

IV - THE ESCAPE OF FOLLY

In considering the Prussian point of view, we have been considering what seems to be mainly a mental limitation: a kind of knot in the brain. Towards the problem of Slav population, of English colonisation, of French armies and reinforcements, it shows the same strange philosophic sulks. So far as I can follow it, it seems to amount to saying "It is very wrong that you should be superior to me, because I am superior to you." The spokesmen of this system seem to have a curious capacity for concentrating this entanglement or contradiction, sometimes into a single paragraph, or even a single sentence. I have already referred to the German Emperor's celebrated suggestion that in order to avert the peril of Hunnishness we should all become Huns. A much stronger instance is his more recent order to his troops touching the war in Northern France. As most people know, his words ran "It is my Royal and Imperial command that you concentrate your energies, for the immediate present, upon one single purpose, and that is that you address all your skill and all the valour of my soldiers to exterminate first the treacherous English and to walk over General French's contemptible little army." The rudeness of the remark an Englishman can afford to pass over; what I am interested in is the mentality, the train of thought that can manage to entangle itself even in so brief a space. If French's little Army is contemptible, it would seem clear that all the skill and valour of the German Army had better not be concentrated on it, but on the larger and less contemptible allies. If all the skill and valour of the German Army are concentrated on it, it is not being treated as contemptible. But the Prussian rhetorician had two incompatible sentiments in his mind; and he insisted on saying them both at once. He wanted to think of an English Army as a small thing; but he also wanted to think of an English defeat as a big thing. He wanted to exult, at the same moment, in the utter weakness of the British in their attack; and the supreme skill and valour of the Germans in repelling such an attack. Somehow it must be made a common and obvious collapse for England; and yet a daring and unexpected triumph for Germany. In trying to express these contradictory conceptions simultaneously, he got rather mixed. Therefore he bade Germania fill all her vales and mountains with the dying agonies of this almost invisible earwig; and let the impure blood of this cockroach redden the Rhine down to the sea.

But it would be unfair to base the criticism on the utterance of any accidental and hereditary prince: and it is quite equally clear in the case of the philosophers who have been held up to us, even in England, as the very prophets of progress. And in nothing is it shown more sharply than in the curious confused talk about Race and especially about the Teutonic Race. Professor Harnack and similar

people are reproaching us, I understand, for having broken "the bond of Teutonism": a bond which the Prussians have strictly observed both in breach and observance. We note it in their open annexation of lands wholly inhabited by negroes, such as Denmark. We note it equally in their instant and joyful recognition of the flaxen hair and light blue eyes of the Turks. But it is still the abstract principle of Professor Harnack which interests me most; and in following it I have the same complexity of inquiry, but the same simplicity of result. Comparing the Professor's concern about "Teutonism" with his unconcern about Belgium, I can only reach the following result: "A man need not keep a promise he has made. But a man must keep a promise he has not made." There certainly was a treaty binding Britain to Belgium; if it was only a scrap of paper. If there was any treaty binding Britain to Teutonism it is, to say the least of it, a lost scrap of paper; almost what one would call a scrap of waste-paper. Here again the pedants under consideration exhibit the illogical perversity that makes the brain reel. There is obligation and there is no obligation: sometimes it appears that Germany and England must keep faith with each other; sometimes that Germany need not keep faith with anybody and anything; sometimes that we alone among European peoples are almost entitled to be Germans; sometimes that besides us, Russians and Frenchmen almost rise to a Germanic loveliness of character. But through all there is, hazy but not hypocritical, this sense of some common Teutonism.

Professor Haeckel, another of the witnesses raised up against us, attained to some celebrity at one time through proving the remarkable resemblance between two different things by printing duplicate pictures of the same thing. Professor Haeckel's contribution to biology, in this case, was exactly like Professor Harnack's contribution to ethnology. Professor Harnack knows what a German is like. When he wants to imagine what an Englishman is like, he simply photographs the same German over again. In both cases there is probably sincerity as well as simplicity. Haeckel was so certain that the species illustrated in embryo really are closely related and linked up, that it seemed to him a small thing to simplify it by mere repetition. Harnack is so certain that the German and Englishman are almost alike, that he really risks the generalisation that they are exactly alike. He photographs, so to speak, the same fair and foolish face twice over; and calls it a remarkable resemblance between cousins. Thus, he can prove the existence of Teutonism just about as conclusively as Haeckel has proved the more tenable proposition of the non-existence of God.

