

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NORTH FRISIAN ISLANDS

I DISMISSED *The Huguenots* from my thoughts, and took up a new subject in the course of my next holiday tour. I wished to find out something about the beginning of the English people, and of the countries and races from which they had sprung. To travel about with an object of this sort in view, gives a new interest to a journey. I knew where I should find the early home of the English race—or at least of that part of it which is Teutonic; for the Englishman is a mixture of many races—Welsh, French, Dutch, Saxon, Dane, and Norman.

Where did we get our perseverance, our industry, our inventiveness, our constructiveness, our supremacy in commerce, our love of home, and yet our love of the sea, and of wandering over the face of the earth? Had England been peopled by Gauls, and the English race, as it is, been blotted out, I suspect that the whole face of the world would have been different. We might, it is true, have had the steam-engine without James Watt, the locomotive without George Stephenson, and the screw steamer without Pellet Smith; but what of the extensive colonisation of North America and Australasia by a people of constitutional habits, carrying with them certain

social, political, and religious ideas, unlike those to be found in any other portion of the civilised world?

I suspect that we owe a great deal of this remarkable power to our ancestors on the further side of the German Ocean, to the Frisians, whose legitimate descendants are the Dutch and the people of the south and south-east coasts of England; to the Angles, and the Saxons, who constitute a large body of the mass of our working people; and to the Danes and Northmen, who gave us that intense love of the ocean which we still retain. To these ancestors, allied in many respects, we owe our complex nationality, our self-dependence, our manifold industry, and our commerce, which whitens every sea and kisses every shore. To them, too, we owe our language, which literally, as well as commercially, is becoming the most important language in the world. Including America, India, and the colonies, it gives the key to the commerce of more than 300,000,000 of people; and it is now spreading, not only in books, but in the language of sailors, all over the globe.

I had already travelled through Holland, and knew something of the Frisians, who form, without doubt, the foundation element of Dutch character and seamanship; but in the summer of 1871, I proposed to make a tour through Schleswig-Holstein, and the North Frisian Islands off the west coast of Denmark, where I believed that I should find the descendants of forefathers of a part of the English people, still living in the greatest simplicity and purity.

A great wedge of the German race has thrust itself into Bremen and Holstein, and thus separated the Frisians of North Holland and East Friesland

from those of West Schleswig and the North Frisian Islands. But in Hamburg there was a great deal to remind one of England. There were the old gable-ended houses in the more ancient parts of the town, reminding one of the old buildings seen in the Side at Newcastle, at Wakefield, at Hereford, and at Canterbury. There were the Fletes, like the Vliets of Holland, reminding one of the place-names ending with the termination "fleet" (such as Purfleet, Northfleet, and the river Fleet itself) on the Thames. The people, too, are like the people at home—large, fair, and well-favoured; very like those we see in Suffolk, Essex, Warwick, Oxford, and in the Midland counties.

The country north of Hamburg is wooded and hedge-rowed, very like England; with much rich pasture and corn land all through Holstein. The high-stepped, thick-thatched roofs cover the cottages as well as the barns, just as we see in old English villages. We cross the river Stöer at Wrist (we have a Stour near Canterbury, and a Stour in Essex), and pass northward and westward, past Niebuhr's famous county of Ditmarchen, so celebrated for the independence of the inhabitants. Here we have the town of Lunden near the Eider, almost as ancient as London on the Thames. North of this point, along the coast, the people are all Frisians, speaking their own language, which is more ancient than the modern German, and really the foundation of our own.

Husum, on the west coast of Schleswig, is a little town situated on the railway to Tønning, from which part a large quantity of cattle, butter, and field produce is exported to England. Husum is the capital of the North Frisian islands. Here the

people come to buy and sell; and steamers start daily on their round of the islands. Looked at from a distance, when the tide is up, the Halligen—as the islands are called—look like a number of great hulls afloat upon the sea. It is only when you are near them, that you see they are dotted over with cattle—the herds of the Halligs.

I went northward to a little cluster of houses called Hattstedt, to see the country near Husum. The farmhouses were scattered all about over the face of the land. Each farmstead had everything under one high thatched roof—house, barn, and crops. They looked roomy, large, clean, and comfortable. Every foot of ground in the country was tilled. Each man seems to have enclosed his piece of land, built his house upon it, made it his *ton* or enclosure, and constituted it his *ham* or home; and there his house became as his castle. These people were all freeholders, tilling their own land. The whole country seemed full of well-being and well-doing. The people are large and fair—warmly clad, well shod, and comfortable looking; and their houses looked the picture of cleanliness.

