

Attila, King of the Huns.

JUST nineteen hundred years ago Europe—that is civilized Europe—a large tract of North Africa, most of Syria and Asia Minor, together with the islands of the Mediterranean, were beginning to enjoy the luxury of profound peace. For the first time in history, perhaps, the entire western world as well as the near East had, after centuries of warfare, learned what it was to be at rest. Poets and prophets imagined that the Golden Age was come again, when Order and Justice were to take up their abode among men, who were not to learn war any more. Such was the result of the long struggle between rival parties in the old Roman Republic, on the ruins of which was to be erected the imposing fabric of Empire, itself destined to become the birthplace of the “Pax Romana.”

It was during the reign of the first Emperor, Augustus, that an event took place which, insignificant as it must have seemed at the time, even to the most shrewd observer, was to exercise an unparalleled influence on all succeeding history. It was the birth, in an obscure Syrian village, of a Jewish child, known later as a prophet and teacher among his co-religionists, who was to seal his testimony by dying a criminal's death before he was forty—Jesus of Nazareth.

For some 250 years after Augustus's death, the strong and impartial hand of Rome kept its grip upon all the states, dependencies and provinces which composed the Roman world. During this time, now under the rule of bad, now of good, Emperors, the western world flourished exceedingly. Rome imposed her culture upon all the countries that owned her sway; her arts, her laws, her language, her institutions became a pattern for mankind. From the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed away to the frontiers of Persia; from the Danube in the north to Egypt and the Great Sahara, the influence of Rome was felt. The trade of the Empire was of vast dimensions. Roman roads and military outposts were everywhere; and so wisely were the various provinces policed, and so admirably was the system of local government practised, that a traveller from York to Alexandria in the year 100 A.D. could have performed that journey as rapidly and as safely as the traveller of only 100 years ago.

But about the middle of the 3rd century a cloud arose on the horizon. It was a cloud coming out of the still barbaric north. In the early days of Empire, the Romans were supreme in military power and prestige ; but two long centuries of peace had produced their inevitable results. The old Roman spirit had become weakened through wealth and luxury. The old " National Service " system had gradually disappeared, and had given place to a new system whereby the army was recruited from classes of men who had no personal interest in the Mother-City. The citizen army had become, in large degree, a mercenary army inspired by hireling hopes. And while the military spirit had undergone this change, a change had come over the dreams of the fierce northern tribes, no longer content to remain within their immemorial fastnesses, but eager to share with the master of the world the rich prize of empire towards which they began to turn hungry eyes. In course of time these tribes crossed the frontier, and a great battle was fought which ended in a victory for the barbarians. Worse than this even, Rome was obliged to purchase peace—or rather a cessation of hostilities—by paying a huge indemnity to the victors.

The Goths, thus enriched, moved back behind the frontiers ; but the rumour of their success had spread far and wide, and other tribes became seized with a longing to try conclusions with Rome. The Franks, zealous for plunder, fell upon the rich provinces of Gaul and Spain ; while, in the East, the Persians plundered Armenia and overran Syria.

It seemed, for the moment, as if Rome had developed such grave internal weakness that the very existence of the Empire was threatened. At home, no fewer than nineteen Emperors arose within the space of about thirty years, held authority for a brief period, then fell by assassination. At last there succeeded to the purple, not a Roman noble, but an Illyrian peasant, Diocletian, who by sheer force of character and military merit stemmed the tide of invasion.¹ After a reign of twenty years Diocletian voluntarily abdicated, but not before he had succeeded in making a division of the Empire, East and West.

Following immediately on his resignation came a fierce struggle for Empire, a struggle which terminated finally in Constantine's

¹ It was under Diocletian that the last great persecution of the Christians took place ; but it was one of the most terrible in the history of the Church.

uniting the Empire again under a single sceptre. Pagan Rome became Christian; the era of persecution was at an end for the Church, which now embarked on a course of worldly triumph that remained unbroken for more than a thousand years.

