

The Decline and Fall of Practically Everybody

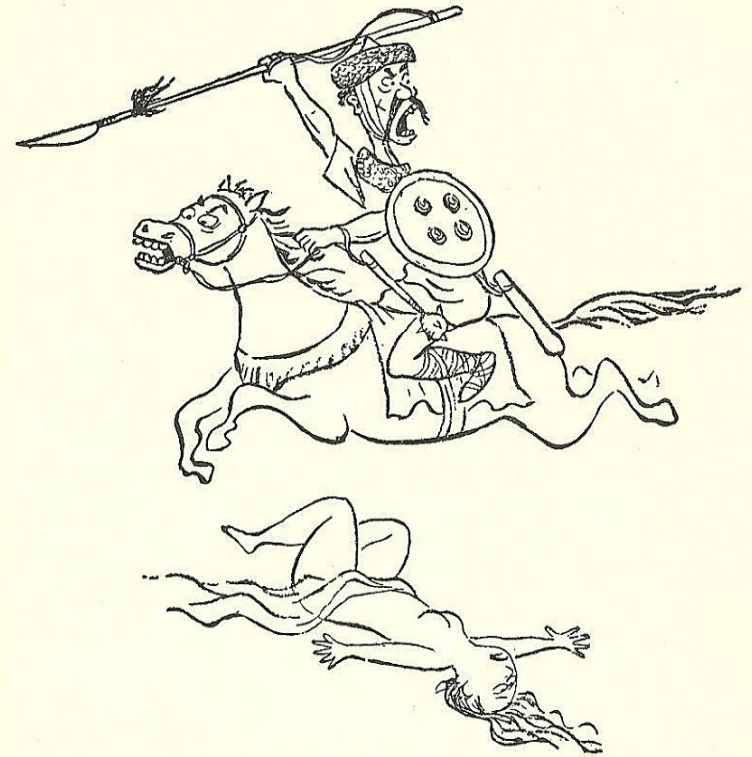


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ATTILA THE HUN

ATTILA THE HUN was an awful pest, but there are plenty of others. You mustn't blame him for all your troubles, because most of them are your own fault, and the sooner you realize it the better.¹ He has even been blamed for the Fall of Rome, when he

¹ *Attila's name does not rhyme with vanilla, as it used to in my day. It is now believed that, if children can be taught to accent Attila on the first syllable, things may take a turn for the better.*

wasn't anywhere near at the time. I forget exactly why Rome fell. It was probably just one of those things.²

The Huns were Asiatic nomads who dashed into Europe on mangy little ponies in the fourth century A.D. and started a crime wave.³ They have been identified with the Hiung-nu, a foreign tribe that occupied Mongolia in the reign of Shi-Hwang-ti, but I am beginning to doubt it.⁴ They kept riding from place to place in search of pasturage, rapine, and pillage, and they got so they couldn't stop.

Huns were horrid-looking creatures. They flattened their noses with boards and bandages and scarred their faces in youth so that they wouldn't have to shave. In the time saved from shaving they could be flattening their noses. Sometimes male and female Huns would fall in love and get married, and everybody wondered what they saw in each other.

They lived on meat and mare's milk and dressed in the skins of field mice. Huns were smaller than most people and the field mice were larger than nowadays.⁵ When asked who they were, they replied something that sounded like the neighing of a horse, and it was believed that they were trying to say they were Huns, or possibly Hiung-nu. The Romans said the Huns were not human, which was only partly true. As in any other group of people, some of them were human and some were not.⁶

² Gibbon has discussed the matter at sufficient length, to put it mildly.

³ Marcellus described them as "two-footed beasts, small and beardless, and seemingly chained to their horses. They even sleep leaning on the necks of their mounts." And they called that living?

⁴ There were two kinds of Huns, one of them Finnic, Permian, or Ugrian. Ours were the other kind.

⁵ Huns looked more imposing on horseback. Who doesn't?

⁶ Their language seems to have been less suitable than Latin for the growth of the arts and sciences. Either you go in for these things or you neigh like a horse. Not both.

