



(3) The Battle Of Chalons

ON the plains around Chalons, in the north-east of France, two converging lines of history met and clashed in the year 451 A.D.

Last week on this page we saw one beginning on the banks of the Metaurus, when Rome met Carthage in the Italian peninsula, won the battle, and cleared the way for a conquest that spread north, east, west, and south. The Greeks had held their civilisation against the Persians. The Romans took it and threw it out along their spreading communications. Here it reached the Goths, the Germans, the Franks, the Saxons, the Scandinavian Races.

The other was the advance of the Huns from the East, out of Asia. The Huns began in the vast wildernesses of high Asia, between the mountain chains of the Altai and the Himalaya. First their conquests took them east into China. But from China they were driven by the Sienpi, another nomad tribe from Central Asia, and by the fourth century they had made their presence known and felt in Europe. They came across above the Black Sea and followed the Danube westwards. Germans and Scandinavians alike fell before them. Rome sent legions to stay their course along the Danube; and saw these cut to pieces.

The Huns were led by Attila. He was more than a strong savage, bolstered in his power by fear and superstition. He was an extremely cunning military tactician. To his qualities of skill and courage he added actual ferocity in the field and a legend of invincibility. He was one of the world's first propagandists. All Europe feared him as an evil spirit. In truth his claims to supernatural power were manufactured by himself. But they were useful. They gave him and his armies a reputation before which Europe quailed.

Rome Was Weak

Rome was in no condition to meet Attila alone. Between Metaurus and Chalons it had suffered reverses. Arminius led the Germans to a conquest that made the Rhine the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. Blows like this from without, and rottenness within, had been sapping the power of Rome. Her outer provinces were restive.

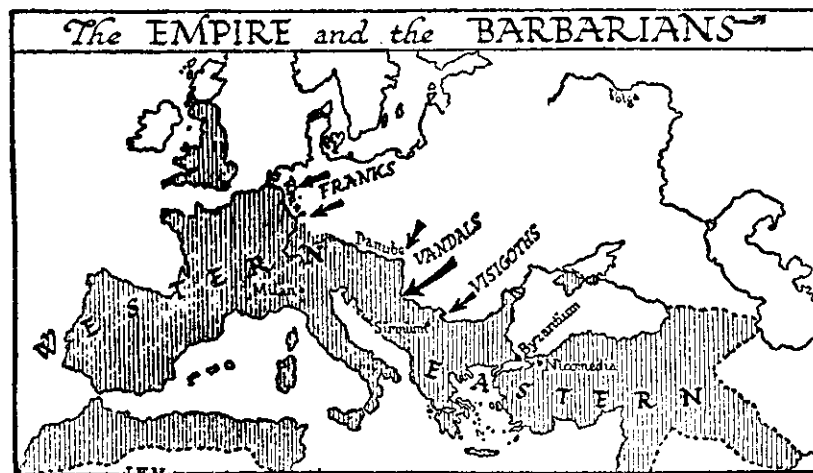
Many of them had won their freedom. They had learned for themselves the modern art of war under Roman generals, and had also acquired new conceptions of nationhood. The boundaries were closing in on Rome. But she was still capable of one big effort. This she made at Chalons, in alliance with the Gothic king Theodoric.

The clash between East and West was savage, bloody, and exhausting. Rome reduced the power of the Huns, but weakened herself irreparably at the same time. The way was clear for the Germanic races to bid for control.

And let us face the facts of history. The Germans are not Huns racially. Almost the only relic of Attila's conquering drives into Europe are the Magyars

Historical Route

He crossed the Rhine just about the place where the Germans crossed it this year to drive into Belgium—near Coblenz; and here, again like the Germans in the Battle for France this year, he changed and divided the direction of his southward thrust. One army he sent westwards, and back towards the north against Tongres and Arras. This would protect his right flank and support his Frankish allies on the lower Rhine. This movement corresponded to this year's German drive to the Channel Ports. Attila's right flank, however, was not concerned with any enemy in the channel and behind the cliffs of Dover. He contented himself with subduing the main towns. His main body he led west and south. He destroyed Besancon and reduced the resistance of the people of Burgundy. Here his forces covered what we now know as the Belfort Gap, and he went on to cover the alpine passes on the Swiss and Italian borders through which French soldiers fled this year in front of a similar movement by the German left flank.