It was not till nearly a century after Constantine had transferred the seat of Empire from the banks of the Tiber to the shores of the Bosphorus that Rome fell into the hands of the barbarians. Yet during the whole of that time the Empire itself was continually distracted, and divided in its aims. The Emperor Theodosius, by re-uniting East and West in fact and not in name, was indeed able for a time to stem the tide of invasion from the populous north; but at his death the Empire was again split up between his two sons Arcadius and Honorius, of whom the former ruled at Constantinople and the latter in Rome. It was during Honorius' troubled and inglorious reign that the Goths, under the warlike Alaric, forced a passage into northern Italy. The one man, Stilicho, who might have saved the situation, was basely betrayed and murdered; and then the end came. Famine and pestilence had done their deadly work; and though a half-hearted effort was ultimately made to keep Alaric at bay, on August 24, 410, Rome—the Queen city of the world, which had for hundreds of years dictated the policy of nations—was forced to submit to all the horrors of a sack. It was Antwerp and Louvain over again, though Alaric, more merciful than the German Kaiser, ordered the lives of the unresisting inhabitants to be spared, and the churches to remain inviolate.

After the capture and the sack of the Capital, Alaric pursued his victorious course through the rich lands of Italy, only to find his triumph cut short by death. His successor married the sister of Honorius, who himself died in the year 423, after an eighteen years' inglorious and tragic reign.

Of the successors of Honorius history says little; they flash before us, like patterns in a kaleidoscope. True, they bore imperial names; but the fabric of the once inviolable Empire was fast falling to ruin. The proud and wealthy province of northern Africa was incapable of maintaining its independence against the Vandals, under the fierce Genseric, who wrought havoc everywhere along the Mediterranean littoral, and did not spare even the sacred shores of Italy.

And, as though this were not enough to fill the cup of human

misery to the brim, there was shortly destined to arise an even greater and more terrific figure on the horizon—one before whom the Romans alike in the East and West were to stand dismayed, the figure of the dreadful Hun monarch, Attila, “the scourge of God.”

We hear first of the Huns somewhere about the year 425 A.D. Their encampments lay, roughly, within the limits of modern Hungary; and when we meet them on the stage of history it is in connexion with the Eastern capital which they had begun to threaten. They were bought off, for the time, by promise of an annual subsidy,—to such a depth of degradation had the rulers of Constantinople sunk, thanks to weakness, political imbecility and miserable intrigue. Had the Eastern Emperor, Theodosius, possessed manhood enough to fling down his gage and challenge these barbaric hosts as a brave man should, the whole history of Europe might have been different. But unhappily he did not.

One of the first acts of Attila, on succeeding to the Hunnish throne, was to humiliate the Eastern Empire by levying on it a fresh and heavy indemnity. His next move was to enlarge his dominions in the northern and western portions of Europe; and henceforward Attila could count on a crowd of vassal princes to serve, when summoned, under his standard. His warriors numbered over half a million—an immense army in those days. If his expedition against Persia was unsuccessful, it did not constitute more than a temporary set-back, as the future was shortly to demonstrate. In the year 441 Attila formed an alliance with the Vandal king, Genseric, thus securing that astute and ruthless monarch in the possession of N. Africa, and depriving the Western Empire of any chance of recovering this rich and prosperous province. At the instigation of his new ally, Attila presently attacked the Eastern Empire. An ambitious and crafty prince, when bent on war, can generally trump up some excuse for his action, as we know to our cost. Attila was not slow in making a trivial incident a justification for embarking on this fresh enterprise; and it was a Christian bishop who assisted him by an act of treachery. The king of the Huns descended upon the Balkans almost exactly where, in 1914, the Austrians made their first infamous attack on Serbia. City after city fell before the furious onslaught of the barbarians, and hundreds of miles of Europe, in its most fertile and civilized parts, were laid

desolate. What Falkenhayn has recently accomplished in Rumania, was done by Attila in his devastating march. Nothing could stand against his fierce and fanatical soldiery. Yet the Emperor Theodosius stood irresolute—or unconvinced; the policy which “waits and sees” is as old as the hills, and never yet mastered a resolute and unremitting foe. The armies of the East, hastily called together at last, were unable to withstand the tidal wave of invasion; and in a brief while Attila appeared before the gates of the imperial city. Multitudes of captives were dragged from their homes, to be dispersed among the wild tribes that owed obedience to Attila.

