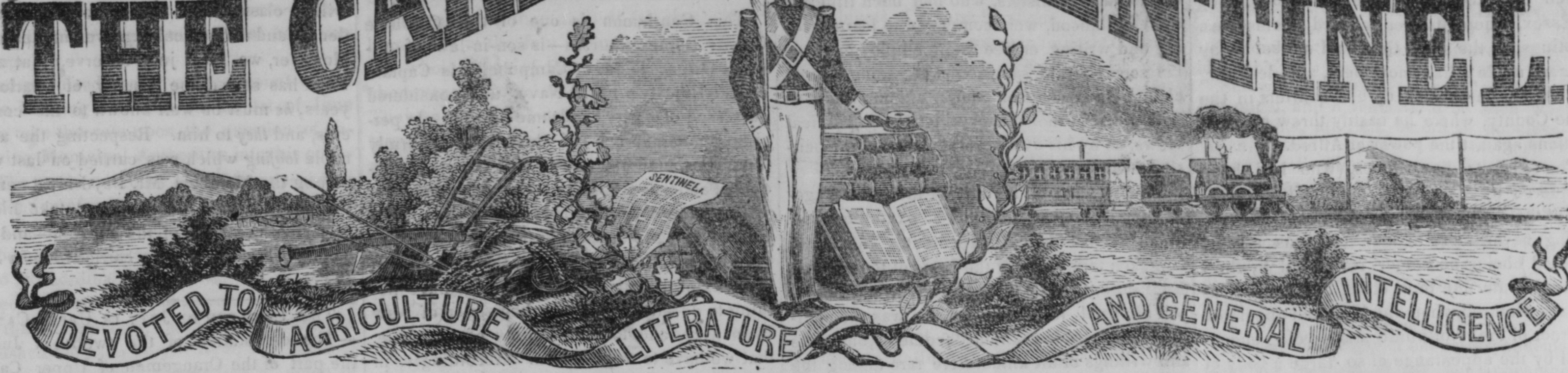


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Prize Essay.

[At the request of Mr. McCoy, teacher of the Grammar School in this place, we insert the following Essay, written by T. P. Peabody, to whom the Medal was adjudged for proficiency in Composition.—*Ed. Sentinel.*]

ALFRED THE GREAT.

ALFRED was the most famous of all the Saxon kings of England, and very early in life gave marks of those great virtues and shining talents which afterwards gave splendour to his reign, and by which during times of the greatest difficulty and distress, he was able to save his country from utter ruin and subversion. At the age of five he was sent by his father to Rome, yet such was the barbarism of those times that he was unable to read before his twelfth year.

His genius was first roused by the recital of some Saxon poems, which recounted the praise of heroes, and in which the Queen took delight. These poems served to expand those noble and elevated sentiments which he had received from nature.—Stimulated by his own ardent imagination and encouraged by the Queen, he soon learned to read these Compositions; and also to acquire a knowledge of the Latin tongue, in which he met with authors who better prompted his heroic spirit and guided his ambition. He was so much absorbed in his literary pursuits, that on his accession to Royalty, he rather regarded the event as an object of regret than of pleasure. But being called to the throne in preference to his brother's children, as well as by the will of his father and the voice of the nation, he shook off his literary indolence, and exerted himself in the defence of his people.

He had hardly buried his brother, when he was obliged to take the field to oppose the Danes, who had seized Wilton and were ravaging and devastating the Country round. He marched against them with the few troops he could assemble on a sudden, and at first gained an advantage, but pursuing the victory too far, the superiority in numbers of the Danes prevailed, and recovered them the day. Their loss, however, was so considerable, that fearing Alfred would receive fresh reinforcements, they were willing to stipulate for a safe retreat, and promised to depart the kingdom.

New bands of these adventurers continued to pour over every year, and although frequently repulsed by Alfred, they were never discouraged, but always returned with increasing numbers, till they firmly established themselves in the islands of Thanet and Sheppey, at the mouth of the river Thames, from whence they made constant incursions into the neighboring country.

They gradually overran the greater part of England, built castles and fortified posts to secure themselves in the possession of the country, and treated the inhabitants with barbarous oppression and cruelty. The Saxons at last became quite dispirited. Finding that after all the miserable havoc they had undergone, both in their persons and in their property, and after all the vigorous exertions they had made in their own defence, that fresh bands continued to arrive every year upon the coast, they lost all hopes of successfully resisting the invaders. Some left their country and retired into Wales, or fled beyond the sea, and others submitted to the conquerors, in hopes of appeasing their fury by a servile obedience. The attention of every man was now engrossed in concern for his own preservation. Alfred exhorted them to make one effort more in defence of their prince, their country, and their liberties, but they were so terrified at even the name of the Danes, that he was

unable to assemble a sufficient number of men to risk the chances of an engagement with the enemy.

