

Nesbit Edith

Royal Children of English History



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Содержание

Alfred the Great	5
Prince Arthur	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	10

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Alfred the Great

WHEN I was very, very little, I hated history more than all my other lessons put together, because I had to learn it out of a horrid little book, called somebody's "Outlines of English History"; and it seemed to be all the names of the kings and the dates of battles, and, believing it to be nothing else, I hated it accordingly.

I hope you do not think anything so foolish, because, really, history is a story, a story of things that happened to real live people in our England years ago; and the things that are happening here and now, and that are put in the newspapers, will be history for little children one of these days.

The people in those old times were the same kind of people who live now. Mothers loved their children then, and fathers worked for them, just as mothers and fathers do now, and children then were good or bad, as the case might be, just as little children are now. And the people you read about in history were real live people, who were good and bad, and glad and sorry, just as people are now-a-days.

a. d. 827

You know that if you were to set out on a journey from one end of England to another, wherever you went, through fields and woods and lanes, you would still be in the kingdom of Queen Victoria. But once upon a time, hundreds of years ago, if a child had set out to ride, he might have begun his ride in the morning in one kingdom, and finished it in the evening in another, because England was not one great kingdom then as it is now, but was divided up into seven pieces, with a king to look after each, and these seven kings were always quarrelling with each other and trying to take each other's kingdom away, just as you might see seven naughty children, each with a plot of garden, trying to take each other's gardens and spoiling each other's flowers in their wicked quarrels. But presently came one King, named Egbert, who was stronger than all the others; so he managed to put himself at the head of all the kingdoms, and he was the first King of *all* England. But though he had got the other kings to give in to him, he did not have at all a peaceful time. There were some very fierce wild pirates, called Danes, who used to come sailing across the North Sea in ships with carved swans' heads at the prow, and hundreds of fighting men aboard. Their own country was bleak and desolate, and they were greedy and wanted the pleasant English land. So they used to come and land in all sorts of places along the sea-shore, and then they would march across the fields and kill the peaceful farmers, and set fire to their houses, and take their sheep and cows. Or sometimes they would drive them out, and live in the farmhouses themselves. Of course, the English people were not going to stand this; so they were always fighting to drive the Danes away when they came here.

a. d. 871

Egbert's son allowed the Danes to grow very strong in England, and when he died he left several sons, like the kings in the fairy tales; and the first of these princes was made King, but he could not beat the Danes, and then the second one was made King, but he could not beat the Danes. In the fairy tales, you know, it is always the youngest prince who has all the good fortune, and in this story the

same thing happened. This prince did what none of his brothers could do. He drove out the Danes from England, and gave his people a chance of being quiet and happy and good. His name was Alfred.

Like most great men, this King Alfred had a good mother. She used to read to him, when he was little, out of a great book with gold and precious stones on the cover, and inside beautiful songs and poetry. And one day she said to the young princes, who were all very fond of being read to out of this splendid book —

"Since you like the book so much, I will give it to the one who is first able to read it, and to say all the poetry in it by heart."

The eldest prince tried to learn it, but I suppose he did not try hard enough; and the other princes tried, but I fear they were too lazy. But you may be quite sure the youngest prince did the right thing. He learnt to read, and then he set to work to learn the poems by heart; and it was a proud day for him and for the Queen when he was able to say all the beautiful poetry to her. She put the book into his hands for his very own, and they kissed each other with tears of pride and pleasure.

You must not suppose that King Alfred drove out the Danes without much trouble, much thought, and much hard work. Trouble, thought, and hard work are the only three spells the fairies have left us, so of course he had to use them. He was made King just after the Danes had gained a great victory, and for the first eight years of his reign he was fighting them continually. At one time they had conquered almost the whole of England, and they would have killed Alfred if they could have found him.

You know, a wise prince always disguises himself when danger becomes very great. So Alfred disguised himself as a farm labourer, and went to live with a farmer, who used to make him feed the beasts and help about the farm, and had no idea that this labourer was the great King himself.

