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THE PRUSSIAN WENDS, AND THEIR HOME



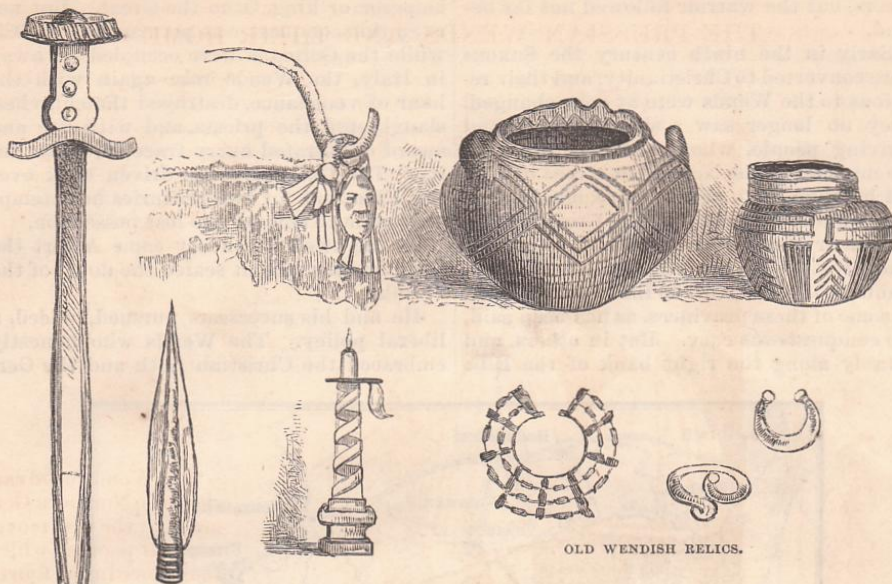
AT THE CHURCH DOOR.

THIS title describes the remnant of a people once numerous, warlike, and powerful, and the region where they sought a refuge centuries ago from the conquering arms of the Germans. It is, indeed, the only colony which retains any thing of the ancient speech and habits. Elsewhere the Wends accepted the German religion, language, and laws, and gradually lost their distinctive character, as in Pomerania, Mecklenburg, and other provinces; or, as in the Mark of Brandenburg and in Lausitz, they fought almost to the point of extermination, and offered a moral resistance when that of arms no longer availed. The Northern Wends accordingly cease to have a history of their own after one or two centuries. Those of the Elbe and the Spree alone survive in the little colony of the Lausitz swamps, and in the memory of a brave but useless struggle for altar and home. Their strange repugnance to the new civilization, the brave, prolonged, and desperate warfare which they waged against it, the sullen and apparently organic incapacity to discard their peculiar habits and character even after they ceased to defend them by force, suggest so many points of resemblance to the North American Indians; and in the fate of both peoples there is the same element of plaintive and romantic sadness which appeals to every generous heart.

The Wends were carried into Northern Germany by the vast movement of peoples which took place in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era. As fast as the Suevi, Franks, and other original German tribes swept over the Rhine and down upon the fair domains of the Roman Empire, their

places were filled by other barbarians from the vast plains of Asia. In the adjustment of these races in the West it happened that the Slaves or Slavonians acquired nearly the whole region from the Elbe eastward, including Silesia, Poland, Prussia, and much of what is now Russia. These were not, indeed, all Wends. This term seems to have been given by the Saxons to such Slaves as were their immediate neighbors in Northern Germany, and was hardly derived from any corresponding distinction made by the Slaves themselves. The Wends were also further subdivided into local families, such as the Lutritans and Abotritans.

By the fifth century the Wends were firmly settled in their new homes. In culture and refinement, in the arts and conveniences of life, in agriculture, trade, and other industries, they were not behind the Saxons, their neighbors. They lived in towns and villages, and possessed a rude system of civil government. Their domestic institutions revealed but too often their Oriental origin, and in no respect more painfully than the position given to woman. She was little more than a menial. Polygamy prevailed. Mothers often strangled their female infants to save them from a more painful life; and in the same way decrepit parents were put to death by their sons, as



OLD WENDISH RELICS.

in More's *Utopia*, because they were burdens upon the public, and a violent end insured a happier life beyond the grave. But they were a remarkably honest people, abhorred a thief or a liar, and were kind to the poor.