From Hattstedt church, which stands on high ground, you see the same high thatch-roofed farmsteadings, spreading far away to the North, as far as the eye can reach. The whole country is covered with them. How different from France, where the country people cluster together in villages, doubtless for the sake of society; whereas here the people seem to be satisfied to live apart, each with his wife, and family, and home. Indeed, the name of “Homestead” is as familiar to the English as to the Frisian.

I went round the churchyard, and found the

names on the monuments were, with a little difference in spelling, for the most part English. There were Mathiesens, Thomsens, Jansens, Christiansens, Petersens, Paulsens, Hansens, Carstens, and such like.

I sailed by the little steamer *Sylt* from Husum to Föhr, one of the North Frisian islands. We passed along a narrow, shallow, and intricate channel, marked off by branches of trees stuck into the mud. We passed many little Halligs—little patches of land, some the size of only a small farm, banked round, each with a little farmhouse on it. These had at one time been united with the mainland; but heavy storms came from the North Sea, washed away the intervening soil, and left only these little banked-up patches of land.

When the industrious Frisians along the coast found their farms slipping from under them, being washed away by the incoming ocean, and realised that there was a land flowing with milk and honey across the sea, waiting for settlement and tillage, it is no matter for wonder that they should have taken to their boats with all their belongings—for they were all sailors as well as farmers—and made for the new territory, for Britain, for the country which afterwards became Angle-land or England.

There they would not have to fight with the sea for the possession of the land; there, there was enough of it, and to spare. In fact, there were then the same inducements to emigrate to the east coast of England as there now are for the over-populated nations of Germany, Denmark, Norway, England, Scotland, and Ireland, to sail over the much wider Atlantic, and settle upon the eastern shores of Canada and the American continent.

The skipper of our little steamer, Captain Höck, tells me that he is a native of Flensburg, which is in Angeln (England?), and that he remembers a very old dialect used in his district, which is now almost forgotten. It was not Frisian. Indeed, it was as unlike Frisian as it is unlike German. His idea is that it must have been what is now known as Anglo-Saxon. The nearest tongue that he knows, which resembled it in sound as well as in meaning, is broad Scotch. This was very curious.

Most of the people living in the Halligs are Protestants but on one of the largest islands—Nordstrand, opposite Husum—is a colony of Dutch Roman Catholics, who still get their priests from Holland. They are very industrious, hard-working people.

I observe that the all-pervading language connected with the use of the steamboat has extended here—the same as is used on the Rhine and the Nile; and that “ease her,” “stop her,” “turn a starn,” are the captain’s orders to the enginemen below.

After many windings through the shallows of the channel, we drew up at the pier of Wick, in the little island of Föhr. Wick or Wich—a common enough name in England and Scotland—was in old times a little harbour, where the whaling ships, setting out from the North Frisian islands towards the North Pole, used to fit and repair.

I walked out into the country to see the land. It presented the same appearance as the neighbourhood of Husum. There were the same high thatched cottages, independent farm-steadings, and comfortable looking cottages. I observed that the women were handsome and well grown, almost invariably

fair. But it was difficult to see their faces ; for they wore a heavy black fall, which concealed their features. They were also for the most part dressed in black ; and those going to market, had a black cloth placed over their baskets. I was told that these women were the wives of sailors, and that while their husbands were at sea, they dressed in this manner, remained at home, and looked after the crops. They were very substantially dressed, but all seemed to be in mourning. The Frisian married women look very like nuns.

The names of the little collections of houses through which I passed, indicated that Paganism had existed in this little island long before Christianity had been extended hither. Hence there was Bol-dixum or Baldursheim (after the old god Baldur), Wrixum or Freiasheim (after the pagan Freia, the goddess of marriage), Nieblum or Nebelheim and Odersum or Hödersheim, after others of the old heathen gods.

I went into the churchyard of Nieblum, and there found many of the old English names on the monuments. There was Petersen, Nicholsen, Cramers, Boysen, Jacob, Hansen, Johnsen, Harrold.

In the church I found Mr Magnussen, the artist, engaged in painting a picture of his daughter, in Frisian dress, with the entrance to the church as the background. He had painted a picture for the Crown Prince and Princess of Germany, of the people going to communion in the same church. This is now in the prince's house at Berlin. He afterwards painted a picture of the Princess Louise's marriage, which is now the property of Her Majesty.

