

Chapter II - The Protestant Hero

A question is current in our looser English journalism touching what should be done with the German Emperor after a victory of the Allies. Our more feminine advisers incline to the view that he should be shot. This is to make a mistake about the very nature of hereditary monarchy. Assuredly the Emperor William at his worst would be entitled to say to his amiable Crown Prince what Charles II. said when his brother warned him of the plots of assassins: "They will never kill me to make you king." Others, of greater monstrosity of mind, have suggested that he should be sent to St. Helena. So far as an estimate of his historical importance goes, he might as well be sent to Mount Calvary. What we have to deal with is an elderly, nervous, not unintelligent person who happens to be a Hohenzollern; and who, to do him justice, does think more of the Hohenzollerns as a sacred caste than of his own particular place in it. In such families the old boast and motto of hereditary kingship has a horrible and degenerate truth. The king never dies; he only decays for ever.

If it were a matter of the smallest importance what happened to the Emperor William when once his house had been disarmed, I should satisfy my fancy with another picture of his declining years; a conclusion that would be peaceful, humane, harmonious, and forgiving.

In various parts of the lanes and villages of South England the pedestrian will come upon an old and quiet public-house, decorated with a dark and faded portrait in a cocked hat and the singular inscription, "The King of Prussia." These inn signs probably commemorate the visit of the Allies after 1815, though a great part of the English middle classes may well have connected them with the time when Frederick II. was earning his title of the Great, along with a number of other territorial titles to which he had considerably less claim. Sincere and simple-hearted Dissenting ministers would dismount before that sign (for in those days Dissenters drank beer like Christians, and indeed manufactured most of it) and would pledge the old valour and the old victory of him whom they called the Protestant Hero. We should be using every word with literal exactitude if we said that he was really something devilish like a hero. Whether he was a Protestant hero or not can be decided best by those who have read the correspondence of a writer calling himself Voltaire, who was quite shocked at Frederick's utter lack of religion of any kind. But the little Dissenter drank his beer in all innocence and rode on. And the great blasphemer of Potsdam would have laughed had he known; it was a jest after his own heart. Such was the jest he made when he called upon the emperors to come to communion, and partake of the eucharistic body of Poland. Had he been such a Bible reader as the Dissenter doubtless

thought him, he might haply have foreseen the vengeance of humanity upon his house. He might have known what Poland was and was yet to be; he might have known that he ate and drank to his damnation, discerning not the body of God.

Whether the placing of the present German Emperor in charge of one of these wayside public-houses would be a jest after his own heart possibly remains to be seen. But it would be much more melodious and fitting an end than any of the sublime euthanasias which his enemies provide for him. That old sign creaking above him as he sat on the bench outside his home of exile would be a much more genuine memory of the real greatness of his race than the modern and almost gimcrack stars and garters that were pulled in Windsor Chapel. From modern knighthood has departed all shadow of chivalry; how far we have travelled from it can easily be tested by the mere suggestion that Sir Thomas Lipton, let us say, should wear his lady's sleeve round his hat or should watch his armour in the Chapel of St. Thomas of Canterbury. The giving and receiving of the Garter among despots and diplomatists is now only part of that sort of pottering mutual politeness which keeps the peace in an insecure and insincere state of society. But that old blackened wooden sign is at least and after all the sign of something; the sign of the time when one solitary Hohenzollern did not only set fire to fields and cities, but did truly set on fire the minds of men, even though it were fire from hell.

