

NORTH GATE AND WALL.

THE ANCIENT CITY OF WISBY.

BY W. W. THOMAS, JUN.

FROM the early time before the dawn of accurate history, out from the mists of myth and tradition, there comes drifting down to us this saga of the lofty North. Far out on the wild Baltic Sea there floated of yore a wondrous island. Now and then some adventurous or storm-driven mariner caught sight of the low and indistinct outlines of this fabled isle shimmering in the moonlight. But if the sailor lay to his craft and waited for day, lo! the island vanished with the dawn, and only a wide expanse of white-capped waves rolled where dark groves had stood all through the hours of night. For this strange island sank beneath the sea every morning, and where it would reappear when the night came again no man knew, for it drifted about through the seas like

a spectre-ship. But at last a stalwart Northern chieftain, Thjelvar by name, sailed forth from the coast of Sweden in quest of this ghostly holm. Fortune favored the valiant sailor. He succeeded in effecting a landing on the shores of this drifting, sinking no-man's land. Instantly he struck fire. The heaven-born flames, as they leaped on high, drove out the demons and trolls and powers of darkness that had bewitched this wandering isle, and it now became fixed and stable. So was Gottland located and settled.

The little colony founded by Thjelvar spread gradually over the island, and in their insulated position took to the water as naturally as ducks. They built ships and sailed on trading voyages, not only

to Sweden, but also to Germany and Denmark and Russia. They sailed far up the rivers of northern Europe, and traded with the inhabitants along their banks. And so the thrifty and adventurous Gottlanders began to grow rich with the proceeds of their trading voyages and the booty of their Viking forays.

Many kings fought for the possession of this island, and though the Gottlanders were always victorious, and continued to maintain their independence, they at last thought it best to seek a strong alliance, and place themselves under the protection of some powerful king. So they sent an embassy for this purpose to the King of Sweden. Their ambassador was a wise and aged chieftain, one Avaje Strabajn. The result was a treaty by which Gottland came under the crown of Sweden, and although other powers have not unfrequently conquered and held this island, it has always reverted after a season to the mother-country, to which, after the

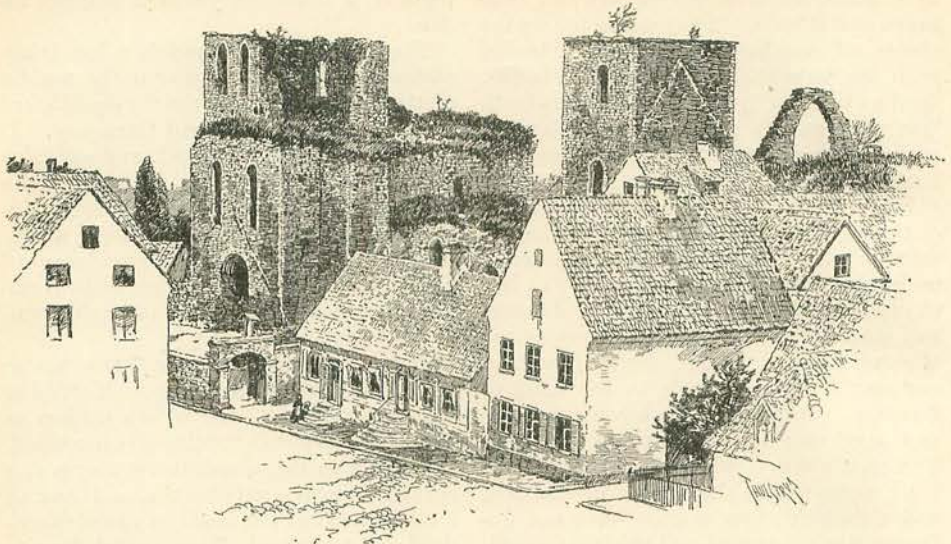
lapse of a thousand years, it belongs to-day.

The island of Gottland is a low-lying plateau of limestone, rising in the middle of the Baltic Sea, and nearly equidistant from Sweden, Russia, and Germany. It is 70 miles long, 35 broad, and contains 1200 square miles. The island is quite level, the soil generally good, and the climate peculiarly mild for so high a latitude. It numbers to-day a population of 54,000, who are chiefly engaged in farming, the breeding of horses and cattle, and the fisheries.

During the Middle Ages there was no spot in northern Europe so well fitted to be the home of a race of sea traders as Gottland. Its trade continually increased, and early in the eleventh century a city sprang up near a safe harbor, and beneath a cliff where of old heathen priests sacrificed their victims. They called the city Wisby, which means "the city of the place of sacrifice." Wisby is situated on



POWDER TOWER AND PART OF THE WALL OF WISBY.