They were no less warlike than their German predecessors. On land or sea, mounted or on foot, in the open field, in the swamps, or behind their fortified towns, they fought clumsily, but bravely and desperately. Their weapons were not unlike those of their neighbors in style and quality. The illustration contains a short sword and a spear-head, as well as some other products of Wendish art, the top and handle of a bronze pail, two stone vessels, a necklace, and bracelets. Relics of this sort may be found in nearly every provincial museum.

Their religion was a species of polytheism. They believed, indeed, in one supreme God—Belbog; but he seems to have been a Slavonic Jove among lesser divinities, such as Czernbog, the evil spirit, and Radegast, the god of war. Other branches of the Slaves had other gods, for no universal system existed. The priests enjoyed great honor and power, and they were the most resolute in opposition to the Germans. That which the latter first

demanded was conversion to Christianity—a demand which could not be agreeable to the interpreters of the rival religion.

During two centuries the Wends and Saxons lived at peace, and even in friendship. The commerce of the former, which began with petty local traffic, rose to a scale almost imposing along the Baltic coast. It is said that three hundred ships were sometimes seen in their harbor of Wenita. Traders flocked thither from Denmark, from Germany, from other Slavonic lands, and even from the Orient, bringing metallic wares, cloths, jewels, and coins, and carrying away amber, furs, and similar goods.

In the middle of the eleventh century the city of Wenita was captured by the Danes, and Wendish commerce then rapidly decayed and died.

Long before that, however, a more powerful foe had obstructed their traffic from the south. So long as the Saxons were heathen, and knew only the faith of their fathers, they could live peacefully with neighbors who were also heathen. But Christianity was a conquering religion. It could not be stagnant, it must advance; and the historian is forced to admit that in early times it was little scrupulous about the policy by which it spread



GREAT SEAL OF ALBERT THE BEAR.

itself among the unreclaimed barbarians. The missionaries were often, indeed, the pi-

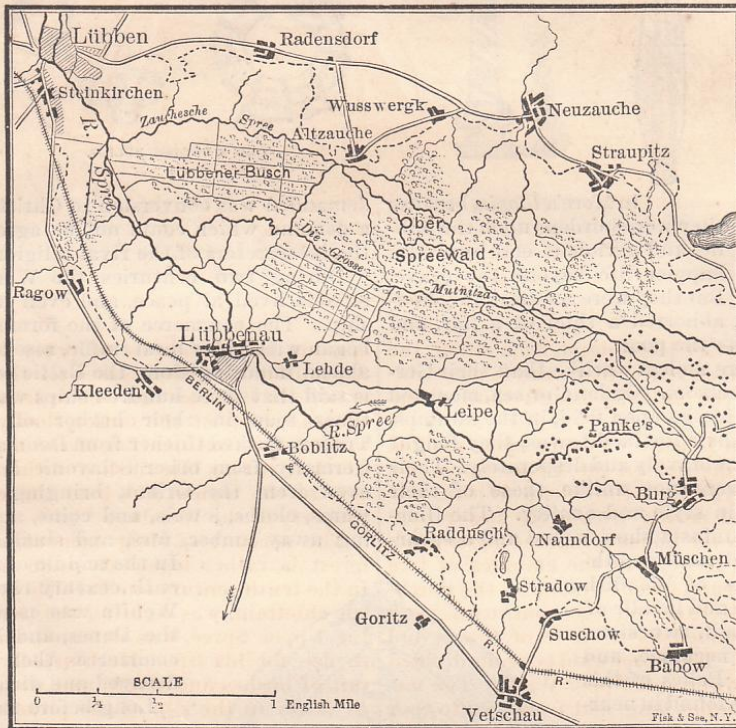
oneers, but the warrior followed not far behind.

Early in the ninth century the Saxons were converted to Christianity, and their relations to the Wends were at once changed. They no longer saw a simple, active, and thriving people, whose products filled all the markets of the North, but a race of defiant heathen, who, at any price, must be reduced under the sway of the Cross. They sent their bishops and abbots through the whole region—to Poland, to Silesia, to Pomerania, to the banks of the Elbe and the Oder. In some of these provinces, as has been said, the conquest was easy. But in others, and notably along the right bank of the Elbe

emperor or king, Otho the Great. But not even this conquest was permanent. In 983, while the Germans were occupied far away in Italy, the Wends rose again with the hour of vengeance, destroyed the churches, slaughtered the priests, and with fire and sword obliterated every trace of Christianity. The Germans were driven back over the Elbe, and for two centuries no attempt was made to recover the lost possession.

