

ALFRED THE GREAT



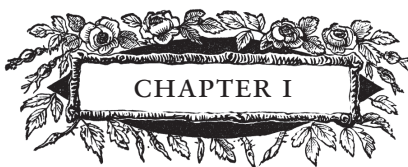
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THE BRITONS.



ALFRED the Great is, in a sense, the founder of the British monarchy. He was not actually the first king of the English, as there had been several insignificant dynasties before him who had ruled small portions of the land, more like chieftains than kings. Alfred followed these by hereditary right, and spent his life laying the foundations on which the enormous British empire was later built. If any of the tales which have come down to us are true, he was an honest, conscientious, fair, and far-seeing ruler. If the system of hereditary succession had always given us such kings, then the world's monarchies would have survived much longer than they did.

If traced back far enough, the histories of all nations eventually turn into legends and fantastic stories. Before art and writing were advanced enough to record events, tradition was the only means of handing down the memory of events from generation to generation, and over time, tradition always turns facts into fiction. The stories about

the discovery and settlement of Great Britain are good examples of these fantastic myths. Take the following, for instance: Aeneas escaped the Fall of Troy with a band of Trojans, and after many adventures which Virgil has related, he settled in Italy. Here, in time, he had a grandson named Silvius. Silvius, in turn, had a son named Brutus, who was thus Aeneas' great-grandson.

One day, while Brutus was hunting in the forests, he accidentally killed his father with an arrow. His father was King of Alba, a region of Italy near the future location of Rome, and so Brutus fled the country.

After many wanderings, he reached Greece with a number of Trojan followers. They attacked a local king named Pandrasus, took him prisoner, and eventually agreed upon extraordinary terms of peace. Pandrasus would give his daughter Imogena to be Brutus' wife along with a fleet of ships as her dowry. Brutus would then take his new wife and all his followers, and sail away to seek a home in some other part of the world.

Brutus, with his fleet and his bride, went to sea and soon landed on a deserted island, where they found the ruins of a city. Here they found an ancient temple of Diana and a statue of the goddess which possessed the power of speech. Brutus asked this oracle where he should settle:

“Goddess of shades and huntresses who strides
Across the moon and on the oceans wide,
On thy third realm, the earth, look now and speak:
What land to dwell in would you have me seek?”

To which the oracle statue returned the following answer:

“West and north beneath the cloudy skies
Beyond the realm of Gaul an island lies

Now empty, where of old the giants roamed
There shall your people find a lasting home.”

Obviously, this meant Britain. Brutus, following the oracle's directions, sailed westward through the Mediterranean Sea. He reached the Pillars of Hercules, the ancient name for the Rock of Gibraltar and its counterpart across the strait. It was believed that Hercules had built these promontories to mark the western limits of his wanderings. Brutus sailed through the strait and turned northward along the coast of Spain.

Eventually, after great danger and hardship on the broad Atlantic Ocean, they arrived safely on the shores of Britain and found the land full of fruitfulness and abundance. The land was unoccupied except for wild beasts in the forests and a few giants in the caves. Brutus and his followers drove the beasts into the mountains of Scotland and Wales, and killed all the giants. The chief of the giants, named Gogmagog, was hurled from the top of the white chalk cliffs into the sea.

Even though the island of Great Britain is on the same latitude as Labrador, which is covered with ice and snow, the Trojans found it to be a region of inexhaustible greenness and beauty. And although it is often called a little island, they found its fields and forests to be sufficiently extensive, for it was nearly four hundred miles wide where they landed and six hundred miles long. It never would have come to be called small had not the British gone on to create such a great empire that Britain itself seemed insignificant by comparison. To Brutus and his companions it was like a whole new world, larger than they even wished to explore, and all of it covered with the same fertile, green mountains, valleys, and plains.

Brutus accordingly settled on the island and founded a kingdom over which he reigned as the founder of a new dynasty. Countless tales are told of his successors down to the time of Caesar: quarrels over the throne, wars between tribes, cities founded, fortresses built, and rivers named for princes and princesses drowned in them. There is a vast collection of these legends, and most of them are of little interest or value.

The story of King Lear, immortalized by Shakespeare in one of his tragedies, is the most famous and entertaining of these: one of Brutus' descendants was a king named Lear. He founded the city now called Leicester. He had three daughters, whose names were Gonilla, Regana, and Cordelia. One day he asked them for some assurance of their love. The two eldest responded with the most extravagant expressions, but when it was Cordelia's turn, she said, "Father, I love you as a daughter loves a father. What more can a father ask or a daughter promise? Any who pretend beyond this only flatter."

The foolish king was pleased by the declarations of love made by Gonilla and Regana, but he thought Cordelia was heartless and cold, and so he divided his kingdom among the other two and left Cordelia without any portion whatsoever. Despite this, she was eventually married off to a French prince, who evidently understood the value of the honest truth. He took her away with him to France.

Now that the old king had given up his kingdom to his two eldest daughters, they managed to take everything from him through lies and manipulation, so that he became wholly dependent upon them. They and their husbands made life so unbearable for him that he eventually had to leave the realm, and went in poverty to Cordelia for refuge. She took him in with great enthusiasm and af-

fection. She raised an army and went with her father back to England to help him recover his kingdom. She was successful. The king took possession of his throne again and reigned in peace for the rest of his days.

Centuries passed, and at length the great Julius Caesar, who was extending Roman power in every direction, made his way across the Channel and landed in England. The details of this invasion are described in our history of Julius Caesar. The Romans ruled the island, more or less, for four hundred years.