Now the German and the Englishman are not in the least alike--except in the sense that neither of them are negroes. They are, in everything good and evil, more unlike than any other two men we can take at random from the great European family. They are opposite from the roots of their history, nay of their geography. It is an understatement to call Britain insular. Britain is not only an island, but an island slashed by the sea till it nearly splits into three islands; and

even the Midlands can almost smell the salt. Germany is a powerful, beautiful and fertile inland country, which can only find the sea by one or two twisted and narrow paths, as people find a subterranean lake. Thus the British Navy is really national because it is natural; it has cohered out of hundreds of accidental adventures of ships and shipmen before Chaucer's time and after it. But the German Navy is an artificial thing; as artificial as a constructed Alp would be in England. William II. has simply copied the British Navy as Frederick II. copied the French Army: and this Japanese or ant-like assiduity in imitation is one of the hundred qualities which the Germans have and the English markedly have not. There are other German superiorities which are very much superior.

The one or two really jolly things that the Germans have got are precisely the things which the English haven't got: notably a real habit of popular music and of the ancient songs of the people, not merely spreading from the towns or caught from the professionals. In this the Germans rather resemble the Welsh; though heaven knows what becomes of Teutonism if they do. But the difference between the Germans and the English goes deeper than all these signs of it; they differ more than any other two Europeans in the normal posture of the mind. Above all, they differ in what is the most English of all English traits; that shame which the French may be right in calling "the bad shame"; for it is certainly mixed up with pride and suspicion, the upshot of which we called shyness. Even an Englishman's rudeness is often rooted in his being embarrassed. But a German's rudeness is rooted in his never being embarrassed. He eats and makes love noisily. He never feels a speech or a song or a sermon or a large meal to be what the English call "out of place" in particular circumstances. When Germans are patriotic and religious, they have no reaction against patriotism and religion as have the English and the French.

Nay, the mistake of Germany in the modern disaster largely arose from the facts that she thought England was simple, when England is very subtle. She thought that because our politics have become largely financial that they had become wholly financial; that because our aristocrats had become pretty cynical that they had become entirely corrupt. They could not seize the subtlety by which a rather used-up English gentleman might sell a coronet when he would not sell a fortress; might lower the public standards and yet refuse to lower the flag.

In short, the Germans are quite sure that they understand us entirely, because they do not understand us at all. Possibly if they began to understand us they might hate us even more: but I would rather be hated for some small but real reason, than pursued with love on account of all kinds of qualities which I do not possess and which I do not desire. And when the Germans get their first genuine glimpse of what modern England is like, they will discover that England has a very broken, belated and inadequate sense of having an obligation to Europe, but

no sort of sense whatever of having any obligation to Teutonism.

This is the last and strongest of the Prussian qualities we have here considered. There is in stupidity of this sort a strange slippery strength: because it can be not only outside rules but outside reason. The man who really cannot see that he is contradicting himself has a great advantage in controversy; though the advantage breaks down when he tries to reduce it to simple addition, to chess, or to the game called war. It is the same about the stupidity of the one-sided kinship. The drunkard who is quite certain that a total stranger is his long-lost brother, has a greater advantage until it comes to matters of detail. "We must have chaos within," said Nietzsche, "that we may give birth to a dancing star."

In these slight notes I have suggested the principal strong points of the Prussian character. A failure in honour which almost amounts to a failure in memory: an egomania that is honestly blind to the fact that the other party is an ego; and, above all, an actual itch for tyranny and interference, the devil which everywhere torments the idle and the proud. To these must be added a certain mental shapelessness which can expand or contract without reference to reason or record; a potential infinity of excuses. If the English had been on the German side, the German professors would have noted what irresistible energies had evolved the Teutons. As the English are on the other side, the German professors will say that these Teutons were not sufficiently evolved. Or they will say that they were just sufficiently evolved to show that they were not Teutons. Probably they will say both. But the truth is that all that they call evolution should rather be called evasion. They tell us they are opening windows of enlightenment and doors of progress. The truth is that they are breaking up the whole house of the human intellect, that they may abscond in any direction. There is an ominous and almost monstrous parallel between the position of their over-rated philosophers and of their comparatively under-rated soldiers. For what their professors call roads of progress are really routes of escape.