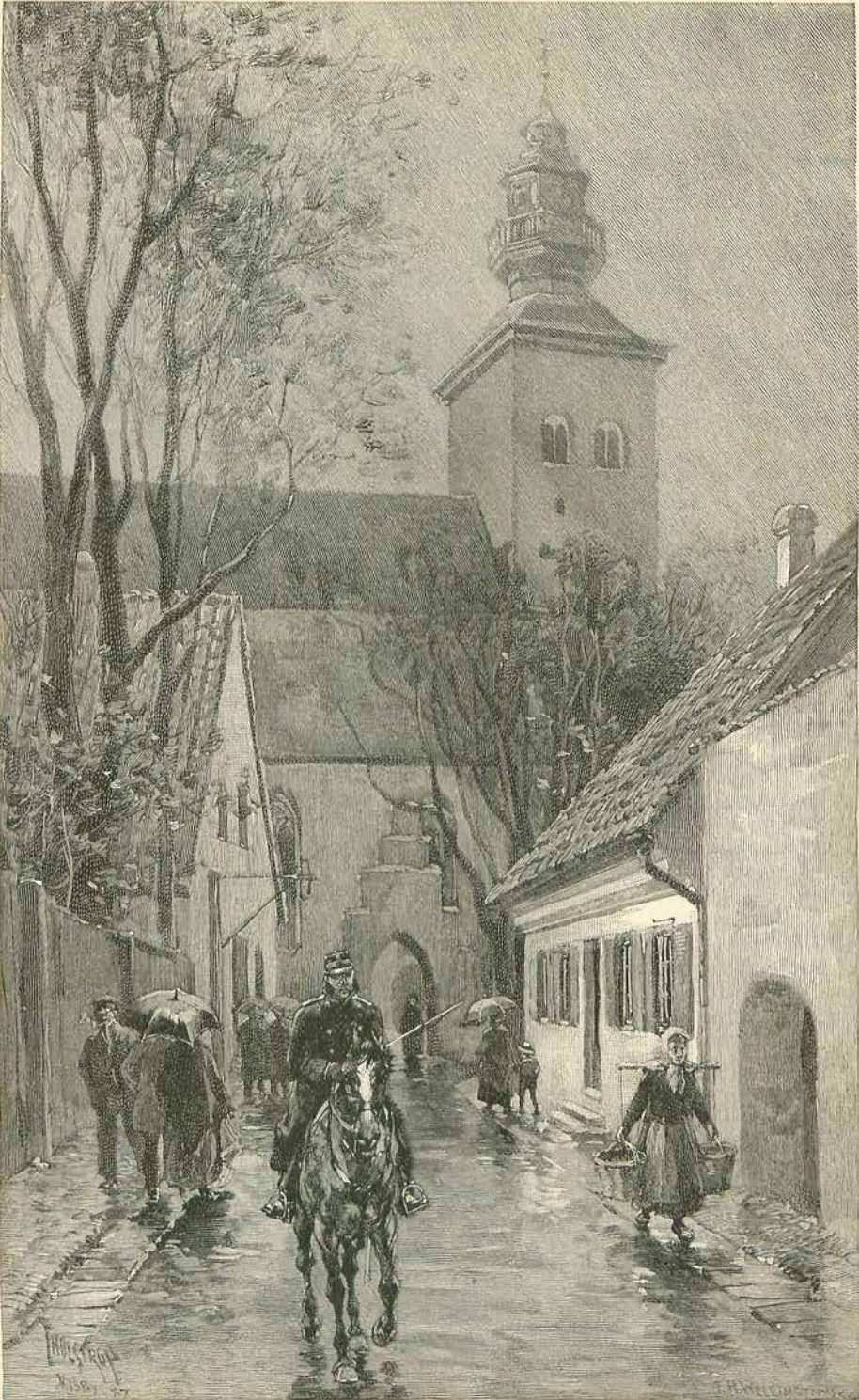


SISTER CHURCHES, ST. LARS AND ST. DROTEN.