One day the farmer's wife went out – perhaps she went out to milk the cows; at any rate it was some important business – and she had made some cakes for supper, and she saw Alfred sitting idle in the kitchen, so she asked him to look after the cakes, to see that they did not burn. Alfred said he would. But he had just received some news about the Danes, and he was thinking and thinking and thinking over this, and he forgot all about the cakes, and when the farmer's wife came in she found them burnt black as coal.

"Oh, you silly, greedy fellow," she said, "you can eat cakes fast enough; but you can't even take the trouble to bake them when other people take the trouble to make them for you."

And I have heard that she even slapped his face. He bore it all very patiently.

"I am very sorry," he said, "but I was thinking of other things."

Just at that moment her husband came in followed by several strangers, and, to the good woman's astonishment, they all fell on their knees and greeted her husband's labourer as their King.

"We have beaten the Danes," they said, "and everyone is asking where is King Alfred? You must come back with us."

"Forgive me," cried the woman. "I didn't think of your being the King."

"Forgive me," said Alfred, kindly. "I didn't think of your cakes being burnt."

The Danes had many more fighting men than Alfred; so he was obliged to be very cautious and wise, or he could never have beaten them at all. In those days very few people could read; and the evenings used to seem very long sometimes, so that anybody who could tell a story or sing a song was made much of, and some people made it their trade to go about singing songs and telling stories and making jokes to amuse people who could not sing songs or tell stories or make jokes themselves. These were called gleemen, and wherever they went they were always welcomed and put at a good place at table, and treated with respect and kindness; and in time of war no one ever killed a gleeman, so they could always feel quite safe whatever was going on.

Now Alfred once wanted to know how many Danes there were in a certain Danish camp, and whether they were too strong for him to beat. So he disguised himself as a gleeman and took a harp, for his mother had taught him to sing and play very prettily, and he went and sang songs to the Danes

and told stories to them. But all the time he kept his eyes open, and found out all he wanted to know. And he saw that the Danes were not expecting to be attacked by the English people, so that, instead of keeping watch, they were feasting and drinking and playing all their time. Then he went back to his own soldiers, and they crept up to the Danish camp and fell upon it while the Danes were feasting and making merry, and as the Danes were not expecting a fight, the English were easily able to get much the best of it.

At last, after many fights, King Alfred managed to make peace with the Danes, and then he settled down to see what he could do for his own people. He saw that if he was to keep out the wicked Danes he must be able to fight them by sea as well as by land. So he learned how to build ships and taught his people how to build them, and that was the beginning of the great English navy, which you ought to be proud of if you are big enough to read this book. Alfred was wise enough to see that knowledge is power, and, as he wanted his people to be strong, he tried to make them learned. He built schools, and at University College, Oxford, there are people that will tell you that that college was founded by Alfred the Great.

He used to divide up his time very carefully, giving part to study and part to settling disputes among his people, and part to his shipbuilding and his other duties. They had no clocks and watches in those days, and he used sometimes to get so interested in his work as to forget that it was time to leave it and go on to something else, just as you do sometimes when you get so interested in a game of rounders that you forget that it is time to go on with your lessons. The idea of a clock never entered into Alfred's head, at least not a clock with wheels, and hands on its face, but he was so clever that he made a clock out of a candle. He painted rings of different colours round the candle, and when the candle had burnt down to the first ring it was half an hour gone, and when it was burnt to the next ring it was another half-hour, and so on. So he could tell exactly how the time went.

He was called Alfred the Great, and no king has better deserved such a title.

"So long as I have lived," he said, "I have striven to live worthily." And he longed, above all things, to leave "to the men that came after a remembrance of him in good works."

He did many good and wise things, but the best and wisest thing he ever did was to begin to write the History of England. There had been English poems before this, but no English stories that were not written in poetry. So that Alfred's book was the first of all the thousands and thousands of English books that you see on the shelves of the big libraries. His book is generally called the Saxon Chronicle, and was added to by other people after his death.

