

ALFRED THE GREAT

The celebrations in connection with the millenary of King Alfred struck a note of sympathy in the midst of much that was unsympathetic, because, altogether apart from any peculiar historical opinions, all men feel the sanctifying character of that which is at once strong and remote; the ancient thing is always the most homely, and the distant thing the most near. The only possible peacemaker is a dead man, ever since by the sublime religious story a dead man only could reconcile heaven and earth. In a certain sense we always feel the past ages as human, and our own age as strangely and even weirdly dehumanised. In our own time the details overpower us; men's badges and buttons seem to grow larger and larger as in a horrible dream. To study humanity in the present is like studying a mountain with a magnifying glass; to study it in the past is like studying it through a telescope.

For this reason England, like every other great and historic nation, has sought its typical hero in remote and ill-recorded times. The personal and moral greatness of Alfred is, indeed, beyond question. It does not depend any more than the greatness of any other human hero upon the accuracy of any or all of the stories that are told about him. Alfred may not have done one of the things which are reported of him, but it is immeasurably easier to do every one of those things than to be the man of whom such things are reported falsely. Fable is, generally speaking, far more accurate than fact, for fable describes a man as he was to his own age, fact describes him as he is to a handful of inconsiderable antiquarians many centuries after. Whether Alfred watched the cakes for the neat-herd's wife, whether he sang songs in the Danish camp, is of no interest to anyone except those who set out to prove under considerable disadvantages that they are genealogically descended from him. But the man is better pictured in these stories than in any number of modern realistic trivialities about his favourite breakfast and his favourite musical composer. Fable is more historical than fact, because fact tells us about one man and fable tells us about a million men. If we read of a man who could make green grass red and turn the sun into the moon, we may not believe these particular details about him, but we learn something infinitely more important than such trivialities, the fact that men could look into his face and believe it possible. The glory and greatness of Alfred, therefore, is like that of all the heroes of the morning of the world, set far beyond the chance of that strange and sudden dethronement which may arise from the unsealing of a manuscript or the turning over of a stone. Men may have told lies when they said that he first entrapped the Danes with his song and then overcame them with his armies, but we know very well that it is not of us that such lies are told. There may be myths clustering about each of our personalities; local saga-men and

chroniclers have very likely circulated the story that we are addicted to drink, or that we ferociously ill-use our wives. But they do not commonly lie to the effect that we have shed our blood to save all the inhabitants of the street. A story grows easily, but a heroic story is not a very easy thing to evoke. Wherever that exists we may be pretty certain that we are in the presence of a dark but powerful historic personality. We are in the presence of a thousand lies all pointing with their fantastic fingers to one undiscovered truth.

Upon this ground alone every encouragement is due to the cult of Alfred. Every nation requires to have behind it some historic personality, the validity of which is proved, as the validity of a gun is proved, by its long range. It is wonderful and splendid that we treasure, not the truth, but the very gossip about a man who died a thousand years ago. We may say to him, as M. Rostand says to the Austrian Prince:

"Dors, ce n'est pas toujours la Légende qui ment: Une rêve est parfois moins trompeur qu'un document."

To have a man so simple and so honourable to represent us in the darkness of primeval history, binds all the intervening centuries together, and mollifies all their monstrosities. It makes all history more comforting and intelligible; it makes the desolate temple of the ages as human as an inn parlour.

But whether it come through reliable facts or through more reliable falsehoods the personality of Alfred has its own unmistakable colour and stature. Lord Rosebery uttered a profound truth when he said that that personality was peculiarly English. The great magnificence of the English character is expressed in the word "service." There is, perhaps, no nation so vitally theocratical as the English; no nation in which the strong men have so consistently preferred the instrumental to the despotic attitude, the pleasures of the loyal to the pleasures of the royal position. We have had tyrants like Edward I. and Queen Elizabeth, but even our tyrants have had the worried and responsible air of stewards of a great estate. Our typical hero is such a man as the Duke of Wellington, who had every kind of traditional and external arrogance, but at the back of all that the strange humility which made it physically possible for him without a gleam of humour or discomfort to go on his knees to a preposterous bounder like George IV. Across the infinite wastes of time and through all the mists of legend we still feel the presence in Alfred of this strange and unconscious self-effacement. After the fullest estimate of our misdeeds we can still say that our very despots have been less self-assertive than many popular patriots. As we consider these things we grow more and more impatient of any modern tendencies towards the enthronement of a more self-conscious and theatrical ideal. Lord Rosebery called up before our imaginations the picture of what Alfred would have thought of the

vast modern developments of his nation, its immense fleet, its widespread Empire, its enormous contribution to the mechanical civilisation of the world. It cannot be anything but profitable to conceive Alfred as full of astonishment and admiration at these things; it cannot be anything but good for us that we should realise that to the childlike eyes of a great man of old time our inventions and appliances have not the vulgarity and ugliness that we see in them. To Alfred a steamboat would be a new and sensational sea-dragon, and the penny postage a miracle achieved by the despotism of a demi-god.

But when we have realised all this there is something more to be said in connection with Lord Rosebery's vision. What would King Alfred have said if he had been asked to expend the money which he devoted to the health and education of his people upon a struggle with some race of Visigoths or Parthians inhabiting a small section of a distant continent? What would he have said if he had known that that science of letters which he taught to England would eventually be used not to spread truth, but to drug the people with political assurances as imbecile in themselves as the assurance that fire does not burn and water does not drown? What would he have said if the same people who, in obedience to that ideal of service and sanity of which he was the example, had borne every privation in order to defeat Napoleon, should come at last to find no better compliment to one of their heroes than to call him the Napoleon of South Africa? What would he have said if that nation for which he had inaugurated a long line of incomparable men of principle should forget all its traditions and coquette with the immoral mysticism of the man of destiny?

Let us follow these things by all means if we find them good, and can see nothing better. But to pretend that Alfred would have admired them is like pretending that St. Dominic would have seen eye to eye with Mr. Bradlaugh, or that Fra Angelico would have revelled in the posters of Mr. Aubrey Beardsley. Let us follow them if we will, but let us take honestly all the disadvantages of our change; in the wildest moment of triumph let us feel the shadow upon our glories of the shame of the great king.