

CHAPTER XX—THE DAYS OF THE NORTHMEN

In the days after the death of Charles the Great, while his grandsons and their sons were fighting over his lands, the Northmen or Danes whom he had dreaded so much were sailing the seas and attacking the countries of the West in greater numbers than ever. They would sail up the mouths of rivers, attack the cities, carrying off all the best things from the houses and the richest treasures of the churches. Then they would sail away again.

In this way they sailed up the mouths of the French rivers and the rivers of the North of Germany. They came to England, too, and robbed and burned for many years. Then there came a time when these fierce men of the North came and conquered and did not go away again. They were great tall men, fierce and uncivilized, and still of course pagans. In fact, they were very much like the Franks and the Angles and Saxons who had overrun Gaul and Britain four hundred years before. In France the Northmen nearly took Paris for their people, but they were driven back by Count Robert the Strong.

The French kings, the descendants of Charles Martel and Pepin and Charles the Great, had become weak and stupid just as the family of Clovis had done. One of them who ruled both Germany and France for a time was called Charles the Fat, and he went mad before his death. Another of this family who was king of France was called Charles the Simple. A king like this was of no use against the fierce Northmen, but the Counts of Paris helped these weak kings just as the Mayors of the Palace had ruled for the family of Clovis.

Under Rolf or Rollo, a fierce chief, the Northmen were allowed to settle down in the land round Rouen, which they had seized and which became the Duchy of Normandy. Rolf was called 'Rolf the Ganger' or walker, because he always went on foot, as no horse was strong enough to carry him. The Northmen showed themselves very clever in learning the ways of the new countries they settled, and in Normandy especially showed themselves a brave and brilliant people. Meanwhile other Northmen, or Danes as they were generally called, had settled down in England.

THE GREAT KING ALFRED

When they began to attack England in earnest, the kings of Wessex had for the first time joined all the little kingdoms into which England had been so long divided into one kingdom. There were still kings of Northumbria and Mercia, but they were under the king of Wessex. When the Danes came, it was the king of Wessex who had to fight them. It was as king of Wessex that the great King Alfred fought the Danes and kept them from conquering the whole of England. After many years of fighting, Alfred made peace with the Danish King Guthrun, but even then he had to give up the whole of the East of England to the Danes.

It was called the Danelaw and in it the Danes settled down, and lived at peace with the English just as the other Northmen had done in Normandy. Guthrun, the Danish king, had been baptized, and Alfred was his godfather. All the Danes of course became Christians like their king. Alfred was able to rule his own people in peace. In some ways he was very much like Charles the Great, but he was a better man in many ways, especially in his own private life.

Like Charles, he made good laws and tried to keep his people safe and happy. He himself wrote things in English which they might read. It was he who began the English Chronicle in which the history of England began to be written down for the first time. Like Charles, he set up schools and monasteries. He built ships, too, to keep England safe from any more attacks.

Alfred was the greatest of the early English kings. The kings who came after him tried to go on with his work, and in time they conquered the whole of England, even the part which had been given to the Danes. The last of these great kings was Edgar the Peaceful, and it is told of him how six under-kings rowed him up the river Dee to the church of St. John at Chester.

But after Edgar came the weak king 'Ethelred the Unready.' The Danes, who had now settled in kingdoms of their own in Norway, and Sweden, and Denmark, began to come again, and Ethelred, instead of fighting them, gave them money to go away. Then he did a very dreadful and foolish thing. He had many of the Danes who were already in England murdered on St. Brice's Day in the year 1002. The Danes from Denmark came to punish Ethelred, and he was driven out of the country. Danish kings now ruled England, the most famous being the great king Canute, who was almost a saint. But not many Danes came with him, and they did not alter the English ways of doing things or the English language.

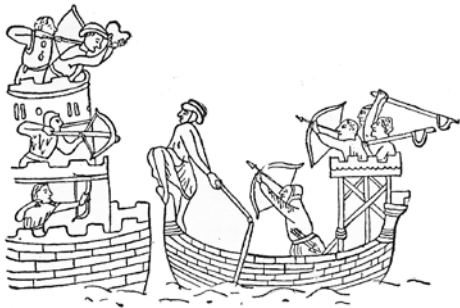
After a time England got English kings again, the last of them being Edward the Confessor, who was a saint, but a weak king. After him, Earl Harold took the throne, but was killed by the Norman Duke William at the Battle of Hastings; so the Northmen again ruled England, but the story of William the Conqueror will come later on.



King Alfred the Great (Statue at Winchester, England).

While the Northmen were attacking the West countries, the Magyars, a wild tribe like the Huns, were attacking Germany on the East and the Saracens were overrunning Sicily and Italy. One result of all this danger, and also of the disorder after the empire of Charles the Great was divided up, was the growth of what is called the Feudal System.

In the Feudal System, all the land of any country belongs to the king. He gives large pieces out to his nobles, who must do him 'homage' for them. They, in their turn give their lands out to other men, knights and others who become their 'men,' and have to do them homage and fight for them, just as they have to do homage to the king and fight for him. The poorest people of all under the Feudal System were 'serfs.'



Norman Soldiers Attacking a Castle by Sea

They were not exactly slaves. They lived on a small piece of land on which they could grow things for themselves, but they had also to work on the land of their lords. They could not be sold like slaves, but they were not free to go from one master to another, but had always to stay on the land and work for the lord who owned it. They could not do anything, such as getting married or sending their children to school, without permission from their lord. There were not many schools then, of course, but sometimes even the sons of serfs were chosen to go to the schools at the monasteries. Generally they would become monks, but this could only be with the permission of the lords.