Everything was young once, even Frederick the Great. It was an appropriate preface to the terrible epic of Prussia that it began with an unnatural tragedy of the loss of youth. That blind and narrow savage who was the boy's father had just sufficient difficulty in stamping out every trace of decency in him, to show that some such traces must have been there. If the younger and greater Frederick ever had a heart, it was a broken heart; broken by the same blow that broke his flute. When his only friend was executed before his eyes, there were two corpses to be borne away; and one to be borne on a high war-horse through victory after victory: but with a small bottle of poison in the pocket. It is not irrelevant thus to pause upon the high and dark house of his childhood. For the peculiar quality which marks out Prussian arms and ambitions from all others of the kind consists in this wrinkled and premature antiquity. There is something comparatively boyish about the triumphs of all the other tyrants. There was something better than ambition in the beauty and ardour of the young Napoleon. He was at least a lover; and his first campaign was like a love-story. All that was pagan in him worshipped the Republic as men worship a woman, and all that was Catholic in him understood the paradox of Our Lady of Victories. Henry VIII., a far less reputable person, was in his early days a good knight of the later and more florid school of chivalry; we might almost say that he was a fine old English gentleman so long as he was young. Even Nero was loved in his first days: and there must have been some cause to make that Christian maiden cast flowers on

his dishonourable grave. But the spirit of the great Hohenzollern smelt from the first of the charnel. He came out to his first victory like one broken by defeats; his strength was stripped to the bone and fearful as a fleshless resurrection; for the worst of what could come had already befallen him. The very construction of his kingship was built upon the destruction of his manhood. He had known the final shame; his soul had surrendered to force. He could not redress that wrong; he could only repeat it and repay it. He could make the souls of his soldiers surrender to his gibbet and his whipping-post; he could 'make the souls of the nations surrender to his soldiers. He could only break men in as he had been broken; while he could break in, he could never break out. He could not slay in anger, nor even sin with simplicity. Thus he stands alone among the conquerors of their kind; his madness was not due to a mere misdirection of courage. Before the whisper of war had come to him the foundations of his audacity had been laid in fear.

Of the work he did in this world there need be no considerable debate. It was romantic, if it be romantic that the dragon should swallow St. George. He turned a small country into a great one: he made a new diplomacy by the fulness and far-flung daring of his lies: he took away from criminality all reproach of carelessness and incompleteness. He achieved an amiable combination of thrift and theft. He undoubtedly gave to stark plunder something of the solidity of property. He protected whatever he stole as simpler men protect whatever they have earned or inherited. He turned his hollow eyes with a sort of loathsome affection upon the territories which had most reluctantly become his: at the end of the Seven Years' War men knew as little how he was to be turned out of Silesia as they knew why he had ever been allowed in it. In Poland, like a devil in possession, he tore asunder the body he inhabited; but it was long before any man dreamed that such disjunct limbs could live again. Nor were the effects of his break from Christian tradition confined to Christendom; Macaulay's world-wide generalisation is very true though very Macaulayese. But though, in a long view, he scattered the seeds of war all over the world, his own last days were passed in a long and comparatively prosperous peace; a peace which received and perhaps deserved a certain praise: a peace with which many European peoples were content. For though he did not understand justice, he could understand moderation. He was the most genuine and the most wicked of pacifists. He did not want any more wars. He had tortured and beggared all his neighbours; but he bore them no malice for it.

The immediate cause of that spirited disaster, the intervention of England on behalf of the new Hohenzollern throne, was due, of course, to the national policy of the first William Pitt. He was the kind of man whose vanity and simplicity are too easily overwhelmed by the obvious. He saw nothing in a European crisis except a war with France; and nothing in a war with France except a repetition of

the rather fruitless glories of Agincourt and Malplaquet. He was of the Erastian Whigs, sceptical but still healthy-minded, and neither good enough nor bad enough to understand that even the war of that irreligious age was ultimately a religious war. He had not a shade of irony in his whole being; and beside Frederick, already as old as sin, he was like a rather brilliant schoolboy.

