

The Story of the Middle Ages by Samuel B. Harding

INTRODUCTION

BOYS and girls—and grown folks also—often turn first to the last chapter of a book, before reading it, to see how it "ends." At times this is a good idea; for when we know the end of a story, we can often better understand it as it is told. This then is what we will do in this book. We will first see what the "end" of the story of the Middle Ages is; then, as we read, we shall better understand how that end was brought about.

When Columbus in the year 1492 returned from his voyage of discovery, a keen rivalry began among the Old World nations for the possession of the New World. Expedition followed expedition; Spaniards, Portuguese, French, English, and later the Dutch and Swedes,—all began to strive with one another for the wealth and dominion of the new-found lands; and American history—our own history—begins.

But who were these Spaniards and Portuguese, these Englishmen and Frenchmen, these Dutchmen and Swedes? In the old days when the might and power of Rome ruled over the world, we hear nothing of [10] them. Whence had they come? Were they entirely new peoples who had had no part in the old world of the Greeks and Romans? Were they the descendants of the old peoples over whom the Emperors had ruled from the city of the Seven Hills? Or did they arise by a mingling of the old and the new? Then, if they were the result of a mingling, where had the new races dwelt during the long years that Rome was spreading her empire over the known world? When and how had the mingling taken place? What, too, had become of

"The Glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome"?

Why was America not discovered and settled before? What were the customs, the ideas, the institutions which these peoples brought with them when they settled here? In short, what had been the history and what was the condition of the nations which, after 1492, began the struggle for the mastery of the New World?

To such questions it is the aim of this book to give an answer. It will try to show how the power of Rome fell before the attacks of German barbarians, and how, in the long course of the Middle Ages, new peoples, new states, a new civilization, arose on the ruins of the old.

At the beginning of the period Rome was old and worn out with misgovernment and evil living. But planted in this dying Rome there was the new and vigorous Christian Church which was to draw up into itself all that was best and strongest of the old world. The Germans were rude and uncivilized, but they [11] were strong in mind and body, and possessed some ideas about government, women, and the family which were better than the ideas of the Romans on these subjects.

When the Germans conquered the Romans, and settled within the bounds of the Empire, it might well have seemed that the end of the world was come. Cities were plundered and destroyed; priceless works of art were dashed to pieces; and the inhabitants of many lands were slain or enslaved. For nearly a thousand years Europe did not entirely recover from the shock; and the period which immediately follows the invasions of the barbarians is so dreary and sad that historians have called it "the Dark Ages."

But what was best in the old Greek and Roman civilization did not wholly perish. The Christian Church, too, grew steadily stronger, and sought to soften and civilize the rude Germans. The Germans, in turn, did not lose their vigor or their good ideas. At last from the combination of all these elements a new civilization arose,—stronger, better, and capable of higher development than the old,—and the Middle Ages were past. Then and only then could—and did—the new nations, which meanwhile had slowly been forming, set out on their careers of discovery and exploration which have made our New World possible.

So, we may say, the Middle Ages were the period when Europe became Europe, and made ready to found new Europes in America, in Australia, and in Africa. It was the growing-time for all the great harvest which has come since that time.