

THE ANCIENT GERMANS

WE must begin our story with those new races which were to mix their blood with that of the peoples of the Roman Empire, and form the nations of Europe to-day. These were the ancient Germans, the ancestors of the peoples who now speak German, English, Dutch, and Scandinavian. They lived then,—as part of their descendants still do,—in [13] the lands extending from the North Sea and the Baltic on the North, to the Danube River on the South; and from the Rhine on the West, to the rivers Elbe and Oder on the East. This region is now one of the most flourishing countries in all the world, with many great cities and millions of inhabitants. At that time it had no cities at all and but few inhabitants. The people had just begun to settle down and cultivate the soil, where before they had moved from place to place to find fresh pasturage for their flocks and better hunting. The surface of the country was still almost as Nature had made it. Gloomy forests stretched for miles and miles where now there are sunny fields, and wide and treacherous marshes lay where the land now stands firm and solid.

In this wild country, for many years, the Germans had room to live their own life. To the East were the Slavs, a people still ruder and more uncivilized than themselves. To the West were the Gauls, in what is now France. To the South were provinces of the Roman Empire, separated from them by the broad stream of the river Danube.

The Germans, the Gauls, the Slavs, and the Romans,—though they did not know it,—might all call themselves cousins; for most of the peoples of Europe are descended from one great race, called the Aryans. Long before Athens or Rome was built, before the Germans had come into this land, before any nation had begun to keep a written account of its deeds, the forefathers of these peoples dwelt together somewhere in western Asia or eastern Europe. At last, for reasons which we cannot know after so great a stretch of time, [14] these Aryan peoples separated and moved away in different directions. One branch of them entered Italy and became the ancestors of the Greeks and Romans. Another entered what is now France, and became the Gauls whom Caesar conquered. One settled in Germany, and still others settled in other lands both near and far.

In spite of the kinship between them, however, the Germans and Romans were very different in many ways. The Romans were short and dark, while the Germans were tall—very tall, they seemed to the Romans,—with fair skin, light hair, and clear blue eyes. The clothing of the Germans, unlike that of the Romans, was made chiefly from the skins of animals. Usually it did not cover the whole body, the arms and shoulders at least being left free. When the German was in a lazy mood he would sit for days by the fire, clad only in a long cloak of skins; then when he prepared to hunt or to fight, he would put on close-fitting garments and leave his cloak behind.

The houses in which the Germans lived were mere cabins or huts. Nothing was used but wood and that was not planed smooth, but was roughly hewn into boards and timbers. Sometimes a cave would be used for a dwelling, and often a house of timber would have an underground room attached to it; this was for warmth in winter and also for protection against their enemies. Sometimes in summer the people made huts of twigs woven together in much the same way that a basket is woven. Such houses were very flimsy, but they had the advantage of being easily moved from place to place. Often, too, the house sheltered not [15] only the family, but the horses and cattle as well, all living under one roof. One can imagine that this was not a very healthful plan.

The Germans gained their living partly from hunting and partly from tilling the soil. They also depended a great deal upon their herds and flocks for meat, as well as for milk and the foods which they made from milk. The Germans paid great respect to their women, and the latter could often by their reproaches stop the men when defeated and in flight, and encourage them to do battle again. Nevertheless, the care of the cattle and the tilling of the soil, as well as the house-work, fell chiefly to the women. The men preferred to hunt or to fight; and when not doing either, would probably be found by the fire sleeping or

idling away their time in games of chance. Most of the occupations of which we now see so much were not known to them. There was hardly any trading either among themselves or with other nations. Each family made its own things, and made very little more than it needed for its own use. The women spun and wove linen and other cloth, tanned leather, made soap,—which the Greeks and Romans did not know,—and a few other things. But all this was only for use in their own families. There were no trading places, and almost no commerce, except in a few things such as skins, and the amber of the Baltic Sea. One occupation, however, was considered good enough for any man to follow. This was the trade of the blacksmith. The skillful smith was highly honored, for he not only made tools to work with, but also weapons with which to hunt and to fight.

[16] But usually the free man considered it beneath his dignity to work in any way. He was a warrior more than anything else. The Romans had reason to know that the Germans were very stubborn fighters; indeed, the Romans never did conquer Germany. The Germans were not made weak, as the Romans were, by indulging in all kinds of luxuries. They lived in the open air, they ate plain food, and they did not make their bodies tender by too much clothing. In every way their habits were more wholesome than those of the Romans; and besides this, each man had a spirit of independence that caused him to fight hard to avoid capture and slavery.

At one time, while Augustus was Emperor, three legions of the Roman army, under an officer named Varus, were entrapped and slain in the German forests. The shock of this defeat was felt so keenly at Rome that long after that the Emperor would awake at night from restless sleep, and cry out: "Varus, Varus, give me back my legions!" After this the Romans learned to be more careful in fighting the Germans. The Romans had the advantage of better weapons with which to fight, better knowledge of how to fight, and greater wealth with which to carry on a war. So, in spite of some decided victories over the soldiers of the Empire, the Germans were obliged for many years to acknowledge Rome as the stronger; and Roman soldiers were even stationed in some parts of the German territory.