In the days when enemies like the Danes were threatening the lands, it often seemed safer for free men to put themselves under the protection of some great lord who lived near. They would give their land up to the lord and receive it back as his 'man.' It was in this way that the Feudal System grew. Although the king was supposed to be at the head of all, for many years it was the great lords who had all the power. This was so in France and also in Germany, where some of the 'Counts' whom Charles the Great had set up to rule different parts of the country took the lands for themselves when he died.

In England when William the Conqueror came the Feudal System had begun to grow, chiefly through the power which the great nobles got during the weak rule of Edward the Confessor. All through the Early Middle Ages, when the great nobles everywhere were fighting against each other, the poor people suffered very much. The Church did all it could to make things better for them. When on their deathbeds, men were persuaded to set their serfs free. Feudalism was useful in the days when it first grew up, when the rich men fought for the poor against the enemies of both.

But it meant that every great lord was a soldier and in some ways a king. He could always call his knights to fight for him against some other lord, and the people were made miserable by the continual fighting. The Church tried to make things better by getting the great nobles to agree to a 'Truce of God.' This meant that they would stop fighting for some fixed time. It might be from Wednesday evening to Monday morning in each week, or from the begin-

ning of Lent until after Easter. Or again the lords might be asked to promise that they would not attack priests, or merchants, or Jews, or women. It must have been a great relief to the people when the lords agreed to a 'Truce of God.'

In the Early Middle Ages every gentleman who was not a priest was a soldier, and many were called knights. Though they were often cruel to each other and to the poor people, the best of them were kind and good, especially to women. The Church tried to teach the knights to do what was right, and sometimes a knight

was given his sword and armor with the blessing of the Church. Often he had knelt through the whole of the night before praying in the church. The worst sides of feudalism were put down later on in the Middle Ages when the kings grew stronger, especially in England and France.

In France, Hugh Capet, the Count of Paris, became king in the year 987. At first he had very little more power than the duke of Normandy or the other great feudal lords in France with their strong castles and their armies ready to fight for them. But in time the French kings grew stronger and stronger, and were able to keep the great lords in order, and joined the whole of France into a strong and great kingdom.

THE END OF THE 'DARK AGES'

In Germany the descendants of Charles the Great were dead, and one of the dukes of the four great Duchies into which his German lands were divided became king of Germany. One of the greatest of these was Otto, son of Henry the Fowler of Saxony. It was he who, in the great battle of Lechfield, at last conquered the Magyars, who settled down and mixed with the people in Hungary, which now became a kingdom. The Magyars became Christians, and fifty years later had a saint for their king.

New kingdoms were being made all over the North and East, where at last the people were settling down as they had already done in the West. We have seen how the Danes had made the kingdoms of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The Slavonic kingdom of Poland was made in the tenth century. Then Northern pirates attacked the country we now call Russia, and mixed with the Slavonic tribes to form a great kingdom there. And all these new peoples became Christians in a very short time, for missionaries from East or West went to convert them. Russia was converted by the Eastern Church, to which it has belonged



Making a Knight in the Middle Ages. After he had spent the night in vigil in the church, the young knight had his sword buckled on by the king, while others invested him in spurs, shirt of mail, banner and shield (From a drawing by Matthew Paris, a famous English monk and historian about 1200).

ever since. With the settlement of all these peoples one of the great dangers which had threatened the nations of the West all through the Early Middle Ages was over.

All this time Italy had been full of disorder. The North had been broken up among several dukes. The Popes ruled Rome and the middle of Italy, while the South was divided between the Greeks and Saracens. After the death of Charles the Great the Popes had seemed more powerful than ever.

Pope Nicholas I especially was very much like the Popes who came later in the Middle Ages, and who claimed power over kings and bishops alike. But by the time of the Emperor Otto the Great the Popes had become very weak and wicked, and Otto made up his mind to go into Italy and put all things right again. He first interfered in the North, where a great struggle was going on for the Lombard Crown. Otto went to the help of a young and beautiful woman, Adelaide of Burgundy, whose husband had died while he was trying to have himself made king. Adelaide was put in prison by one of his enemies. Otto now went into Italy, took the crown for himself, and being a widower himself he married Adelaide.

Ten years later, in 963, when he had gone to Italy for a second time, he had himself crowned



Cluny Abbey

emperor by the Pope, John XII, who had begged for his help against his enemies. Otto was anxious to set up good Popes again, and did so. He was the friend of the monks of the new order of Cluny, which was doing its best to make the Church and the people better and holier. The monastery of Cluny in the middle of France had been set up by William the Pious, a French duke, and under its abbot Otto had been made very strict. Many of the Benedictine abbeys had by this time forgotten to do most of the things which they were told to do in the Rule of St. Benedict.

But the abbot of Cluny set up new monasteries, and got some of the old ones to join him. All the monasteries belonging to Cluny had to obey the abbot of Cluny. The old Benedictine monasteries had been quite independent of each other, so that if an abbot was not good or did not mind the rule there was no one to keep him in order. The monks of Cluny did not work in the fields like the Benedictine monks had done, but they had longer time for prayers and lived very simply.

The setting up of this new order of monks shows that there was a new feeling for religion growing up at the end of the 'Dark Ages.' The spread of the order helped to make the feeling stronger. In a short time the Church everywhere became stronger and better. The new Popes were quite different from the Popes before Otto the Great was crowned emperor. With the 'Cluniac Reform,' as it was called, a change seems to come over the times, and we find ourselves in the Middle Ages proper, with their great soldiers and saints, and wonderful churches, and castles, and schools, and monasteries. It is a time above all of wonderful adventure and romance, and we must now tell something of its story.