

*The Decline and Fall
of Practically Everybody*



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CHARLEMAGNE

CHARLES THE GREAT, or Charlemagne, lived away back in the Dark Ages when people were not very bright. They have been getting brighter and brighter ever since, until finally they are like they are now.

Charlie, as they called him at home, was born about A.D. 742, the son of Pippin the Short and Bertha of the Big Foot, an outstanding girl of the period. We have no records dealing with his

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infancy and boyhood, but it is likely that he ate off the mantel from time to time while he was learning more about Bertha.

Pippin was mayor of the palace, or major-domo, for Childeric the Brainless, one of the Do-Nothing kings of the Franks who did nothing but sit around all day long twiddling their mistresses and quaffing mead. Sometimes, for a change, they would get up and assassinate their grandmothers in all sorts of picturesque ways, such as tying them to the tails of wild horses and shouting "Giddap!" Anything for a laugh.¹

As he was fed up with this nonsense, Pippin threw Childeric out of the palace and made himself King of the Franks in A.D. 752.² Pippin the Short died in 768, leaving his title jointly to Charles and Carloman, a younger son who soon died suddenly, although he had never been sick a day in his life.

By this time Charles was twenty-nine and billed as almost too good for this world, a reputation that has persisted to our own day and is pretty sure to last forever. He was so wonderful as soldier, statesman, moralist, reformer, and what not that it would be awful to suggest that there was anything wrong with Carloman's death. The same goes for the sad passing of Carloman's two little sons when their mother tried to make trouble. It seemed to run in the family.³

So there he was, sole King of the Franks, a large and powerful Germanic tribe subsisting mostly upon sausages and beer.⁴ The Franks had all been German at first, but some of them had taken

¹ They were the last of the Merovingians, who were named after an old man named Merwig.

² Pippin the Short can be thought of as Pippin III in the major-domo line if you start with Pippin the Elder as Pippin I and Pippin the Younger as Pippin II.

³ The most I will say is that I feel a little uneasy about it. Gibbon did, too.

⁴ Where such people come from is a problem. They get in somehow.

to eating frogs and snails and were gradually turning into Frenchmen, a fact not generally known at the time since there were no French as yet. Most historians say that Charlemagne was neither German nor French, but Frankish. He was German.

Charlemagne's strong point was morals. He was so moral that some people thought he was only fooling. These people came to no good. Naturally, he wanted to improve others, notably the heathen Saxons, who had stored an immense treasure in a hollow tree called the Irminsul in honor of Woden, or Irmin for short. So he paid them a visit, baptized them all and chopped down the Irminsul, and out fell the contents right into Charlemagne's lap. And was he surprised! Well, they asked for it.

Then he improved the Avars, who had been hoarding great heaps of gold inside a perfectly impregnable fortress, or that's what *they* thought.⁵ He also looked over the Sorbs and the Wiltzes, but they turned out to be hopeless. They were stony broke.⁶ Whenever he decided to help somebody's morals, people would bury their small change and hide in the swamps and forests. Charlemagne had a firm grasp of fundamentals. He has therefore been called the first of the moderns.

Charles was now so obviously good and great that he was crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, A.D. 800, thus becoming, at least on paper, the successor of the Caesars, as high up as one could get in politics. He then announced that he had never sought the honor for one moment and was very much surprised at the whole thing. He said he hadn't an inkling until the crown was actually placed on his head while he wasn't looking. He felt something tickling his brow, and darned if it wasn't the imperial crown.

⁵ *The Avars got their land from the Gepids.*

⁶ *It is well to bear in mind that the Wiltzes were really the Weletabians.*

And who are you, I may ask, to call Charlemagne a barefaced old liar,⁷ even if he had brought the right tie to the ceremony and arranged a few other little details well in advance? Every word you ever spoke was the gospel truth, I suppose.

The Emperor looked wonderful in his new regalia, and Haroun-al-Raschid, Caliph of Bagdad, sent him an elephant named Abu-l-Abbas. That's the trouble with success. People keep sending you elephants as a slight token of their esteem.⁸

As a legislator, Charles was untiring. He held two assemblies of nobles each year, one in the autumn to make more laws and one in the spring to repeal them. He also issued a series of edicts, or capitularies, concerning everything he could think of, and appointed royal visitors, or snoops, to report on the morals of bishops. They brought in some pretty good stories.⁹

Charles wished justice and right to prevail among all classes. He often spoke of the widow and the orphan and the poor and how the wrong persons should not be punished, as often occurred. He was a warm advocate of the trial by ordeal, according to which those accused of anything had to plunge their arms into boiling pitch to see how they liked it. If they interviewed the proper officials, the pitch would be only lukewarm, but the lower orders never got wise to this. You can't do much for the poor, as they are not in with the right people.

