

THE BARBARIANS INVADE THE ROMAN EMPIRE

[1] IN the first centuries of our era the one great power of the world was Rome. All southern Europe bowed beneath the conquering sword of the Romans. Africa and Asia, too, owned their sway. For the Mediterranean, the great trade route of the then known world, was theirs, and the countries bordering upon it became mere provinces of Rome. Even the uttermost islands felt their might, and sailing beyond the "narrow seas," Cæsar set his hand upon the island of Britain. From the Rhine and the Danube in the north, to the desert of Sahara in the south, from the borders of Wales in the west, to the Euphrates and the Tigris in the east, the empire stretched.

Of this wide empire Rome was the capital. Secure upon her seven hills she sat, mistress of the world, a city without rival, until in A.D. 330 the Christian emperor Constantine the Great resolved to build a new Rome upon the shores of the Bosphorus. Constantine called his new city New Rome. [2] But men did not take readily to the name, and the capital upon the Bosphorus became known as Constantinople, or the city of Constantine. It is difficult to-day to remember that Constantinople was founded by a Christian, and was at one time the bulwark of Christianity against the Turk.

The Romans called themselves lords of the world. And so it seemed they were. All the trade and skill, all the art and learning of the known world, were theirs. Beyond the borders of the Roman Empire the world was given over to wild barbarians, who were skilled neither in the arts of war nor of peace. That the civilization of Rome should go down before their ignorance seemed impossible. Yet the barbarian triumphed, Rome fell, and the mighty empire crumbled into dust.

"Rome was not built in a day," neither did Rome fall in a day. The fall was gradual, and came both from without and from within.

It came because there was tyranny in Rome, and no state can long be held by tyranny and the power of the sword alone. The high officials and tax collectors cared nothing for the people's good, they cared only for gold. They laid heavy and unjust taxes upon the middle classes. These classes must always be the backbone and support of a nation, but in Rome's last days they were so oppressed that they ceased to exist. The backbone of the nation was gone. So when wild barbarian hordes poured over the borders of the empire Rome fell.

When the Emperor Theodosius died, about sixty years after the founding of Constantinople, he left two sons, both mere boys. They divided the empire between them, Arcadius, the elder, taking Constantinople for his capital, ruled over the Eastern Empire, and Honorius, a child of eleven, became ruler of the Western Empire, with Rome as his capital. It was upon Rome and the Western Empire that the full force of the barbarian onslaught fell.

[3] First came the Goths. These were Teutons or Germans, and were divided into two tribes, the Visigoths or west Goths, and the Ostrogoths or east Goths. They were tall and strong, their eyes were blue, their hair long and fair. They were lawless, greedy, and treacherous. They came at first fleeing from the Huns, a far more barbarous foe, seeking shelter beneath the still all-powerful sceptre of Rome. They found the protection they desired, but ere long they turned their swords against the men who had provided it.

The March of Alaric

Under their young king Alaric, the Visigoths attacked the empire again and again. Twice Alaric laid siege to Rome. Twice he spared the imperial city. Still a third time he came, and this time he sacked and plundered it without mercy. Then, laden with rich booty, driving a long train of captives before him, he turned southward. The proudest city in the world lay at his feet, and flushed with victory, he marched to

invade Africa.

But an even greater captain than the conqueror of Rome met him on the way. Death laid his hand upon the victorious Goth, and all his triumphs were blotted out. The new king of the Goths, Ataulphus son of the Wolf, did not follow up Alaric's triumphs. He turned aside from Africa, forsook the wasted plains of Italy, and marching his war-worn followers into southern Gaul and northern Spain, settled there.

Meanwhile other barbarian hosts attacked the outposts of the empire. For in a vain endeavour to guard Italy and Rome itself the last legions had been called back even from Britain, and the northern boundaries of the empire were left a prey to the barbarians.

Over the wall which stretched from Forth to Clyde stormed the Picts and Scots, across the Rhine and the Danube poured wild hordes of Franks, Burgundians, Lombards, Allemanni, and Vandals. The Franks settled in Gaul, and made it [4] Frankland. The Burgundians, too, settled in Gaul, and to-day the fair province of France lying between the Loire and the Saône still keeps their name. The Vandals settled in Spain, of which a province is still named Andalusia (Vandalusia). The Lombards, or Longbeards, overran northern Italy, and to-day the central province of northern Italy is still named Lombardy. Angles and Saxons left their homes on the Weser and the Elbe, sailed across the sea, and taking possession of southern Britain, changed its name to England.

