

received a wound of which he died on the 23rd of April, 871, leaving the throne of Wessex to Alfred.

Alfred was scarcely twenty-two years of age at his accession. The circumstances of the times were such that we cannot wonder if he showed some disinclination to accept the dignity, and sought rather to have it conferred on one of his brother's children. But on this point the Witan was unanimous. Alfred had already given sufficient proofs of genius and virtue to convince them that they could get none equal to him as a sovereign; and the idea of conferring the crown on an infant in such a crisis was felt to be an absurdity. The appeal roused all Alfred's better nature; and so with a horde of ravenous savages, encouraged by recent success, in the midst of his kingdom,—with his subjects dispirited by defeat; with all the rest of England standing aloof; with war and toil certain, and death probable, and well knowing that the struggle was for the existence of the Anglo-Saxon race and Christian faith in England—Alfred gathered his energies for the discharge of his hard task.

Hastening from his brother's tomb to the field of battle, Alfred, within a month after his accession, met the Danes at Wilton. They seem to have possessed an enormous superiority of force, and by it wrested victory from his grasp after it had been almost won. This was the ninth pitched battle which had been fought within the year. The country had become utterly exhausted, and Alfred found himself reduced to the humiliating necessity of purchasing the retreat of the Danes from Wessex for a pecuniary consideration.

The invaders crossed the Thames and entered Mercia. Burrhed, its king, twice bribed them to depart; but, as usual in such cases, the bribe only served as a motive to induce a new visit. Within two years the unfortunate king fled in despair from his dominions, and sought peace in a pilgrimage to Rome, at which city he died. The invaders set up a phantom king in his place; but shortly after, becoming dissatisfied even with their tool, they stripped him of everything, and left him to perish miserably.

The Danes now separated into two bodies, one of which attacked Northumbria, and,

the other, in 876, renewed the assault on Wessex. Embarking at night, they sailed to Dorsetshire, and surprised Wareham, whence they renewed their ravages. Alfred, after a slight naval victory, had the impolicy to attempt to purchase their retreat; but, instructed by the fate of Burrhed, he exacted hostages and the most solemn oaths for its fulfilment. He was soon to learn the value of Danish oaths. The night after the treaty had been signed, the Danes sallied forth, cut to pieces the Saxon cavalry, and made their way to Exeter, where they wintered. Here they were enabled to act with their countrymen, who were devastating France, and with the piratical fleets which swarmed in the channel. But Alfred was not yet conquered. When the Danes had again violated their oaths, he was again prepared to face them. Hastening into Devon, in the spring of 877, he strove to besiege Exeter with his army, and to establish a blockade of the coast by means of a hastily extemporised fleet. Hearing of the straits to which these measures had reduced the Danes in Exeter, those who remained in Wareham embarked in 120 vessels, and hastened to its relief. But the elements proved adverse; for a whole month they were tossed on the waves. In the midst of their troubles the Saxon fleet advanced on them, and between it and the storm the whole armament was destroyed. This misfortune left the Danes in Exeter almost helpless, so that they gladly agreed to retire from Wessex, leaving hostages and oaths behind them, as securities against their re-appearance.

They retired into Mercia. But in South Wales there was a band of their countrymen who had recently arrived in England. These proposed to join them in a new attack on Wessex. The offer was accepted. The storm again burst on Alfred and his people, this time more fatally than ever. The attack was carried on both by land and water. The hordes overspread the land like locusts, and seemed, like them, also to rise out of it. The inhabitants were seized with a panic of despair. One last stand was made at Kynwith, where the garrison, by a bold sally, defeated the invaders with a loss of a thousand men, their leader, Hubba, and the famous war-standard called