When the German army was preparing for battle, the men arranged themselves so that each line had a greater number in it and was longer than the one in [17] front. Thus the army formed a sort of wedge, which they called the "boar's head," from its shape. Arranged in this manner the army moved forward with one grand rush, guarding their sides with large wooden shields, and hewing with their swords and thrusting with their spears. If the first rush failed to dismay the enemy and turn them in flight, there was no longer any order or plan of battle. Each man then fought for himself, until victory or defeat ended the struggle.

Among the Germans no man dared to flee from the field of battle, for cowardice was punished with death. To leave one's shield behind was the greatest of crimes, and made a man disgraced in the sight of all. Bravery was the chief of virtues, and it was this alone which could give a man the leadership of an army. The general was chosen for his valor, and he kept his position only so long as he continued to show himself brave. He must be an example to all his followers and must fight in the front ranks. A general was made by his fellow warriors, who raised him upon their shields as a sign of their choice. If he proved less worthy than they had thought, they could as easily make another general in his place. The leader and his men were constantly reminded that upon their strength and courage depended the safety and happiness of their wives and children; for their families often followed the army to battle, and witnessed the combats from rude carts or wagons, mingling their shrill cries with the din of battle.

Times of peace among these early Germans would seem to us much like war. Every man carried his weapons about with him and used them freely. [18] Human life was held cheap, and a quarrel was often settled by the sword. There was no strong government to punish wrong and protect the weak; so men had to protect and help themselves. A man was bound to take up the quarrels, or feuds, of his family and avenge by blood a wrong done to any of his relatives. As a result there was constant fighting. Violent deeds were frequent, and their punishment was light. If a man injured another, or even committed murder, the law might be satisfied and the offender excused, by the payment of a fine to the injured man, or to his family.

Some tribes of Germans had kings, but others had not, and were ruled by persons chosen in the meetings of the people, or "folk." Even among those tribes that had kings, the power of the ruler in time of peace was not very great. The kings were not born kings, but were chosen by the consent of the people. Some few families, because they had greater wealth, or for some other reason, were looked upon with such respect that they were considered noble, and kings were chosen from among their number. Yet each man stood upon his own merits, too; and neither wealth nor birth could keep a king in power if he proved evil in rule or weak in battle. The rulers decided only the matters that were of small importance. When it came to serious matters, such as making war or changing the customs of the tribe, the "folk" assembled together decided for itself. In their assemblies they showed disapproval by loud murmurs; while to signify approval, they clashed their shields and spears together. Every free man had the [19] right to attend the folk-meeting of his district, and also the general assembly of the whole tribe. The power of the king was less than that of the assembly, and he was subject to it; for the assembly could depose the king, as well as elect him. In times of war, however the power of the kings was much increased; for then it was necessary that one man should do the planning, and time could not be taken up with assemblies.

At the period of which we are speaking, the Germans did not believe in one God as we do, but many. The names of some of their gods are preserved in the names which we have for the days of the week. From the god Tius comes Tuesday, from Woden comes Wednesday, and from Thor comes Thursday. Tius was the god of the heavens, and was at first the chief of the gods. Songs were sung in his honor, palaces named for him, and even human beings were sacrificed to him. Woden was afterward worshiped as the god of the sky, and also of the winds. Because he controlled the winds, it was natural that he should be the special god to whom those people looked who depended upon the sea; therefore he became the protector of sailors. He was also the god of war, and the spear was his emblem. After the worship of Tius died out, Woden became the chief god of the Germans. To him also there were sacrifices of human beings. Next in importance to Woden was Thor, the god of thunder and also of the household. His emblem was a hammer. When it thundered the people said that Thor with his hammer was fighting the ice-giants; so he was regarded as the enemy of winter, and the giver of good crops.

[20] Besides these chief gods, there were many less important ones. Among these were spirits of the forests and rivers, and the "gnomes" or dwarfs who dwelt in the earth, guarding the stores of precious metals and jewels which it contains. Long after the old religion had come to an end the descendants of the ancient Germans remembered these spirits, and stories of their tricks and good deeds were handed down from father to son. In this way the Germans kept something of the old religion in the beautiful fairy tales which we still love; and in our Christmas and Easter customs we find other traces of their old beliefs and customs.

When missionaries went among them, however, they became Christians. This shows one of the greatest qualities which they possessed. They were willing and able to learn from other peoples, and to change their customs to suit new circumstances. Other races, like the American Indians, who did not learn so readily, have declined and died away when they have been brought in contact with a higher civilization. But the Germans could learn from the Greeks and the Romans; so they grew from a rude, half-barbarous people, into great and civilized nations.