Magnussen is a native of Bredstedt, and himself a

Frisian. He is perhaps prouder of that than of being a clever artist. He is at present engaged in making a collection of the carvings done by the sailors while engaged on their whaling voyages. He took me to his cottage to see them. Some of them are very ingenious and curious, though he said that some of the finest he possessed were at his house at Hamburg.

While absent from their wives and sweethearts, the sailors did not forget them, but took with them plenty of wood to carve; and on their return they made presents to their beloved ones—boxes, tops of writing tables, “streik-bords” (or flat narrow boards for stretching cloth on), with many cleverly carved figures of animals, fruit, and flowers upon them. I may also mention that all round the island there are numerous whale-ribs to be seen erected over the entrances to the fields, as well as to the churchyards of the island.

Since the war with Denmark, the North Frisian islands have become subject to Germany. The Frisians do not like this. Captain Höck told me that the Danes tried to make Schleswig and Holstein Danish. They tried for twenty-four years and failed; but the Germans, he added, have now made them Danish in two years. The taxes are all much higher, and already the people long to be again under Denmark. What they dislike most is the compulsory military service. They are all liable. If a man has six sons of proper age and height, only one of them is exempted. The others must all serve. I was told of three fine young fellows, who all died of disease before Metz, during the siege.

“Free as Freise” was long a saying amongst them. They are so no longer. They do not fear to

be sailors, for they take to the water like ducks. But soldiering is not in their way. Besides, they will not be forced. The only chance for them is to emigrate. Accordingly, two years before my visit, several hundreds of families had left Föhr for the United States of America; and many more are arranging to depart.

I left Föhr for the island of Sylt or Syld, which lies a few miles to the north. I do not know the origin of the word. It may be from the old word *Sild*, still preserved in Scotland, and derived from Denmark, meaning the herring, or the young of the herring; or it may be from the ordinary English word *silt*, derived from the Scandinavian, meaning a deposit of sand or mud. Anyhow, the island is silted up all round. As our steamer approached it at a late hour, at the end of the long strip of land on the east we had all to get out into boats, and even the little boats could not get to the shore. As we approached, one boat grounded in the mud, and then the men, leaping into the water, set their broad shoulders to it, and heaved it onward. As they approached the land, they called out, "In she gangs, men." I asked a German young lady who was on board what they said. She said she "had no idea: it was not German." I said my impression was, that it was *broad Scots*.

We landed at the Nösse or Ness on the eastern part of the island near Morsum. Places ending in "ness" are known all round the Scotch and English coasts, from Strandburgh Ness in the Shetlands down to Shoebury Ness on the coast of Essex, and Dungeness on the coast of Kent. The ending of *ness* is also known on the other side of the

Channel, at Blanc Nez and Grisnez between Boulogne and Calais. In all these places we have indications left of the wanderings of the northern seamen.

As I had made no arrangements for getting onward to Westerland, to which I was bound, and as there were no means of communication from the place at which I had landed, I was indebted to these German ladies for a place in their conveyance. The night was at first very dark ; but by and by a great conflagration burst out in the east. It seemed to be a fire ; it proved to be only the moon, and shining over the sea outside the Ness ! We drove, by the beautiful moonlight, through the bare, treeless country for about twelve miles to the village of Westerland, where I had the pleasure of enjoying a sound sleep on a sofa. Next morning, I found a clean pleasant lodging for a few days in the house of one Frau Brüggmann.

Julius Rodenberg has written a little work entitled *Stilleben auf Sylt*. It is indeed a *very* still life. There is not a sound to be heard, except of the waves breaking on the beach. There are very few carriages about, and the sound of their wheels is deadened by the sand. One of the pleasures of the morning is to mount the sand dunes on the western part of the island, and look over the silent sea. Not a sail is to be seen, for this part of the coast is out of the track of vessels, except occasionally a steamer running from the mouth of the Skagerrack to Hamburg. And yet Sylt is in the exact latitude of Yorkshire. Right across the sea lies England with its fertile fields. It was always easy to reach that country by sea, for with a sailor people, the sea always offers an easy road.

A little north of Westerland, on the western coast, right opposite England, is an opening through the Red Cliff called Risgap, near Riesenloch. It is quite close to Wenningsted. In front of it, further out to sea, used to be Frisian Haven and Old Wenningsted. Both places are still marked upon the old maps. But Old Wenningsted and Frisian Haven have been washed away by the furious North Sea. Tradition, however, says that it was through Risgap that the ancient Frisians passed down to the sea coast before embarking for the land on the other side of the German Ocean. This was the point of departure for Frisian emigrants to England, just as Liverpool now is for English emigrants to America. The sea coast is now, however, entirely silent; and only the blackened skeletons of ships' ribs show that navigation is practised in the neighbourhood.

