpopular courses on the part of the young king has any substance of truth we cannot say.

Utter gloom now settled down upon the Christian king and people. Had Alfred yielded to his inclinations, he would have probably have followed the example of his brother-in-law, Buhred of Mercia, and sought a congenial retreat amidst the churches and libraries of Rome; asceticism would have afforded him a pretext for so doing; but he remained at the post of duty. Athelney, a little island in the marshes of Somersetshire—then marshes, now drained and a fruitful plain—to

which he retired with the few followers left him, has been aptly compared to the mountains of Asturias, which formed the last asylum of Christianity in Spain. A jewel with the legend in Anglo-Saxon, "Alfred caused me to be made," was found near the spot, and is now in the University Museum at Oxford. A similar island in the marshes of Cambridgeshire formed the last rallying point of English patriotism against the Norman Conquest.

Of course, after the deliverance, a halo of legends gathered around Athelney. The legends of the king disguised as a peasant in the cottage of the herdsman, and of the king disguised as a harper in the camp of the Dane, are familiar to childhood. There is also a legend of the miraculous appearance of the great Saxon Saint Cuthbert. The king in his extreme need had gone to fish in a neighbouring stream, but had caught nothing, and was trying to comfort himself by reading the Psalms, when a poor man came to the door and begged for a piece of bread. The king gave him half his last loaf and the little wine left in the pitcher. The beggar vanished; the loaf was unbroken, the pitcher brimful of wine; and fishermen came in bringing a rich haul of fish from the river. In the night St. Cuthbert appeared to the king in a dream and promised him victory. We see at least what notion the generations nearest to him had of the character of Alfred.

At last the heart of the oppressed people turned to its king, and the time arrived for a war of liberation. But on the morrow of victory Alfred compromised with the Northmen. He despaired, it seems, of their final expulsion, and thought it better, if possible, to make them Englishmen and Christians, and to convert them into a barrier against their foreign and heathen brethren. We see in this politic moderation at