The Eastern Emperor was obliged to come to some sort of understanding with the savage conqueror. An embassy was dispatched from Constantinople to his camp. “What city in the Empire,” cried the boastful king to the trembling envoys, “could exist if it were our royal pleasure to wipe it off the face of the earth?” Yet Attila, unlike his modern imitator, did display some signs of relenting, and consented to terms which, though harsh and onerous, were not quite impossible. A reconstruction of the map of Eastern Europe followed upon the Conference, and a huge indemnity was imposed.

Two years later, the payment of the tribute (which, according to agreement, was to be paid annually) was refused; and Attila, mightily incensed, resolved to attack the Empire both East and West. The king frankly despised the Eastern Empire; perhaps the treacherous attempt on his life by secret emissaries from Constantinople had convinced him that he had little to fear from a Government which had sunk so low that, when unable or afraid to attack him openly, had recourse to the knife of a hired assassin. It says something for Attila that he actually forgave the Emperor for this treacherous design.

The Emperor himself did not long survive the inglorious pact which he had made, or his effort to undo the hard terms of that pact by the method named. He died from a fall from his horse in the year 450, and was followed by Marcian, a good man and a vigorous soldier, who, had he been able to succeed to the throne at an earlier period, might conceivably have done something to invigorate a vacillating and weak policy. It was Marcian's act, in refusing further tribute, that provoked Attila to undertake

his campaign against the Empire as a whole. The new Emperor felt—rightly—that to allow the majesty of Empire to be insulted by a barbarian, without some decisive protest, was intolerable. The refusal at once brought Attila into the field. To the unspeakable terror of the inhabitants the Huns invaded Gaul in the next year (451). They perhaps reckoned on as easy a victory as had fallen to their lot when they had swept through the Balkans to the walls of Byzantium. But in this they were mistaken. The commander-in-chief of the Western armies was no time-serving minion of Eastern origin, but a man who combined in his person the wisdom and strength of the Romans of a former age. Aetius was as brave as he was able, and was clearly marked out as the one soldier equal to face so tremendous an emergency. More than that, he had long since won the confidence of all those whose opinions mattered. By a bold and rapid stroke of policy, he was successful in linking up the Roman armies with those of the Visigoths (at that time ruled by the son of the great Alaric). Indeed the Visigoths had everything to gain, and nothing to lose, by standing shoulder to shoulder with the imperial troops. Italy and France were (then as now) united in a determination to resist the common foe. Tribes hitherto neutral passed over to the side of Aetius. They were urged to remember that it was the duty of every Christian man to save from violence and sacrilege the Churches of God from the hands of bloody barbarians, who spared neither priest nor nun, woman nor child, in their devastating course through Europe. The spirit of the Allied nations of to-day was incarnate in the peoples of the West, who saw, with alarm and agony, what a victory by the Huns would certainly involve. Those that had hitherto wavered now followed the lead of Aetius; and the combined army moved by rapid marches to relieve Orleans—which was already being besieged—and to give battle to Attila's innumerable hosts.

On the approach of the Allies, Attila raised the siege and gave the signal for retreat. Foreseeing the fatal consequences of a defeat in the very heart of France, he recrossed the Seine and took up a position on the field of Châlons-sur-Marne—a part of France rendered now doubly illustrious, because it was not far from that historic field that, nearly 1,500 years later, the invading hordes of Germany were repulsed on one memorable September day.

