

love of knowledge which afterwards so deeply affected the whole tenor of his life.

In the year 853 Alfred was sent on a visit to Rome. There seems reason to believe that his father entertained hopes of his receiving the Pope's holy unction and benediction, and of the gift conferring on him something of a title to the succession to the throne. This hope having been fulfilled, in so far as regards the receipt of the unction and blessing, Alfred returned home, but only to accompany his father on a second visit to the Papal city. Ethelwulf longed to escape the duties of his station, and sought relief from his soul's terrors, in monkish penances and priestly promises. He found the latter in plenty at Rome; but left in exchange some crowns, dishes and urns of gold and silver, besides other valuable alms. Returning through France, he halted at the court of Charles the Bald; became enamoured of his daughter Judith, and on the 1st of October, 856, was married to her. On reaching England he found his eldest son, Ethelbald, at the head of a rebellion. An amicable arrangement, however, was effected. Ethelwulf reigned peacefully until his death in 858, when Ethelbald mounted the throne.

Alfred, during the interval between his father's death and the accession of his brother Ethelred, was engaged in cultivating his talents, and fitting himself for the lofty post to which he was destined. Shortly after he had attained his twelfth year, his intense desire to read and write was with difficulty gratified. We can scarcely form any idea of the obstacles which then stood in the way of any person desirous of acquiring these simple elements of knowledge. In after years it was one of Alfred's greatest lamentations that, when he had youth and leisure for study, he could not find teachers. This, probably, refers to teachers in the higher branches of knowledge; but, to whatever it may refer, the difficulty was conquered. Slowly and steadily the heroic boy held on his course undauntedly, until at last he was able to read in his mother-tongue the poetry which he had already learnt by heart. The old songs seemed dearer to him as he understood them better; but soon another, and yet purer field of

study opened before him. He began to turn his thoughts towards the services in which he worshipped God. He collected into one volume the daily services, psalms, and prayers. To it he became so much attached that in later years he always carried it in his bosom, and derived strength and consolation from it in the darkest days of his life. Whilst training his moral and intellectual faculties he did not neglect the body, strengthening it by martial exercises and the chase, nor is it by any means improbable that the health of the mind was thus promoted, and the body rendered subject to its sway. But in 866, Ethelred having become King of Wessex, Alfred, standing forth as a second person in the realm, and heir-apparent to the throne, began to act a more prominent part in the character of a soldier and a statesman.

He was now the pride and hope of the people. In 868, he married Elswitha, the daughter of Ethelred, a Mercian Earl,—a step to which he was prompted by motives of virtue. In the midst of the nuptial festivities, Alfred was seized with a malady which seems to have been of an epileptic nature. To attacks of it he remained subject throughout the remainder of his life. The suffering seems to have been very acute. At times it almost entirely disqualified him for the discharge of any duty; but a short interval of ease never failed to re-establish his powers. Thus, no sooner had Alfred entered on public life, and laid the foundation of his household, than he became subject to a calamity which, in many men, would not only have extinguished hope and energy, but also have caused them to seek relief in ease and dissipation. His history shows that he faced it undauntedly, never allowing it to turn him from the discharge of the duties to which he was called, or the practice of the faith wherein he had been bred.

Scarcely were his nuptials ended, when there came a call which led him into a more active sphere. In 831, the Northmen, or Danes, had for the first time invaded England; and, for close on two centuries, they hung like a dark thunder-cloud over its shores. They came from all the coasts of Scandinavia and all the parts of the Baltic. Their homes were in their ships; their