In the twelfth century came Albert the Bear, and his advent sealed the doom of the Wends.

He and his successors pursued, indeed, a liberal policy. The Wends who honestly embraced the Christian faith and the Ger-



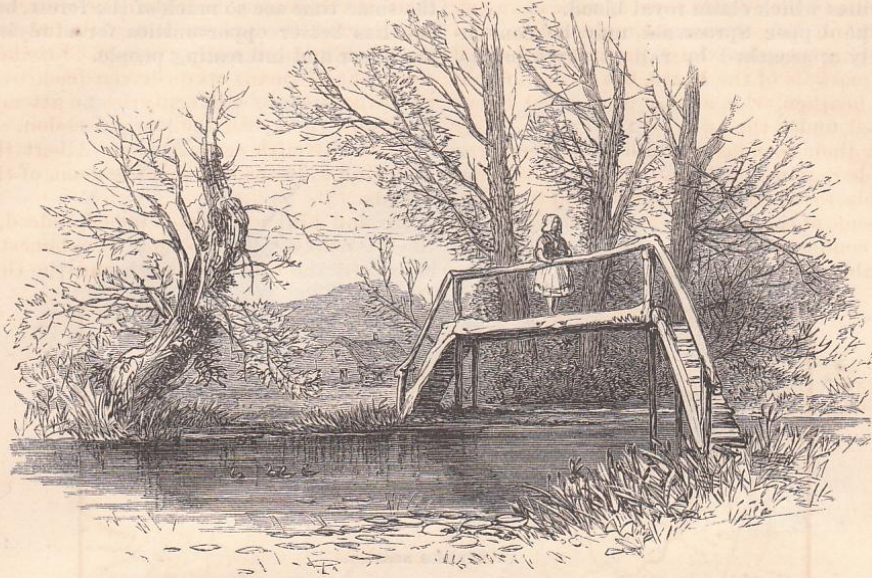
MAP OF THE SPREEWALD.

below Magdeburg, the opposition was strong, the struggle long and arduous. It seemed impossible to persuade the Wends to Christianity or to break their spirit by force. Subdued in places here and there, put under military governors, and compelled to accept the forms of the alien faith, they seized in every case the earliest chance to rise, expel their masters, and restore their own chosen priests. About the middle of the tenth century it seemed as if their resistance had finally spent itself. A bold and enterprising series of captains, of whom the Margrave Gero is best known, held with his vassals the larger part of what was called the "Old Mark," and governed it in the name of the

man manner of life were placed on equal terms with the conquerors. Then there were Wendish peasants side by side with the German; Wendish towns which were Germanized, not destroyed; one or two Wendish princes who were made German nobles, and founded some of the oldest Prussian families. But these were exceptions. The rule for a century was one of actual or tacit hostility. The great body of the Wends fought the invaders step by step, year after year, even century after century. At last the time came when they could no longer resist in the open field; finally the vast swamps of the Spreewald ceased to shelter them, and they have since been losing, day by day, all the el-

ements which made them a distinct people. A Wendish writer says of his kinsmen that "their nationality, habits, and language are

But after passing Cottbus, as if to recover from this prolonged exertion, it flows out into an extensive natural depression, and



HIGH BRIDGE.

like the rock of Heligoland, from which the beating waves yearly tear away a piece, until finally the unlucky island shall disappear."

The term Lausitz was very early applied to a large district on the Upper Spree, between the Elbe and the Oder. Within this district, and mostly within the lower half of it, or Lower Lausitz, lies the Spreewald. It rests, as it were, in the embrace of two railways—the Lower Silesian on the northeast, the Görlitzer on the southwest—and it is surrounded by a circle of towns and highways. The Spreewald is again divided into the Lower and Upper Wald. The former is ten miles long, and from two to four wide; the latter is about sixteen miles long, and five or six miles wide. The map, which is copied and reduced from the one in Carl Riesel's excellent little guide to the region, represents only the upper portion. The Lower Wald is now of little importance, but it may be supplied by the imagination of the reader a short distance north, and in continuation of the district given on the map.

