

KING ALFRED THE GREAT.

BY PROFESSOR GOLDWIN SMITH, LL.D.

I.



ARCUS Aurelius, Alfred, and St. Louis, are the three examples of perfect virtue on a throne. But the virtue of St. Louis is deeply tainted with asceticism; and with the sublimated selfishness on which asceticism is founded, he sacrifices everything and everybody—sacrifices national interests, sacrifices the lives of the thousands of his subjects whom he drags with him in his chimerical crusades—to the good of his own soul. The reflections of Marcus Aurelius will be read with ever-increasing admiration by all who have learned to study character and to read it in its connection with history. Alone in every sense, without guidance or support but that which he found in his own breast, the imperial Stoic struggled serenely, though hopelessly, against the powers of evil which were dragging heathen Rome to her inevitable doom. Alfred was a Christian hero, and in his Christianity he found the force which bore him, through calamity apparently hopeless, to victory and happiness.

It must be owned that the materials for the history of the English king are not very good. His biography by Bishop Asser, his counsellor and friend, which forms the principal authority, is panegyric and uncritical, not to mention that a doubt rests on the authenticity of some portions of it. But in the general picture there are a consistency and a sobriety, which, combined with its peculiarity, commend it to us as historical. The leading

acts of Alfred's life are, of course, beyond doubt. And as to his character, he speaks to us himself in his works, and the sentiments which he expresses perfectly correspond with the physiognomy of the portrait.

We have called him a Christian hero. He was the victorious champion of Christianity against Paganism. This is the real significance of the struggle and of his character. The Northmen, or, as we loosely term them, the Danes, are called by the Saxon chroniclers the Pagans. As to race, the Northman, like the Saxon, was a Teuton, and the institutions, and the political and social tendencies of both, were radically the same.

It has been said that Christianity enervated the English and gave them over into the hands of the fresh and robust sons of nature. Asceticism and the abuse of monachism enervated the English. Asceticism taught the spiritual selfishness which flies from the world and abandons it to ruin instead of serving God by serving humanity. Kings and chieftains, under the hypocritical pretence of exchanging a worldly for an angelic life, buried themselves in the intolerance, not seldom in the sensuality, of the cloister, when they ought to have been leading their people against the Dane. But Christianity formed the bond which held the English together, and the strength of their resistance. It inspired their patriot martyrs, it raised up to them a deliverer at their utmost need.

The causes of Danish success are manifest: superior prowess and valor, sustained by more constant practice in war, of which the Saxons had probably had comparatively