But the direct causes were not the only causes, nor the true ones. The true causes were connected with the triumph of one of the two traditions which had long been struggling in England. And it is pathetic to record that the foreign tradition was then represented by two of the ablest men of that age, Frederick of Prussia and Pitt; while what was really the old English tradition was represented by two of the stupidest men that mankind ever tolerated in any age, George III. and Lord Bute. Bute was the figurehead of a group of Tories who set about fulfilling the fine if fanciful scheme for a democratic monarchy sketched by Bolingbroke in "The Patriot King." It was bent in all sincerity on bringing men's minds back to what are called domestic affairs, affairs as domestic as George III. It might have arrested the advancing corruption of Parliaments and enclosure of country-sides, by turning men's minds from the foreign glories of the great Whigs like Churchill and Chatham; and one of its first acts was to terminate the alliance with Prussia. Unfortunately, whatever was picturesque in the piracy of Potsdam was beyond the imagination of Windsor. But whatever was prosaic in Potsdam was already established at Windsor; the economy of cold mutton, the heavy-handed taste in the arts, and the strange northern blend of boorishness with etiquette. If Bolingbroke's ideas had been applied by a spirited person, by a Stuart, for example, or even by Queen Elizabeth (who had real spirit along with her extraordinary vulgarity), the national soul might have broken free from its new northern chains. But it was the irony of the situation that the King to whom Tories appealed as a refuge from Germanism was himself a German.

We have thus to refer the origins of the German influence in England back to the beginning of the Hanoverian Succession; and thence back to the quarrel between the King and the lawyers which had issue at Naseby; and thence again to the angry exit of Henry VIII. from the mediaeval council of Europe. It is easy to exaggerate the part played in the matter by that great and human, though very pagan person, Martin Luther. Henry VIII. was sincere in his hatred for the heresies of the German monk, for in speculative opinions Henry was wholly Catholic; and the two wrote against each other innumerable pages, largely consisting of terms of abuse, which were pretty well deserved on both sides. But Luther was not a Lutheran. He was a sign of the break-up of Catholicism; but he was not a builder of Protestantism. The countries which became corporately and democratically Protestant, Scotland, for instance, and Holland, followed Calvin and not Luther. And Calvin was a Frenchman; an unpleasant Frenchman, it is true, but one full of that French capacity for creating official entities which can

really act, and have a kind of impersonal personality, such as the French Monarchy or the Terror. Luther was an anarchist, and therefore a dreamer. He made that which is, perhaps, in the long run, the fullest and most shining manifestation of failure; he made a name. Calvin made an active, governing, persecuting thing, called the Kirk. There is something expressive of him in the fact that he called even his work of abstract theology "The Institutes."

In England, however, there were elements of chaos more akin to Luther than to Calvin. And we may thus explain many things which appear rather puzzling in our history, notably the victory of Cromwell not only over the English Royalists but over the Scotch Covenanters. It was the victory of that more happy-go-lucky sort of Protestantism, which had in it much of aristocracy but much also of liberty, over that logical ambition of the Kirk which would have made Protestantism, if possible, as constructive as Catholicism had been. It might be called the victory of Individualist Puritanism over Socialist Puritanism. It was what Milton meant when he said that the new presbyter was an exaggeration of the old priest; it was his office that acted, and acted very harshly. The enemies of the Presbyterians were not without a meaning when they called themselves Independents. To this day no one can understand Scotland who does not realise that it retains much of its mediæval sympathy with France, the French equality, the French pronunciation of Latin, and, strange as it may sound, is in nothing so French as in its Presbyterianism.

In this loose and negative sense only it may be said that the great modern mistakes of England can be traced to Luther. It is true only in this, that both in Germany and England a Protestantism softer and less abstract than Calvinism was found useful to the compromises of courtiers and aristocrats; for every abstract creed does something for human equality. Lutheranism in Germany rapidly became what it is to-day--a religion of court chaplains. The reformed church in England became something better; it became a profession for the younger sons of squires. But these parallel tendencies, in all their strength and weakness, reached, as it were, symbolic culmination when the mediæval monarchy was extinguished, and the English squires gave to what was little more than a German squire the damaged and diminished crown.