Both armies strove to reach a hill of moderate elevation com-

manding the vast battle-ground. Attila, confident (as ever) of victory, resolved, before putting matters to the proof, to deliver an harangue to his troops. "I myself," cried the monarch, "will throw the first spear; and the wretch that refuses to imitate my example is devoted to instant death." These words kindled the martial enthusiasm of his followers, and the order of battle was forthwith formed. On the Roman side, Aetius commanded the left wing, Theodoric the right. The fight began early on the morning of a July day in the year 451. Prodigies of valour were performed on both sides. Quarter was neither asked nor given. During the struggle the Visigothic King, while riding along his ranks to encourage the troops, was slain. The news quickly reached Attila, who now exulted in the thought of coming victory. But it was not to be. Suddenly and unexpectedly a large body of men, whose presence had been carefully screened till then, bore right down from the hills upon the centre of the maddened Huns. Their flanks were left unguarded, and the Allied Armies were quick to press their advantage. Only the approach of night saved Attila from disaster. As it was, he was forced to retire, and entrench himself within the ramparts of his fortified camp.

Silence fell on the battle-field, where, according to trustworthy accounts, a quarter of a million men lay in their last sleep. Attila, dreading some hostile stratagem, remained self-beleaguered in his camp. Then slowly began the great withdrawal. It was indeed the last victory achieved in the name of the Western Empire, but its results are manifest. The Huns retreated sullenly to their inaccessible German fastnesses, the enemy still hanging upon their rear. It was not till the Rhine was once more reached that Attila could feel secure. And, meanwhile, France was saved.

And yet it was only a respite that had been secured. The power and reputation of the Huns were not seriously diminished by the failure of their French campaign. In the following spring Attila repeated the demand he had already made for the hand of the Roman princess, Honoria, in marriage. This demand was decisively, even scornfully, rejected, notwithstanding the all-but incredible fact that Honoria herself (mesmerized perhaps by the glamour of victory that seemed to surround Attila) had written to the Hun to offer herself to him. The indignant king now resolved to avenge himself for the slight by invading Italy. The barbarians were

unskilled in making regular sieges ; but Attila was bent on utilizing the forced labour of prisoners and captives,¹ and counted—not wholly without reason—on treachery among the Romans themselves.

The campaign opened by an attack on Aquileia, a town not much more than twenty miles from the modern Trieste, and standing at the head of the Adriatic. To-day the town is quite small and unimportant, but in those days it was a large and flourishing seaport. Against this town, therefore, Attila brought his siege-train, consisting of battering-rams, and artillery capable of hurling immense stones, and blazing darts. Three months were spent in a fruitless effort to batter down the walls ; and Attila was on the point of abandoning the siege when, one evening, as he was riding round the town, he noticed a stork getting ready to leave her nest in one of the rampart-towers, and to escape with her young into the open country. Attila, who was as superstitious as he was brave, at once regarded this as an omen of victory. The siege was renewed with greater fury than before, and at length a breach was made in the stout walls. Through this breach the barbarians poured into the devoted town, and so thorough was its destruction that, a few years later, the very ruins of Aquileia could hardly be found.

Henceforth Attila's task was easy ; and, as he moved southward, city after city was reduced to heaps of blackened ruin. When he captured Milan, he was annoyed to find in the royal palace a large picture representing the Caesars on their throne, with the barbaric chieftains prostrate before them. Attila bade the painter reverse the figures and the attitudes ; and now the Emperors were depicted, on the same canvas, approaching the king of the Huns in humble attitude, pouring out at his feet sacks of gold—a tribute to the conqueror. It was worthy of the Kaiser himself, in his most inflated moment. But pride is apt to go before a fall. And so it was destined to be in the case of Attila. Meanwhile the task of the gallant Aetius seemed well-nigh hopeless. Unable any longer to count on the support of his former allies, the Visigoths, he stood alone to check the march of the invader, and to delay, if he could not prevent, the destruction of Rome itself. Indeed, Rome, once confident in its own strength, but now grown to be the prey of internal factions, and weakened by luxury and idleness, was wholly incom-

¹ Exactly what the Germans are doing to-day in Belgium and N. France.

petent to withstand the furious onslaught of the Huns. A solemn embassy was, accordingly, despatched by the helpless Emperor to see whether some sort of peace could be patched up ; and the Pope himself consented to head the embassy, and risk his life for the safety of his countrymen. It was a noble and a patriotic act, in somewhat striking contrast to the calculating conduct of his latter-day successor on the throne of St. Peter, who has thereby let slip the most splendid opportunity of justifying his claims before the world.

