

the "Raven." But in general the Saxons yielded to the feelings of despair, fled out of the kingdom, submitted to the invaders, some even renouncing Christianity for their idolatrous rites, and left Alfred alone and a fugitive.

Although thus deserted, he refused to despair. He neither sought relief in a desperate death, nor, in a spirit of mawkish piety, set out to die at Rome or Jerusalem, but calmly remained at his post, determined that with death only would he abandon the cause of his country and religion. Gathering around him his wife and children, together with a few faithful followers, he sought a retreat in the marsh lands of Somerset, there quietly to wait an opportunity to renew the strife. There agriculture had scarcely begun to redeem the soil, and they were not likely to be discovered by an enemy whose main object was to plunder. But whilst there was little for the Danes to plunder, there was equally little for Alfred and his companions to eat, so that during the period in which they sojourned in this retreat their sufferings were terrible. Alfred himself was forced to understand by bitter experience the depth of humiliation to which he had fallen. One day, in the house of a cowherd, who kept in his heart the secret of the king's concealment, he began to mend and trim his bow and arrows. The man's wife casting her eye on him, committed to his care some cakes then baking on the griddle, whilst she went out to look after the cattle. It has been said that a man is never so little alone as when he is by himself, and this in the present instance seems to have been the case with Alfred. His thoughts soon soared away from cakes and griddle, until aroused by the tones of his virago of a hostess at his ear, pouring forth her wrath at his neglect, and informing him that she had no doubt he would be ready to eat her nice cakes, though he was far too lazy to turn them. It is also stated that when his stock of provisions was reduced to a single loaf, he shared it with a pilgrim who sought charity. But these stories cannot be confidently relied on as authentic history.

With the approach of spring, in the year 878, Alfred and his followers left their marshy retreat for a fortification, which

they built on an island at the junction of the rivers Thone and Parrott, known as Athelney, or the Prince's Island. There he again unfurled the Saxon banner, and let his people know that their king still lived. The news seems to have acted on them with the force of an electric shock. During his absence the loss of the man had caused them fully to appreciate his worth. Now from all sides they flocked, sword in hand, to his stronghold, and joyfully greeting their beloved monarch, demanded to be led against the foe. Alfred was as ready as his followers. He appointed a place of meeting for the inhabitants of the neighboring counties at a spot near Selwood Forest, where, about the 12th of May, he found himself again at the head of an army. One quiet night's rest was first enjoyed, after which he started at earliest dawn in search of the enemy. He came up with them at a spot called Ethandune, where they stood ready to receive him. He formed his warriors into a compact phalanx; and, thanks to these skilful tactics and the high spirits of his men, was enabled to withstand successfully the furious assaults of the Northmen, and ultimately to gain a complete victory, chasing them to the very gates of their encampment at Chippenham. That fortress was instantly besieged, and its garrison, at the end of fourteen days, reduced to such extremities of cold, hunger, and misery, that they acknowledged themselves vanquished, prayed for peace, and offered to give as many hostages for its observance as Alfred might choose to take, whilst they did not ask one from him. The offer was gladly accepted, and a treaty concluded whereby the Danes agreed to quit Wessex instantly, but were allowed to settle as colonists in East Anglia. A still stronger pledge of peace was, however, afforded in the adoption of Christianity by Guthorm and many of his followers, and in his warning all who refused to follow his example to depart beyond the sea. Thus, within a few weeks, did Alfred, previously a houseless wanderer, gather round him an army, vanquish his foes, recover his kingdom, and establish peace on terms which, if observed, would convert his enemies into allies! History has few more glorious achievements to recount.