It must be remembered that the Germanics were at that time used as a sort of breeding-ground for princes. There is a strange process in history by which things that decay turn into the very opposite of themselves. Thus in England Puritanism began as the hardest of creeds, but has ended as the softest; soft-hearted and not unfrequently soft-headed. Of old the Puritan in war was certainly the Puritan at his best; it was the Puritan in peace whom no Christian could be expected to stand. Yet those Englishmen to-day who claim descent from the great militarists of 1649 express the utmost horror of militarism. An inversion of an

opposite kind has taken place in Germany. Out of the country that was once valued as providing a perpetual supply of kings small enough to be stop-gaps, has come the modern menace of the one great king who would swallow the kingdoms of the earth. But the old German kingdoms preserved, and were encouraged to preserve, the good things that go with small interests and strict boundaries, music, etiquette, a dreamy philosophy, and so on. They were small enough to be universal. Their outlook could afford to be in some degree broad and many-sided. They had the impartiality of impotence. All this has been utterly reversed, and we find ourselves at war with a Germany whose powers are the widest and whose outlook is the narrowest in the world.

It is true, of course, that the English squires put themselves over the new German prince rather than under him. They put the crown on him as an extinguisher. It was part of the plan that the new-comer, though royal, should be almost rustic. Hanover must be one of England's possessions and not England one of Hanover's. But the fact that the court became a German court prepared the soil, so to speak; English politics were already subconsciously committed to two centuries of the belittlement of France and the gross exaggeration of Germany. The period can be symbolically marked out by Carteret, proud of talking German at the beginning of the period, and Lord Haldane, proud of talking German at the end of it. Culture is already almost beginning to be spelt with a k. But all such pacific and only slowly growing Teutonism was brought to a crisis and a decision when the voice of Pitt called us, like a trumpet, to the rescue of the Protestant Hero.

Among all the monarchs of that faithless age, the nearest to a man was a woman. Maria Theresa of Austria was a German of the more generous sort, limited in a domestic rather than a national sense, firm in the ancient faith at which all her own courtiers were sneering, and as brave as a young lioness. Frederick hated her as he hated everything German and everything good. He sets forth in his own memoirs, with that clearness which adds something almost superhuman to the mysterious vileness of his character, how he calculated on her youth, her inexperience and her lack of friends as proof that she could be despoiled with safety. He invaded Silesia in advance of his own declaration of war (as if he had run on ahead to say it was coming) and this new anarchic trick, combined with the corruptibility of nearly all the other courts, left him after the two Silesian wars in possession of the stolen goods. But Maria Theresa had refused to submit to the immorality of nine points of the law. By appeals and concessions to France, Russia, and other powers, she contrived to create something which, against the atheist innovator even in that atheist age, stood up for an instant like a spectre of the Crusades. Had that Crusade been universal and whole-hearted, the great new precedent of mere force and fraud would have been broken; and the whole appalling judgment which is fallen upon Christendom would have passed us by.

But the other Crusaders were only half in earnest for Europe; Frederick was quite in earnest for Prussia; and he sought for allies, by whose aid this weak revival of good might be stamped out, and his adamant impudence endure for ever. The allies he found were the English. It is not pleasant for an Englishman to have to write the words.

This was the first act of the tragedy, and with it we may leave Frederick, for we are done with the fellow though not with his work. It is enough to add that if we call all his after actions satanic, it is not a term of abuse, but of theology. He was a Tempter. He dragged the other kings to "partake of the body of Poland," and learn the meaning of the Black Mass. Poland lay prostrate before three giants in armour, and her name passed into a synonym for failure. The Prussians, with their fine magnanimity, gave lectures on the hereditary maladies of the man they had murdered. They could not conceive of life in those limbs; and the time was far off when they should be undeceived. In that day five nations were to partake not of the body, but of the spirit of Poland; and the trumpet of the resurrection of the peoples should be blown from Warsaw to the western isles.