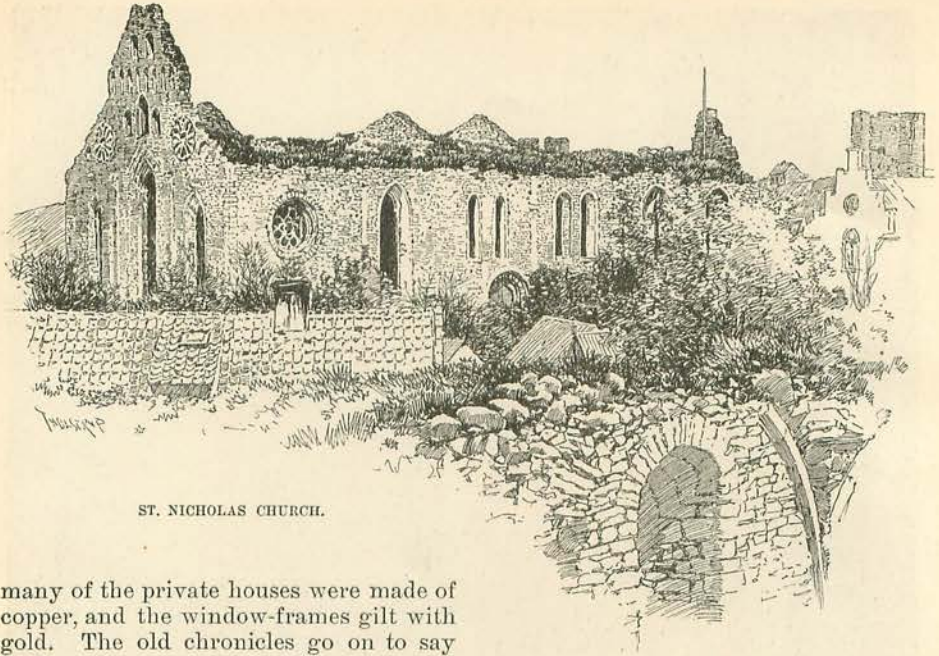
the west coast of Gottland, and about midway the island from north to south. The city continued to increase in trade and riches, in power and importance, throughout the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. The trade of Russia and other countries to the east of the Baltic centred at Novgorod or Smolensk, thence it flowed down the Gulf of Finland or the river Dwina to Wisby. Here the products of the Russian forests and fields were received in great warehouses and factories. To meet this eastern trade there sailed to Wisby merchants and shippers from Germany, Flanders, Sweden, Denmark, and England, with the woollen goods, scarlet cloths, weapons, tools, and luxuries of life. Along the quays and streets and in the warehouses and factories of Wisby there always surged a lively traffic. Its merchants were constantly shipping to or receiving goods from nearly every part of the known world. Many of the costly goods and precious wares of India, Persia, and the farthest Orient found their way up the Volga, the Dnieper, and other rivers of Russia, and so over land and sea to Wisby, whence they were distributed throughout western Europe. During the thirteenth century Wisby was situated upon one of the most important lines of the world's traffic, and was unquestionably the most important market on that line. Hundreds of rich merchants moved

their business from the German and other ports of the Baltic and North Sea to Wisby. Nearly every nation and faith built its own house of worship at this prosperous port. Seventeen great churches, some of them nearly 200 feet in length, and three monasteries, were erected, and their lofty towers and spires overlooked the busy commerce of the town. A massive wall of stone, thirty feet high, and nearly two and a half miles long, was built around the city. Forty-eight lofty stone towers were built above this girdle of stone, and from tower to tower along the walls passed armed sentries to and fro by day and night.

Wisby became the chief emporium of the North, the Queen of the Baltic, as Venice was Queen of the Adriatic Sea, the most important commercial city of northern Europe. Wisby and Gottland in the thirteenth century were the London and England of the North. How large a population Wisby had cannot be accurately ascertained. The old chronicles state that the number of merchants residing within the walls was 12,000. The halls of their guilds were sumptuously furnished, and within them pilgrims and travellers were entertained with a royal hospitality. All mechanics and artisans, save only bakers and goldsmiths, resided in two suburbs without the wall. So rich did the inhabitants become that the doors of



CATHEDRAL OF ST. MARIA.



ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH.

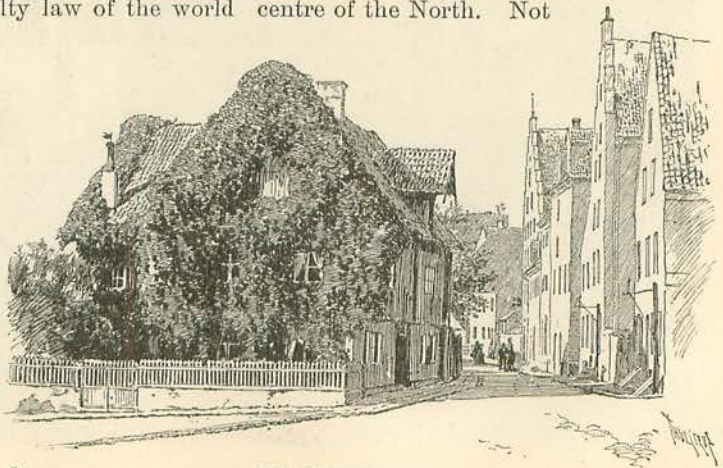
many of the private houses were made of copper, and the window-frames gilt with gold. The old chronicles go on to say that

“The Gottlanders weigh their gold with twenty-pound weights,
And play with the choicest jewels;
The pigs eat out of silver troughs,
And the women spin with golden distaffs.”

