

# RIDDARHOLM CHURCH

By GEORGE E. WILSON

**E**VEN if they would, few people could resist the charm of Sweden's capital. From the very moment of his arrival the visitor falls under the spell of the city built where the waters of Lake Malaren rush to join the sea. On its granite hills and granite islands Stockholm is a real Venice of the North. There is however no feeling of langour or of decay. Here are no gothic palaces slowly sinking back into the sea while the tide gently ebbs and flows, keeping pensive count of the passing of the years. Here are strength and energy, confidence and ambition. Everything is clear and fresh and clean. There is the smell of pine trees in the air, and the northern sea is never far away.

Stockholm is very much a city of the present and the future, but she has not forgotten the greatness of her past. Not every one who sits on the terrace of the Grand Hotel and watches the white ships come in during the long summer evenings, or who goes out to Skansen and listens to the band while the flags come down at sunset, or who admires the Renaissance splendor of the new Town Hall may find it, but it is there. There are still narrow streets in the old town, and historic squares, and ancient churches where memories of long ago still linger.

One such spot is the Riddarholm Church standing on the little Riddarholm Island. Here is the Westminster Abbey of Sweden. It stands in its cobble-stoned square far from the rush and roar of the modern city. Once a church of the Franciscans, the old forms departed when Lutheran Gustavus Vasa installed a new order of clergy, who looked to Wittenberg and not to Rome. For nearly three centuries they conducted their services, but in 1807 the church was turned into a mausoleum and now the only services are services for the dead.

It is very quiet within. Our footsteps sound hollow as they echo through the silent church. The floor is made of grave-stones but whom they commemorate, or when the man lived, has to be left to the imagination. With the passing of the years names and inscriptions have disappeared. What great church-

man, what daring general, what worthy statesman lies beneath is something that the stone no longer tells. Gradually all has been effaced. A shaft of light from a high placed window falls upon the tombstone at our feet. Once the light showed an elaborate coat of arms, but now only the faintest outline remains. Soon that too will fade.

No sound comes from the outside world. Here is the perfect peace and calm of a summer's afternoon. Yet to the ear in imagination the air is full of sound, the sound of cannon and of musketry and the feet of marching men. To those who can understand, the history of Sweden is all around us. It pours in on us from every side.

Three monuments to three Swedish kings stand out conspicuously, and as we stand in front of them what a flood of memories they recall. Here on the south side in its own burial chapel is a green marble sarcophagus on which are inscribed three words, "Gustavus Adolfus Magnus". Here is the grave of the man who raised Sweden to the height of her greatness, who made his own beloved northern land one of the first powers in Europe. Under him Stockholm became the capital of a Swedish empire comprising most of the lands washed by the Baltic Sea.

Born six years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada and while Queen Elizabeth still sat upon the throne of England, he became King of Sweden one year after the dagger of Ravallac had ended the life of the hero of Ivry in a narrow street in Paris. Only five years older than Oliver Cromwell, he died before the star of the Great Protector had arisen. A contemporary of Richelieu and of Mazarin, he might have talked with John Milton or with Descartes, or had his picture painted by Velasquez or Rubens or Rembrandt. He was King of Sweden when Shakespeare died, when Bacon was Lord Chancellor of England, and when the Mayflower carried the Pilgrims to the New World.

It was here in Stockholm that in the year 1630 he took farewell of the Estates before he set forth on his last and greatest adventure. He commanded his three-year old daughter, the future Queen Christina, to the care of his faithful councillors. He himself was going to lead his Swedes down into the plains of Germany. There he would do battle for Sweden, and for the Protestant cause, which had fared so badly during the previous twelve years.

His coming changed the history of Europe. In the autumn of 1631 he met the seventy-year old Tilly on the same plain

where 181 years later Napoleon was to meet his first great defeat. When at sunset the last square of pikemen bore the wounded Tilly from the field, they left the King of Sweden master of Northern Germany.

All the events of the next fourteen months come back to us as we stand here in front of the King's last resting place. The captured flags that hang between the chapel windows seem to move again. They stream above the heads of marching men carrying pikes and huge muskets. The sun gleams from helmets and breast plates, and we hear the endless tramp of great jack-boots as they march along the roads of long ago. We see Gustavus leading his Swedes into the Rhine country, the storming of the Lech, the capture of Munich, the long duel with Wallenstein around Nuremberg and that last fatal victory at Luetzen.

The two antagonists had drawn apart after the failure of the King of Sweden to dislodge his rival from the heights above Nuremberg, and it seemed that the campaign was over for 1632. Wallenstein prepared to go into winter quarters and allowed his great cavalry leader Pappenheim to go off on his own. Gustavus decided to attack. Frantically Wallenstein sent messenger after messenger to order his cavalry back. Desperately he manned the ditches with his musketeers and dug new entrenchments to check the coming Swedish onslaught. All night long the preparations went on without a moment's pause. This time there were no heights; he must face the Swedes in the open plain.