Every one of those barbarian tribes which thus rent the Roman empire to pieces was of German or Teutonic origin. And from the ashes of fallen Rome a new Teutonic empire was to arise. But meanwhile a foe far more fierce and terrible than any German tribe, was sweeping onward ready to grind to dust the already crumbling empire. This foe was the Hun.

Attila and the Huns

The Huns were a warrior race coming from out the wastes of Asia. They were small and swarthy, their eyes were dark and piercing, their noses squat, and their hairless, hideous faces were covered with frightful gashes and scars which made them more hideous still. They spent their lives on horseback, and rode so well that they almost seemed part of their sturdy little ponies. With much riding, indeed, their legs were so bowed that they could scarcely walk. They had no houses, and few possessions. They neither ploughed nor reaped, but lived on raw flesh and clothed themselves in skins. They were fierce, blood-thirsty, vile, and all men fled before them with a shuddering dread.

These were the people who, now led on by their mighty king, Attila, made Europe tremble. Of all the Huns Attila was the most terrible. Though small of stature, his shoulders were of great breadth, and there was something [5] of kingly authority in his piercing, evil eye and loathsome, scowling face. Where he passed he left desolation behind him, and gloried in it. "I am the curse of God," he boasted proudly, "the hammer of the world. Where my horse's hoofs have trod the grass will grow no more."

Like a devastating flood the Huns swept over Gaul, leaving behind them a track of blood and ashes. Town after town was given to the flames, and the fair fields were laid waste. Then, at length, forgetting their old quarrels, Roman and Goth joined to crush the common foe. The Goths, under King Theodoric, and the Romans under Aëtius, "the last of the Romans," marched northward. Franks and Burgundians, too, joined the army, and upon a plain near Chalons a great battle was fought between the allies and the Hun.

The struggle was long and fierce. Theodoric, king of the Visigoths, was slain, but in the end the Huns were defeated. Defeated they were, but not crushed. Like a wounded animal behind the rampart of his baggage wagons, Atilla crouched, growling and watchful. So dangerous he seemed that the allies dared no more attack him, and content with their victory, they marched homeward.

This fight has been called the battle of the Nations. And although the victory was not a decisive one, a

great question was settled upon the field of Chalons. There it was made plain that Europe was to be the heritage of the Christian Teutons and Romans, and not of the pagan Mongols.

Attila was too crippled to renew the fight, and sullenly he recrossed the Rhine. But the following year, having gathered another army, he marched through Italy, leaving, as was his wont, a trail of ruined cities and devastated plains in his wake. Rome was his goal, but ere he reached it his course was once more stayed. For, accompanied by certain nobles, the pope, Leo I, came out to meet the savage conqueror.

[6] Upon the banks of the River Mincio the misshapen heathen met the priest of God. Upon the one side there was religion and knowledge and everything that stood for civilization, discipline, and lofty aims. Upon the other there was ignorance, licence, and base lust of blood.

Leo came unarmed to meet the foe before whom all Europe cowered. Yet he conquered. His solemn words of pleading and warning pierced the heart of the fierce heathen. Perhaps, too, the gold which he brought in his hand as a bribe from the feeble emperor aided not a little the eloquence of his words. However that may be, Attila yielded. "Hastily," we are told, "he put off his habitual fury, turned back on the way he had come, and departed with the promise of peace."

"I can conquer men," he said, "but the Lion (Leo) knows how to conquer me."

In this appeal made by Leo the Great to a heathen foe we see the first beginnings of the enormous power in worldly matters which the popes of a future day were to wield. But other arguments besides those of the bishop of Rome hastened Attila's going. For "the Huns were stricken by the blows of heaven," famine and pestilence thinned their ranks. So, taking the gold which was offered to him, their leader returned, perhaps not unwillingly, to his own borders. He hoped doubtless to come again at another time to wreak his will upon Rome. But the following year he died. His empire fell to pieces, and the Hun vanished from Europe.



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