And this Queen City of the North was not only rich, but was of such commanding commercial importance that it gave out a code of sea laws, which was followed and observed throughout northern and western Europe. The maritime code of Wisby commanded implicit obedience from the ports of Russia to the Mediterranean, and forms much of the groundwork of the admiralty law of the world to-day. During the twelfth century the merchants from all countries residing at Wisby formed a league, whose decrees and ordinances were obeyed by all the Hanse Towns. Out of this league of Wisby grew the mighty Hanseatic League, which at one time embraced thirty-one cities, and

was powerful enough to do battle with kings.

The vast riches of this thriving city excited the cupidity of Valdemar Atterdag, King of Denmark. He landed with an army on the coast of Gottland. The proud burghers of Wisby advanced to meet him. A pitched battle was fought just outside the walls, and the forces of Wisby were defeated, with a loss of 1800 slain. So Valdemar marched in and plundered the town, gaining an enormous booty. This was in 1361. From that time dates the decline of this great trade centre of the North. Not

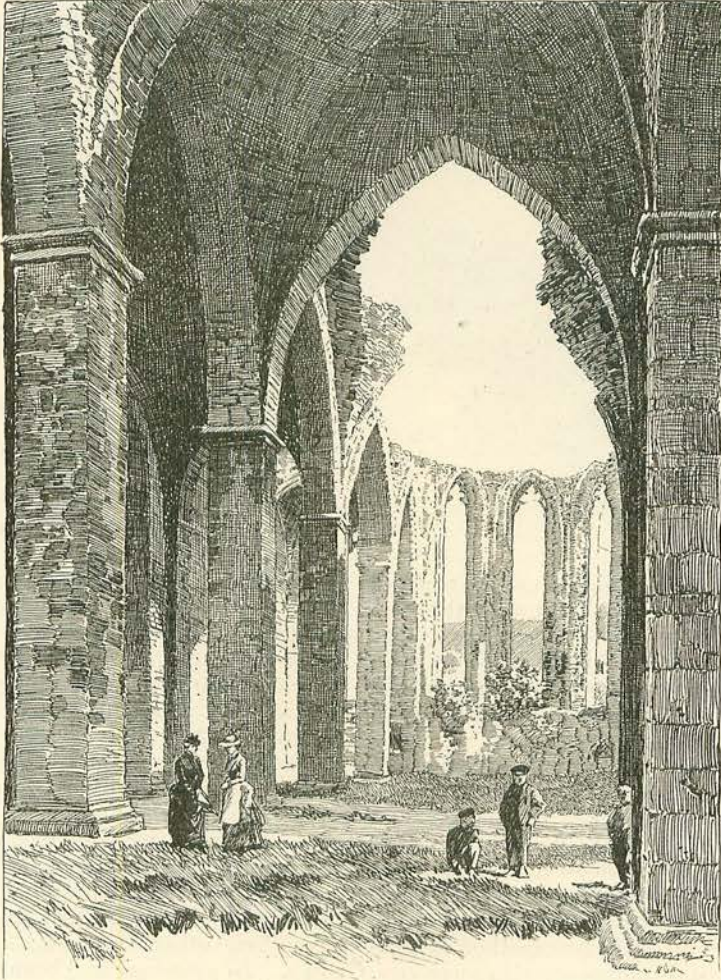


THE BURMEISTER HOUSE.

singly do misfortunes fall either upon individuals or cities. Some thirty years after the sacking of Wisby by Valdemar, the Mongolian hordes, under Tamerlane, invaded Russia. They destroyed the city of Astrakhan, where the Volga flows into

cape of Africa, and deserted the Baltic and Wisby.

At six o'clock on an afternoon in May I sailed from Stockholm in the little steamer *Gottland*, bound for Wisby. Our course at first was not out into the Baltic,

