

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

THE UNION OF THE HEPTARCHY UNDER EGBERT.

IF it be a sound philosophical truth, that two of a trade can never agree, we may take it for granted that, *à fortiori*, seven in the same business will be perpetually quarrelling. Such was speedily the case with the Saxon princes; and it is not improbable that the disturbed condition, familiarly known as a state of sixes and sevens, may have derived its title from the turmoils of the seven Saxon sovereigns, during the existence of the Heptarchy. Nothing can exceed the entanglement into which the thread of history was thrown by the battles and skirmishes of these princes. The endeavour to lay hold of the thread would be as troublesome as the process of looking for a needle, not merely in a bottle of hay, but in the very bosom of a haystack. Let us, however, apply the magnet of industry, and test the alleged fidelity of the needle to the pole by attempting to implant in the head of the reader a few of the points that seem best adapted for striking him.

“A needle in a bottle of hay,” is an old English phrase, of which we cannot trace the origin. Bottled hay must have been sad dry stuff, but it is possible the wisdom of our ancestors may have induced them to bottle their grass as we in the present day bottle our gooseberries. We will take a run through the whole country as it was then divided, and will borrow from the storehouse of tradition the celebrated pair of seven-leagued boots, for the purpose of a scamper through the seven kingdoms of the Heptarchy.

We will first drop in upon Kent, whose founder, Hengist, had no worthy successor till the time of Ethelbert. This individual acted on the principle of give and take, for he was always taking what he could, and giving battle. He seated himself by force on the throne of Mercia, into which he carried his arms, as if the throne of Kent had not afforded him sufficient elbow-room.

This, however, he resigned to Webba, the rightful heir: but poor Webba (query Webber) was kept like a fly in a spider's web, as a tributary prince to the artful Ethelbert. This monarch's reign derived, however, its real glory from the introduction of Christianity and the destruction of many Saxon superstitions.

He kept up a friendly correspondence with Gregory, the punster pope, and author of the celebrated *jeu de mot* on the word Angli, in the Roman market-place.

The pun in question is almost too venerable for repetition, but we insert it in a note, as no History of England seems to be complete without it. The pope, on seeing the British children exposed for sale in the market-place at Rome, said they would not be Angles but Angels if they had been Christians.

Non Angli sed Angeli forent si fuissent Christiani.



Ethelbert died in 616, having been not only king of Kent, but having filled the office of Bretwalda, a name given to the most influential—or, as we should call him, the president or chairman—of the sovereigns of the Heptarchy. His son, Eadbald, who succeeded, failed in supporting the fame of his father. It would be

useless to pursue the catalogue of Saxons who continued mounting and dismounting the throne of Kent—one being no sooner down than another came on—in rapid succession. It was Egbert, king of Wessex, who, in the year 723, had the art to seat himself on all the seven thrones at once; an achievement which, considering the ordinary fate of one who attempts to preserve his balance upon two stools, has fairly earned the admiration of posterity.

Let us now take a skip into Northumberland—formed by Ethelred in the manner we have already alluded to, out of the two kingdoms of Deiri and Bemicia—which, though not enough for two, constituted for one a very respectable sovereignty. The crown of Northumberland seems to have been at the disposal of any one who thought it worth his while to go and take it; provided he was prepared to meet any little objections of the owner by making away with him.

In this manner, Osred received his quietus from Kenred, a kinsman, who was killed in his turn by another of the family: and, after a long series of assassinations, the people quietly submitted to the yoke of Egbert. The kingdom of East Anglia presents the same rapid panorama of murders which settled the succession to all the Saxon thrones; and Mercia, comprising the midland counties, furnishes all the materials for a melodrama. Offa, one of its most celebrated kings, had a daughter, Elfrida, to whom Ethelbert, the sovereign of the East Angles, had made honourable proposals, and had been invited to celebrate his nuptials at Hereford. In the midst of the festivities Offa asked Ethelbert into a back room, in which the latter had scarcely taken a chair when his head was unceremoniously removed from his shoulders by the father of his intended. Offa having extinguished the royal family of East Anglia, by snuffing out the chief, took possession of the kingdom. In order to expiate his crime he made friends with the pope, and exacted a penny from every house possessed of

thirty pence, or half-a-crown a year, which he sent as a proof of penitence to the Roman pontiff. Though at first intended by Offa as an offering, it was afterwards claimed as a tribute, under the name of Peter's Pence, which were exacted from the people; and the custom may perhaps have originated the dishonourable practice of robbing Paul for the purpose of paying Peter. After the usual amount of slaughter, one Wiglaf mounted the throne, which was in a fearfully rickety condition. So unstable was this undesirable piece of Saxon upholstery that Wiglaf had no sooner sat down upon it than it gave way with a tremendous crash, and fell into the hands of Egbert, who was always ready to seize the remaining stock of royalty that happened to be left to an unfortunate sovereign on the eve of an alarming sacrifice. The kingdom of Essex can boast of little worthy of narration, and in looking through the Venerable Bede, we find a string of names that are wholly devoid of interest. The history of Sussex is still more obscure, and we hasten to Wessex, where we find Brihtric, or Beortric, sitting in the regal armchair that Egbert had a better right to occupy. The latter fled to the court of Offa, king of Mercia, to whom the former sent a message, requesting that Egbert's head might be brought back by return, with one of Offa's daughters, whom Beortric proposed to marry.

The young lady was sent as per invoice, for she was rather a burden on the Mercian court; but Egbert's head, being still in use, was not duly forwarded. Feeling that his life was a toss up, and that he might lose by heads coming down, Egbert wisely repaired to the court of the Emperor Charlemagne.

There he acquired many accomplishments, took lessons in fencing, and received that celebrated French polish of which it may be fairly said in the language of criticism, that "it ought to be found on every gentleman's table."

Mrs. Beortric managed to poison her husband by a draft not intended for his acceptance, and presented by mistake, which

caused a vacancy in the throne of Wessex. Egbert having embraced the opportunity, was embraced by the people, who received him with open arms, on his arrival from France, and hailed him as rightful heir to the Wessexian crown, which he had never been able to get out of his head, or on to his head, until the present favourable juncture. In a few years he got into hostilities with the Mercians, who being, as we are told by the chroniclers, “fat, corpulent, and short-winded,” soon got the worst of it. The lean and active droops of Egbert prevailed over the opposing cohorts, who were at once podgy and powerless. As they advanced to the charge, they were met by the blows of the enemy, and as “it is an ill wind that blows nobody good,” so the very ill wind of the Mercians made good for the soldiers of Egbert, who were completely victorious.



Mercia was now subjugated; Kent and Essex were soon subdued; the East Angles claimed protection; Northumberland submitted; Sussex had for some time been swamped; and Wessex belonged to Egbert by right of succession. Thus, about four hundred years after the arrival of the Saxons, the Heptarchy was dissolved, in the year 827, after having been in hot water for centuries. It was only when the spirit of Egbert was thrown in, that the hot water became a strong and wholesome compound.