He made a number of wise laws. It is believed that it was he who first ordained that an Englishman should be tried not only by a judge but also by a jury of people like himself.

a. d. 901

Though he had fought bravely when fighting was needed to defend his kingdom, yet he loved peace and all the arts of peace. He loved justice and kindness, and little children; and all folk loved and wept for him when he died, because he was a good King who had always striven to live worthily, that is to say, he had always tried to be good.

His last words to his son, just before he died, were these – "It is just that the English people should be as free as their own thoughts."

You must not think that this means that the English people should be free to think as they like or to do as they like. What it means is, that an Englishman should be as free to do good deeds as he is to think good thoughts.

Prince Arthur

a. d. 1066

THE Danes never succeeded in conquering England and in making it their own, though many of them settled in England and married English wives. But some relations of the Danes, called the Normans, were bolder and stronger and more fortunate. And William, who was called the Conqueror, became King of England, and left his son to rule after him. And when four Norman Kings had reigned in England, the Count of Anjou was made the English King, because his mother was the heiress of the English crown.

His great-grandfather, Ingeger, the first Count of Anjou, must have been a very brave man. When he was quite a boy he was page to his godmother, who was a great lady. It was the custom then for boys of noble family to serve noble ladies as pages.

One morning this lady's husband was found dead in his bed, and the poor lady was accused by a nobleman, named Gontran, of murdering him. Gontran said he was quite sure of her guilt, and that he was ready to stake his life on it, that is to say, he offered to fight anyone who should say that the lady was innocent. This seems a curious way of finding out a person's innocence or guilt, but it was the custom of the times.

The poor lady could find no one who believed in her enough to risk his life, and she began to despair, when suddenly her boy-page rushed forward and begged that, though he was not yet a knight, and so had really no right to fight, yet that he might be allowed to do combat in her defence. "The whole Court were spectators. The Duke Charles was on his throne, and the accused widow in a litter curtained with black. Prayers were offered that God would aid the right. The trumpets sounded, and the champions rode in full career against each other. At the first onset Gontran's lance pierced his adversary's shield so that he could not disengage it, and Ingeger was thus enabled to close with him, hurl him to the ground, and despatch him with a dagger. Then, while the lists rang with applause, the brave boy rushed up to his godmother and threw himself into her arms in a transport of joy."

When William conquered England he became King of England and still owned his own possessions in Normandy, and the Count of Anjou, when he became King, still held the lands he had held as Count, so that the Kings of England held a great part of France as well as England. The Counts of Anjou used to wear a sprig of broom, or *planta genista*, in their helmets, and from this they were called the Plantagenet Kings.

The first of them was brave and clever, and the second was brave, but the third, John, was mean and cruel and cowardly, and had really no right to the throne at all. His nephew, Prince Arthur of Brittany, ought to have been King, because he was the son of John's elder brother. But John wanted the kingdom for himself, and though the King of France tried to help Arthur to get his rights, John would not give up the crown he had stolen. He managed to take Prince Arthur prisoner, and then pretended to be very fond of him. "All this quarrel has been a mistake," he said; "come with me and I will give you a kingdom."

So Prince Arthur went with him, and in the dark night, as they passed along by the river, the wicked King stabbed the young Prince with his own hand, and pushed him into the swift-flowing water. "There," he cried, "that is the kingdom I promised you."

And the poor young Prince sank into the dark flood, never to rise again.

Shakespeare tells another story of Prince Arthur's death, which you will read for yourselves one day; and this is the story: —

After King John had taken the young Prince prisoner, he shut him up in the Castle of Northampton, and ordered Hubert de Burgh, the Governor of the Castle, to put poor Arthur's eyes out, because he thought that no one would want a blind boy to be King of England. So Hubert went into the room where the little Prince was shut up.

"Good morning," said the Prince. "You are sad, Hubert."

"Indeed, I have been merrier," said Hubert, who, though he did not like to disobey the King, was yet miserable at the wicked deed he had been asked to do.

"Nobody," said Arthur, "should be sad but I. If I were out of prison and kept sheep I should be as merry as the day is long. And so I would be here but for my uncle. He is afraid of me and I of him. Is it my fault that I was Geoffrey's son? Indeed it is not, and I would to heaven I were your son, so you would love me, Hubert."

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