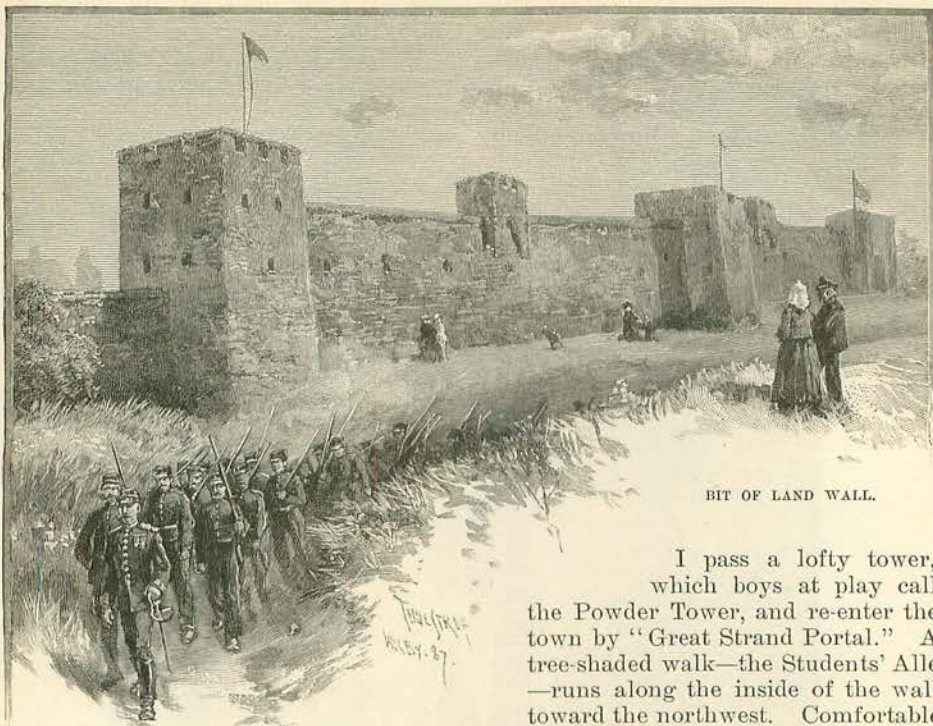


ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH, INTERIOR.

the Caspian Sea, and thus cut off from *Gottland* the greater portion of the rich traffic of the Orient. A century later, in 1498, six years after the discovery of America, a new route to India was found by sailing around the Cape of Good Hope. This was an easier road for the commerce of the East, than overland across Russia, and so trade floated around the southern

but in the opposite direction, up the Mälär Lake.

At eight o'clock we reached the town of Södertelge, famous for its *kringlor*—ring twisted cakes—and its lock, through which the Mälär Lake finds an artificial outlet to the sea. Through this lock our steamer was dropped about eighteen inches; then we steamed out into the Baltic.



BIT OF LAND WALL.

Not till near midnight does the steamer pass Landsort and push out upon the open sea. Before this time the sea-sick voyager has prudently turned in, and he may arise with safety at seven next morning, for the steamer is then quietly moored alongside the quay of Wisby.

A sleepy hotel boy, with a long red-nosed man in black to help him, took my bag to the hotel, showed me a room, and instantly disappeared. Unable to find or rouse anybody to whom to communicate my earnest longing for coffee and breakfast, I wandered out for a desultory stroll, which, after all, is the best method of making your first acquaintance with a new city.

An old wall of gray stone stands directly across the street in front of me. The wall is pierced with an arched passageway. An ancient burgher, all in black, and with an ancient black hat rolled up at the sides and projecting fore and aft, appears walking through the arch as naturally as though he were a part of it. To my question he answers, "Little Strand Portal." Outside the portal fishermen were drying their nets, hung in festoons across horizontal poles placed some two feet above the greensward.

I pass a lofty tower, which boys at play call the Powder Tower, and re-enter the town by "Great Strand Portal." A tree-shaded walk—the Students' Allé—runs along the inside of the wall toward the northwest. Comfortable green benches are placed at intervals, and through an embrasure one looks

out upon the sea. Near by was a handsome park and garden, and a thriving plantation of mulberry-trees. Here, too, was a restaurant, built like a villa. On its wide veranda I enjoyed a good breakfast and the steaming cup of coffee for which I had been longing.

During the day I was fortunate enough to have for my cicerone Professor C. J. Bergman, the learned historian of Gottland. Together we wandered among the ruined churches of Wisby.

Of its seventeen churches, only one, the Cathedral of St. Maria, is in use to-day. Ten others are standing, but in ruins. In grandeur and beauty of architectural design they will compare not unfavorably with many of the ruined churches and abbeys of England and Scotland. One of the most beautiful is St. Catharina, the cloister church of the Franciscan monks. It is a basilica, 140 feet long, and was built in the middle of the thirteenth century. Between the nave and the aisles stand twelve pillars, six on either side. The roof of the church has long since fallen in, but the six pointed arches which supported it still remain.

Side by side stand the sister churches of St. Lars and St. Drotten. They were built as early as the twelfth century, and, if one may believe the tradition, by two sisters. These were rich and spiteful, and hated each other so warmly that they

crumbling vaults of St. Lars. Its walls are seven and a half feet thick, and contain within them many narrow passages and galleries, some of them going round the entire church. Mr. Bergman sent a small boy to run through these

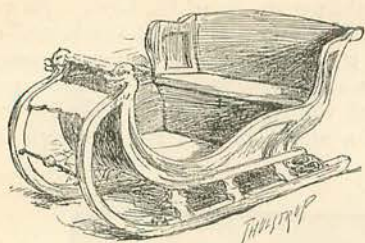


HELGE-ANDS KYRKA.

could not worship together in the same temple. So each built her own church, and there worshipped in peace and happiness.

