



In the Days of Alfred the Great

Eva March Tappan

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They had good reason for their alarm; for perhaps even before the king and his men could reach the eastern shore, another fleet would come to land on the southern coast, and the fierce Danes would sweep like a whirlwind through the land, burning the homes of the people, carrying away the women, and tossing the little children back and forth on the points of their spears. There were many workingmen about the king's palace, for almost everything that was needed had to be made on the premises. Not only must the grain be raised, wheat or barley or oats or corn, but it must be ground, sometimes by many small hand-mills, and sometimes by one large mill that belonged to the king. For drink, there was a kind of mead, or ale, and that must be brewed in the king's brewery. When it came to the question of clothes, there was still more work to do; for leather must be tanned for the shoes as well as for the harnesses, and flax and wool must be spun and woven. Then, too, there were blacksmiths, who not only made the simple implements needed to carry on the farm, but who must be skilful enough to make and repair the metal network of the coats of mail, and to keep the soldiers well supplied with spears and swords and battle-axes and arrowheads. A king who was willing to "rough it" a little could live on his royal domain very comfortably without sending away for many luxuries. If his land did not border on the seashore, he would have to send for salt that was made by evaporating seawater; and whenever he needed a mill-[4] stone, he would send to France, for the best ones were found in quarries near Paris. For iron, King Ethelwulf sent to Sussex, not a very long journey, to be sure, but by no means an easy one, for some of the roads were of the roughest kind. If he had lived on the coast, it would have been almost as easy to send to Spain for iron, and sometimes men did make the long voyage rather than go a much shorter distance by land and bring home the heavy load. When the millstones were landed from France, the laborers had to take their cattle, and make the slow, tiresome journey to the shore to bring them home.

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