

TRAVEL



Visby, Enchanted City

by WIRT W. BARNITZ

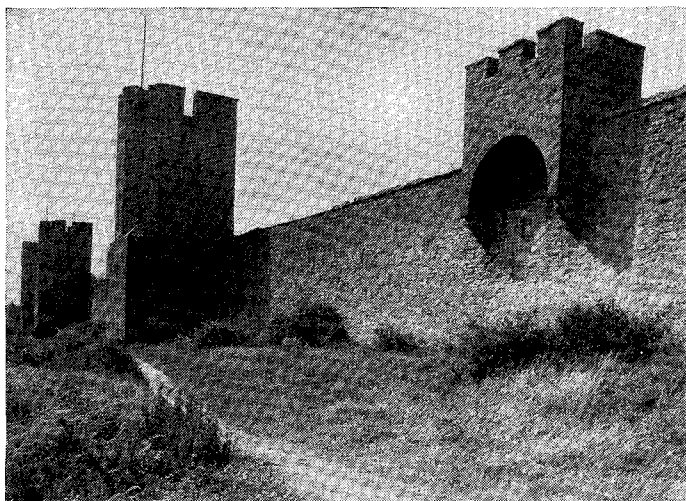
ON AN ISLAND in the midst of the Baltic, away from the rest of Europe and utterly alone, is an ancient city. For centuries it belonged to the past. History records its days of power and grandeur, when it was one of the most important bases of the Hanseatic League, and when richly laden argosies dropped anchor in its harbor.

Time and again the Danes, in the days of their great power, beat against the fastnesses of this old town, sometimes with success, sometimes without. Marauding pirates beset its walls and frequently carried away spoils of fabulous value. In fact almost every northern nation of medieval times assailed Visby and its Island of Gotland, attempting to rob it of its vast wealth.

which only the eyes of seafarers might behold.

We have been told by the captain of the little boat that was carrying us from the mainland of Sweden to Gotland to get up early and see the island rise out of the dawn mists. He assured us that the illusion would be complete and that we should actually witness Visby mounting from the waves.

At break of day we were on deck. Afar off, against the dim gray of the dawn, lay an irregular silhouette of spires and towers, which, for the moment, awakened memories of Jerusalem. Then the sun burst from a cloud bank that lay along the horizon and magically touched everything with gold, transforming what had seemed a dead place into what might be an abode



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The Town Wall of Visby

From 1250 to 1350 this Hanseatic city was at the height of its greatest prosperity and at that time dominated the commerce of northern seas as truly as did Venice the trade of the Adriatic and the Mediterranean. Then, suddenly, the trade routes of the world changed and Visby sank into oblivion. Legend soon threw her gossamer strands about the place and wove a wondrous tale of the ancient stronghold sinking into the bosom of the sea and rising at long intervals as a mirage

of spirits. The engines of our boat had stopped, and we were gliding noiselessly into a harbor drenched in silence. A few souls moved dreamily about on the quay. Beyond, in deep shadow, loomed a great, gray gate which, with the dusty road that led up to it, was a stage set and awaiting the entrance of the actors.

The ancient city wall, tall and perfectly preserved, stretched away to the south and to the north. Thirty-eight magnificent towers marked the great extent of its

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Travel

encircling protection. Here and there masses and turrets of ruins reached upward; some clad with ivy, others naked and bare; and in the midst of all towered the huge limestone arches of a cathedral, the dominant note in this picture of age-old serenity.

HERE we were in the midst of the Middle Ages, having made the leap from the present to the far-distant past in less than two weeks from New York. Although there are other ancient cities just as charming hidden away in Europe, none that I have yet discovered quite possesses the atmosphere of medieval days in such a pure and unalloyed state. The burghers still think the thoughts of the Middle Ages, speak the same, quaint old Swedish, affect the same customs, and live their placid lives much as did their forbears. Much of their furniture has descended from generation to generation through the centuries, while even a great deal of their table wear is that of their ancestors. One house, at least, that we visited had added nothing new for more than a hundred years.

Soon after going ashore, a great cliff in the southern quarter of the city attracted us. Perched high on the top of it was a row of little log houses. One of these stood out from the others in an inviting sort of way. We had been told of it; and so up the winding, narrow street, lined with low-eaved and tiny-windowed houses, we climbed. Once upon the summit it was but a moment to our destination. The house looked more like a pretty toy dwelling than anything else. We were struck by the quaintness of the old-fashioned flower garden in its two-by-four dooryard. The hut commanded a view of superb beauty. Below were rose-covered ruins, while in the offing the blue bosom of the Baltic gently rose and fell.

Under an arbor sat an old woman knitting. In our lame Swedish we informed her that we sought lodgings in her doll's house; but she eyed us doubtfully. When we explained that Consul Ekman, the dominating personality of Visby, would vouch for us, her hesitation gave way to exuberant welcome and her whole house became ours. Such hospitality as that good, old soul extended us was a revelation. Special dishes, fancy cakes, her oldest, home-brewed wines—these were all shadowings forth of her genuine, Visbian friendliness. Each afternoon she diligently plied her knitting there beneath her ancient arbor which had faithfully supported the trusty vine that had unfailingly furnished her family through the years with shade and wine. As her needles flew, her tongue wagged rapidly in mumbled conversation with her children who had, long before, gone to America.

A message from the Consul that we

should meet him at the Burgomeister's House sent us on our way thither. But it is hard to hurry in Visby. The streets are so crooked and interlace in such fashion that a labyrinth is simplicity in comparison. Three times in our haste we found ourselves back at the foot of the staircase street before we finally made the proper turns and twists.

The Burgomeister's House is a great, red building of several gables with tiny, leaded-glass windows and heavily linteled doors. It was once the abode of a wealthy Hansa merchant, who, just as Consul Ekman to-day, controlled the destinies of the town some hundreds of years ago. This part of the old city, more than any other, bespeaks the commercial heyday of Visby. Here are some of the huge warehouses with towering gables abutting on the street; and not far off is the apothecary's shop, surmounted with turret-like shafts of masonry.

The Burgess greeted us with true Swedish heartiness and waved us into chairs. Then he moved across the room to a chest. Lifting its iron-bound lid, he drew forth one gigantic key after another until he had piled a dozen or more at his feet. These he strung together on a light chain and handed the whole ponderous open-sesame to us with metallic clangings, with the words: "These are the keys to the city. The town is yours. Explore the mysteries of the place." With Swedish punch he skoaled us, supplied us with a youthful guide of highly romantic tendencies, and merrily sent us on our way.

OUR romantic guide managed the gigantic keys without undue difficulty. One enchanted ruin after another we visited, wandering now by the sanctuary of Helgeands, then past the Cathedral of Saint Mary, with its deep-toned organ softly pealing some ancient hymn, for it happens that this magnificent edifice has never been allowed to fall into ruin and has been used continuously for ages.

Arriving at the Well Tower, Harold the Romantic swung the largest of the keys with much grandiloquence into the rusty lock. With considerable flourish and gesticulation he detailed the story of the maiden who was buried alive. She was the daughter of the Burgomeister of that day, so legend has it. The leader of the Danes, who were then besieging the city, disguising himself as a Gotlander and succeeding in penetrating beyond the walls, made ardent love to the fair damsel. To put it tersely and in good American, she fell for him, and she fell so hard that she delivered up unto him not only herself but her city. So much for the Heaven-given power of love.

Of course, as the story goes, she stole into her father's room in the dead of night and, while he peacefully snored, drew