He was therefore obliged to relinquish the ensigns of his dignity, to dismiss his servants, and to seek refuge in the disguise of a peasant, in the hut of a *neatherd* or cattle-keeper, who had been entrusted with the care of some of his cattle.

During his stay with the peasant, there passed an incident which has been recorded by all the historians and was long preserved by popular tradition, though it contains nothing memorable in itself, except so far as every circumstance is interesting which attends so much virtue and dignity reduced to such distress. The wife of the neatherd was ignorant of the condition of her royal guest, and observing him one day by the fireside trimming his bows and arrows, she desired him to take care of some cakes which were toasting, whilst she was employed elsewhere in other domestic affairs; but Alfred, whose thoughts were otherwise engaged, neglected this injunction, and the good woman, on her return, finding her cakes all burnt, rated the king very severely, and upbraided him that he always seemed very well pleased to eat her warm cakes, though he was thus negligent in toasting them.

Alfred lived in this way for some time, and amused himself with music, and supported his humble lot with the hopes of better fortune. Though fearing an enemy in every quarter, and supposed to be dead by most of his followers, yet he resolved to remain in the country, to aid in bringing it relief on the first occasion that offered. On one occasion, Alfred, in company with an associate to whom he had revealed himself, were roaming about the country, they heard a tramp of horsemen approaching. Fearing they were Danes, they hid themselves among the bushes, but on coming in sight, Alfred discovered them to be the Earl of Berks, a Saxon nobleman, with a number of attendants. Seeing Alfred in the way he inquired the road to Taunton, and on being answered by the king, the Earl was struck by the sound of his voice, and demanded who he was. Alfred, drawing him away from his followers, into the thicket, removed his peasant's cap, and disclosed to the eyes of the astonished Earl, the well-known features of the Saxon king. The Earl informed him that he was about to assemble his retainers, and take up arms against the Danes; they arranged measures together, and the Earl departed on his enterprise. Alfred again returned to the peasant's cottage, to wait for a favorable moment to attack the enemy.

By degrees, Alfred, as he found the search of the enemy become more remiss, collected a small band, and retreated into the centre of a bog, formed by the stagnant waters of the Thone and Parret, in Somersetshire. Here he found two acres of firm ground, and building a habitation on them, rendered himself secure by fortifications, but more so by the unknown and inaccessible roads which led to it, and by the forests and morasses by which it was in every way environed. From this place, he made frequent and unexpected sallies upon the Danes, who often felt the vigor of his arm, but knew not from what quarter the blow came. He subsisted himself and his band by the plunder which he acquired from the Danes. From small successes, he opened their minds to hope that notwithstanding their present low condition, more important victories might attend his valour.

Alfred lay concealed in this place, and continued this mode of warfare during a twelvemonth, when the news of a prosperous event reached his ears, and called him to the field. The Danish chieftain, Hubba, having spread devastation, fire, and slaughter over Wales, landed in Devonshire from

twenty-three vessels, and besieged the castle of Kinwith, near the mouth of the small river Tau. Oddune, Earl of Devonshire, with his followers, had taken refuge there, and not being well supplied with provisions, or even with water, he determined, by a vigorous effort, to prevent the necessity of submitting to the barbarous enemy, and for this purpose, made a sudden sally upon the Danes before sun-rising. The Danes, not expecting such a sudden movement, and being quite unprepared, were put to the route, with great slaughter, and Oddune, pursuing them, killed Hubba himself, and got possession of the famous *Reafen*, or enchanted standard, in which the Danes put great confidence. On this "Reafen," curiously interwoven with many magical incantations, by the three sisters of Hinguar and Hubba, was the figure of a raven, which, by its different movements, prognosticated as the Danes believed, the good or bad success of any enterprise.

Alfred observed this symptom of successful resistance in his subjects, and resolved to follow up this advantage. He now left his retreat, but before he would assemble them in arms, or urge them in any attempt, which, if unfortunate, might, in their present despondency, prove fatal, he resolved to inspect personally, the situation of the enemy, and to judge of the probability of success. For this purpose, he entered their camp under the disguise of a harper, and passed unsuspected, through every part. He tried all his musical arts to please, and entertained them so well with his facetious humors that he met with a welcome reception; and was even introduced to the presence of Guthrum, their prince, where he remained some days.