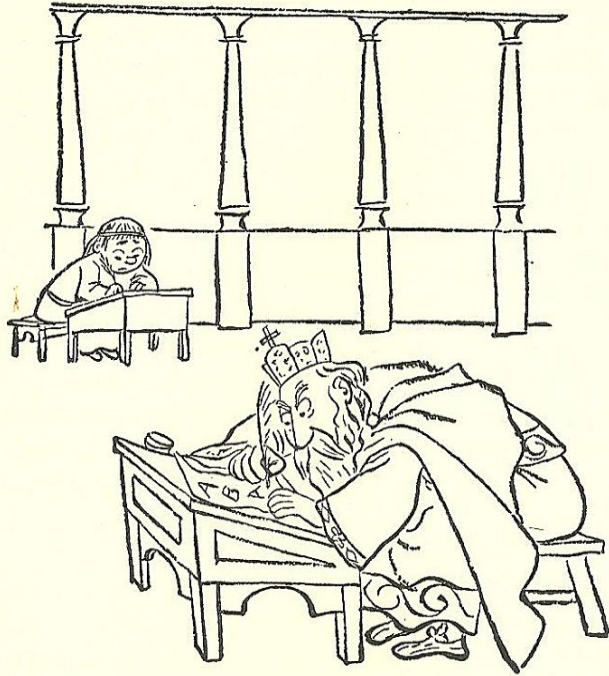
Not least among Charlemagne's achievements was his contribution to learning. He imported teachers from Ireland, England, and Italy. They lived at the palace, ate every day, and taught the subjects traditionally included in the trivium and the quadrivium,

⁷ *As we all know, Charlemagne had a long white beard.*

⁸ *The King of Siam tried to give an elephant to President Lincoln. He was talked out of it.*

⁹ *Trogo, one of Charlemagne's illegitimate sons, is said to have lived an exemplary life as Bishop of Metz.*

which were then believed to make sense. This was nice for the professors. Sometimes the Emperor would propose riddles, and they would answer them in Latin hexameters, or, in a pinch, pentameters. Ho, hum!¹⁰



One of Charlemagne's admirers has called him the greatest intellect of the Middle Ages. He was hardly that, but he did try to learn reading and writing. Although he mastered elementary reading, he was never able to write more than his name, and he

¹⁰ Angilbert, a young poet of the court, worked for years on a Latin epic, portions of which he would read out at the dinner table. Finished or unfinished, this poem has not come down to us. We may never know what it was all about.

preferred to sign his initial. He slept with pencil and paper under his pillow in case the knack should come to him during the night, but somehow it never did. He said he could not accustom his fingers, callused by much use of the sword, to the shaping of the letters. The trouble was not in his fingers.¹¹

As we all know, Charlemagne's height was seven times the length of his foot, but we aren't quite sure what that was. If he took after Big-footed Bertha in that respect, he would have been eight or nine feet tall, which is doubtful.¹² He was a fine figure of a man in spite of his long nose, short neck, and prominent middle, and I think Mr. Gibbon rather goes out of his way to spoil the picture when he remarks, "Of his moral virtues, chastity is not the most conspicuous." Why bring that up?

The fact is that Charles was a natural-born husband and father, as Gibbon certainly was not. He had four or five wives, never more than two at a time, and five or six concubines for good measure.¹³ If there was one thing he loved, and there was, it was honeymoons. I figure that Desiderata, Hildegard, Fastrada, and Luitgarde were legal and Maltegarde, Gerswinda, Regina, and Adelinda were not. I don't count Ermintrude, his earliest attachment. At that time he was only practicing.

Among the children were several daughters who were kept at home and not allowed to marry, since Charles wanted no heirs in the female line. One of them struck up a beautiful friendship with the poet Angilbert, and their son Nithard became a

¹¹ Charlemagne handled his great sword beautifully in parades. For reasons best known to himself, he never appeared personally in battle.

¹² Monsieur Gaillard, in his history of Charlemagne, fixed his height at six feet one and one quarter inches. I make it six feet three and a half.

¹³ St. Augustine, Charlemagne's favorite author, has some passages on that sort of thing. He was against it.

literary critic. The others made out all right, too, but there was a good deal of talk.¹⁴

I'm afraid there is no truth in the story that Emma, or Imma, married Eginhard, or Einhard, her father's biographer, after carrying him out of the palace on her back so that he would not leave footprints in the snow. Eginhard, or Einhard, married Emma of Worms, a different girl altogether.¹⁵ Besides, Charlemagne had no daughter named Emma, or Imma.

At least eight of Charlemagne's sons and daughters were legitimate. He recognized ten others as his own, a fact which speaks well for his generosity and spirit of fair play. I do think that people who confess to ten illegitimate children probably have more.

Charlemagne waged fifty-four wars during the forty-three years of his reign. His empire became greater with each one until it reached a really ridiculous size, extending from the North Sea to the Mediterranean and from the Atlantic Ocean to goodness knows where.¹⁶ He died of a severe cold in A.D. 814 and was buried in his capital of Aachen. It is not true that his beard grew so much that it filled his sarcophagus and overflowed through the cracks.

As we learn in the books, Charlemagne remade Europe practically singlehanded, changing it from a mere mess of hostile tribes and governments to an organized and unified whole. Historians are agreed that he brought culture, religion, and civilization in general to all and sundry and laid the foundations of a just and lasting peace among all nations. What won't they think up next!

¹⁴ *I am sorry to find Gibbon repeating this gossip in some detail, even though he seems to be quoting Schmincke.*

¹⁵ *They parted by mutual consent a few years later. Incompatibility.*

¹⁶ *But don't get the idea that he resembled Attila the Hun. Charlemagne was a much smoother article.*

The elephant Abu-l-Abbas predeceased his master by several years. In A.D. 810 Charlemagne took him across the Rhine on a campaign against Guthfrith the Dane, intending to use him à la Hannibal. But this was not to be. Abu-l-Abbas lay down and died at Lippenheim, in Westphalia, and was there interred. It must have been something he ate.