

Tales and Legends of The Northlands

GOTLAND, THE EYE OF THE BALTIC

A STRIKING EXAMPLE of the shifting courses of commerce and the consequent rise and decline of cities is seen in the ancient and once proud city of Visby, on the Island of Gotland, in the Baltic sea, approximately one hundred miles south and a few miles east of Stockholm, equidistant between Sweden and Russia. In medieval days Visby was the Queen City of the Baltic and the metropolis of the North. It was probably the greatest emporium of all Europe and was rivaled only by Venice, Queen of the Adriatic, in the south. About the Isle of Gotland and this ancient city is woven myths of strange interest and stirring history of the Viking period.

Out of the mist of tradition comes the saga of the discovery and settlement of the island. Far back in the days when magic held sway and the most wondrous things were worked by ever warring spirits of good and evil, the ancient mariner venturing far out on the wild Baltic, or storm driven, now and anon caught sight of a mysterious isle, which, plainly visible in the dim and shimmering moonlight, disappeared with the coming of the dawn. The island was visible only at night. In the morning it sank beneath the surface of the sea and drifted about as a phantom ship.

Finally from the north came the stalwart chieftain Thjelvar, the Industrious, who sailed from the coast of Sweden with the avowed purpose of landing on the mysterious ile, and he succeeded in locating it. When his foot struck the land a magic flame was ignited which swept over the island driving out the trolls and imps of darkness that had held possession, and the wandering isle became fixed and stable in its location and Thjelvar and his followers established themselves upon it in comfort and security.

The colony prospered and spread over all the island, which is thirty-five miles wide and twice that distance in length. They built ships and sailed out to the neighboring countries on trading expeditions. They were thrifty and venturesome and soon grew rich from the profits of their traffic and the booty of their forays. On account of its commanding position the island became known as the 'Eye of the Baltic' and was coveted by many of the petty kings and lords, but the Gotlanders managed by dint of hard fighting to maintain their independence. But growing weary of being almost continuously harassed they finally decided to form an alliance with some powerful nation in order to receive protection, and with this object in view an ambassador was chosen to journey to the court of Sweden at Upsala.

This representative of the Gotlanders to the Swedish court was a man of extraordinary physical proportions and was called Strabajn, or "long-legs." This ambassador was well fitted for his mission physically as well as mentally, and in due time his good long legs brought him to Upsala and to the royal palace. The monarch and his courts were at dinner and Ambassador Longlegs, making his way to the portal of the dining hall, announced his name and stated his mission. The king was not very cordially disposed toward the Gotlanders and for some little time their representative was ignored, the customary invitation to find a place at the board not being im-

mediately extended. At length the king asked: "What news from Gotland?"

"None," replied Long-legs, "except that a mare on the island has foaled three colts at a birth!"

"So, So!" said the king. "And what does the third colt do when the other two are sucking?"

"He does as I do," replied Long-legs. "He stands and looks on."

The laugh went round and Long-legs was invited to a seat at the table, and was entertained most royally. His visit ended in a treaty in which Gotland agreed to pay a certain sum annually to the king and his jarl and in turn receive protection when necessary and requested.

Gotland continued to flourish on account of its advantageous position to the sea traders and early in the eleventh century the city of Visby was founded near a safe harbor beneath a cliff on the west coast, the scene of many sacrifices by the old Pagan priests. The name itself signifies the city, or place of sacrifice. It grew rapidly in power and importance. Merchant ships permeated the waterways of Russia and to all the water-washed countries of Northern Europe. Wares from the Orient, and particularly India and Persia, found their way by land or sea to Visby, and were distributed to all parts of the known world. Rich merchants from all over Europe established houses in this, the most important mart on the line of the world's greatest traffic. Many amassed great wealth. So rich did some become that the doors of their dwellings were made of beaten copper and the frames of windows were gilded with gold, while jewels gathered from the four corners of the earth were displayed most lavishly.