(From H. G. Wells's "Short History of the World")

BEFORE THE DECLINE: The Roman Empire before the inroads of barbarians from the north began reducing its power. Franks, Vandals, and Visigoths were among the tribes which fought against the outer provinces. This week's battle story describes how they in their turn were conquered by the Huns, thrusting in from the East

in Hungary. Huns and Germans were actually bitter enemies. For many years the German races were the losers. After Chalons they had their opportunity.

But we have still to see what happened at Chalons. It was in 450 A.D. that Attila prepared his forces for the eastward march that took him into the heart of France. His army was estimated to be 700,000 strong. He found his excuse in a marriage invitation from Honoria, Roman Princess, sister of Valentinian III, Emperor of the West. Rome wanted no marital liaison with Attila and scotched the plan by imprisoning Honoria. Attila proclaimed that he would march to rescue her. A quarrel between two chiefs of the Franks, then settled on the Lower Rhine, gave him fresh excuse. One appealed for aid to Rome, the other to Attila, who was able through his Frankish ally to march unmolested along the Rhine from his base in Hungary, where he had made Budapest his capital.

seeing the allies formed against him, retreated towards ground more favourable for open battle. He made the plains around Chalons his rallying place and called there his forces from the north in Arras and from the south-east in Besancon.

His whole army faced the allies. Aetius took the right wing, and was able to place himself on a sloping hill which commanded Attila's left flank. Theodoric took the left. Between them, in the spear-head of the allied army at the centre, they placed Sangiban, King of the Alans, whose fidelity was suspect.

Attila opened the battle by trying to force Aetius from his advantageous position. The Romans repulsed the Huns. The centres met and fought fiercely, although neither could make progress. Theodoric assailed the right of Attila's army. He was struck down by a javelin and trampled to death by the horses of his own men; but instead of discouraging them, his death gave his army a new fury. They swept through Attila's right flank, and turned into his centre. Attila was forced back to his camp, where his men could stave off the charges of the Gothic cavalry with bow and spear. Aetius did not press his advantage on Attila's left flank, and at nightfall the Hun was able to assemble his remaining men behind the carts and waggons of his encampment. His personal property he stacked in the form of a huge funeral pyre, which was to take his body if the morrow saw defeat coming to him.

The next day the allied armies saw the preparations Attila had made for resistance and decided not to attack. The Hun was allowed to retreat, and did so; but his power was broken. Although he won more battles against the Western Empire, his strength was gone and his legend shattered.

BEYOND DESCRIPTION The English Countryside

A NEW ZEALAND sergeant who reached England with the Second Echelon began his first letter home in these terms:

"England—and the English—have been a revelation. Remember I had often said that I never wanted to see the place; I had imagined that the towns were dull and industrialised and gloomy, and the country 'pretty-pretty'."

"In fact the villages (and towns) have a mellow beauty far beyond anything I had imagined—and the countryside is beyond description."

"The people, too, are amazingly friendly. I haven't seen any of that English 'standoffishness,' though in trains and buses and hotels they are as quiet as mice. No one ever dreams of the unheard-of boldness of engaging his neighbour in chatty conversation. This is particularly noticeable in hotels."

"This English quiet was very soothing at first, but I am beginning to sigh for our cruder but livelier ways. They say we are 'just like the English.' Don't believe it. There's a world of difference."

Final Struggle

The two forces managed to combine after much difficult manoeuvring south of Orleans and the Loire. Orleans had stoutly withstood the siege and Attila,