They did not, however, rule it in peace. They were always at war with the native Britons, who hated the oppression of the merciless Roman generals. One of the most formidable rebellions the Romans encountered during their troubled rule was led by a woman. Her name was Boadicea. She was tall and masculine in appearance. Her voice was harsh. Her hair was yellow and hung down past her waist, making her appear even more terrifying. She wore a great cloak of many colors over shoulders and a gold chain around her neck, and carried an ornamented spear in her hand.

Thus equipped, she gathered an army of one hundred thousand men, and whipped them into a frenzy against the Romans with words of revenge. Boadicea had good reason to hate the Romans, for they had robbed her of her treasures and her kingdom, imprisoned her, beat her, and inflicted the worst possible injuries upon her daughters. These things had driven the wretched mother into a perfect frenzy of hate and compelled her into this desperate struggle for revenge. But all was in vain, for the Roman army was the best in the world. Her army was beaten. In despair, Boadicea poisoned herself.

In this way the battle between the Romans and the Britons raged on for generations, with the Romans conquering time and time again, until the Britons finally learned to submit without further resistance. When barbarian hordes attacked the land from fortresses hidden in the islands and mountain glens, the Romans built a wall and a line of forts from coast to coast between England and Scotland to protect the inhabitants of the southern country, who had learned at last to live peacefully under their rule.

One of the most memorable events that occurred during the time that the Romans ruled Britain was the visit of the Emperor Severus. He was powerful and prosperous, but his life was troubled by the perpetual quarrelling of his immoral sons. To remove them from Rome, where they were disgracing both themselves and their father, Severus took them with him on an expedition to Britain, hoping to turn their minds towards new and nobler ambitions.

At the time of Severus' expedition, he was very old and ill. He suffered from gout and was carried almost the whole way upon a litter. He crossed the Channel with his army, left one of his sons in command of the southern part of the island, and with the other son advanced north into the heart of Scotland at the head of an enormous force, hoping to put a final end to the war with the Picts and the Scots.

He met, however, with only limited success. His soldiers fell into bogs, they were caught in ambushes, they suffered every degree of hardship for lack of water and food, and were continually forced by their enemies to fight in situations where they were at a disadvantage. Also, the old and feeble emperor was continually tormented by anxiety for Bassianus, the son whom he had brought with him.

The change of scene had not altered his awful character at all. Bassianus formed plots against his father's authority, he caused mutinies in the army, he formed riots, and he was finally caught in a plan to actually assassinate his father.

When Severus discovered this wicked plan, he sent for his son. He laid a naked sword before him, reproached him for his undutiful and ungrateful conduct, and said, "If you wish to kill me, do it now. Here I stand, old, sick, and helpless. You are young and strong. It would be easy. I am ready. Strike the blow."

Of course, Bassianus went away without committing the crime. His character, however, remained unchanged, and this constant trouble, when added to all the other difficulties Severus encountered, prevented him from thoroughly conquering his northern foes. He made a sort of peace with them and retreated to the line of forts, where he set his whole army to the work of repairing the wall, a task which took them two years. The resulting fortification was so solid that traces of it still remain today. It is known both as the Wall of Severus and the Antonine Wall.

The wall extended across the island, from the mouth of the Tyne River on the North Sea, to the Solway Firth—nearly seventy miles. It was twelve feet high and eight feet wide. Where it crossed pits or bogs, wooden beams were driven into the ground to serve as a foundation. Since such a wall by itself would be no defense, it was to be occupied by soldiers, for whom great fortresses were built at intervals along the wall. These were called *stations*, and small towns of laborers and craftsmen soon sprung up around them. Between the stations, at smaller intervals, were smaller fortresses called castles. These were intended as rallying points in case of attack, but did not contain large numbers of troops. Then, between the castles at even

smaller intervals were turrets, used as watch-towers for the sentinels. Thus, the whole wall was defended along its entire length by armed men, the number of whom was said to be ten thousand. There was a long, deep ditch on the northern side of the wall, to make it even harder for the enemy to cross, and a wide military road on the southern side for quickly moving troops and supplies from one end to the other.

The wall was a good defense as long as Roman soldiers remained to guard it. But about two centuries after Severus' reign, the Roman empire began to decline, and their distant armies were called home to the capital. The wall was left to the Britons, who were unable to defend it. The Picts and Scots renewed their assaults. They knocked down the castles, broke the wall, and built ships to sail around by sea to once more plunder and destroy. The Britons begged again and again for help from the Romans, and occasionally help came. In the end, however, all aid from Rome ceased, and the beleaguered Britons were forced to resort to desperate measures, the nature of which will be explained in the next chapter.



THE ANGLO-SAXONS.

THE Anglo-Saxons began as pirates and robbers, and desperate and dangerous ones at that. They were famed and dreaded throughout the world, not only in the days of Alfred, but several centuries before. All the historians of that time describe them as a forceful, energetic people, mentally and physically powerful, and always driven by their spirit of enterprise to embark on wild and daring expeditions. They built vessels in which they boldly sailed on the North Sea or the Baltic Sea on excursions for conquest or plunder, often sailing in tempests and storms by choice, so as to come upon their enemies unexpectedly.

They would build small boats out of willow branches, covering them with animal skins, and in fleets of these frail vessels they would sally forth among the howling winds and foaming waves of the North Sea. On these expeditions, the leaders shared in all the toils and hardships of the men, and the men took part in the counsels and plans of