When the Huns first came to Europe they subdued the Alans and the Heruls, then picked on the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths, simple, lubberly Teutons who had been having an easy life. One day they would push the Ostrogoths across the Danube and the next day they would push them back again. Then they would go into camp and flatten their noses. The Ostrogoths and the Visigoths were so much alike that it was impossible for a layman to tell them apart, and, if you could, what would you do about the Asdings, the Silings, and the Gepids, not to mention the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, and the Lithuanians. Name three important exports of the Gepids. Name one.

Attila was the son of Mundzuk the Ugly, King of the Huns. He was born somewhere in the Balkans about A.D. 395.⁷ As an infant he was so hideous that his mother hardly knew what to do. She thought he might grow out of it, but the more she flattened his nose the worse he looked. At the age of six he won the National Face-Making Championship. You guessed it—he wasn't playing.

Upon the death of King Rugila, who had succeeded Mundzuk, Attila and his brother Bleda became joint rulers of the Huns in the year 433. Attila soon had the Rugians and the Ostrogoths and the Gepids where he wanted them.⁸ His Hunnish Empire stretched from here to there and things went smoothly for almost twenty years. That is, for the Huns. Whenever Attila leered at the tribes, they would drop everything and run.⁹ Then Attila would grab what he could.

One of Attila's main sources of income was Theodosius II, Roman Emperor of the East.¹⁰

⁷ While riding in a chariot, they tell us. No wonder he was always on the move.

⁸ You needn't keep track of Bleda any more. He didn't live long.

⁹ Attila had a habit of rolling his eyes fiercely. It unnerved people.

¹⁰ Theodosius II was called Theodosius the Calligrapher because

Theodosius, a timid soul, had heard so much about the Huns that he paid them well to stay away from Constantinople. At first sight of Attila's profile he doubled the annual payment, making it seven hundred pounds of gold. A few years later, when Attila made faces at him again, Theodosius agreed to give three times as much and a bonus of six thousand pounds more if he would never come back. Theodosius' successor refused to carry on, but love will find a way.

It seems that Attila had received a letter from Honoria, sister of Valentinian III, Roman Emperor of the West, asking him to come to Italy and save her from a bad situation. She had been caught holding hands with Eugenius, her steward, and her relatives, who were bound and determined that she should never have any fun, had sentenced her to marry Flavius Bassus Herculanus, an elderly senator with a splendid character and palsy.¹¹

Although she was something of a romp by nature, Honoria was very plain and suffering from hysteria brought on by an enforced visit in Constantinople with the saintly sister of Theodosius II and some other girls interested in prayers, fasting, and vigils, all dedicated to perpetual virginity.¹² She figured that marriage to Flavius would be the same sort of thing and she couldn't face it.¹³

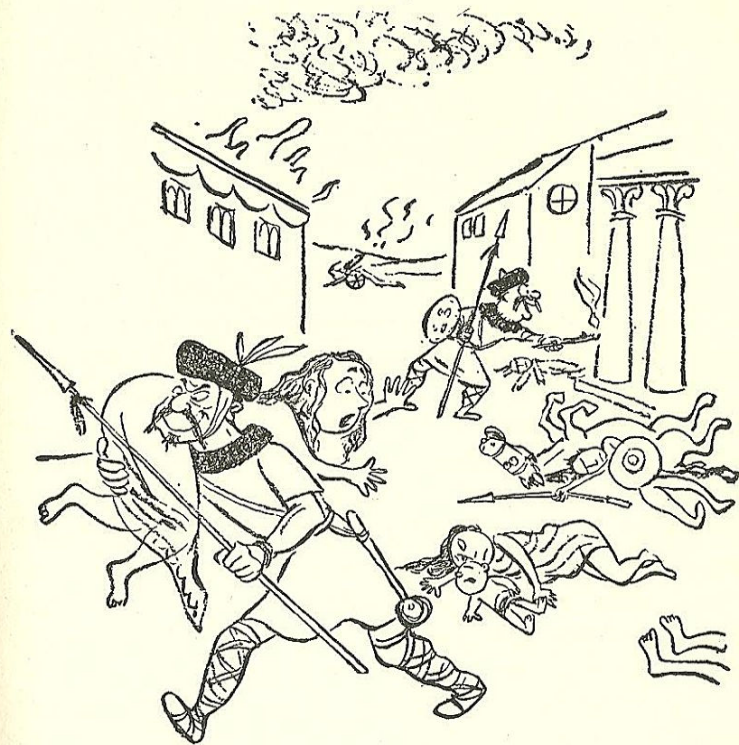
Attila already had three hundred wives, but he decided he might as well blackmail Honoria's family, anyhow, and clean up

of his beautiful penmanship. Such persons generally draw birds, too.