White doves were wheeling about and alighting beneath the shelter of the

galleries, and as he kept alternately appearing at vaulted openings, vanishing into the wall and again appearing, I could imagine how attractive it must have been in the olden time, when a procession of priests and boys, clad in rich



OLD SLEIGH IN THE WISBY MUSEUM.

vestments and chanting as they marched, wound slowly round the church, now seen through a vaulted archway, now lost in the wall of the sanctuary, their chant dying away within the wall, and bursting forth with full power as the head of the brilliant procession came again into view.

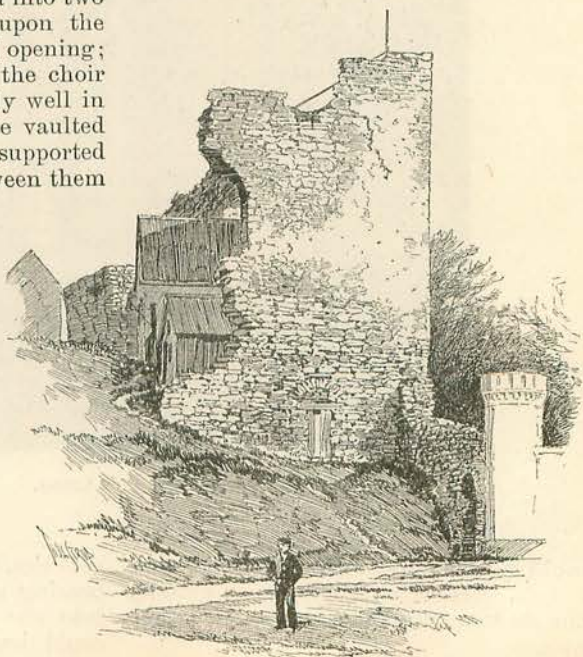
Each church has a massive square tower, which doubtless at one time was used as a fortress. The tower of St. Drotten is 31 by 45 feet on the ground; it rises to the height of 120 feet, and its walls are eight and a half feet in thickness.

Helge-ands Kyrka, or the Church of the Holy Ghost, was built about the year 1250. It is composed of an octagonal tower joined on to an oblong rectangular choir. The tower is divided into two stories; each story looks out upon the choir through a spacious arched opening; so that a service going on in the choir could be seen and heard equally well in both stories of the tower. The vaulted ceiling of the lower story is supported by four square pillars, and between them in the centre is an eight-sided aperture, seven feet in diameter, piercing the ceiling and communicating with the second story. In the upper story are four round pillars supporting a vault and arches slightly pointed. The arches below are round. The first story is in no sense a crypt, as it is entirely above-ground. I doubt if there is another church of this peculiar architecture in the world.

Passing through a garden, we come upon St. Nicholas, the monastery church of the Dominicans. It was built about the year 1240. It is a basilica, 65 feet broad and 199

feet long. The round and pointed arches are used indiscriminately, and appear side by side in window and portal. A wide-spreading walnut-tree stood near the southern wall of the structure, and thrust its branches through an empty Gothic window. Grape-vines clambered along the ruin.

High up on the west gable end, which overlooks the sea, are two rose-windows, or rather window-like depressions, for they do not penetrate through the wall. The saga is still told that in the time of Wisby's magnificence two huge carbuncles of priceless value adorned the western facade of St. Nicholas, one being placed in the centre of each rose-window. At night these carbuncles shone with the brightness of the sun at noonday, and served as guiding lights to storm-tossed mariners far out on the Baltic wave. Twenty-four soldiers stood constantly on guard to watch these ruddy gems, the most precious possessions of the church, and no one, on pain of death, might approach the sanctuary after the going down of the sun. But when King Valdemar sacked the town he tore these sparkling jewels from the wall, and placed them on board the largest ship of his



RUIN OF FORTRESS OF WISBORG.

fleet, together with the gold and silver, the sacred vessels, and other booty of which he had despoiled the churches. But God in His wrath followed this profaner of His temples. Scarce had Valde-

And to this day, when a calm broods over the quiet sea, a strange, weird, ruddy light often comes welling up from the depths of the Baltic, and spreads far and wide over the mirror-like face of the wa-



HANSE CHURCH DURING SERVICE.

mar put to sea when a great storm arose. The ship bearing the sacred spoils was wrecked, and sank with all her ill-gotten booty near the Karl Islands, just off the coast of Gottland. The king himself was saved with difficulty, and taken on board another ship.

