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ATTILA THE HUN

King from 434-453 A.D.

I

The Huns, the fierce and warlike tribe who had driven the Goths to seek new homes, came from Asia into Southeastern Europe and took possession of a large territory lying north of the River Danube.

During the first half of the fifth century, the Huns had a famous king named Attila. He was only twenty-one years old when he became their king. Although he was young, he was very brave and ambitious and wanted to be a great and powerful king.

Not far from Attila's palace there was a great rocky cave in the mountains. In this cave lived a strange man called the "Hermit of the Rocks." No one knew his real name, or from what country he had come. He was very old, with a wrinkled face and long gray hair and beard.

Many persons believed that he was a fortuneteller, so people often went to him to inquire what was to happen to them in the future. One day, shortly after becoming king, Attila went to the cave to get his fortune told.

"Wise man," said he, "look into the future and tell me what is before me in the path of life."

The hermit thought for a few moments and then said, "O King, I see you a famous conqueror, the master of many nations. I see you going from country to country,

defeating armies and destroying cities until men call you the 'Fear of the World.' You heap up vast riches, but just after you have married the woman you love, grim death strikes you down."

With a cry of horror, Attila fled from the cave. For a time he thought of giving up his idea of becoming a great man. But he was young and full of spirit, and very soon he remembered only what had been said to him about his becoming a great and famous conqueror, and he began to prepare for war. He gathered together the best men from the various tribes of his people and trained them into a great army of good soldiers.

II

About this time one of the king's shepherds, while taking care of cattle in the fields, noticed blood dripping from the foot of one of the oxen. The shepherd followed the streak of blood through the grass and at last found the sharp point of a sword sticking out of the earth. He dug out the weapon, carried it to the palace, and gave it to King Attila. The king declared it was the sword of Tiew, the god of war. He then strapped it to his side and said he would always wear it.

"I shall never be defeated in battle," he cried, "as long as I fight with the sword of Tiew."

As soon as his army was ready, Attila marched with it into countries which belonged to Rome. He defeated the Romans in several great battles and captured many of their cities. The Roman Emperor Theodosius II had to ask for terms of peace. Attila agreed that there should be peace, but soon afterwards he found out that Theodosius had formed a plot to murder him. He was so enraged at this that he again began war. He plundered and burned cities wherever he went. At last the emperor had to give him a large sum of money and a portion of country south of the Danube.

This made peace, but the peace did not last long. In a few years Attila appeared at the head of an army of 700,000 men. With this great force he marched across Germany and into Gaul. He rode on a beautiful black horse and carried at his side the sword of Tiew. He attacked and destroyed towns and killed the inhabitants without mercy. The people had such dread of him that he was called the "Scourge of God" and the "Fear of the World."

III

Attila and his terrible Huns marched through Gaul until they came to the city of Orleans. Here the people bravely resisted the invaders. They shut their gates and defended themselves in every way they could. In those times all towns of any great size were surrounded by strong walls. There was war constantly going on nearly everywhere, and there were a great many fierce tribes and chiefs who lived by robbing their neighbors. So the towns and castles in which there was much money or other valuable property were not safe without high and strong walls.

Attila tried to take Orleans, but soon after he began to attack the walls he saw a great army at a distance coming towards the city. He quickly gathered his forces together, marched to the neighboring plain of Champagne, and halted at the place where the city of Chalons (sha LON) now stands.

The army Attila saw was an army of 300,000 Romans and Visigoths. It was led by a Roman general named Aetius (AY tee yus or AI tee yus) and the Visigoth king Theodoric (thee Ah duh rik). After the death of Alaric, the Visigoths had settled in parts of Gaul. Their king had now agreed to join the Romans against the common enemy, the terrible Huns. So the great army of the Romans and Visigoths marched up and attacked the Huns at Chalons. It was a fierce battle. Both sides fought with the greatest bravery. At first the Huns seemed to be winning. They drove back the Romans and Visigoths from the field, and in the fight Theodoric was killed.

Aetius now began to fear that he would be beaten, but just at that moment Thorismund (THOR iz mund), the son of Theodoric, made another charge against the Huns. He had taken command of the Visigoths when his father was killed, and now he led them on to fight. They were all eager to have revenge for the death of their king, so they fought like lions and swept across the plain with great fury. The Huns were soon beaten on every side, and Attila himself fled to his camp. It was the first time he had ever been defeated. Thorismund, the conqueror, was lifted upon his shield on the battlefield and hailed as king of the Visigoths.

When Attila reached his camp, he had all his baggage and wagons gathered in a great heap. He intended to set fire to it and jump into the flames if the Romans should come there to attack him.



St. Leo halting Attila at the gates of Rome.

"Here I will perish in the flames," he cried, "rather than surrender to my enemies."

But the Romans did not come to attack him, and in a few days he marched back to his own country.

Very soon, however, Attila was again on the war path. This time he invaded Italy. He attacked and plundered the town of Aquileia (ah kwi LAY yuh), and the terrified inhabitants fled for their lives to the hills and mountains. Some of them took refuge in the islands and marshes of the Adriatic Sea. Here they founded Venice.

The people of Rome and the Emperor Valentinian III were greatly alarmed at the approach of the dreaded Attila. He was now near the city, and they had no army strong enough to send against him. Rome would have been again destroyed if it had not been for Pope Leo I, who went to the camp of Attila and persuaded him not to attack the city. It is said that the barbarian king was awed by the majestic aspect and priestly robes of Leo. It is also told that the apostles Peter and Paul appeared to Attila in his camp

and threatened him with death if he should attack Rome. He did not go away, however, without getting a large sum of money as ransom.

IV

Shortly after leaving Italy, Attila suddenly died. Only the day before his death, he had married a beautiful woman whom he loved very much.

The Huns mourned their king in a barbarous way. They shaved their heads and cut themselves on their faces with knives so that their blood, instead of their tears, flowed for the loss of their great leader. They enclosed Attila's body in three coffins—one of gold, one of silver, and one of iron—and they buried him at night in a secret spot in the mountains. When the funeral was over they killed the slaves who had dug the grave, as the Visigoths had done after the burial of Alaric.

After the death of Attila we hear little more of the Huns.