But the people still continue sailors as before. The first two men I spoke to in Sylt—my landlord and his son-in-law—answered me in English. "How is it you speak English so well?" I asked. "Oh!" said the landlord, "we are all sailors here." As if English was the proper language of sailors! And so it is. English ships, English steam engines, English screw propellers, English engineers, and English commerce are found all over the world. "Ships, colonies, and commerce" has long been our motto; and wherever trade is done, there the English language must be spoken.

The Frisian language has a closer resemblance to the English than to the German. I experimented a little upon the population. To a boy I said one morning, "Schöne zeit!" He shook his head. I then said "Good weather." He understood me at

once. "Ta! ta!" I had some conversation with a matron coming from Finnum, and had no difficulty in making myself understood. She said I must be the Englishman that had come into Sylt. Frau Brüggmann, my landlady, must have told of my whereabouts. Indeed, the news of my arrival had spread all over the place. When I went across to Keitum to see the museum of Christian Hansen, and to buy some of his books—for he is the solitary author of the island—he told me that he had heard of the arrival of the Englishman "by Brüggmann."

The Frisians are not a little proud of their relationship with the English. They resemble each other very much. The Frisians are for the most part fair or light brown, blue-eyed and soft-voiced; they have oval faces, are well formed in figure, and are generally taller than the people on the mainland. The Frisian faces are so like the English, that Mr Christian Hansen has a portrait of our Charles James Fox, which he has adopted as the true portraiture of Mr Decker, the Strand Inspector at Munkmarsch. He says it is an absolutely faithful likeness. Mr Hansen told me that many of our English words resemble the Frisian far more than they do the German. Woman (füman), wife (weib), and boy (büy) are still preserved in Frisian. "Thunder" and "light" are Frisian, not "donner" and "blitzen" as in German. "Englishmann" not "Engländer"; "work," not "arbeiten." "Housewife" and "homestead" are Frisian. The Scotch have preserved many of the Frisian verbs. They still "gang to bed," and go to "the Kirk." The Scotch proverbs have also a great resemblance to the Frisian.

Mr Hansen recommended me to go to Wenningstedt to see a very remarkable neolithic barrow there. I passed over a piece of ground containing several tumuli. One of them had been dug open, and was found so full of small chips that it might have been an ancient small arms manufactory. Mr Hansen had got many of his celts, arrowheads, and ancient flint weapons from this place. I brought several of the arrowheads away with me.

The ancient barrow at Wenningstedt is very curious. I descended by a ladder into a tomb, formed by gigantic stones, just like the Kits Coty chamber in Kent. There is a long open entrance to the level of the ground, as in similar monuments in the west of Europe. It is what is known as a chambered tomb. I asked the girl who showed it me what she called the place, to which she replied, "An under grave." It is still covered by its original mound of earth.

Sylt contains several ancient monuments. There is the Burg—an old fortified camp, surrounded by a mound of earth, and a deep moat outside. A footway runs inside the top of the embankment. Not far off is Tinum, or Thingum, the place where, at some former time, the Thing or Parliament of the place met, and legislated. The "Thing" still survives in Norway; and the name is preserved at Tain and Dingwall in Scotland, at Dingwall in Devonshire, and at Tynwald Hill in the Isle of Man.

After a few days' loafing about the sandhills near Westerland, and walking by the sands of the sea-shore, I prepared to leave my good friends the Brügmans. I got up early one morning, and started by six for Munkmarsch. Frau Brügmann

insisted on getting up and preparing breakfast for me before setting out ; and so everything was ready, and set before me, trig, and clean, and neat. I think that one of the best legacies the English, as well as the Dutch, have inherited from their Frisian ancestors, is their healthful cleanliness. That is a great virtue.

I reached the steam ferry at Munkmarsch in good time, and was taken across the shallow waters to Hoyer on the mainland. We joined the railway at Tondern, and went on to Flensburg. My object in reaching this town was to inspect the remains of a very old warship, which had been dug up from Nydam Bog a few years before. I had found it referred to in Victor Hugo's *Travailleurs de la Mer*. The waiters at the Stadt Hamburg, where I put up, knew nothing of it. I asked for the Hotel de Ville. There was no such place. "The Rathhuis?" No ; but there was the Police Office. I went thither, and after many inquiries, I was referred to a yard in the main street (No. 582 Kreisgericht), where I found the famous old warship in a loft, almost touching the roof.