¹¹ *She was mad clear through.*

¹² *After the death of Theodosius II, his sister Pulcheria, chief of the virgins, executed Chrysaphius, the Grand Eunuch, her brother's factotum. She had quite a temper, for some reason.*

¹³ *Valentinian executed Hyacinthus, the eunuch who carried Honoria's message to Attila. Life was no bed of roses for those fellows.*



in the West, now that the East wasn't so good any more. Since she had sent a ring with her note, he called it a proposal and demanded Honoria as his bride, together with half the territory ruled by Valentinian for her dowry. They turned him down, just as he had expected.

So Attila invaded Gaul in A.D. 451 with an army of Rugians, Scirians, Ostrogoths, and what not, pillaging, raping, and burning as he went.¹⁴ He was defeated at Châlons by Aëtius, a Ro-

¹⁴ *Among those present was Ardaric, King of the Gepids, now a firm ally and a member of Attila's staff.*

man general, and Theodoric, King of the Visigoths.¹⁵ Attila came again the next year, still mumbling how he was engaged to Honoria and would not see her mistreated. Pope Leo the Great met him outside the gates of Rome and gave him a good talking to, and Attila went right back to his home in the Dracula country and that's about all there was to it. Nothing came of Honoria's attempt to lead her own life.¹⁶ They locked her up for the rest of her days.

What Leo the Great said to Attila that made him pick up and leave so hurriedly was not announced. I have a theory that some third party, perhaps Valentinian, slipped him all the gold he could carry away, so much that you might call it Honoria's dowry. In this view, I may add, I am supported by Mr. Gibbon. Of course we're only guessing.¹⁷

Attila was now sixtyish.¹⁸ His mind was weakening and he decided to marry again, as he had been terribly misunderstood the first three hundred times. So he married Ildico, or Hilda, a beautiful blonde damsel whose parents he had recently slaughtered in Gaul. Next morning he was found dead in bed. Ildico was sitting there, looking straight at the corpse and jabbering in a strange tongue. When they asked her if she had murdered her husband, she kept right on sputtering umlauts. They dropped it and nobody knows to this day what happened during that night in June. It could have been a stroke.¹⁹

He was buried in three coffins, of gold, silver, and iron, and

¹⁵ *The Battle of Châlons was fought not at Châlons but at Troyes. Naturally, it was called the Battle of Châlons.*

¹⁶ *Gibbon speaks of Honoria's "indecent advances." Now, really.*

¹⁷ *At the prompting of his eunuch Heraclitus, Valentinian murdered Aëtius, who had saved the country, then Valentinian was murdered for seducing the wife of Petronius Maximus, and Heraclitus was jailed for disorderly conduct. And you ask why Rome fell.*

¹⁸ *Unfortunately, he had not grown old gracefully.*

¹⁹ *Some say he simply burst a blood vessel. It's happened before.*

some very nice things were said at the funeral. The Huns went on for a few years under his six favorite sons, Ellak, Dengehizik, Emnedzar, Uzindar, Geisen, and Ernak, or Ernie. They kept slipping and finally they were wiped out by the Igours.²⁰

As a conqueror, Attila was only a flash in the pan. His appearance was against him from the first, and his approach to world problems was extremely crude.²¹ He never pretended to be anything but a rat, an attitude that will hardly do in a great character of history. He liked to be called the Scourge of God, but to me he's just Old Flatface. He also said that grass never grew where his horse had trod. It did so.²² Attila's career teaches that you may get by for a while, but it can't last.

²⁰ *When Attila died, the Gepids changed sides again. They were exterminated by the Lombards in A.D. 567. This simplified matters a little.*

²¹ *He was just an ugly little man who rode around on a pony.*

²² *Still, he had some pretty bright ideas, for a Hun.*