Through the loss of its forests and the efforts of engineering skill, the region has been deprived of most of its original wildness. A hundred—and even fifty—years ago it was almost an impassable forest and swamp. The river Spree flows with rapid descent from its source near Bautzen till it reaches Cottbus, and during a course of thirty miles has one thousand water-falls and forty mills.

spreads into hundreds of petty branches. An individual Spree ceases for the time to exist. In its place is a web or labyrinth of Sprees, which at the outlet slowly reunite to form the continuation of the main river. The key to this labyrinth, and therefore access to the region, was long the exclusive property of the Wends.

The account of their occupation of the forest is rather legendary than historical. In the tenth century one Prebislaw, a Wendish chieftain, was fighting the Germans on the Upper Spree, was defeated, and forced to flee for his life. He hurriedly made a raft of bushes and straw, and with it floated down to the site of the present village of Burg, where he rallied his followers and built a rude earth-work for shelter. On this earth-work, which was high like a hill, he afterward erected a castle, and for many years, even centuries, it was the seat of the kings his successors. The hill itself is still standing near Burg, and is known as the "Burgberg." The graves of Wendish kings have recently been found there, as well as diadems, urns, and other articles of luxury or use.

The successor of the amphibious Prebislaw, called Ziscibor, was, according to another legend, a cruel monster. From his castle on the "Burgberg" he ruled like a savage despot, plundering and burning and murdering Christians, and above all, by a singular refinement of cruelty, stealing their children. Finally, as was proper, his career

was terminated by a stroke of lightning. The dynasty was maintained for a long time afterward, and though now extinct in fact, it survives in the pride of certain Wendish families which claim royal blood.

The Upper Spreewald may be conveniently approached by rail at three points,

to "Panke's," the best inn in the forest, and making this place our head-quarters, we took thence a series of excursions to various points. By this plan one does not in the same time see so much of the forest, but one has better opportunities for studying the queer and interesting people.



AN EXPRESS BOAT.

via Lübben, Lübbenau, and Vetschau. These are now three dull German towns, which were originally founded as barriers against the aggressions of the Wends, and formed part of a circle of forts which almost surrounded the forest. They now contain a large Wendish population, but the German language is pretty generally understood. In the cities the Wendish women are much valued as servants, nurses, and laundresses, for they are strong, healthy, and faithful, and in the laundry especially are not inferior to the Chinese. Their own linen, of which they make liberal displays, is singularly clear and fine.

They who leave the train at Lübben can drive to Neuzauche, and take a boat there for the tour of the forest. From Lübbenau, which is a better point in some respects, a canoe can be procured at once. From Vetschau, again, one drives to Burg or to the "Colony," and thence by water. It is well, however, to so arrange the tour in advance as to enter at one station and return by another.

Travelers who, like ourselves, depart from Lübbenau will at once engage a vehicle and pursue their way as in the above illustration. The boatman is a stalwart Wend, who speaks broken German. If one prefers not to stop long at any place, but to visit as rapidly as possible the leading points, it is better to hire a boat by the day for the entire time. This will vary, of course, according to taste, but the whole tour may be made leisurely in three or four days. Our own plan was different. We went directly

The boatmen do not row or scull their canoes, but, standing upright in the stern, push them. This requires uncommon skill. The streams are seldom more than ten feet wide, the angles are very sharp and frequent, and the danger from collision with other craft incessant; yet the boatman must propel and guide his boat at the same time and with the same instrument. Almost any body can give a boat some motion with oars, but the novice makes ludicrous work of the Wendish vessel. He can push it, indeed, but not steer it; and if he does not run the prow into the bank, he will probably run it upon some other unlucky craft.