The latter spent the cold November night in their ranks. Two hours before sunrise the drums rolled, the Swedes sang Luther's great hymn, "A Strong Fortress is our God", and waited for the moment when they could strike a blow for King, for Country, and for the Reformed Faith.

The mists hung low over the plain of Luetzen and it was nearly ten o'clock before the Swedes began the battle. Until darkness fell the struggle wavered back and forth. Then at last the Swedes forced the Imperialists out of their entrenched camp. The victory was theirs, but their King no longer led them. On the misty field he had become separated from his followers and had been killed by a detachment of the enemy cavalry. The King's riderless white horse first told the story to his men. From the field of victory the body of the dead King was carried back to Sweden and now lies here at rest in

the Ridderholm church. The 'Lion of the North' had fought his last fight and won his last victory.

Opposite the chapel where rests the green marble sarcophagus of the hero of the Thirty Years War there is another chapel and another grave that tell a very different story. Here rests the body of Charles XII. Here is tragedy, stark and heroic. In that black marble sarcophagus, adorned with the lion's skin in brass, with crown and sword and sceptre, lies the dust of the soldier king of Sweden. A stray shot of a Danish cannon had killed him as he lay on a breastwork observing the siege of the fortress of Fredrichshald. Over the mountains of Norway and through the December snows his soldiers carried him home to a ruined country. Here in sorrow, bitterness and pride they laid him beside the great Gustavus. Eighty-six years had passed since the battle of Luetzen. The great Vasa had established the Swedish Empire. Now it was only a memory, but a memory that no Swede would ever want to forget. The collapse of the Empire had been as glorious as its creation had been. Defeat had been made as splendid as victory. In flame and smoke and storm the power of Sweden had been broken, but its passing was like the crashing of Valhalla and the ruin of the gods.

The twelfth Charles had known victory and defeat, he had known famine and privation, but he had never known the meaning of the word surrender. "Fight On" had ever been his motto. As long as there was steel in Sweden, and Swedish arms to wield it, the struggle would not end. Better a soldier's death upon the field of honour than any compromise with one's enemies. Within that black marble rests the dust of a King who even in defeat was victorious.

There is a third royal chapel in the church before which we well may pause. A great square sarcophagus of porphyry is the last resting place of Charles XIV, founder of the present royal family, and great-great-grandfather of the present King, Gustavus VI.

He may have been King of Sweden, but the fourteenth Charles had no relationship with any of the previous thirteen. Swedish blood did not course through his veins. He died King "of the Goths and the Vandals", but this was not his home nor this his native land. He sleeps here under a northern sky where the days grow short and the wind blows cold as it sweeps by from over the ice on Lake Malaren and down to the sea. But he grew to manhood in a different clime and under warmer skies. Son of a lawyer in a small town in Gascony, he began life as a

soldier in the army of Louis XVI. Nothing could have seemed more absurd than to prophesy that one day he would sit upon the throne of the Vasas or in death rest in pride here beside Gustavus Adolphus.

When he was a soldier in the army of the Bourbons he could not hope to attain even to the rank of captain. An officer had to be able to show four quarterings of nobility and that was something that the handsome grenadier was unable to do. No matter what his gifts he seemed condemned to pass his life in the ranks. He might rise to be a non-commissioned officer but that was all.

The French Revolution changed everything. Soon the adjutant was a lieutenant, then a captain, a colonel, and in 1794 a general in "The Army of Sambre and Meuse". In 1797 he met Napoleon in Italy, and from then on their careers were linked together. Never a devoted follower of the Emperor, often critical and sometimes envious, he nevertheless became one of Napoleon's Marshal's and later a Prince of the Empire. The lawyer's son was now Marshal Bernadotte, and after 1806 the Duke of Ponte Corvo.

In 1810 he was chosen by the Swedes as their Crown Prince, and in 1818 ascended the throne as Charles XIV. After the fall of Napoleon he had some hopes of exchanging Stockholm for Paris, but when that proved impossible he accepted his fate and ruled over his northern land until his death in 1844.

Did he sometimes speculate on the ways of time and chance and marvel how the lawyer's son had come to sit in the great square palace on the banks of the Baltic? Did he sometimes long for his southern boyhood home or often recall the days when he had been a simple soldier of France?

Here we must leave them, the three warrior Kings of Sweden who recall so much in her stirring history. The church grows dim as the shadows lengthen. There is a chill in the air. Another day is fading into eternity. We must depart and disturb no more the solitude of the Kingdom of the Dead.