The Roman ambassador, with Pope Leo at their head, met the ferocious Attila by the shores of lake Garda. Overawed—so the story goes—by the presence of the venerable Pontiff, Attila actually consented to leave Italy, his retreat being expedited by the payment of a huge sum of money. Possibly he believed that it was prudent to retire, before his army, weakened by disease and losses, and already enervated by the climate and luxury of Italy, proved unequal to the task of overwhelming the capital and overrunning the south of Italy. Moreover, the sudden and miraculous appearance of the two Apostles, Peter and Paul, who (we are told) threatened the king with instant death if he molested Rome, may have influenced him, then as always liable to superstitious fears. Such is the legend, according to old writers. Whatever the reason, Attila withdrew his forces, and the Empire was, for the moment, saved. Nevertheless, Attila threatened a fresh incursion if the princess Honoria were not yielded up to him ; and this threat might have been carried out, had not a stronger than Attila appeared to cut short all his ambitious schemes.

In the very next year, the Hun consoled himself for the loss of Honoria by adding a beautiful girl, Ildico, to the tale of his many wives. The marriage was celebrated with much barbaric pomp ; and Attila, after drinking heavily at the wedding banquet, retired for the night. He did not arise next morning ; but his attendants, fearful of disturbing their master, let him alone until late in the day, when, alarmed at the ominous silence in the royal apartment, they broke into his room. There they found him dead, and bathed in blood ; but whether this was due (as some thought) to Ildico, or whether he had broken a blood-vessel, was never known. The whole Hunnish nation celebrated his obsequies with savage ritual and wild lamentations, and buried him along with the bodies of innumerable captives, massacred in his memory. So perished Attila, the last king of the Huns.

As it was his military genius alone that had kept together his loosely knit and barbaric empire, so his death was the signal for its rapid dissolution. Founded on force and fraud, and cemented with blood, this Empire possessed no power in itself apart from the guiding hand of its terrible and ruthless creator. After his death the civilized world once more breathed freely, for the Huns were no longer an object of dread. Yet the respite granted was but for a brief interval. The Roman empire was corrupt and ready to fall. As an example of the weakness and cruelty of its rulers—and the two things often go together—mark the fate that was in store for Aetius, whose services to the state had been so precious. The base and feckless emperor, Valentinian, grown jealous of the great commander who had saved Italy, and freed at length from the terror of the Huns, murdered Aetius with his own hand.

Justice, not slow to punish such treachery, swiftly overtook the guilty emperor. In the year 455, two years after Attila's death, Genseric accomplished what the Hun had purposed to do, but had never succeeded in doing—he took and sacked Rome. During one awful fortnight the city, with all its wealth and magnificence, suffered the cumulative horrors of a systematic pillage. And if, in one sense, Rome managed to survive even this, she survived the loss of all that men hold dearest—her freedom, her virtue, her honour.

Such is the tragic story of the fall of Rome.

“O doom of overlordships! to decay
 First at the heart, the eye scarce dimmed at all;
 Or perish of much cumber and array,
 The burdening robe of Empire—and its pall.
 Far off from Her that bore us be such Fate,
 And vain against Her gate
 Its knocking.
 Nor must She, like the others, yield up yet
 The generous dreams, but rather live to be
 Saluted in the hearts of men as She
 Of high and singular election, set
 Benignant on the mitigated sea;
 That, greatly loving freedom, loved to free,
 And was Herself the bridal and embrace
 Of strength and conquering grace.”¹

E. H. BLAKENEY.

¹ William Watson, *Ode on the Coronation of King Edward VII.*