The warship is, after all, only a very long open boat ; but it must have been capable of carrying about a hundred men. Judged by the remains of it found, this warship must be about fourteen hundred years old. It is a splendid model of a boat ; about 79 feet long, by about 15 feet at the widest part, with nineteen seats for the rowers. The vessel must have breasted the seas like a bird. It was doubtless a warship, for the remnants of bows and arrows were found in it ; as well as ashen shafts for spear heads. I afterwards found that this warship and its contents had been completely described in a work

published in England; so that I need not further describe it.*

I went by steamer down the Flensborg Fjord to see the neighbourhood. We skirted the northern district of Angeln. The people, as well as the country and the houses, are very like those we see in England. The houses are red tiled and white-washed; the cottages are thatched, but tidy looking; the fields are separated by hedges, with occasional clumps of trees, just as we see at home. The fields are green and smiling. The number of sailing boats in the fjord resembled the Thames on a sunny day. Possibly the men who rowed this Flensborg warship, some fourteen hundred years ago, may have been the ancestors of Englishmen, who now navigate the world.

From Flensborg I went northward by rail to Fredericia, crossed the Little Belt; then by rail to Fünen; then by the Great Belt to Middelfart; and after a few hours of railway travelling, I found myself in Copenhagen at 10.30 P.M. I found the museums of this city very wonderful; but they are so well described in "Murray" that I need not detail my visit. I next went by steamer up the Cattegat to Gothenborg, for three days steaming across Lakes Wener and Wetter to the city of Stockholm.

On board the boat, I found several persons whom I knew. As the company was associated together for about three days, we got to know each other a little by conversation. There were two Swedish ladies on board, and I remarked to one of them, that the more I knew of the world, the smaller I found it

* *Denmark in the Early Iron Age.* By Conrad Englehart, late Director of the Museum of Northern Antiquities at Flensborg. London: Williams and Norgate.

to be; what Alexander von Humboldt had said of it, "El mundo es poco"—the world is a little place—was very true.

"Oh, no!" said the lady, "the world is a very big place. I know next to nothing of it!"

"But I should not wonder," I rejoined, "that although we do not know each other, we may find some mutual friend whom we both know."

"No!" she answered resolutely, "that is impossible."

"Very well," I said, "let us try: have you ever been out of Sweden?"

"Oh yes, I have once been in London."

"Then you know some people there."

"I only know two persons: it is such a very big place."

"Who are the two persons?"

"You cannot know them!"

"Well; tell me their names."

"One is called Burrows."

"Yes," I said, "I know him: he is a little fat man, with a brown wig—a stock and share broker."

"It is perfectly true; I stayed in his house while in London!"

"And who is the other?"

"Oh, you cannot know him."

"What is his name?"

"Forbes."

"Yes, I know him—a dapper, bright, clever, curly-haired man—manager of the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway!"

"I am perfectly surprised," said the lady.

"You observe," said I, "that after all the world is a very little place. But now that you have mentioned

two persons, I will mention another. Do you know Tester?"

She looked almost frightened, as if she had thought me the ———. "Ah!" she ejaculated, "that was a frightful story. What has become of him?"

The reason of my happening to know these people was very simple. The lady in question was wife of the manager of the Royal Swedish Railway. Burrows had been employed in London to get the shares of that Company into the market; and being also a shareholder in the South-Eastern Railway, he used to come and speak at our meetings. Mr Forbes had been a railway manager on the Continent, was well known to the lady's husband, and I had often met him in connection with our railway competition. Tester, it may be remembered, was the person in our passenger department, who entered into alliance with Agar and Pearse, to rob us of the gold which we carried for the London bullionists; and who went to Sweden (with my certificate of character in his pocket) to take charge of the railway of which the lady's husband was now manager. Had a fourth name been mentioned, most probably I should have been baffled.

But another illustration of the world being a very little place, occurred in the course of the same year. My youngest son was on his voyage from Auckland in New Zealand, to Honolulu in the Sandwich Islands, when a fellow passenger, observing the name on his portmanteau, said, "A remarkable name! Have you any friends in Scotland?"

"Yes!"

"Have you any in Paisley?"

"Yes, an uncle—James Smiles."

"Strange!" said the gentleman, "he is married to

my sister. And I am introducing myself to you in the middle of the Pacific ocean!"

My three days' voyage ended at Stockholm; and after a visit to ancient and modern Upsala, a railway journey across Sweden and Norway to Christiania, and a voyage to Hull over the seas so often crossed by the Norse Vikings long ages ago, I reached my home at Blackheath after a very delightful holiday trip.