From what he saw, he was encouraged to hope for success, and secretly sent emissaries to the most considerable of his subjects, and summoned them to a rendezvous at Brixton, on the borders of Selwood forest. The insolence and rapine of the Danes had now become intolerable, and those who before had hoped to escape their calamities by a servile submission, were now ready to undergo all their former fatigues and dangers, rather than remain in their present state of bondage.

On the appointed day they joyfully resorted to their prince, and on his appearance, he was received with shouts of applause; nor could they satiate their eyes with the sight of their beloved monarch, whom they had so long regarded as dead, and who now, with voice and look expressing his confidence of success, called them to liberty and to vengeance.

Taking advantage of his previous knowledge of the Danish camp, he directed his attack against their most unguarded quarter. The Danes were so astonished at seeing an army of English, (for so the Saxons were now universally called,) whom they had considered as totally subdued, and still more so to hear that Alfred was at their head, made but a faint resistance. Those of the enemy who escaped, retreated to a fortified camp, but being besieged by Alfred, and reduced to extremity by want and hunger, were forced to surrender.

Alfred, no less generous than brave, gave them their lives, and even formed a scheme for converting them, from mortal foes, into faithful subjects and confederates. The kingdoms of East Anglia and Northumberland had been desolated by the frequent inroads of the Danes, and he now proposed to people them with Guthrum and his followers, in the hope that they would at last betake themselves to industry, when, by reason of his resistance and the exhausted condition of the country, they could no longer subsist by plunder.

This expedient seemed for a time to promise success, and to correspond to Alfred's hopes. The greater part of Guthrum's army settled peaceably in their new quarters, and some smaller bodies of

the same nation were distributed into the five cities of Derby, Leicester, Stamford, Lincoln, and Nottingham.

England was not infested by the inroads of these barbarians for some years after this, except a small band which sailed up the Thames, and landed at Fulham, but suddenly retreated to their ships on finding the country in a posture of defence.

This interval of tranquility was employed by Alfred in restoring order to the country, which had been shaken by so many violent convulsions, in establishing civil and military institutions,—in composing the minds of men to industry and justice,—and in providing against the return of like calamities. After rebuilding part of London which had been destroyed by the Danes in the reign of Ethelwolf, and repairing the ruined cities, he established a regular militia force for the defence of the kingdom, and ordained that all his subjects should be armed and registered. He assigned them a regular rotation of duty, distributing part into the castles and fortresses which he had built in proper places, and requiring another part to take the field on any alarm, and to assemble at stated places of rendezvous; and he left a sufficient number at home employed in the cultivation of the land, who afterwards took their turn in military service. So well arranged were all his measures that the Danes could no sooner appear in one place than a sufficient number would be assembled to oppose them, without leaving other important points defenceless or disarmed.

Alfred's next care was to provide himself with a naval force, being sensible that the proper method of opposing an enemy who made incursions by sea, was to oppose them on their own element. This, though the natural defence of an island, had hitherto been totally neglected by the English. He built a fleet of one hundred and twenty ships, and he trained his subjects in the practice of sailing as well as of naval action. He distributed his armed vessels in proper stations round the island, and was certain to meet the Danish ships either before or after they had landed their troops, and to pursue them in their incursions. The coast had generally become desolate by the frequent ravages of the Danes, and they might suddenly, by surprise, land, but on their return they were almost certain to encounter the English fleet, and therefore could not escape as formerly, by abandoning their booty, but paid the penalty of the disorders they had committed, by their total destruction. Several incursions of the Danes had been defeated by this vigilant precaution, and the kingdom was maintained in peace and tranquility for some years.

At last the famous sea-king or piratical chieftain, Hastings, who having ravaged all the provinces of France, and being obliged to quit that country more by the desolation which he himself had occasioned, than by the resistance of the inhabitants, directed his attention to England, and appeared off the coast of Kent with a fleet of three hundred and thirty sail, and began to commit the most destructive ravages. On the first alarm of this descent, Alfred flew to the defence of his people, and at the head of a select band of soldiers, and the armed militia from all quarters, appeared in the field with a force superior to that of the enemy. Straggling parties of the Danes, who had been drawn to a distance from the chief encampment, by necessity or by the love of plunder, were cut off by the English, and the invaders, instead of increasing their spoils, found themselves cooped up in their fortifications, and obliged to subsist on the plunder which they had brought from France. This situation not proving agreeable to them, those who had encamped at Apuldore rose suddenly from their encampment, with the intention of marching towards