In the Spreewald proper these little boats are the only conveyances. Horses are almost unknown, and even the pedestrian, in view of the web of streams and the scarcity of bridges, can hardly make his way across the country. There are bridges like the one shown on the preceding page, but they are narrow and frail structures, and are of little use to the stranger. In the place of horses and in contempt of bridges, the peasant has his boats. One will see them, often half a dozen in number, moored in little sluices which conduct from each house into the stream, light, clean, and always harnessed. If the owner has a visit to make, he jumps into a boat, seizes a pole, and pushes swiftly away. If he and his family attend a wedding, they take a boat, or boats, and thus sail up to the very scene of festivity. In the work of the farm the canoes are again invaluable. So thoroughly is every farm and every field intersected by the water-

courses, that the products of the land can be shipped at any point, floated down to the barn, and then unshipped for storage. A load of hay in this manner is a strange spectacle. The hay is packed over both sides of the boat till it floats on the water's surface, while on the extreme stern the owner stands and propels the cargo to its destination. When a long column of these hay transports is seen threading its way among the labyrinthine canals, or when one column meets another, and seamanship is most severely tried, the spectator will recognize in scene the picturesque and romantic of the hay field.

The visitor who goes to the Spreewald for fine scenery will be disappointed. The low, marshy nature of the country of course excludes the idea of mountains or any striking details, and the quiet charm which might once have been enjoyed of lying dreamily on your back in the bottom of a canoe, and floating through primeval forests paved with venerable moss, and barely admitting the rays of the mid-day sun, has been cruelly dissipated by the axe of the woodman. The term "Spreewald" describes a thing of the past. Two young noblemen, who were the largest land-owners in the region, and had squandered their fortunes in dissipation, found it necessary to clear off their forests for the timber and fuel, and to convert their redeemed acres into farming land. Only along the banks of the streams a solitary row of trees was permitted to stand, as a protection from the sun and a monument of the past. The myriad of muscular roots which spread out into the water

raw ham. Besides, on Sundays a roast of veal is often served, and fresh fish with the world-renowned Spreewald sauce. The traveler who consults the bill of fare will, therefore, do well to arrange for one Sabbath at Panke's. The excellent Panke himself is now no more; the hotel alone commemorates his virtues. He was a local personage of some importance. He enjoyed the confidence of the government, and held for many years the office of Schulze, or petty magistrate. This made him also feared by all local malefactors, whether Wend or Teuton. But he derived a larger income beyond doubt from the sale of Schnapps to the peasants, and of other commodities to more illustrious guests.

On Sunday, too, the traveler will have an opportunity of attending service in the little Wendish church of Burg. The Wends of the Spreewald are all Protestants; those of Altenburg, who are more completely Germanized, are Catholics. They are also very devout Christians. They go to divine service regularly every morning, and work in the field the rest of the day. That is their conception of religious duty; and since piety is, after all, a relative term, who shall say that they are wrong? It is at least better to attend church half the day than to work all day and not attend church at all. Sunday is the day and the church the place for seeing at their best the quaint and showy costumes of the women, of which our illustrations reproduce unfortunately only the form, not the colors.

As in Holland and Switzerland, so among the Wends of Germany, the style of the



A HAY BARGE.

beneath the trees are exceedingly weird in appearance.

"Panke's" as an inn leaves, indeed, some things to be desired by one accustomed to the corrupting luxury of city life; but a philosopher ought to know how to subsist for two or three days on scrambled eggs and

women's costumes varies in different localities. Those about Cottbus, for instance, and again on the Lower Spree, are more subdued in tint and more modern in pattern, while those in and about Burg are more gaudy and striking. The "dress centre" is always the head. The head-dress is made of a sin-

gle square piece of linen as white as snow, and starched with exquisite art, which is bound about the head, as one sees it in the picture, by a second person. It stands out



GROSSMÜTTERCHEN.

on each side like a great fan, but it is cool, and it hides the hair. This is another Oriental prejudice which the Wends have preserved—a reluctance to expose the hair to the general gaze. This prejudice does not extend, however, to the lower limbs. While the Wendish woman, unlike ladies of fashion, scrupulously hide their hair and breast, they expose their legs, with the greatest composure, up to a point which would shock the delicacy of a five-year-old girl in Paris or New York. The venerable grandmother does not differ in that respect from little Anna, who for a Silbergroschen will give one a glass of water and a look into her clear black eyes.

