

Across the North Sea

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We are a mixed race, we English, and perhaps the mixture of which we have most reason to be proud is our strain of Norse blood, our kinship with the Scandinavians.

We are accustomed in our childish history books to read of the "Danes" and their continual invasions of England as if these human beings, many of whom came from Norway and not Denmark at all, were a mere swarm of locusts, seeking what they might devour. Certainly their resolute efforts to obtain a share of the soil and wealth of Britain from the earlier settlers were frequently attended with destruction of life and of peaceful industry. Those old Norsemen cared as little for the life of the man or woman of an alien community as their descendant, the fisherman of to-day, cares for the suffering of the wretched whiting, from whose living body he cuts slices for bait, and then throws it back to agonize in the water. Nevertheless, they were fine fellows, them old sea rovers who colonized England, the ancestors from whose resolution, enterprise and daring comes much of the most sterling stuff in our national character.

Just such a bold, sturdy, resolute, independent race are their descendants of the nineteenth century across the North Sea. The Norwegians have not been corrupted as we have been by immense wealth, and, as a rule, the peasantry, that is the vast majority of the people, have known how to protect themselves from land thieves. There are large estates in Norway, but they are few and far between; the greater part of the land still belongs to peasant families who cultivate it themselves. In 1865, there were 147,000 farms, i.e., a farm for every 12 persons, and 131,800 of these holdings were cultivated by their owners.

Much of the country is a barren rocky plateau, partly covered with perpetual snow, and inhabited only by bears and reindeer. The only portions habitable by men are the valleys, from 2,000 to 6,000 feet below, where foaming rivers rush down from the glaciers into the fjord, and the deep lakes sleep beneath mighty cliffs. There, among the pine trees beside the waterfall, on a grassy ledge of the precipitous mountain, or on the narrow strip of meadow near the sea, nestles here and there a farmstead, with its wooden dwelling-house, roofed with turf, where a hay-crop grows in summer, and sometimes a birch or ash 12 or 15 feet high springs up beside the stone chimney. The outbuildings too are built of logs, and there are often five or six of them; for everything must be kept under cover, even the manure, through the long, dark, icy winter. Very often there is also a little water-mill; for a Norwegian peasant family do almost everything for themselves. Grow their own corn, mostly rye and oats, grind it and make it into bread, shear from their town sheep the wool for their own clothes, comb and spin and weave it, dye the cloth or serge, and make it

up themselves, or get the traveling tailor, who works from house to house, to make it. The things they want and cannot make, like coffee or cotton, they buy out of what they get by selling their butter and cheese.

Sometimes one farm holding belongs to several families. Then each family considers its particular house and bits of cultivated land scattered among the rocks as its own, whilst the forest and grazing ground is held in common. Again, a large estate (for Norway) often consists of a principal farm, and four or five smaller holdings cultivated by "housemen." The houseman and his wife have a life tenure of their house and land, and pay a sort of rent in labor to the proprietor of the principal farm. The lads and lasses usually go out as farm assistants, if they are not all wanted on their parents' farm. They get their food, clothes, and lodging, and from £2 to 94 wages. Of course they live with the family of the farmer they are assisting, and there are no social barriers between employer and employed; the "servants" are treated as sons and daughters of the house.

When a Norwegian peasant dies, his land and property belong to all his children; but if there are too many for the farm to support them comfortably, one or two usually buy out their brothers and sisters'; so that the land has not been broken up into over-small portions. These young Norwegians, for whom there is no land at home, constantly emigrate to America, where they form Norwegian colonies, and continue the simple honest life of the mother country, living by their own labor and exploiting no man. The effect of this human, dignified, independent life of honest labor, is to fill the majority of Norwegians with a manly respect for themselves and for others. They treat one another with the true politeness which springs naturally from real kindness and fellow feeling—that real kindness between man and man which is impossible in a nation of masters and slaves. The curses of social inequality and the uneven distribution of wealth have touched Norway but very slightly. There are next to no great industries under the control of monopolists of the means of production; and by dint of much-hard fighting the brave Norsemen have held their own against the land-grabbing of king, churchman, and baron. Though they are poor—many a worthy farmer lives upon nothing better than porridge, musty rye bread, cheese, dried fish, and sour milk—they have preserved their freedom to a greater extent than almost any other civilized people, and they are meeting their present grievances and the encroachments of the Court in the same bold and rebellious spirit which defeated so many previous attempts to enslave them. Would that their English cousins showed equal manhood in resisting the extortions of landlord and capitalist.

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