And the Gottland fisher, drying his nets on the shore, looks out over the watery plain, illumined by "the light that never was on sea or land," and knows that the sacred lost jewels of the church are now shining from the cavernous depths of ocean.



STREET IN WISBY.

We strolled through the town. The streets are narrow and crooked, and paved with rough stones. Some of the dwelling-houses of the old Hanse merchants are still standing. They are narrow and lofty; they stand for the most part with their gable ends toward the street, and the front of the peaked roof is built up like a double flight of steps that meet on top. Sometimes a vaulted passageway is thrown across the narrow street from house to house, like the "Bridge of Sighs."

These old houses by their size and spacious apartments indicate the opulence of their builders. They have vaulted ceilings, supported by short, massive stone pillars, marble seats in the recesses of the windows, and across the cellar floor flows to this day a stream of living water, which by little dams was transformed into a succession of fish-ponds. The roofs of some of these old houses are still covered with the ancient monk and nun tiles.

Near the centre of the city stands an interesting wooden house of a later period, the Burmeister House, built by a merchant of that name in 1662. A spacious saloon in the second story is painted all

over—walls, ceiling, and beams—with scenes, many of them from the Bible, but some from the artist's own fancy. Outside you may see the lid, now raised to a perpendicular and forming part of the wall of the house, but when let down on its hinges to a horizontal level became the counter projecting into the street over which goods were sold by the proprietor, remaining inside his house, to customers standing in the highway.

In one respect Wisby is like the city of Quebec: it has a lower and an upper town. A steep cliff of klint one hundred feet high runs nearly parallel to the shore and quite close to it. Wisby is built partly on the low land near the sea and partly on top of the klint. Very steep zigzagging streets, and in some places steps cut in the rock, lead from the lower to the upper town. From the harbor side at the southwest end of Wisby the old tower wall climbs the steep hill, passes the fortress of Wisborg, and runs east to the south gate. The wall then turns and runs northeasterly, and nearly parallel with the shore, about a mile past the east gate, to the north portal. Here

the wall curves to the northwest, and descends the hill-side to the tower "Cames," close by the sea. At this tower the wall makes a right angle, and runs southwest-

yards, and the sea wall on the fourth side 1970 yards long. The original wall was about twenty feet high, battlemented, and probably without towers. It was un-

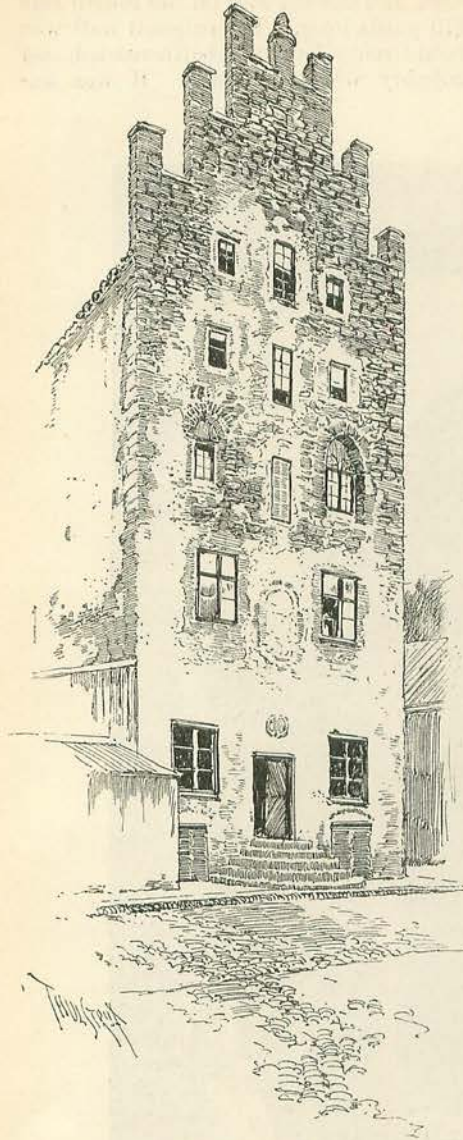


DOORWAY OF COUNTRY CHURCH.

erly along the sea and harbor to our starting-point near the fortress of Wisborg.