A jacket of black velveteen with full white sleeves is not enough for the body; over this small shawls of Oriental brilliancy are tightly and neatly pinned. The shawls are sometimes worn instead of the white linen on the head, and with the long fringe falling down look very fantastic and picturesque. In this dress the prettier girls are favorite models for artists. The showy colors and graceful drapery are, of course, more artistic than the stiff white linen, which rather suggests the nun. The skirts always make up in width what they want in length. They are usually of plain woolen goods, red, blue, green, or orange, trimmed at the bottom by a band of black velvet ribbon or some plaid stripe. The lining is of the stiffest crinoline, and the skirt is reduced to the size of the waist by ten or twelve rows of regular and faultless gathering. This, of course—an excellent lady informs

me—sends the fullness to the bottom of the skirt, and so when the Wendish belle walks rapidly, her short, wide skirts are inflated by the wind like the drapery of a ballet girl. These dresses lined with crinoline are worn only on festival days and Sundays; for work, the skirt is quite as short, but hangs more modestly about the limbs. There is still another costume, worn by widows and by communicants at the Sacrament. It is made in the same style, only the colors and material differ. The skirt is black, and instead of the heavy linen head-dress a piece of thin white mull is laid across the head, with a black ribbon to keep it in place. The face sinks down into an immense Elizabethan ruff of the same white material. With bowed head and clasped prayer-book these devout Christians and forlorn widows enter the village church, leaving as a last sight for the spectator their naked feet and massive brown limbs.

The weekly spectacle at the church attracts in summer many tourists from neighboring and remote cities. The later part of summer, when the grain is ripe, is the best season. The landscape is very flat, interrupted by few trees, and from every direction, miles away, the gay dresses may be seen threading their way to the village church, rising and falling with the slight irregularities of the path, sometimes tossing in the wind, and forming a striking and singular contrast with the rich golden yellow of the harvest. When a boat shoots through the trees, driven by the vigorous



LITTLE ANNA.

arm of a young Wend, the scene is complete.

At the church one makes the acquaintance of "Cantor" Post. This worthy man

is more than chorister or organist; he is at the same time sexton and clerk of the parish, school-teacher and historiographer of the town, a merchant of photographs, the guide and counselor of all travelers, and the bachelor friend of maids and widows. Few men besides Bismarck have so many interests in their charge. And yet, in spite of this burden of official responsibilities, in spite of the perverse difficulties of the struggle for life, in spite of the selfish and perplexing demands of his woman admirers, the Cantor is always in good spirits and has a smile for every one. Next to the pastor and the solitary *gendarme*, he is the highest social dignitary of the town. But he bears his honors meekly. He will sit under the trees at Panke's and relate the sad tale of his people the Wends; on a Sunday he will greet the strangers at church, and at the close of the service produce diffidently his stock of colored photographs. A modest, humble, faithful man, whose primitive and simple kindness was not corrupted by two visits in Berlin, who is content in a petty peasant settlement to employ talents which elsewhere might have made him a master-mason, and even a dealer in prints, linen, and ribbons.

Their funeral service is somewhat different from that of the Germans. The corpse is first placed in the court or before the door, where, in presence of the assembled friends,

the "Dober Naz," or good-night—*i. e.*, farewell—is said. This is followed by a hymn, and then by refreshments, such as bread and cheese, beer and brandy. The body is then carried to a canoe; the mourners and friends

embark in similar conveyances; the village teacher and his pupils lead the way, and the preacher receives the *cortège* at the landing. After a collect the burial is performed. The company next repair to the church, where the discourse is preached, where hymns are sung, and a collection is taken for the clergy. In the evening before and the evening after the funeral there are gatherings of the young people at the house of mourning for singing hymns. A wreath which is borne upon the coffin during the funeral is afterward

hung in the church, with the name of the deceased.

The wedding festivities are more imposing, and last several days. Being mostly peasants, the young people try so to mate themselves that each pair shall begin life with an establishment. A part of the dowry is given at the betrothal, which, as among the Germans, is almost as sacred a compact as marriage. On the day of the wedding the groom wears a long blue coat liberally decorated with flowers, and a modern "cylinder" hat trimmed with twigs and ribbons. The bride wears a black dress bound with heavy ribbon, and a broad sash, and on her



"CANTOR" POST.



A FISH BOX ON THE SPREE.



A WEND'S HUT.

head a wreath and silk ribbons. The procession makes its way to the church in boats or wagons, and in the following order: The musicians, the bride with her maids, and the other women; the groom, with his attendants and friends. After the ceremony, which is in Wendish, the procession reforms and proceeds to an inn, where the banquet is served. It is common to load the bedding, linen, furniture, and other wedding gifts upon a wagon or boat as a part of the procession, and it is also common for the young men, as a mild pleasantry, to obstruct the way of this important vehicle until the owner, by money, redeems it. The festivities are kept up, through the hospitality of the young pair, for several days, and vast quantities of brown bread and spirits are consumed. The bride is not allowed for four weeks to re-enter the paternal house, lest the marriage be thereby dissolved. This is a wide-spread popular superstition.