In the twelfth century a league of merchants was formed whose decrees governed traffic in all the Hanse towns and out of which grew the mighty Hanseatic league, which in the height of its power embraced eighty-one cities and was sufficiently powerful to defy and to dictate to kings. Here, also, was formulated the maritime code which forms much of the groundwork of the admiralty law of the world to this very day.

A great wall was built about the city for protection against invaders. This massive bulwark was of stone thirty feet high and was surmounted by forty-eight great towers, and on the walls from tower to tower, night and day, walked armed sentries. The population of the city is not given in the old chronicles, but it is stated that twelve thousand merchants resided within the walls. All artisans and craftsmen save bakers and goldsmiths resided without the walls, so that it will be seen that it was a large city for that period, though but a village compared with the large cities of the world today. The guild halls of the people were furnished most sumptuously and pilgrim merchants and princes were entertained with royal hospitality.

The far-famed wealth of Visby caused many war-like chieftains to plot and plan its capture, but was not until 1361 that this transpired. King Waldemar Atterdag, of Denmark, landed on Gotland with an army and advanced upon the city. The proud burghers advanced to meet him and a decisive battle was fought without the walls. The invaders were successful and the gates of the city were opened to King

Valdemar and his men. The conqueror set out upon the great market place three of the largest ale vats to be found in the city and commanded that they should be filled with gold and silver within three hours. The terror-stricken inhabitants brought out their treasures and the vats were filled long before the allotted time had expired. But the conqueror was not yet satisfied. The city was plundered and immense booty secured.

Nearly every faith of every nation of Northern Europe had built its house of worship in Visby each with its treasures in accordance with the customs of the period. There were sixteen large churches besides a number of monasteries which yielded great booty. High in the west gable of St. Nikolaus, the monastery chapel of the Dominicans, in the center of beautiful rose windows, one legend relates, there were two huge carbuncles of priceless value. At night these jewels shone with the splendor of the noonday sun, serving as beacons to guide the storm-tossed mariner to safety in the city's harbor. They were the most precious possessions of the church. Twenty soldiers constantly guarded the gems and after setting of the sun none might approach the sanctuary on pain of death. These jewels King Valdemar ruthlessly tore from their setting and placed them on board his ship with sacred vessels and other booty and put out to sea. Hardly had he left land until a violent storm arose and the ship bearing the sacred spoils was wrecked, just off the coast, and the king himself was saved with difficulty. And to this day, says the saga, when quiescence rests on a tranquil sea, a deep and ruddy glow comes welling up from the still depths, spreading far and wide over the face of the waters. It is the light that "never was on sea or land," the luster of the lost jewels beaming from the bottom of the ocean.

The plundering of Visby marked the decline of the emporium of the Baltic. Some thirty years later Russia was invaded by the Mongolians under Tamerlane, who destroyed the city of Astrakhan, on the Caspian sea, at the mouth of the Volga, cutting off the rich trade from the Orient. Then came the discovery of America and the new route to India around the cape of Good Hope an easier route than across the steppes of Russia, and so the commerce once centered in Visby gradually deserted the City of Sacrifice, leaving it stranded, a pitiable wreck of its former greatness. Visby is today a town of less than ten thousand people, but the traveler finds it a place of interesting ruins and rich in tales and legends of the days when in her glory she ruled as the Queen of the Baltic and ranked with the greatest marts of the world.

THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY.

Henrik Ibsen.

What you call liberty I call liberties; and what I call the struggle for liberty is nothing but the constant living assimilation of the idea of freedom. He who possesses liberty otherwise than as a thing to be striven for, possesses it dead and soulless; for the idea of liberty has undoubtedly this characteristic, that it develops steadily during its assimilation. So that a man who stops in the midst of the struggle and says, "Now I have it!" thereby shows that he has lost it.

IT REQUIRES COURAGE

To live according to your convictions.
Not to bend the knee to popular prejudice.