The land wall, which encloses the city on three sides, from the ruins of Wisborg round to the tower "Cames," is 2400

doubtedly built early in the thirteenth century, although no one knows the exact date. In 1289 the burghers of Wisby began to strengthen the land wall. They built on to it upon the inside until it



THE APOTHECARY'S.

was six and a half feet in thickness. They raised it to thirty feet in height, and added the towers. This great work occupied ten years, and was finished in 1299. On the sea side, especially along the harbor, large sections of the wall are torn down; but on all sides looking out upon the land the wall is in good condition, and would need but few repairs to make it as strong as ever. In two places only is the land wall battlemented. For the most part it is finished off with large

tall flat stones, placed like rafters, slanting together to a point on top, and thus roofing in the wall. At intervals of about 260 feet all along the walls are built high towers. These project outside the wall. Most of them are square on the ground, but above present five sides of an octagon to the foe, the square corners being sliced off into independent faces. The whole side toward the town is open. These towers are sixty to seventy feet high, and are divided into four or five stories. Each story is pierced with narrow embrasures for arrows. The tops of the towers are battlemented, and on their upper floors or roofs catapults were placed in position. The towers are of unequal size; that next the north gate toward the sea is thirteen feet broad by sixteen feet deep in the inside, and its side walls are seven feet thick. The Powder Tower is thirty-four feet square on the outside. Half-way between the high towers were built bartizans, or "saddle-towers," as the Gottlanders expressly call them. These small, low structures are not built up from the ground, but sit astride the wall like saddles. Many have toppled over, and carried considerable sections of the wall with them in their fall. Near the top of the wall, on the inside, square holes have been left between the stones at short distances from each other and in a horizontal line. In these holes were inserted wooden beams; upon them rested a wooden platform, along which in the olden time the sentinels of Wisby paced their lofty rounds in sunshine and storm. Three portals pierce the wall on the land side. They are called the South, East, and North gates. A massive tower rises above each portal. These gates are in fact but vaulted passageways through the lower story of great square towers. Grooves in the sides of the portal show where the portecullis fell, and on projections outside rested of old the drawbridge. Streets pass through each gateway from the city to the country. A wide moat runs around the outside of the entire wall, and to the north there were at least two, perhaps three, moats parallel with each other.

In the afternoon I took a stroll to the castle of Wisborg. But a few crumbling fragments are left of this once mighty fortress; but as I stood among them on the high cliff overlooking the Baltic, it was easy to build again the castle, in im-

agination, rising grandly, with its seven towers gay with waving banners and fluttering pennants—at one time the palace of a king, at others the stronghold of freebooters and pirates.

The Coliseum became the quarry which furnished the Roman princes for centuries with the stone for their palaces, and in like manner the walls of the grand old castle of Wisborg have been pulled down piecemeal and burnt in kilns near by to furnish lime for modern dwellings. The lime used in building the royal palace at Stockholm was made from the stones in Wisborg's walls.

I continued my walk around the outside of the ancient wall. Of the forty-eight high towers, thirty-eight are still standing in almost perfect preservation. One is used to-day as a state-prison. A cheap wooden pointed roof has been placed on another, which is utilized as a storehouse for hay. A third, by the water-side, serves as a powder-house. Every tower has its name and its history. The Powder Tower was called of old *Silfverhättan*—silver-cap—from its shining roof, now replaced with dull tiles.

Strolling across level green fields, I came upon the stone cross raised by King Valdemar to mark the burial-place of 1800 citizens of Wisby whom he slew in the battle that decided the fate of the city. The cross stands in a grove of newly planted trees, about a quarter of a mile from the city wall. It is nearly ten feet high, and has a circle around the axis. It is ornamented with a bass-relief of the Saviour upon the cross, and an inscription cut in the abbreviated old monk style.

The ancient wall, churches, castle, and monuments of Wisby were all built of Gottland limestone. Their extraordinary preservation is due in part to the excellence of the stone, but chiefly to the mild and equable climate of the island.

On this remote isle of the Baltic there is indeed preserved a bit of the Middle Ages, and it is handed down to us as perfectly as the fly in amber.

The Wisby of to-day is a little town of 6400 inhabitants. It has shrunk away from its wall as an old man from the garments of his prime, and its vacant places are covered with flowering gardens and wide-spreading trees.

Next morning, bright and early, I rattled out through the east gate, and drove away over the open country.

After proceeding a dozen miles in a southeasterly direction, we turned into a cross-road, drove past Halla church, and soon came into another highway leading northwesterly back to Wisby.

We pulled up at Dalhem church, and the driver led the horses into the stable of the parsonage to bait them. The whole congregation was out-of-doors, enjoying the warm noontide sun of spring. The women looked queerly with broad-brimmed white straw hats perched on top of the black silk kerchiefs that were closely bound around their heads and cheeks.

The men and boys were sitting on a log ladder or leaning against the trees and fences in front of the church, while the women and girls strolled among the graves in the church-yard in the rear.

The priest shakes hands with a white-haired veteran, bows to others, and enters the church. The bell strikes a few strokes, and the congregation slowly file in. Soon I hear the organ pealing through the open portal, then the voices of the choir singing a psalm.

We drove off at one o'clock; the road was level and smooth, our ponies fresh as in the morning; and we were back in Wisby at three, having taken in thirty-two miles of this snug little island.