The house of the Wend peasant is not unlike that of his German brethren, so far at least as the exterior is concerned. It is commonly made of logs roughly hewn into shape, the chinks are filled with mud, and the surface is rudely whitened with plaster. The roof is thatched with heavy reeds and straw. The interior arrangement depends upon the wealth of the owner and the size of his mansion. If there is space enough for a partition into two or three rooms, one of these, like the view in the illustration below, will be the general family room, where all the inmates eat and some of them sleep. In more modest houses one room serves for all purposes.



AN INTERIOR.

There are several churches in Lausitz where Wendish services are held. At Burg the pastor, a Wend, holds two services each Sunday, one in his own language and one in German, and he preaches equally well in either. There are Bibles and hymn-books in Wendish, and at Cottbus a tiny missionary periodical is published.

It is an agreeable language when heard in conversation, and, in spite of the profusion of consonants, which would shock the ear of an Italian, it lends itself easily and successfully to vocal music. The Wends are understood by the Poles, the Servians, the Czechs of Bohemia, and, though with more difficulty, by the Russians. As a written language, however, it will soon disappear, and even in speech the German is slowly displacing it.

Physically the Wends are a powerful people, and resemble the American Indians. The men are tall, erect, and muscular; they are generally beardless, and, through exposure, their complexions acquire in summer a dark copper tint. The women work in the field with the men, and, as a rule, perform the hardest tasks. The heaviest burdens and the poorest tools are relinquished to them. This life tends, of course, to develop to a remarkable degree sinews which nature originally did not make too delicate. They are somewhat shorter than the men, and their massive limbs are the wonder of travelers. In *Saxon Studies* Julian Hawthorne describes the legs of the Dresden market-women. Far be it from me to question his statements. Any one who has had an opportunity of observing modestly the generous proportions of the Saxon will freely concede their claims. But the Wends are several degrees higher—or larger—in the



THE KING'S ALDER.

scale of development. The limbs of a Wendish woman are to the limbs of the Saxon as the King's Alder is to a common sapling. This mammoth tree was saved from destruction by the late King of Prussia. His Majesty once made a tour through the Spreewald, and seeing this beautiful tree, redeemed it by a liberal sum from its owner, who was about to cut it down. Hence its name, "Die Königs Erle." It is held in great reverence by the peasantry, and they would resent the uses which, in the cause of physiological science, I was compelled to make of it.

A FOOT-HOLD.

HARDLY a steamer that crosses the sea

But carries one traveler more,
For a little time, out on the shoreless sea,
Than she counted when leaving the shore.

Blown far away from his mate where she sings,
By the pitiless sea-bound gale,
Lost, and plying his patient wings
Till heart and courage fail;

Lost on the shoreless, unknown main,
Blinded with salt white spray,
Dazed with the endless, waving plain,
Scared by the lengthening way;

Lost on the sea, and no land in sight;
Through the heavy and misty air
Struggling on through the dark and the light
To terror and mute despair;

Till on the horizon a cloudy speck
Clears to the mast, like a tree,
Clears to the solid and ground-like deck,
And he follows it wearily,

And clings and crouches, a welcome guest,
An eager and tremulous bird,

With the green and blue on his neck and breast
By his heart's hard panting stirred.

Then come pity, and food and drink to the brim,
And shelter from wave and cold;
But the quick head droops, and the bright eyes dim,
And the story all is told!

Pitiful comfort, yet comfort still
Not to drop in the hungry sea,
Reeling down out of the empty height
To that terrible agony.

Bitter and hard to be driven to roam
Between the sea and the sky,
To find a foot-hold and warmth and home,
And then—only to die!

Yet it was harder, God He knows,
Who counts the sparrows that fall,
For the birds that were lost when the wild winds rose,
When the sea and the sky were all;

When the sky bent down to infold the sea,
And the sea reached up to the sky,
And between them only the wind blew free,
And never a ship went by!